



Consistency and Commitment Beat Brilliance and Talent

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

When I was growing up in Detroit, I went to school with kids whose parents were the [Chief Executive Officers](#) of major auto companies and were in other high level roles. Sometimes I would turn on the television and see the same men I'd eaten dinner with at a friend's house on the nightly news giving a press conference in Washington, or speaking about an issue of national importance. Another friend's father was the [CEO](#) of a major national bank and, by the time I was 13 or 14, I was smart enough to realize I could learn a lot from these men. I figured they must all be enormously gifted intellectually and have other skills I could learn.

In my spare time, I read books such as *Iacocca*, about Lee Iacocca, and when the Publisher's Clearing House mail came to my mother's house, I ordered *Forbes*, *Business Week* and a ton of other business magazines so I could impress these nationally important men and talk to them about their careers and what they did. After reading a book about Lee Iacocca, and having spent months reading business magazines, I had the opportunity to speak with my friend's father. He used to work for President Ford writing speeches and he now worked directly for Henry Ford writing his speeches. Because I had read so much, I realized after about an hour, I knew much more than even he did about various aspects of his business.

When I was 13 or 14, I dominated dinnertime conversations at my friends' homes spinning off facts and figures and entertaining major figures in various auto companies. The more I talked about business with these men, the less I realized they knew. I couldn't believe men who might have gotten MBAs from Harvard Business School knew so little. I figured that, based on their lack of knowledge about arcane business facts, none of them must be all that intelligent.

Most of these men were from all over the country and had joined, right out of school, automobile companies, banks and the other institutions they would one day lead. In at least one incident, one man worked on an automotive manufacturing line in a factory during college. In another case, my friend's father went to a school called General Motors Institute (no longer in existence) which was a college run by General Motors.

Every day, these men got up early and drove into Detroit. They came home late each evening. Once a year, they took vacations for a couple of weeks, usually skiing in Colorado or at a ski resort in Michigan. At the same time, most had wives who never worked and stayed at home raising the children and providing their husbands with the sort of environment that would enable them to succeed. By the time I met many of these titans of business and industry, they had been getting up at the same time to go to work and living the life they lived for over 30 years--more than twice as long as I'd even been on earth.

And there I was sitting at their dining room tables uncovering how much information they didn't know and believing they were stupid.

The more I realized these men didn't know about business facts, the more I read. One thing I quickly realized was none of these men were angry, and all of them seemed to enjoy learning what they didn't know from a child. In addition, there was a very gentle way about them because, despite the fact I must have looked like an idiot spewing forth various facts and figures, they never sought to correct me. They were always diplomatic in all respects.

Just because I was aware of more facts and figures, it certainly did not mean I was more talented than these men. On the contrary, they were actually busy leading their lives and careers while I stood on the sidelines simply reading about it.

Now some 20+ years later, I can reflect on what was going on:

1. I've never been on the evening news giving my opinions before the United States Congress.
2. I don't sit in the office of the President of the United States and give him advice about what to talk about in speeches or write speeches for him.
3. My actions and opinions are not mentioned weekly in the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal*.

Now, I look at these men with profound respect because the lesson their careers hold is something I've learned from, and you can too: *Work ethic and consistency trump brilliance and talent.*

There are many people with a lot of talent, or who know a lot. These talented people may know more than the next person. They may be better socially. They may have a better idea of what needs to be done. They may have better educations. They may be better sales people. They may be more connected.

But when it comes right down to it, none of this really matters if the talented person can't simply "show up" and do the same thing over and over. The people who win and become the most successful are the ones who put in a massive effort over the long run. Nothing is more effective than being consistent. The Grand Canyon could never have been built by one giant flood. Instead, it was built over millions of years by a consistent flow of water that applied a small amount of pressure and erosion over time. So, too, it is with your career. If you are consistent, you will achieve a lot more over time.

Talent and brilliance have sex appeal. Talent is something that blows us away.

Several years ago, I was sitting in my mother's living room in Detroit, and in the other room was a man who was providing one of the most brilliant analyses of the meaning of the world I ever heard. The more this man's mind worked through an idea, the more brilliant I realized he was. At the time, I was 27 and had been through college and [law school](#). In addition to practicing law, I was also teaching in a law school. I'd heard a lot of very brilliant men speak in my career, but the person I was listening to was incredible.

As I listened to this man speak, I was firmly convinced he was the most brilliant man I'd ever heard. After he left, I found out he had an extraordinary IQ and had received a PhD from Princeton. However, he'd never applied his skills. Instead, he was living in a small \$350 a month apartment and had lived there for years. He didn't use his brilliance in his job and, instead, his

talent went to waste because it wasn't being consistently applied. He'd worked [multiple jobs](#) in his career. What if this man had decided to spend his career writing? What if this man decided to spend his career teaching? He did none of those things and, despite incredible talent, nothing ever happened. We need to apply our talents.

Talent is fickle. Sometimes talent shows up, and other times it doesn't. In contrast, being consistent requires a high level of tenacity. You need to keep plowing through. You can't give up. Anyone can be a better performer in one thing or another for a short time. What really takes skill is to consistently perform over time. This is what my friends' fathers were all doing. Imagine 30+ years of doing the same thing and climbing within the same organization. This consistent effort is what creates the best results and enables people to win over time. Only certain people are born with brilliance and incredible talent, but anyone can work hard.

When we are consistent, we make small bits of progress on a daily basis. Making small daily bits of progress are what transform careers and lives. Anything you focus on consistently will make you better. Many people lack the ability to consistently focus over time, and instead believe one small flash of brilliance or talent will make a difference. This is almost never the case. Consistency and work ethic always trump brilliance and talent.

THE LESSON

Consistency and commitment trump brilliance and talent. The most successful people are those who put massive long-term effort into their careers. Only certain people are born with innate talent or brilliance, but consistent effort lies within the reach of anyone and is ultimately a much greater factor in success. Anything to which you apply consistent focus will show progress.

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