

Remain Calm

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

For a portion of one summer when I was younger, I had a valet job at the Grosse Pointe Yacht Club outside of Detroit, Michigan. I worked during the lunch hour and spent most of my time sitting in a small air conditioned shed in a corner of the parking lot waiting for cars to pull up. When a car would pull up, I would fling open the door to the shed and run over to the car, hand the person a ticket, and park the car.

One day, I was sitting in my little shed and a giant Cadillac pulled up and a man stepped on to the curb. As I was exiting my shed, he looked at me and shouted:

"Hey Boy ... PARK THIS!"

The man then proceeded to throw his keys in the grass.

This amazed me. I used to lift weights and played football in high school. From the way I'd taught myself to think, this sort of treatment was not to be tolerated.

"Are you kidding?!" I shouted at the man. "Are you trying to start something with me? Because if you are, I'm ready!" I strolled slowly up to the car which was about 20 yards away. Apparently terrified, the man went sprinting inside of the club. A few moments later, the [manager](#) of the club emerged and fired me. The manager was so upset about the whole thing he actually called my mother and told her about the incident.

I lost my job because I lost my cool.

When you think about your life and your career, what would be different if you had, instead, developed the ability to remain calm? Most people are agitated--moving in many different directions and unable to remain calm. When you remain calm, many things end up changing in your life.

Remaining calm is one of the most important traits we can have. Being calm is not just about being relaxed and not yelling. Being calm is about being focused enough to absorb the world around you and make deliberate and carefully considered decisions before acting. When you are calm, you do not lose jobs like I did, and you are more likely to keep friends and to advance rapidly in whatever environment you are in. People will trust you more. People will look to you to fill leadership roles. When we are calm, we are far more powerful than when we choose, instead, to react from our gut with anger, fear, or other nonproductive emotions. Calmness is a virtue and one of the strongest you can have. The calmer you are, the more you can control and understand the world around you. The more you understand the world around you, the better you can be at everything you do. This is the nature and importance of being calm.

Several years ago, I took a multi-day course at Disneyland about leadership. While I could write for several days about what the course covered, I remember when the instructors summed up the entire meaning of the course after countless examples and numerous exercises they said it with few words: "Leadership is about being calm."

The more I thought about this example, the more I realized the most important thing we can do in business, our careers and in leadership, is to be calm. The more we relax our minds and our bodies, the more positioned we are to make the correct decisions in our careers. I once read a book about former president Kennedy. Apparently, Kennedy liked to use stimulants and was often up for days during his periods of stimulant use. While it is not widely talked about, there was some fear among members of his cabinet that he might have potentially created a disaster during the Cuban Missile Crisis due to his use of stimulants and inability to remain calm. Some conspiracy theorists have even speculated he was assassinated by the CIA because they felt his inability to control his emotions could have led to a nuclear Armageddon. Despite an illustrious presidency in many respects, Kennedy's inability to consistently be calm was considered by many a massive weakness.

Several years ago, a high school friend of mine named Jeff was coming to Los Angeles from the Midwest to visit me and a friend of mine, John. We decided we would rent a giant limousine and take Jeff around Los Angeles to show him the sites. The limousine was so large it had a Jacuzzi in its trunk! I had honestly never seen anything like it. Because it was so massive, it blocked two driveways when it was parked in front of my house. About 10 minutes after the limousine arrived, we called our friend to see where he was.

He told John and I he would not be able to make it because he was having dinner with his girlfriend and her parents, who'd shown up at the last minute. At that moment, I got extremely angry and felt hurt. Here I was with this giant limousine in front of my house with a bubbling jacuzzi in the trunk I'd already paid for. I felt alone and stupid. I exchanged some harsh words with Jeff and decided I would never speak with him again.

That was several years ago.

Do I regret it? Yes. I overreacted. In contrast, John got mad too, but he made up with Jeff just a few days later. To this day, I have not spoken with Jeff.

It's easy for me to look back now and realize how wrong I was. Jeff was rude, but if I had looked at the totality of the situation I would have realized getting angry was a stupid decision. Instead, I should have remained calm and simply filed this episode away and recognize that I could not always trust him when we made plans. I could have also been empathetic and understanding of his need to entertain his girlfriend's parents. Instead, I chose to get mad.

I've seen careers abruptly crash because of people failing to be calm. People react inappropriately to a perceived slight and fire off a crazy and savage email to someone. Someone does not think something through before acting. People whose careers soar to incredible heights are most often the ones who have the ability to remain calm. Being calm is more than just

consistently being relaxed. Being calm is having the ability to react in a level-headed way to circumstances around you and face the world without getting flustered and keep your confidence strong.

Being calm is a sign of security and self confidence.

When you are calm, you are often more in control than the people around you. Many people fly off the handle at work, in public and when they feel they have been wronged. Generally, when someone flies off the handle, someone else is receiving their anger and negative emotion. The person who is on the receiving end typically has a couple of potential reactions. The first is to lash out and get angry. This is the most common reaction. The least common reaction is when the person on the receiving end remains calm. The person who remains calm puts themselves at a profound advantage. Usually what ends up happening is the person who has reacted angrily, or irrationally, comes to their senses and realizes they acted and responded in the wrong way. They come back to the person they have reacted to and seek apologies or attempt to make up. At that point, a subtle power shift has occurred and the person who was able to remain calm has assumed control. When you remain calm, you almost always end up in the role of the leader—regardless of the situation.

When we think of generals, presidents, [CEOs](#) and other leaders, we rarely think of them as people who fly off the handle. Instead, we think of them as people who are constantly able to remain calm no matter what. We want leaders who have the ability to stay focused and calm despite the turmoil around them. We do not want people who fly off the handle.

We think more of people who have the ability to remain calm. We respect those around us who stay calm. Being calm is so respected we have a word for it in the English language - "cool". We call people with the ability to remain calm "cool". We elevate people in society we believe are cool. Fonzi from the show "Happy Days" was considered "cool". LL Cool J is considered "cool". Action heroes are always "cool" when others around them appear to be acting nuts. We respect people in our society who are able to maintain their composure and stay cool.

In your job, nothing is more important than being cool. One of the [best jobs](#) I ever had growing up was working for Domino's Pizza as a driver. Back in the 1980s, I was making \$150+ some days delivering pizza. The tips were really good.

Unfortunately, I only worked there for one summer due to an incident delivering pizza in a bad neighborhood. I did not get fired from this job. However, when I tried to get a job there the next summer they told me they did not have any openings (which I am almost certain was not true). I'm pretty sure they told me this because of the incident I am about to relate.

I dropped off a pizza in a bad neighborhood and the person's change was only a few cents. When the person asked me for change I said: "Are you kidding?" There was only a few pennies at issue and in addition to not giving me a tip the person was asking for a few cents. I was deeply offended.

After I fished the few cents out of my pocket, the guy said to me: "If you had the change ready, I might have let you keep it. Now get the f**k off my porch."

I was absolutely incredulous. I got in my car and started driving away, but then my anger got the better of me. I stopped my car and backed up. I got out of the car and screamed "F**k you!" at the top of my lungs at the house. The guy came out of his house and screamed "F**k you too, bitch!" This bizarre episode lasted a minute or two as we stood there screaming at each other. Eventually I peeled out in my car and drove away.

When I got back to the pizza parlor, my manager said, "Calm down. Calm down." The manager looked like Bill Murray and he said something I will never forget to this day: "I know that guy too. He is a total a**hole, but you have to calm down. It is not professional to stand on the street screaming at a customer when you have a Domino's pizza sign on the top of your car. The guy's neighbors called me about you!"

The calmer you are, the more opportunities will present themselves and the fewer opportunities you will end up losing in your life. There is no sense losing your calm. This is simply not something you should do. You need to remain calm at all times.

Remaining calm will not only keep you employed, it can also help you [get a job](#). When you are calm, you make better decisions and understand more of the world around you and what is going on. You can see opportunities where others cannot. People who are effective networkers are often very calm because they are very adept at being able to listen to others and understand where others are coming from.

People who are not calm are most often more interested in making themselves heard than understanding others. Steven Covey, the author of *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, is fond of saying "Seek to understand before being understood." This is excellent advice and something I have heard many of the most successful people repeat time and time again. In sales, for example, this is something I have seen transform careers. People who have the ability to remain calm are much more likely to have cultivated the ability to understand. Understanding people and situations requires that you remain calm.

When we react to things in the world, or instantly make decisions, we are most often doing so due to our conditioning and the things we have been led to believe. We react instinctively instead of thinking things through. The ability to react instinctively often serves us well. However, when we are able to remain calm we are often far more effective. One of the most effective things we can do is to delay our decisions and not make decisions quickly. Making rapid-fire decisions is something that can do us a great deal of harm. When you are calm you are able to make decisions in a slower and more deliberate way that will serve you very well. If you delay making a decision you can always make another decision later.

THE LESSON

Remain calm at all times, and stay focused on the world around you to make considered decisions before acting. You must remain calm in order to fully understand people and situations around you, and in turn make better decisions. Being calm leaves you in greater control than those around you, and empowers you to react in a level-headed way.