

Do Not Be a Victim

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

When I was growing up, my mother was an investigator with the Michigan Department of [Civil Rights](#). Essentially, her job involved listening to various peoples' complaints alleging they were discriminated against by an employer due to their race, sex, sexual orientation, and so forth. Then, she investigated to see if any discrimination really occurred. Typically, she interviewed the employer and the people at a given place of business, as well as the person alleging discrimination. Once she did this, she sent a report to [civil rights lawyers](#). They determined whether or not to pursue action against the employer based on the information she provided.

She did this for a long time. She got the job through an African American state senator with whom we were friends. My mother worked for him for several years before working for the Department of Civil Rights. He was the Pro Tempore of the Michigan State Senate for at least a decade and he was incredibly gracious in sharing with me the incredible level of frustration African Americans had with the white establishment in Detroit throughout the 70s, 80s, and 90s. This insight was invaluable and drove a lot of my early interest in helping people who had not been given a fair break in the job market for various reasons. I could not believe so many talented people were trapped in their lives and circumstances due to their race, class, and other factors. The lessons I learned from the Senator and watching my mother fight for the rights of African Americans and other disadvantaged people has been a major motivating force in my life.

I've governed my life using the lessons he taught me. There is a tremendous amount of discrimination that exists. Growing up, I witnessed a great deal of this. What this taught me is many people do not have the tools or the knowledge to help themselves and are really kept down by society. When I was growing up, society had a pattern of keeping people down through a lack of access to information. For example, people might learn about [top jobs](#) on the golf course rather than the paper. People would exchange information among their peers about jobs and this often kept certain people in one place and never gave them opportunity. I saw this when I started practicing law to some extent. I gradually came to believe the very best thing to do was to ensure people received information about various opportunities. I believed this lack of information was something holding many people back. People can only take advantage of opportunities if they are presented with them. Many people relish opportunity and do everything within their power to make the most of themselves.

What makes me really angry, however, is there are so many people who do not take advantage of the opportunities they are given. Instead, they look upon the few opportunities they have as a way to game the system and take the most they can from an employer. This way of thinking is somewhat prevalent in the United States, and it's always had disastrous consequences for those who involved in it.

Seventy years ago, our country was very isolated politically and economically. After World War II, countries in Europe and Asia were busy rebuilding themselves and the United States became an extremely powerful economic force. We were sending our goods and services all over the world and an incredible amount of wealth and opportunity was flowing into our country, creating wealth and opportunities.

This massive growth in the United States also resulted in unions and other organizations gaining tremendous power. Incredible inefficiencies were allowed to occur in numerous organizations. Many of these inefficiencies are still working themselves out today in companies such as General Motors. More importantly, the wealth created resulted in a massive level of entitlement whereby those working expected massive rewards from the company regardless of the effectiveness of their work. People started suing their current and former employers for trivial things and eventually word spread you could make a lot of money holding employers accountable even when the employer had often done nothing wrong.

My mother used to come home with numerous cases she was investigating each day and leave them on the dining room table. I would read all about the people who lost their jobs. In fact, for several years I found this information far more interesting than anything that was going on in school. I would say up to 95% of the reports I read were people who had filed complaints in circumstances where there actually was no discrimination. The people would just make up reasons for the alleged discrimination. My mother is extremely liberal and had spent her entire career trying to help people she believed had been discriminated against, and she became exasperated by much of what she saw. Numerous people wanted to be "victims" so much and get something for nothing, they did everything in their power to bring down their employer. This was upsetting to my mother and she didn't understand it. It was as if most of the people she met were genuinely evil in some respects.

The other 5% of the people had truly been discriminated against, and there were many horrible stories. When my mother did find actual discrimination, she would spend all night working on cases. She would loan money to people and bring them blankets and food if they had no money. She would fight like hell for the real cases of wrong in the world she saw. This was the only thing she liked about the job. This was something that really motivated her, and I am proud of the hard work she did. My mother was fascinating to watch at these times when something bad really had occurred and she felt like she could make a difference in someone's life and bring them justice.

From an intellectual standpoint, it was the 95% where no discrimination occurred that was the most interesting to me. I could not understand why people would lie and want to be victims when nothing had happened to them. The people who were alleging discrimination where none existed included women alleging sexual discrimination, people alleging age discrimination, people from Europe alleging discrimination due to their accents, people who were gay alleging discrimination, Jews alleging discrimination, Catholics alleging discrimination against them by Protestants and others, and blue collar workers alleging class discrimination against them by white collar workers. What all of these people had in common, however, was they'd been fired from their jobs.

One of the things I noticed most about these cases, after years of reading them, was a lot of people simply do not do good

work, nor do they even want to work. Most of these cases involved people who were basically doing all they could to not play by the rules and get work done. They spent most of their time not working and not contributing to their organization. Their way was to look for reasons not to get certain things done as opposed to getting things done. They were on the outside.

To this day, my mother has an incredibly annoying habit of asking for chronological information such as, "and then what happened ... and then what happened..." This is how her reports read as well. The report would typically delve into the typical day of the fired worker. This was incredibly interesting and informative. Most of the people had rituals and other things that made them consistently late for work. When they got to work, they generally did close to nothing. I noticed the following about these fired workers:

1. They were frequently late.
2. They frequently missed a lot of work.
3. They frequently had many problems outside of work that resulted in them bringing these problems to work with them.
4. They frequently did not contribute as much as they could to the organization.
5. They frequently had habits and other rituals that isolated them at work.

Incredibly, the people filing these discrimination claims were almost always let go because of certain negative patterns and other things they did to upset their employer. They were more motivated by a sense of entitlement and anger towards employers, in general, more so than simply getting the work done. To me, this was surprising. As a young person, I began to realize there was a massive attitude of entitlement that existed. These were also people who often refused to take responsibility for their lives.

There are a lot of people who refuse to take responsibility for their lives. Several years ago, I was home from school on college break. My mother had made friends with the mother of a kid I'd known growing up. The kid was absolutely hilarious and had been smoking pot several times a day since he was 13. He came over and told me about how he was currently living in the Caribbean on a small island with a bunch of other guys who had also gotten big workers' compensation settlements. Apparently, he and a group of guys had figured out a way to go to work for an employer and fake various on-the-job injuries and extract giant settlements from their companies. He had been smoking pot in the Caribbean for the past several years on a beach due to a workers' compensation settlement and had several friends who were doing the same.

As I listened to this, I was not envious, but realized there is really something seriously wrong with the world and many of the people in it. In fact, there are so many people who are not interested in being contributors, it's difficult to believe.

What I would encourage you to do is to not have a victim mentality. You need to believe no one owes you anything and move on. Make the most of your life and your time in it by trying your very hardest every single day. Do not expect a free ride. Prisons are full of people who expected free rides and there is no such thing. Rise above feeling like you are a victim and become a crusader for what you are capable of achieving. Give life and your career your all.

THE LESSON

Rather than adopt a victim mentality, work to take advantage of the opportunities that you already have. Most people only seek to gain as much as they can from their employers, hoping to get something for nothing by feigning victimhood. These people have no interest in being contributors, and refuse to take responsibility for their lives. Do not expect a free ride, but instead strive to perform at your greatest possible potential.