

Success Requires Ignoring Group Norms

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

When I started [legal recruiting](#), within a few months of starting the business, I met a man who was one of the founders of the dominant legal recruiters association. At one time, he had the largest legal recruiting firm in California. As I spent time getting to know him, he told me that he had been "kicked out" of the recruiters' association he started because he had started a job site to help attorneys get jobs as well. Apparently, the recruiters' association viewed the job site as competitive with legal recruiting—despite the fact that less than 1% of attorneys are even qualified to use a legal recruiter.

I found this very odd, but at the time I realized that there were certain rules and dynamics associated with being part of this organization.

Several years later, I largely forgot about what had happened to this recruiter and joined the organization myself. Soon thereafter, I started receiving all sorts of correspondence from them stating that I should not make any statements that my job site for attorneys ([LawCrossing](#)) was a good way for attorneys to get jobs (because doing so was competitive with recruiters who were also members of the association). To my astonishment, in order to be a member of this organization in good standing, it was a virtual [unwritten] requirement that you only be in the legal recruiting business and have only one opinion about how attorneys should get jobs.

You are most certainly surrounded by people with all sorts of opinions regarding what is "normal" and "expected" in your life and career:

- What your opinions should be
- What lines of work you should be doing
- How you should dress
- How you should act
- How you should spend your free time
- Who you should associate with

In fact, no matter your profession, my guess is that there are certain norms regarding what is expected of you with respect to items such as those above. In fact, in every job I have ever held, there have been people around me with all sorts of opinions regarding who I should be.

Most people follow the path that has been laid out for them by others. Most lawyers do this. Most physicians do this. Most businesspeople do this. In fact, in just about every profession out there, people are following what the "norm" is—for their profession and the people they are working with.

My first job was as an asphalt contractor. Here, there were "prevailing rates" for the work I was doing in the Detroit suburbs. In fact, no one ever charged beneath a certain minimum rate for the sort of work that I was doing (at least where I was working). In my second year of business, I realized that if I charged less money, I would make more money. To the astonishment of other competitors in the community, I started charging 50% less for my work. I was ostracized by them. I had my equipment stolen and vandalized by them. Nevertheless, within a few years I ended up taking over all of the residential asphalt work in at least three good-sized residential suburbs of Detroit and I no longer had any competitors where I operated. I also made a lot more money than I would have, had I sat on the sidelines and played by the rules.

It was all because I chose to act in my own way—and with my own rules—that I was able to dominate the business.

Several years later when I started legal recruiting, it was my ability to see beyond this business that made me the most successful. Instead of just recruiting, I went into fields as diverse as student loans, resume revision, property, and more. I did things differently and as a consequence, became far more successful than I otherwise would have been. Far more successful than any legal recruiter I have ever known—or heard about.

It was all because I chose to act my own way—and with my own rules—that I was able to be successful.

A few years ago, I started writing articles each day about how people can get jobs and how to be more successful. Last year, I decided that I wanted to create a course that would teach people how to search for a job. I started doing all sorts of videos related to this, writing all sorts of articles, and so forth. I have been studying how to get a job my entire career and really believe in what I have to teach.

When I first began this project, a few people working for me started coming to me and saying things like "it is not dignified," that I should never be doing this. I also started receiving all sorts of hostile e-mails, voice messages, and so forth from people who were offended by my advice (I still receive these daily). Other people approached me and told me confidentially that others did not believe I should be writing such articles, or doing [job search videos](#), because it is not "CEO-like."

I've never been bothered with this. Today, my job search-related articles go out to more than 750,000 people per week. I love sharing my advice with people. I chose to do things differently and in my own view of things, I have helped people in their careers. Who cares if most job search companies are run by people who do things differently?

It was all because I chose to act my own way—and with my own rules—that I was able to share my knowledge with so many people.

You need to make your own rules in your life and in your career. If you make your own rules, then you can accomplish far more than you would just being part of the status quo and doing things the way everyone else does. Ultimately, you need to awaken what is inside of you to be unique in order to take charge of your career and life.

The rewards for not taking charge of your life are that you will never grow to your full potential. Growing to your full potential is the result of making small decisions that change the outcome of your life and your contribution to the world. These decisions involve taking action in areas where most others might not act. If you are going to do anything—and really amount to something—you are going to need to learn to take action.

The main cost of not taking action is that you will always be dependent on a group psychology and way of doing things. In some cases, there is nothing wrong with this group psychology—but in most cases, there is. *Most people who have become very successful have seen something wrong with acting in accordance with group norms and have taken action to step outside of these norms.* Having the ability to be unique, stepping outside the mold, and knowing what other sorts of opportunities exist on the other side can make a huge difference. Can you step outside the mold?

One of the most interesting stories I ever heard was of a distinguished accountant working in an accounting firm. This particular accountant was motivated by making a lot of money, and for a few decades he had sat behind a desk working all day. He had bosses and office politics to deal with and all sorts of pressures that people have working in an office.

One of the accountant's clients was an exterminator. The accountant had a good education, was a CPA, and had worked hard his entire career to get to the point where he was making \$120,000 a year or so. To his astonishment, the exterminator (with no education) was making more than \$500,000 a year with only a few employees. Moreover, when the accountant spoke with the exterminator, he was always calling him in places where the exterminator was on vacation, like Florida.

One day, the accountant quit his job and decided he too was going to be an exterminator. Apparently, some of his bosses went over to his house and spoke to his wife—they thought he might need to be institutionalized. The accountant became an exterminator. Within a few years, he was earning as an exterminator multiple times what he had made before. Moreover, he was vacationing several weeks per year. The way the former accountant likely viewed it, it was the people who were still working in the accounting firm (not him) who were crazy....

I love telling success stories about people like the accountant turned exterminator. You should know, of course, that there are many stories like this where someone makes a decision to do something and fails. Of course there are. People fail all the time—and on an ongoing basis. In fact, I am sure I am going to fail at a ton of stuff today, this week, and this year. Some of my failures will be small and others will be larger.

Every time you do something different from what those around you are doing, or take an action others are afraid to take, there is a chance you may fail. That is perfectly fine. Failing is good and can be helpful. Failure develops good judgment.

Most people who succeed have made tons of bad decisions in the past. Then they learn from these decisions. The important thing about successful people, though, is that they made decisions and then acted on these decisions.

1. Success in life is the product of having good judgment.
2. You only acquire good judgment from having experience.
3. Getting experience is usually the result of bad judgment.

If you are going to reach your potential in anything, you need to make a decision and gain experience—even if you fail, you are going to improve your judgment.

THE LESSON

People tend to follow the norms for their chosen profession; your own success depends on your ability to step outside of these norms and create your own rules. You must take charge of your life in order to reach your full potential. Be unique, and stay constantly aware of what other opportunities exist. You need to make your own decisions and gain the experience that comes with success or failure.

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