

Do Not Allow the Past to Limit Your Opportunities Today

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

My one-year old daughter calls a coffee cup "hot" and avoids coffee cups lest she get burned. Until she learns that the coffee cup can also contain coffee, milk, and other foods that will not harm her, she is likely to avoid coffee cups for some time. She must have been burned a little by touching a coffee cup at one point and learned to stay away from them. Until she is able to see the coffee cup for what it is (a cup), and not her past experience (getting burned), she will not be able to experience anything positive that can be associated with a coffee cup. What does she know about the coffee cup except her association with it being hot in the past? She has no idea what a coffee cup is except what she experienced in her past learning. Does she, then, really see the coffee cup?

My daughter's reaction to a coffee cup is no different than how many of us react to life due to negative experiences we've had in the past. We make giant generalizations about various people, places, and things and end up living our lives and careers controlled by generalizations about our past. This limits the number of opportunities we have access to and prohibits us from living the lives and having the careers we could potentially have. For most of us, our limited understanding of the past actually ends up limiting our opportunities in the future.

How we deal with our past largely influences how we perceive the present. We may have had negative experiences in the past and these negative experiences control us because we want to avoid having them in the future. I spent several years of my life working in [law firms](#) and, to this day, I don't like going into law firms because they make me feel uncomfortable and remind me of when I was practicing law. Notwithstanding, I make my living from law firms as a [legal recruiter](#) and fight against this uncomfortable feeling I get every time I go inside one. You, too, may have reactions to environments, people, places, and things that remind you of negative and emotionally draining experiences you may have had in the past.

It's important when you're having these reactions to make sure your reaction is the proper one for what's really going on. You don't want to negatively react to the wrong thing in your past or perform generalizations about something that's unrelated to any past pain you may have experienced. For example, my daughter was reacting with a huge generalization that all cups are "hot" and to be avoided. Were she to carry this logic to its conclusion, she would spend her life never drinking anything out of a coffee cup again. She would be depriving herself of all the enjoyment that can come from enjoying the contents of a coffee cup based on a massive generalization that if she goes near any coffee cup she is likely to get burned.

Because most of us have had limited experiences in the world, we too form generalizations regarding our beliefs as to the directions our careers should take based upon these incredibly limited experiences:

- Some men only want to work for other men
- Some women only will work for men.
- Some women will only work for women.
- Some people only will work in large companies.
- Some people will only work in small companies.
- Some people refuse to ever assume a management role.
- Some people refuse to be anything but a [manager](#).
- Some people avoid working for new companies.
- Some people avoid working for older, more established companies.
- Some people will only work alone.
- Some people will only work in large cities.
- Some people will only work in small cities.
- Some people will only work in jobs where they are represented by a union.
- Some people refuse to work in jobs where they are represented by a union.
- Some people will only work in the service sector.
- Some people will only work in the [manufacturing sector](#).
- Some people will only work with groups of large people.
- Some people will avoid work where they have to talk on the phone.
- Some people will only work places where they have to talk on the phone.

I could continue with this list of preferences almost indefinitely, and these preferences are something that really control what happens to us and in our lives. Many of these preferences could be seen as more than just "preferences" and could instead be called "musts" because many people refuse to work in certain types of environments and do certain things that are largely controlled by their past.

When I was growing up, down the street was a family that was extremely poor. The family never had proper clothes, and they never had enough to eat. One of the real low points must have been the time my mother went out and bought a Boy Scouts uniform for one of the boys because their mother couldn't afford one. The mother had asked my mom to do this, and she had. My mother then asked me to take the uniform over to their house and give it to the boy. I remember that, despite the fact that he and several of his brothers were at home, he didn't answer the door. I left it in between the front door of the home and the screen door.

This family was incredibly poor and never had enough of anything because, back in the 1970s in Detroit, plumbers were unionized. If you didn't belong to a union, it was apparently extremely difficult to [get a job](#), and this particular man was

chronically unemployed. He didn't drink or smoke and was fit and willing to work. Due to some early experience he had with unions, however, he simply refused to have anything to do with any job that involved the unions. Due to this one belief about how "evil" he believed unions were, he was effectively cutting himself off from participating in virtually every job out there. His family literally starved due to this, and his wife ended up divorcing him because he could never find work.

This is an example of someone whose beliefs about something in the past are controlling their future. I am sure there are examples in your own life about beliefs from things in the past and how they are controlling your future. You need to ensure you don't shortchange yourself and your future life due to erroneous beliefs you may have about the past.

Because most of my career has involved legal recruiting, one of the conversations I've had many times throughout my career is a call from attorneys in New York City who inform me they no longer have any interest in working in New York City. They may say something along the lines of the following:

"I never want to work in New York City again. The people there are too competitive and mean. I need to get out of here and work in a smaller market."

The experiences these people are having in New York City are typically just related to the practice of law in general. The practice of law in any law firm is "competitive" and "mean" in many respects. However, most people that don't like practicing law who are working in New York City will generalize the fact that *they do not like New York City and not they do not like the practice of law*. This is another sort of generalization that's extremely dangerous. Here, someone is making a generalization about a massive geographic market and the people within it instead of looking at what really may be the cause of their frustrations.

The attorney who forsakes the entire City of New York is often making a very reckless mistake. First of all, there are thousands of law firms in the city. To surmise that not a single one of them may be a place the attorney would like working is dangerous. Secondly, the attorney who is contemplating moving out of New York may already have a life set up there. They may have children in school, and they may already have a substantial network of professional contacts. Third, the attorney has already taken the bar exam in the state. To simply walk away from this is extremely reckless.

In speaking with these people, I'm always pretty amazed because they will have all sorts of generalizations about why they don't like New York that involve things like public [transportation](#), the size of their apartments, and other trivial things. Most of these conversations never revolve around how the situation may be fixable in New York itself and not require a cross-country move to another part of the United States. For example, the person may be better off practicing law inside a corporation or working in a different practice area of the law in New York City. However, few of these people will regularly undertake this sort of rigorous self-examination and will instead make various conclusions about why New York is the wrong market for them to be working in.

This person may subsequently pick up their family and moved to a small southern town to practice law. They may end up earning one third the salary and working just about as hard as they did in New York. The attorney may have a wife and children they bring with them in the move. Once the attorney starts working with the new law firm in the small city, they will start experiencing the same pressures and issues again. They will have left all of their friends and maybe even some relatives back in New York and now will be isolated in a small town. The attorney may spend years trying to convince themselves that the problem they had was New York City and not the practice of law, their practice area, or another issue with the work. They will spend the rest of their career avoiding New York for jobs under the belief that this is something that created problems for them.

You need to be aware of beliefs you may have from things that have happened to you in the past that may be limiting you today. What are these beliefs and how are they hurting you? The past never equals the future and associations of what things represent from the past can be extremely dangerous.

Several years ago, I had a customer in my asphalt business, Ken, who owned a giant mansion in Grosse Pointe, Michigan. I would see this man every year when I would come by to work on his asphalt, and I made personal friends with him to some extent over the years. He was a person I liked very much, and I feel bad for not staying in more contact with him throughout the years. On his property, he had a guest house, and he had a tenant in the guest house who was a man around 45 years old. The man had never been married and Ken noticed that there was a constant procession of new women continually going to the guest house over the years. Eventually, Ken told me he sat down with the man and asked him why he could never have a steady relationship. He said that the man told him he wanted to, but that he kept cheating on his girlfriends. When Ken asked him why he continued to do this, the man stated that he had learned somewhere along the line that if he did not cheat on women, they would eventually cheat on him, so he never saw any reason to be faithful. Ken tried to reason with the man, but the man simply couldn't bring himself to believe anything different than this.

Think about the gravity of this statement and how truly significant it is. This one belief this man had picked up in the past was preventing him from ever settling down and having a family. He was essentially dooming himself to a life of short-term relationships and connections with other people due to a belief deep down that no one could be trusted. We all have beliefs like this, and these beliefs can be guiding our careers for the positive or the negative.

A couple of years ago, I purchased a house that didn't have any air conditioning or heat in it. I still live in this house today. The previous owner of the home had been forcibly evicted from it and, for whatever reason, had taken the entire air conditioning and heating system with him. I am unclear what someone would do with used heaters and air conditioners, but this guy was able to accomplish this. The situation was even a bit more alarming because the owner of the house left in the middle of the night. He was being watched and pursued by the Federal Bureau of Investigations and other authorities for stealing \$40,000,000 from [school teachers](#) and others. He was eventually arrested in Aspen, Colorado, for various crimes after checking into a hotel under the name "Bryce Pilaf" ("Rice Pilaf")--not his real name--and passing numerous bad checks.

For several weeks, I lived in this house with no air conditioning or heat. We had moved in during the Fall and despite the fact that I live in Los Angeles, the nights do get pretty cold. Showers in the morning were the worst. While I was enjoying the significant financial savings, my wife was starting to get really upset by this. Eventually, I got estimates for having the work done. It was not an inexpensive job. In fact, I believe it cost about \$15,000 to have everything done. I selected a contractor based on price alone and not anything in particular other than that.

For several days, the air conditioning contractor worked on the job with another worker. The contractor in charge of the job was extremely dramatic about the entire thing.

"This is hard work, oh boy!!!" he would say every time I saw him running around the house.

After he had completed the job, he came to me and presented me a bill for the work he had done. I owed him around \$5,000 because I had given him two progress payments of \$5,000 each for the job. The bill he presented to me was for \$10,000.

"Clearly, this is not the correct amount," I told him. "The balance due is \$5,000."

The contractor then puffed his chest out and started telling me how the work was "much harder" than he had originally believed and, due to this, he "deserved" an "extra \$5,000." Obviously, I did not pay him the extra \$5,000. However, I was absolutely fascinated that this guy thought he could get away with this and proceeded to talk with the contractor about his experience doing this sort of thing. I got him to "loosen up," and he told me that he always did this on jobs, and everyone always agreed to pay him more money. He told me that, in his experience, this "always works." He related a belief about his customers that they were basically "evil," and his job was to take as much money from each person as he possibly could.

The man was a complete "scum bag," but I realized right then and there that somewhere in the past this man had learned that the best way to get ahead was to rip people off like this. I found the experience extremely informative on several levels. Here was someone who had learned and came to believe that his customers were there to be stolen from, intimidated, and not served. He had to take as much money from each person as possible, and he needed to do it unethically and in whatever way he could. This was this man's belief about business and how he did his job.

I looked this guy up with the State of California a couple of days later and saw that he did not even have a contractor's license because it had been taken away by the state for this sort of behavior. What I found so difficult to believe was that this guy's entire career had been defined by being incredibly dishonest. The more I had questioned him, the more I realized that this was the only way he knew and understood how to get ahead in his work. He only knew being dishonest.

One of the most destructive things we all do is look at the world in front of us in a way that is defined almost entirely by the past. We use the past as a guide to what objects, people, and circumstances represent in the present. You do this. I do this, and everyone around us does this. The past has an incredibly defining impact on the things that happen to us in the present. In fact, all of the decisions we make about our lives and what happens to us in the present are affected by what has happened to us in the past.

In the case of this contractor, somewhere deep down he believed the only way he could get ahead was to be dishonest. He literally didn't know how to be honest in business. His entire perception of the world was controlled by a belief that it's best to be dishonest. People seek to control their future by making giant generalizations about the past. They generalize the way things are going to be by things that happened to them in the past.

You need to look very closely at your life and see how your beliefs about the past may be limiting you in the future. Do not allow the past to limit the opportunities you have today.

THE LESSON

For most of us, our limited understanding of the past can in turn limit our future opportunities. Looking at the future as defined by your past experiences is among the most destructive things you can do. Instead, look very closely in your life and determine how your past opinions may be limiting your current situation then change those opinions.

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