

Do and Give More Than Is Expected of You

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

When I was 18 years old I spent three months working as a garbage man in Detroit. It was one of the more interesting experiences of my life. I had taken the job out of necessity because I had the good fortune of being cut off from any spending money by my parents. Facing my first year of college in a few months, I wanted to make sure that I had money for my books and other expenses.

When I started the work I threw myself into it with a great deal of enthusiasm. I had no other choice, so I told myself I would make the most of it. If I did a good job collecting garbage there were all sorts of promotions I could receive. For example, I could be put in charge of mowing city grass on an automatic mower. I might be allowed to paint lines in the street. Alternatively, I might be given the job of going around in a boom crane and replacing city light bulbs.

My job was to ride around on the back of the truck and pick up bags of trash at each stop. Most of the other garbage men rode lazily on the back of the truck between each house, got off at each stop, and then got back on. Not me. I decided early on to simply jog alongside the truck. Instead of picking up one garbage bag per stop, I would try and pick up two, three, or more.

Within a few weeks I was in some of the best shape of my life. I worked so hard at the job that I started pressuring the men driving the garbage trucks to drive faster so that I could pick up more garbage.

I noticed early on, though, that the men did not seem to like me working so hard. I did not understand it at the time, but the men I was working for were unionized and paid by the hour. By picking up so much garbage I was not only shortening their shifts, but also making them look bad. Despite doing such good work, I was actually hurting myself by picking up so much garbage.

One day after work my supervisor asked me if I “had a minute.”

He looked embarrassed and a little scared: “I’m going to have to let you go,” he said.

“Why?” I asked, somewhat puzzled. “I’m doing a good job.”

“These guys are complaining to me. They are complaining to their union. You are only here a few months before you go to school. I have to keep them happy. You’re getting the work done too fast and costing them money.”

Without any argument, I thanked him and went home. When I got home my mother was sitting on the couch watching television. My mother spent twenty-plus years (the better part of her career) working as an investigator for the Michigan Department of Civil Rights. Essentially, this job involved investigating cases of discrimination against people because of their race, age, sexual orientation, and so forth. She then would assist people in either getting their jobs back or suing their employer.

“They told me I was getting fired because I was working too hard,” I told her.

My mother got on the phone and called the Department of Public Works, where I had been working as a garbage man. Within ten minutes I had my job back. When I got to work the next day my supervisor apologized, gave me a small raise, and promoted me to a job mowing lawns and doing other sorts of work on city lots. Riding around on a lawnmower all day and screwing around with a weed whacker was like paradise compared to throwing garbage all day.

It was a promotion!

However it comes about, I have never heard of anyone who did not

- get promoted
- get a **better job**
- or find themselves in a better life

as a result of doing more than was expected of them. The harder you work—and the more you do than is expected—the more you will attract the attention of your superiors and the sooner you will find yourself in a better life. In the case of my job as a garbage man, my hard work attracted the attention of my superiors at first in the wrong way—but then it paid off.

In my job as a garbage man I was surrounded by men whose entire careers had been based on not doing more than was expected of them. In contrast, I was of the belief that I should always do more than was expected of me. This belief is something that I owe every success I have ever had to.

In academics, this means studying more than is expected of you. In the work world, this means doing more than is expected of you in many, many ways. When I was in college, if a teacher told us we had to write a paper of a “minimum” of five pages—I would write a thirty- or forty-page paper.

“Why are you writing such a long paper,” my classmates would always ask me.

“Because I want to get an A,” I would tell them. And when I wrote such long papers and put so much effort into them, I always got As (often the only A in the class) when everyone else turned in their five-page (or maybe six-page) papers and got Bs and Cs. I even saw many people play with their margins to get to over five pages.

The practice of law (which I did for some time) is like this too. I remember one of my first insights into really great lawyering came when I was clerking for a judge. I started to notice that the best lawyers from the best firms did very small, imperceptible things that other attorneys would not.

For example, if they were sending you a bunch of pages paper clipped together they might put a sticky note between the

paper and the paper clip so the pages were not marked with the paperclip indentation. This is, of course, excessively anal but it is an example of the smallest of details that the best attorneys do not miss. Their work is proofread meticulously. They are on top of just about every single thing they are doing to an extraordinary degree, and no detail is too small. In contrast, the work of average attorneys would be proofed far less carefully and contain far more errors, typos, and other sorts of things. Forget about a sticky note so there is no paper clip indentation...

Whether it is working as a lawyer or as a garbage man, there is always a way to do much more than is expected of you in every profession. There is no job where you cannot do more than is expected of you. You may not immediately see the results, but over time you will. No supervisor misses their hardest and best workers. You will soon find yourself promoted, given raises, given bonuses, and more. You will be offered a **supervisors job** eventually. Or you will be hired away by an astute competitor who sees how much you are giving and knows they can channel your energy.

"If I give more than is expected of me, won't I be used and taken advantage of?" you may ask.

There is a remote chance of this occurring. But human nature is to give back in response to receiving. This is how it works 99% of the time. It is just a law of the world.

I have seen so many **attorneys get better jobs** by giving more than is expected of them. Other lawyers notice and hire them away. They rise up the ranks of firms. They attract clients who also see their devotion. They get to the top fast. It is like this in every profession.

There is no other thing that has given me more in life than performing more than is expected of me. Let your competitors in your job slack off and put in half-assed efforts. A few years from now you will be living the dream while they are stuck or moving backward.

If you are not doing your absolute best and withholding your best work, you are only prolonging your present situation and are dooming yourself to a life of mediocrity (for your abilities) or, at worst, failure.

Resist the urge to do only what is expected of you. Give all you can to everything you do and you will succeed.

THE LESSON

In every job, there is always much more to do than what is actually expected of you; by doing more than expected, you will attract the attention and respect of your superiors and find your life improving. When you withhold your best work, however, you only prolong your current situation and confine yourself to mediocrity. Put everything you can into all of your work, resist the urge to only put in the expected effort, and you will find your life and career improving accordingly.

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