

Create Rules that Make You Feel Successful, Not Unsuccessful

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

I attended a private high school named Cranbrook-Kingswood. There was a lot of competition to get accepted. A couple of years before I started there, the founder of Little Caesar's Pizza, Mike Ilitch, made a large donation to the school with instructions to build an indoor hockey rink. Mike loved hockey, and his son had also been very good at the sport. I believe he may have also "required" the school, as part of his gift, to have an exceptional hockey team.

The school went out and recruited the best hockey players from all over the United States and Canada and gave them free tuition, room and board and, most of all, admission to the high school. In order to ensure these same kids could [graduate](#), the school created special classes for some of them in mathematics and other disciplines they could pass. I want to be clear that several of the hockey players were extremely intelligent and did not need these classes. However, many of them had come from backgrounds where athletics, and not academics, had always been stressed.

I first found out about this special program when I became friends with a kid from my neighborhood who played hockey for my school. He had been a star hockey player in his public high school his first year and was living a dream of sorts. He loved hockey and was doing fine in school, and the girls loved him. One day after practice, a scout from my high school approached him and told him if he wanted to attend private school and play hockey there he could do so and tuition would be free. He accepted. My friend and his family were incredulous because they had known other kids who were far more intelligent who had applied and gone through a rigorous admissions process and were not able to get into the school.

My friend's instant admission to the school was incredible to me because it took months for me to get into the school. I had to take tests, come in for interviews - even my parents were interviewed.

The guy I was friends with was kicked out of the school for bad grades after one year. He was a big handsome guy who the girls in his school really liked a lot. After getting kicked out he really struggled, however. His self esteem dropped and he migrated into aggressive partying. He also had several auto accidents while drunk. I think he even stopped playing hockey.

Before going to the school he'd been a star hockey player and was very happy with his life. After going to the school, he became very unhappy. The more I got to know him, the more I realized he was unhappy because he was not on the path to attend a prestigious college, was not smart enough to pass the classes in a private school, and, despite being a good hockey player and getting a scholarship to the school, he had failed. It was as if being in a good [environment](#) had taught him how to be unhappy with his life and who he was.

At Cranbrook-Kingswood he learned a bunch of rules about what success meant - ones completely different from the rules he'd known before attending the school. Rules like:

1. It is important to do well in school; and,
2. You are only successful if you are on the path to going to an important college.

In the environment from which he'd come, none of this mattered. All of a sudden, in this new environment, all of it mattered, and he felt bad about himself and self-destructed. Imagine having the rug pulled out from under you like that. It must have felt horrible. He went from all to nearly nothing just based on the rules he had learned.

Over the years I met many of these hockey players, and I came to believe that, for many of them, going to this school did not serve them well. While they could have been extremely happy in most environments, going to a school where academics and getting into college were stressed so much set them up for feeling badly about themselves. They learned that to be successful, you need to do well in school and not in hockey. I am not sure how well these rules served them. I think they learned to think about themselves in a way that was not empowering.

As the head of a [legal recruiting firm](#), I used to spend several hours a day reviewing [resumes of attorneys](#) who were [applying for jobs](#) for which our firm was recruiting. In addition, I would take phone call after phone call from these same attorneys about various jobs and their attempts to get a position. Sometimes these attorneys would show up in our office and want to talk about [getting a job](#).

The hopes and dreams of attorneys are something I have come to understand quite well. No matter if the attorney is in [law school](#), has been practicing several years, or is a partner in a large [law firm](#), there are certain "rules" most attorneys measure themselves by that tell them if they are successful or not. These rules most often involve:

1. The size of the firm they are working at.
2. How prestigious this firm is considered by the [legal community](#).
3. How much money their firm is paying relative to other firms.
4. The quality of law schools and pedigrees the attorneys have at the firm for which they're working.
5. After several years, whether or not they are a partner in a prestigious law firm.
6. When they are a partner in a law firm, whether or not they have a lot of business.

This is, of course, not the rule for every attorney but it is for most of them. For the most part, attorneys judge how successful they are based on how they stack up under this criterion.

One of the hardest things about going to a top law school is the competition inside these schools is quite intense for the top jobs. Every year students in these schools compete for the jobs paying the most at the largest law firms. At the top law schools a higher percentage of the students get the jobs with the [highest paid](#) and best firms than at the lower ranked law schools.

While I do not know the exact numbers, I believe over 85% of the [law students](#) graduating each year will not get the jobs with large law firms that pay top market salaries. Instead, they [get jobs](#) (if they get one) in smaller law firms that pay 50% or less than what the jobs pay in the largest, and most prestigious law firms. In the smaller law firms the work is most often for smaller and less prestigious companies, as well. Nevertheless, the attorneys inside these law firms are doing work that is essentially no different than in the largest law firms.

I have been in the legal recruiting industry for a long time. What I have noticed is the attorneys from the best law schools are always governing their lives and their career with the following rule: "I will not be successful unless I am practicing law with a large law firm." In addition, attorneys with small law firms who went to bad law schools spend a lot of effort trying to get into the larger law firms. They, too, do not feel successful unless they are practicing law with a large law firm. Somewhere along the line they picked up the "rule" that they will not be successful until they are working in a large law firm.

Most [legal recruiters](#) around the United States spend their time trying to help attorneys realize the dream of working in a large law firm or remaining employed in a large law firm environment. Attorneys panic when they feel they may not be able to remain employed in a large law firm. Because the "rules" most attorneys have about their careers and lives require them to be in a large law firm, many of them are extremely unhappy when they are not doing so. They literally use this rule to set themselves up for lifelong unhappiness.

It's crazy. Instead of being happy practicing law, a lot of attorneys spend their career feeling like they have failed. You need to have rules for your life and career that empower you.

I try to spend my time around people who are the happiest. What I have noticed is the people who are the happiest have the fewest rules about the way things should be, and who they should be. If you ask yourself what it takes to be successful you may say:

1. I need this kind of car.
2. I want this sort of job.
3. I want this sort of house.
4. I want this sort of mate (or, for many people, I want my mate to be a certain way).

These are the rules many people require of themselves for being happy and feeling successful.

Other people may just tell themselves they will be successful and happy as long as they are alive.

This is the most amazing thing. Who do you think is happier? The person who is happiest is the person with the easiest rules to meet and the least stringent rules.

You determine your level of happiness and success based on the rules you set for yourself. If you set rules which are difficult to meet and you will never meet, you will experience lots of pain. If you set rules for yourself rules that are easy to meet you will experience lots of fulfillment. It is up to you what you do with your rules. You are in complete control of how you feel about yourself and whether or not you believe you are successful.

My definition of success requires that I experience very little pain and tons of pleasure. I set rules which empower me rather than hurt me. I set high standards for myself, but require very few rules in order to be happy. People who feel the most successful typically have the fewest rules.

We are constantly asking ourselves the question "What does this mean?" and do this on a daily basis. If we see someone smile at us, we assume they are nice and friendly. If we see someone grimace at us, we assume they do not like us. We have rules for our environments and how to interpret the things happening all around us. The rules we formulate about the world and our surroundings have a giant impact on how we feel. In the case of the hockey player, he learned rules that suddenly cast a shadow over what was a very happy and successful life. Have you allowed rules to do this to you?

What I want for you is to use rules to make yourself happy. I want you to have fewer rules and make success something you are always feeling, instead of constantly needing to be something different. The more success you feel, the more good things will come your way. Like attracts like. You need to feel good about yourself and your life, and the more of this you feel, the more you will attract. The more negative you feel, the more negativity you will attract.

When I look around me, I see so many people who do not allow themselves to be happy due to the rules they set for themselves.

I live in a large city and, when I go to small towns, people tell me they are unhappy and wished they lived somewhere else. When I meet people who went to bad schools, they tell me they wish they had gone to better schools. I used to hire lots of writers in our offices in Los Angeles who had experience in the entertainment industry. I stopped doing this long ago because they all felt lousy about themselves and never gave their work their all. They had "rules" that said they were only successful and doing well if they were selling huge screenplays to major motion picture studios. Anything less was failure. Consequently, they never gave the job with our company their all.

Your rules for what it means to be successful will largely control how you feel about yourself and your job. One of the worst things that can happen to someone is to be in an atmosphere where they are surrounded by the most successful people imaginable when they are not the same way. I remember once speaking with a man who had grown up, been friends with, and gone to school with a couple of people who ended up becoming very famous—one was a United States Senator, the other was a governor of a huge state, and the other was the CEO of one of the largest companies in the world. This person had never been anywhere near as successful as these people, but he still had a [good career](#). How do you think this person felt about himself? Instead of feeling like he had a good career, he could only compare himself with the people he knew who had become incredibly successful. He felt like a failure his entire life. What a lousy rule to have for ourselves.

What has to happen for you to feel successful?

Rules control so much. They literally control our sanity and how we feel about ourselves on a daily basis. Every upset you have ever had in your life with another person is probably due to them violating some rule you had about such and such, or vice versa.

I have very few, if any arguments, with my wife about anything. However, if she gets excited while talking about something while eating, she will often speak while chewing. When I was growing up my mother used to go ballistic and get incredibly angry with me if I opened my mouth and spoke while chewing food. She would call it a sign of disrespect and, in one case, I think she actually made me sit next to the dog on the floor while eating as punishment. In fact, my mom was so angry, it was

as if I had committed a crime.

Years later, I find myself also getting angry when I see people I am close to eating with their mouths open. I take it as a sign of disrespect, among other things. I want to be clear that I know this is completely irrational. The only reason I am reacting this way is because of the rules I learned when I was younger. Here I am, decades later, having a happy meal with my wife and suddenly this rule about the way things should be comes up and prevents me from having a good time. Do you have any rules which are impacting your life like this? I bet you do.

Make the rules you have for your life and your career empower you. Make your rules represent success and not failure. You need to feel good about this life and your life. Work hard and enjoy your life. Do not allow your rules to hold you back.

<https://www.harrisonbarnes.com/>