

## Understand Your Ultimate Goal

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

Several years ago, I was living in New York City and taking the subway to work every single day. Like many young people, I'd been taught somewhere along the line that this was "the place" to work and where the most sophisticated work happened, where the [highest salaries](#) were paid, and where the most important work occurred. I think this is true to a great extent. The city is extremely exciting and people work so hard there they can't help but become incredibly good at their jobs. The concentration of businesses in New York also creates an abundance of extremely sophisticated work for people to do.

While I love living in New York, I asked myself frequently while living there "What's the point?" People work so hard there and live in small apartments and put up with so much. The city is incredibly expensive and it's difficult to work in. People from all over the United States come to New York seeking to be at the pinnacle of their professions whether it's law, [advertising](#), or [public relations](#). People go there really seeking something. What people are seeking is to feel differently about themselves.

New York can be a really stressful place to live. At the time, I was living in a small apartment and despite making a good salary I quickly realized that there isn't much to do inside small apartments. Like many people in New York, I spent a good amount of time walking around on the streets, going into cafés, seeing movies, and exploring museums. There is a lot of activity in New York City and it's a very exciting place to be. As a young man, I started to ask myself what all of this means. The entire city seemed to be dedicated to working extremely hard. If you're inquisitive like I was and you're thinking about where you want to spend the rest of your life, one of the questions you ask yourself is: What does this all mean? What are these people in this city all trying to achieve?

When I think of images of New York, what I see are men and women rushing down the street on the way to [various jobs](#). They are all going to and from work and the streets are incredibly crowded with people rushing about on their way to and from work. On the streets themselves, there are people working as well, selling sodas, coffee, and other things from carts. When I think of New York City I think of people rushing around working. The image I have of New York is simply "work."

Last night, I saw a picture in a magazine and it was of the roof of Rockefeller Center where apparently there is a garden with a lawn. The article went on to describe how incredible it was that there was a garden in the midst of this concrete jungle. It was a happy article, but it left me thinking that "green grass" is something that is sort of unattainable in New York. New York City represents streets and a world where not much grows. There is too much concrete and progress for this.

When I look at all of the people on the street, the image is traditionally of a man or woman rushing somewhere. There is typically a bit of stress in their faces and they do not appear totally excited about where they are going or what they are doing. They have something to do. They don't say hello to people on the street. They need to rush off and be somewhere. Work is too important. Who cares about green grass?

I think a lot of what you see in the expressions of the people of New York on the street is a metaphor for much of our work lives--we are rushed, stressed and unhappy. I heard a statistic recently that something like 15% of all Americans are clinically depressed. A lot of those people rushing back and forth on the streets of places like New York will smoke cigarettes to alleviate the stress. They will drink to excess, use cocaine, and do all sorts of other things to feel good. Many will also go shopping and spend incredible amounts of money on haircuts, suits, vacations, and do other things to feel good. The jobs they have are something that they have pursued in order to capture something. Everyone is chasing goals.

When growing up, many of us are taught that we need to [be lawyers](#), architects, or doctors in order to be happy. This message is that something needs to happen outside of us in order for us to feel good about ourselves. When we become doctors or lawyers we are taught that we need to be partners, or reach a certain level, in order for us to be happy. Many of the people I know in New York are obsessed with the consumer culture and can tell you about the latest this or that. These people are incredibly knowledgeable about various things that are available for purchase. This is part of what many of us are as people, however. We believe that something outside of us needs to happen in order for us to be happy:

1. We need to purchase something
2. We need to get a particular [type of job](#)
3. We need to receive a particular acknowledgement
4. Someone needs to do something for us
5. We need to get promoted

The idea with all of these things is that something outside of us needs to happen in order for us to be happy. The fallacy of this thinking is that nothing is ever good enough. There will always be a better job, something else which can be purchased, and something else outside of us that can happen in order for us to experience happiness. I have no doubt that much of our thinking in this world is driven by the fact we are in a consumer society and as part of this society, we are constantly bombarded with advertisements that link up the purchase of a particular good or service to being happy. That's why, for example, in the heart of consumerism in an area like New York City, the idea that something outside of us can make us happy is even more pronounced.

The most amazing place to me in the world is Thailand. If you've never been there, you need to go. I spent some time attending high school there and the experience of living with the Thais changed my life. The people there are extremely happy and despite massive western influence, have largely stayed removed from a psychology which requires external events to occur in order for them to be happy. The last time I was in Thailand, my wife and I met a man who stated he goes there at least twice a year because it's the only place in the world where people are happy all the time. He feels good there because people don't think about happiness the same way. The thinking of the people of Thailand is that happiness comes

from the inside and not the outside.

When you watch a baby, you can see the baby be happy about an incredible number of things. They can laugh at a light bulb on the ceiling. They will smile for the most trivial reasons. When you watch a baby being happy, what comes to mind is that we are born happy. Happiness is on the inside. Happiness is something we are born with.

Back on the street of New York, people rush too and fro and the thought that occurs to me is people are working so hard and living these lives because their ultimate goal is really to be happy. They believe if something occurs, they will be happy. This is such a Faustian bargain and it makes no sense. People do all of this and work so hard because they believe that if they do, they will be happy. When you think of someone walking down the street, singing a song because they are so happy, the image is typically not of someone in New York. The image is most likely of someone in the country where there's no one around to judge, evaluate, and tell the person they shouldn't be happy. You need to be happy regardless of what's going on outside of you. We are seduced by the outside world into definitions of happiness that require various external things to occur before we can be happy. Happiness is inside of you and never requires any sort of external intervention.

The reason I'm focusing so much on your happiness is because the happier you are, the better job you will get and the better you will do in your career. Your happiness will guide the course of your life. When you are happy, you perform better at your job. When you are happy all the time, people want to be around you. When you are happy, good things happen to you and continue to happen to you. Most of all, the best way for you to be happy is to stop focusing on externalities and realize that happiness is already inside of you right now.

You don't need any rules of what must and must not happen for you to be happy. You can just be happy. You need to realize that what is already inside of you will give you joy if you allow it. You need to set up rules which allow you to be happy for no reason at all—just because you are happy.

Another important way to insure you are constantly happy is to change your focus. I am amazed when I go into different companies and meet people. I can always get a very good sense of what the people are like and what the company is like by speaking with the people. In some companies, the second you get there, the people talk about how exciting this or that is and what a great place the world is and how much opportunity there is. In other companies, the people talk about how awful the world is, how tough the economy is, and more. Most of this thinking occurs and is prevalent in these companies regardless of the state of the economy. When the economy is good, the people focus on the bad and when the economy is bad, the people focus on the bad as well. This sort of negative thinking is very destructive. People feel what they focus on and a negative focus is self reinforcing and continues to make things worse and worse.

Focus is one of the most important skills you can learn. Refusing to be negative is a skill that really can help you accomplish a great deal in your life and career. Right now, you can start thinking about who has wronged you in the past and get angry. You can focus right now on jobs you have lost and get angry. You can focus on people in your life you were close to that died and feel incredibly sad. You can continue focusing on negative things forever if you like (which many people do) and will continue to feel absolutely dreadful about your life. You can share your negativity with everyone you meet and insure that you spread this negativity everywhere. This is what a lot of people enjoy doing. They focus on the negative.

Refuse to focus on the negative.

When you look at the world around you, there are many choices you need to make. For example, if someone is rude to you, one option you have is to be rude back. Another option is to empathize with them and see if there's anything you can do to brighten their day and make them feel better. You need to choose meaning that supports you and makes you continually feel good. Nothing in your world and life has any meaning except for the meaning you give it. One thing I've noticed about unhappy people and the most unproductive organizations is they are constantly judging and putting a negative spin on people and events around them. They decide to interpret things in a negative way and this ends up doing them a massive disservice.

When you think about all of the famous people in history who have died, despite being incredibly gifted, but have taken their lives with drugs, it makes no sense. All of the overdoses and issues of rock stars and other entertainers are nonsensical. Some of the most talented people in the world have used drugs like this to excess, most likely because they felt stressed and upset by the world around them. They wanted to feel good. Managing how you feel about yourself and your life is probably the greatest skill you can have. You need to feel good about yourself and how you feel about yourself is most often determined by the meanings you give to circumstances and the world around you. The most important thing you can do with your life is to choose meanings that empower you.

One of the reasons I think so many people get into so much trouble when they get famous is they are suddenly surrounded by people who are even more famous and talented than they. They look at these people and start comparing themselves. Because they make happiness external, they don't feel good about themselves due to the fact that someone is better than they are in one way or another. One of the ways we look at the world and interpret the world is through contrasting ourselves with others. For example, I run a group of career sites I believe are the best at what they do in the world. I feel very good about the power of [EmploymentCrossing](#) and how good it is in terms of getting people jobs. However, if I decided that the measure of my success was whether or not this site had as many users as a free site like Monster, I probably would never feel that good about myself and my business. The reason I wouldn't feel good is because I would be measuring my success and ability to feel good by something external.

I made this mistake growing up. I grew up in a very wealthy neighborhood with parents who weren't well off. Since the people around me were making such a big deal about cars, homes, vacations, clothes, and so forth (none of which I had at the same level), I decided I should feel bad about myself. This is a crazy reaction. A choice I could have made was that I should feel happy I'm being exposed to this and glad my parents are able to afford for me to be in an [environment](#) where I can associate with these sorts of people. Instead, however, I chose the negative interpretation. I think this is how many of us run our lives. We so often use contrasts to make ourselves feel badly instead of to make ourselves feel good. You need to use contrasts to make yourself feel good and not bad. Contrast is one of the most important tools you can possibly use in your psyche and it will change your life.

One of the largest obstacles to our true happiness is not just the contrasts we make, it is the rules we make for when we can be happy. I remember one time I was on my way to visit a relative with my mom and I had on a shirt that I thought was alright and a sport jacket. I was probably 25 at the time. My mom started getting all agitated in the car and was very unhappy and angry with me. She wanted me to stop at a store and purchase a new jacket, slacks, and shirt. The whole thing seemed very strange to me.

"You need to look 'crisp' and if you don't, these people won't respect you. Your clothes have too many wrinkles. You need to be 'crisp'," she said.

Somewhere along the line she had picked up a rule about the importance of being "crisp" that led her to believe that wrinkles were a massive sort of sin. Perhaps she was right, but if she didn't have this rule, she would have had a much better time that day and so would I. Many of us have rules about the way things need to be that prevent us from being happy. We want things to be a certain way before we will allow ourselves to be happy. We decide that to be happy we must be rich, lose 10 pounds, have a certain mate, or drive a certain type of car. We allow ourselves to be paralyzed by rules that are difficult if not impossible for us to ever meet and this prevents us from ever being happy. So many people out there are paralyzed by rules like this. Relaxing these rules would change their lives forever.

I would challenge you to stop externalizing your happiness with rules, conditions, and more that will continually make you unhappy. Instead, you need to adopt a belief for your life and career that defines success as simply being happy and failure as not being happy. While we all have our ups and downs in life, the most important thing that you can do is to be happy. When you are happy, your career and life as you know it will change. More happy people will start coming into your life and you will attract the energy of good opportunities and other happy people. Your life is too important not to be happy. Change your mind and you will change your life.

### **THE LESSON**

Your life's ultimate goal is happiness. Your drive for happiness guides the course of your life, and you need to be happy regardless of the external circumstances in your life. The happier you are, the better jobs you will get and the more successful you will be in your career. In order to achieve happiness, turn away from externalities and instead focus on the happiness that is already inside of you. Your life is too important to be unhappy.

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