

You Need to Stand for Something

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

Today, I read a story in the *Washington Post* about a girl who recently resigned from West Point and is going to Yale. She resigned from West Point because she is gay and the school will kick her out if it learns that she is gay. Tired of compromising between what she believed was right and wrong, she resigned to protest the policy and be consistent with her own internal compass.

When I started reading the story, I immediately thought—*she's probably transferring to Harvard or Yale*. Sure enough, I was not surprised when I learned later in the article that that was where she was going.

Why wasn't I surprised? Because a school like Yale probably receives a couple of hundred transfer applications for every spot it has open (very few people drop out of Yale). In order to get one of those spots you need to stand for something. How memorable is it to have a good grade point average? Lots of people have good grades. Very few people stand for something. The people who stand for something are the ones who are remembered, and most often, the ones who get hired for the most competitive positions, get into the best schools and consistently have the most opportunities presented to them.

I read stories all the time about people taking a stand for something and then changing directions in their careers and lives. Usually they end up doing exceptionally well. People who stand for something always do better than those who have not. Companies who stand for something always do better than companies who do not. In fact, the most important thing a company can generally do is to stand for something.

- Coca-Cola makes coke. It does not make automobiles or computers.
- Intel makes microchips. It does not make computers or refrigerators.
- McDonald's makes hamburgers and fast food. It does not make airplanes.

The most successful companies stand for something. They not only stand for something, but they are completely consistent with their core principles. I am willing to believe that companies like Coca-Cola and McDonald's are presented with opportunities to do different things all the time. Instead of doing something different, they remain consistent with what they do. They stand for something. This is what keeps them going and this is what makes them successful.

One of the most interesting things about reviewing resumes is that very few of them ever stick out. Instead of trying to distinguish themselves, most people put together resumes that are bland and similar to other resumes out there. This sort of homogenization of resumes has gotten out of control.

- Most resumes contain tons of bullet points about this or that.
- The resumes contain "canned" sorts of descriptions about a person's skills and so forth.

The people try and look like everyone else so they can "fit the mold" of being a certain type of person. The problem is that looking like everyone else is not going to help them be remembered, or get a job.

A couple of years ago, I was looking for a computer firm to help our company do some work. I will never forget the day I spoke with the owner of the company in Louisiana. Despite having an impressive computer science background from Berkeley, the guy was chewing tobacco and spitting while I was talking to him.

"Are you chewing tobacco?" I asked him. I was interviewing him to do some very important work for our company.

"Yes Sir, I am," he responded without an ounce of hesitation.

Then as I was speaking, I started to hear a bunch of motor cross motorcycles in the background. These motorcycles were loud and they were whining up a storm. The man started screaming into the phone:

"I am sorry!! I am at a motor cross race right now. Let me go into the trailer where I keep my motorcycles. It is quieter."

I realize that this may not seem like the best way to behave in an interview, but immediately I was able to connect with him and know exactly what sort of guy he was. I used to chew tobacco in my younger years and grew up with guys like him who did motor cross. Prior to speaking with him, he was just an average "nerd," good at computer science, and so forth. After speaking with him, he was the sort of person I was excited to go into a professional relationship with.

Why?

Because I knew the sort of person he was likely to be.

- I knew that if he was bullshitting me, I would be able to pick up on it.
- I knew that he was not overly concerned with how he looked to me if he was chewing tobacco and racing motorcycles during the day.
- I knew that the guy with a Ph.D. in computer science from Berkeley, was brilliant as all hell, and if he was also interested in motor cross and chewing tobacco too, he probably was an incredibly interesting person.
- I knew that if he raced motor cross, he was probably out of a blue collar background and thought that office politics and so forth were bullshit.
- I knew that if he was towing a trailer full of motorcycles around, then he probably lived in a rural area where he could also keep his trailer (it is pretty rare to keep motor cross trailers in big cities and nice suburbs).
- I knew that if he lived in a rural area, he probably had certain values as well (I have a lot of family friends who live on farms and small towns).
- I knew that if he chewed tobacco, he probably was not too concerned with what others thought of him and tended to

associate with a certain sort of person.

You can tell a lot about a person based on them standing for something. When someone does not stand for anything you cannot tell a lot about them.

After talking with the motor cross computer programmer, I hired him. He has done a great job and made a good deal of money working for us.

You can tell a lot about the girl who resigned from West Point because she was gay as well. I can almost 100% guarantee you that any discussion about her by Yale admissions officers did not revolve around her grades or extracurricular activities: It revolved around what she stood for.

I am in Washington, DC, interviewing people for a position this week. I have reviewed a ton of resumes for this position. While some of these resumes stick out, for the most part I cannot remember most of them. One of the biggest problems that I am having is that everyone looks pretty much the same. Most people have similar experience and fairly similar backgrounds.

No one I am interviewing seems to stand for anything. They may have had good jobs in the past, or good experience — but they do not really stand for anything in particular.

If you do not stand for something, you typically do not get remembered.

I have decided in light of the resumes I have reviewed that one of the most important things on a resume is to stand for something. It does not matter in particular what you stand for (unless it is incredibly offensive). Just standing for something

- Makes you more interesting.
- Makes you stand out.
- Makes people interested in hearing about your interest(s).

This morning I interviewed someone I found quite interesting (although he was not a good fit for our company). This man had a commitment to something called "diversity recruiting," which is filling positions in law firms that lack diversity. I found this quite interesting and had never seen a resume like this. He wanted to do nothing but diversity recruiting. The gist of our conversation was that he would be interested in speaking with me further, provided I had a job for him doing diversity recruiting for our company; however, if I did not have a diversity recruiting job, he would look elsewhere for a job.

There are, of course, not a lot of positions out there I can imagine for someone to do nothing but diversity recruiting, compared to recruiting in general. By limiting his search to just "diversity recruiting" it seemed to me that he was limiting himself; but in reality, I believe he was actually opening up a lot of doors.

If someone needs a diversity recruiter, he will almost certainly get interviewed and called. He will stand out among other recruiters not committed to diversity. He will probably do very well.

One of the biggest problems that people have is that they try and fit in and try to be all things to all people. To some extent, this is how we are programmed:

- Schools reward people who are good at math, science, languages, social sciences, and more. The ability to be good in all disciplines is rewarded.
- If someone is a good student in all disciplines and a good athlete, or good at an instrument, or theater as well—all the better. The more things people are good at the better!

Historically, the most positive feedback goes to people who are good at all things.

However, in reality the best thing you can do is to be good at one thing and stand for one thing. One of the largest problems that people have in their career is when they diverge from what they are good at. Everyone is good at something, and diverging from your true strengths (and what you stand for) is something that almost always backfires.

When you do not stand for something, you divert from your true strength and will not do well, not get as much recognition, and will not rise as fast as you are capable of. Everything begins to crumble and slowly fall apart when you are not doing something that you are really good at and do not stand for.

The biggest success comes when you stand for something and are good at it.

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