

Avoid the Envy of Others

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

I am sure you have heard about how Sam Walton used to drive around in an old pickup truck—despite being worth billions of dollars.

Warren Buffet lives in a house not worth more than \$200,000 and has lived there for thirty-plus years. He also works in the same office he has always worked in, and it is not that nice of an office.

For years, Jeff Bezos, the billionaire founder of Amazon.com, drove around in a late-model Honda Accord.

Very few people succeed at the level of men like Walton, Buffet, and Bezos. People who are able to gain and keep power understand that one of their greatest dangers is the people who are below them. Watching someone come from nothing to be worth billions of dollars cannot help but make some of those around the successful person feel inferior and instill some level of envy. And it does not have to be about money—it could be fame, power, or something else. The more successful you are, the more you will attract “silent enemies” who envy you and want nothing more than to see you fall.

To ensure that they do not attract the envy of others, these successful men downplay their success, doing their best not to flaunt it. They do their best to appear the same as those around them.

In fact, regardless of your level of success in the world, it is wise to downplay your success and deflect attention from yourself because otherwise you will eventually be attacked, undermined, and so forth. Envy creates enemies; they may not say anything but they will be waiting for every possible opportunity to undermine you and create problems for you. The more successful you become, the more people around you will come to resent you because your success only amplifies their comparative lack of achievement.

Envy is extremely dangerous. Often, when people envy you, they cannot admit it. For most people, showing envy for others is to also admit feeling inferior. Therefore, people find ways to disguise their envy for those people who arouse it within them. When we encounter people whom we see as superior to us, we become uncomfortable. This is because most people want to believe they are smarter, more attractive, more successful, and so forth than those around them. When we meet people who show we are not the things we imagine ourselves to be, our self-image is weakened and we become envious.

One of the most common ways of disguising envy is to criticize others. I couldn't even count how many times I have been in conversations about successful people when I start hearing statements like the following:

- He may be successful, but he is immoral and he probably cheats on his wife.
- She may have done well, but she is really very unhappy deep down.
- They may be famous, but they are actually really screwed up.

In virtually every incident where I have heard these sorts of statements, they are being made by people who were once peers of someone who ended up becoming extremely successful.

The more successful I have become in my own life, the more people who were once close to me and my former peers have made statements like this about me. A few years ago, a bunch of statements similar to these started appearing about me on the Internet, and I was very shocked. Since the attacks were so in-depth, untrue, and personal in nature, I hired a lawyer to find out who it was.

It turned out it was a former employee of mine who had gone to school with a bunch of my college friends. At one time he had been my peer, but I had long ago surpassed him. This was someone whom I never would have suspected was so envious. The person had not worked for me in more than five years and yet had gone on an underground and anonymous vendetta—using fake names on message boards and so forth—due to his feelings of envy. This is the power of envy. If others become envious of you, they will attack in underhanded and anonymous ways and may lie in wait for years.

When I first started practicing law, at the age of 26, I had recently sold an asphalt business and bought myself one of the most expensive Porsche's I could find. The car was flashy, drove fast, drew lots of attention, and stood out. I thought having the car was a great thing and I figured I was entitled to and deserved such a great car.

One of my first days in the office, an attorney I worked with who was very well known (and rumored to make at least a few million dollars a year), pulled up next to me in the parking lot in a late-model Toyota—a car probably not worth much more than \$10,000. I was surprised. *Why would such a successful attorney be driving around in such an old car?* At the time I did not understand that he was playing the same game Buffet, Walton, Bezos, and others play: he was doing his best not to attract envy.

In fact, most of the [successful attorneys](#) I was working with drove inexpensive cars. It was almost as if there were an unwritten agreement for attorneys to drive cars that were bland and ordinary. Moreover, many of the attorneys also did not live as well as you might expect them to and dressed in ordinary and inexpensive clothes. When I joined my second law firm, my boss did extremely well financially. Yet he drove a ten-year-old Mazda Miata and made sure to always fly coach when he traveled. I could list numerous examples like this of the lengths that people go to in an attempt to not attract envy.

It is easy to draw inferences about successful people who drive inexpensive cars--these are concrete examples that show they do not want to inspire envy. Instead, they want to fit in and not be showy. The cost of drawing the envy of others is greater than any enjoyment they might get from driving around in a nice car. These men make displays of how much they are like everyone else, rather than how much money they make.

Whether it is because you have gotten a promotion, a raise—or some other symbol of success--every achievement you earn will likely attract the envy of those around you. To ensure that you do not create more problems for yourself than

necessary, the best thing you can do is to emphasize that you're just like everyone else. When you talk to people, it is not a bad idea to downplay your success. Being self-deprecating also goes a long way with people. This can help deflect their envy.

I know several people whom I would estimate are worth in excess of \$100 million. When I speak with these people, they are constantly downplaying their strengths and always bringing up their weaknesses. They will never tell you that business is good. They will never brag. Moreover, they will go out of their way to make sure you understand all of the problems they are having in their lives--personal, financial, social, and others. They are distracting you from focusing on their power and strengths, and ensuring that you do not become envious of them.

Successful people do not want to be envied by others. For many, the last thing they want is to draw attention to themselves as being above or better than those around them. They know that if people are envious of them, this envy will stew within people and these people will eventually try to undermine them in ways that they cannot predict. The more important thing is actually *having* power and success and not that others *think* you have it.

It is important to recognize envy in others. Many times this envy can take the form of lots of small criticisms. Other times it can be a look you notice. At still other times, the envy might be evident through false praise. Suddenly someone appears in your life offering compliments and flattery for everything you do. This false praise comes from someone who wants to achieve what you have and maybe wants to replace you. These people can be quite dangerous and need to be avoided because their objective is generally to surpass you, and doing so often requires that they hurt you in some way.

For the past ten years, I have operated a legal recruiting firm. In this job, I hire attorneys with good pedigrees to do recruiting. Several times during the course of operating this business, various recruiters have approached me for aggressive mentoring—acting as if they wanted to be close friends. Many called me on the phone every day and chatted about [the job](#). Others came and stayed with me for an extended period of time. In almost every instance, these people watched everything I did very closely and were always ready with praise for one thing or another that I was doing. I can say almost unequivocally that the people who praised me the most were the most dangerous. Each and every one of them ended up quitting without notice and establishing competing businesses. In several cases, I learned that they had been stealing from the company while they were employed. They were the last people I ever expected to quit or steal. I had been blinded by their praise and flattery.

The most dangerous people in our [careers](#) are those we allow to envy us.

To deflect this envy, people employ all sorts of methods. Several years ago, I spent some time with a man and his family who have a giant horse ranch of hundreds of acres overlooking the ocean in Malibu. The man had a somewhat successful business but had inherited a great deal of money from his father, who was a famous performer, and still received giant royalty checks each month from his father's estate. The property is spectacular and certainly worth tens of millions of dollars.

"This would be a great place for you to have a company party!" I told him one day.

He suddenly turned very serious.

"Are you out of your mind? The last thing in the world I would ever want to do is have a company party here. You cannot imagine how many problems that would cause for me at work."

If people envy you they will put obstacles in your path. I know a guy who thinks he is cool because he drives nothing but Ferraris (he collects them and they are almost all red). He has been stopped for negligible speeding (5-10 miles an hour over the speed limit) more times than he could remember. Eventually, after a series of these small tickets, he lost his license. Then, after losing his license, he kept driving and was pulled over and taken to jail. Now he has a criminal record for being "busted" for the serious crime of driving 5 miles an hour over the speed limit too many times. He also pays incredible insurance rates.

Do you think he would have been stopped so much for minor speeding infractions if he were driving a Chevrolet compact car? I seriously doubt it. He was stopped because he was attracting unnecessary attention to himself and drawing the envy of the police. "*I'll show him!*" I'm sure the police thought each time they stopped him. And they did. They chipped away at him with small ticket after small ticket until he wound up losing his license. That is the power of envy.

If you get pleasure out of making others feel inferior to you, then you have a serious problem you need to fix. When something good happens to you, don't go bragging about it to your peers or anyone else. If you arouse sufficient envy, they may exclude you socially, undermine you professionally, and create all sorts of problems for you that you never see coming.

To advance in your career, it is important that you do your best to avoid the envy of others. It is paradoxical that in order to remain powerful, you need to appear less powerful than you are. By avoiding envy, you put yourself in a situation where you are more likely to succeed. If you avoid envy, you can compete more effectively in the world.

THE LESSON

Avoid the envy of others. Successful individuals know envy can lead others to undermine them; in order to remain powerful, you must paradoxically minimize the appearance of power. Avoiding envy will put you in a much better position to succeed and effectively compete.