

Why You Need to Be Calculating

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

Years ago I was seeing a woman who was romantically involved with another man -- her boss at the time. I knew about this from picking up numerous clues, but the most damning evidence was a diary that for some reason had been left open on the nightstand by *my bed*. Needless to say, I was confused about the entire thing. I was also quite young at the time.

This woman and I were planning a trip a distance away for a wedding. It happened that her boss was also going to the same event and offered us a ride on his personal jet. Though I was aware of the affair, I decided it would be an adventure and a lot more fun than flying commercial.

During the flight, the man asked me to sit on a small seat at the back of his plane, while he and my romantic partner lounged in giant chairs that resembled Laz-y-Boys. They sipped champagne, ate fine cheeses, and seemed to enjoy themselves thoroughly. He had the pilot fly over his mansion so he could show it to us from the air.

"You OK back there?" he'd shout back at me from time to time while laughing and sipping his champagne.

When we landed, a rental car met the airplane on the runway and the attendant gave the man the keys. I sat alone in back as the man drove us to our destination. My girlfriend seemed to have greatly enjoyed the trip and was most impressed by the man's massive show of wealth. In truth, he also seemed like a decent, likeable guy. I was in my 20s and certainly in no way could compete (financially, at least) with a man who owned a \$10 million jet and was worth hundreds of millions of dollars more.

I'd been with this woman for some time and was trying to come to terms with all of it. I obviously needed to end the relationship, but I was so confused and messed up that I was paralyzed.

My weekend did not go well. I was angry, resentful, shaken, disconcerted. I was starting to realize I was with the wrong person and had made a huge mistake. We fought most of the weekend. Had this man not been involved in our trip, I'm sure we would have had a perfectly nice time.

But it became clear to me that the things my girlfriend and I had in common -- our shared experiences, our mutual interests -- now seemed inconsequential, dwarfed by this incredibly successful man.

On the trip home, the man altered the dynamic in a way that completely took me by surprise. He sat next to me on the airplane, was completely attentive, and even confided in me. He confessed he didn't have anyone in his life, that his achievements meant nothing. He acted vulnerable, exposed his weaknesses. He solicitously brought me the Diet Cokes I favored. He said he'd love to help me with my business. He talked about some of the traits that make people successful.

When the plane landed, he sadly said something to the effect of "Now I get to go home alone."

I actually loved the woman I was with at the time. But I felt so sorry for the guy I considered telling her to go home with him. In fact, I'd actually thought to myself several times during the 90-minute flight, "*He can have her ... I honestly don't care.*"

As he was chauffeured off alone, I decided right then and there I no longer had any interest in continuing my relationship with the woman. I honestly did not care. I knew I could meet someone else who would not do something like this to me. And indeed, a short time later this woman was no longer part of my life.

I've thought many times about this episode throughout the years. This man had been able to get the result he wanted by shifting the dynamic and how I regarded the situation. Normally I would have fought for this woman. But here I did not care—and I did not understand why.

A subtle but powerful dynamic in any relationship—actually, with everyone we come into contact with—is a struggle for control. The most sophisticated businesspeople are absolute masters of control. They are able to manipulate others to their advantage in incredibly effective ways. In that situation, I'd been clearly and successfully manipulated.

First, I was put back on my heels by having to travel with this man in his plane. What guy in his 20s would not be pissed sitting in the back of a jet while some stranger drank champagne with his girlfriend? In doing this, he made me resent the woman I was with. He created a lot of tension between us—and this might well have been the strategy.

Second, he was able to disarm me later by making me feel sorry for him. He sat with me and was friendly, even intimate, and he made himself vulnerable. When I should have felt like beating him up, he somehow got me to effectively hand my girlfriend over to him.

The way this man shifted the dynamic was brilliant. At the time I also reflected that this was probably the way he had made hundreds of millions of dollars. But how can you possibly make someone think in a way that is patently against their self-interest? Here's how:

- You control the dynamic of your interaction with them.
- You control how the other person feels.
- You control how the other person relates to others.
- You control how the other person feels about you.
- You control how the other person feels about others.
- You put the person in a position where they're not in control.
- You emphasize the other person's weakness by emphasizing your own strength.

There are countless people in your life who seek to control you and make everything work on their terms. They do this in different ways—some subtle, others not.

When I was growing up, my grandmother often took care of me. She was well liked and completely non-confrontational. She was afraid to stick up for herself if someone did or said something she didn't like. I never saw her raise her voice at others or be cross or bossy with me. But in fact she was actually quite effective at getting what she wanted.

If something was not going her way, she'd cry and say things like "I'm so good to you and you never listen ...". She did this with my mother, her own son, and many others. In response to this crying, people would react and sit down and apologize. They'd hug her and soften up. Ultimately, my grandmother would always get what she wanted.

This was an incredibly effective strategy. Crying and making the other person feel sorry for you worked much better than controlling the person directly. It was also a form of control. While she appeared a sweet woman who was nice to everyone around her, she actually controlled everyone around her to a remarkable degree.

Subtle, invisible control is the most effective control there is. All around you, people are controlling the dynamics of your life and existence. They could be your boss, your mate—or even someone who's stealing your mate from you. But few people realize when they're being controlled. And so they allow others to control them.

A number of women I know employ a tactic when they're in a situation they want to get out of: they suddenly declare they're not feeling well and need to go home. By being "sick" and avoiding the situation that they don't want to confront directly, they exert control.

You undoubtedly have numerous "hot buttons" people use to control you in your life—we all do. Most people want the dynamic on their terms and want to define the dynamic of their relationships; they want to put you in reaction mode. Putting you in reaction mode makes you uncomfortable and allows the other person to dominate you.

Take the traditional, stereotypical class-conscious WASPs in this country who consider themselves cultured and exclusive. They trace their roots back centuries and are part of a society with its own customs, dress code, language. These groups are very good at recognizing one another. In many respects, they could be said to share a great deal with the English who originally colonized this country.

For centuries the English were able to colonize groups of people far numerous than they, and they did this all over the world. They would come into societies and introduce rules and customs they considered improvements to the people they wanted to dominate. They'd build schools, set up government bodies, introduce religions, build roads for trading, and so forth.

But despite everything the English did, the people they colonized would never be truly English. They merely followed the rules and customs imposed by the English. Thus, native people in colonized lands always felt a sense of inferiority; their own cultures and lives had been taken over by what was represented as a superior culture—but it was a culture they'd never completely fit into. Someone from India, for example, was never going to be part of the British royal family.

The British were able to control others by having a set of rules that constantly put others on the defensive, in a reaction mode.

In the United States, some people coming from a true "blue blood" WASP background feel a sense of superiority to those who are not like them and establish rules no outsider can ever fully fit in with. Using social class or race, these people can put others on the defensive by insisting their rules are superior. It is the modern-day equivalent of what the British did to their subjects in the lands they colonized and is arguably a holdover from that.

It is no coincidence, for example, that the majority of United States presidents have been Anglo-Saxons and Episcopalians (a religion brought over from England), despite the fact they are a minority in the United States. Their power comes from their ability to set rules in which they emerge the winner.

Americans are extremely uncomfortable with any talk of class. Most people who came to the United States were not part of the upper class in European societies and felt oppressed by it. Class makes them uncomfortable because it is perceived as controlling and outdated. But it exists as a power vehicle. It has probably been used against you (and you may have used it against others as well). Money, too, is used as a power vehicle over others—you've probably felt it used against you, and you've probably used it against others as well.

The world conspires to put us on the defensive. People look for ways to undermine us in order to dominate. They'll use every tool at their disposal—dress, accent, social class, religion, pedigree, schooling, achievements. People will also try and make you subscribe to a set of rules that benefits them and may not benefit you. They'll overpower you by setting their own rules. Everyone wants to fight in the way that makes them look best.

In the legal arena, imagine two attorneys competing to make partner in a law firm. One attorney is brilliant and able to come up with stunning conclusions and ideas to impress superiors. The other attorney is not as smart and lacks the same abilities. How does the attorney who's not as smart stand out? All that's necessary is to discover the major weakness of the competitor and make it seem important.

For example, the brilliant attorney may make the occasional typo. The other attorney might circulate a memo about the importance of well-proofed work. Then the other attorney makes sure his own work is perfectly proofed and starts correcting the brilliant attorney's work. Pretty soon the brilliant attorney looks careless and the not-so-smart attorney looks competent. A campaign carried out like this for an extended period of time can produce devastating results against an opponent.

Smart people in office environments and elsewhere carry out campaigns against opponents all day long on multiple fronts. It's simply part of the game of work and life. The more you put people in reaction mode, set rules to your advantage, and make yourself look good, the better off you will do.

Yes, I'm telling you to be calculating. You absolutely need to be. And you can be calculating only when you think through every move and do your best to get opponents to do business on your terms. Life is a battle. Your career is a battle. The most intelligent thing you can do is make the battle on your terms. If the battle is about being a hard worker, make it about being an accurate worker if this is your skill, or a brilliant worker if that is your skill. Reframe every issue to your skill set.

If you do not frame the competition in your own terms and according to your own rules, you'll be dominated. And you won't like that place in the backseat one bit.

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