

## Why You Should Be Suspicious of Flattery and Listen Closely to Criticism

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

A year or so ago, a film producer called me and told me he was going to make me quite famous. He had been reading my columns and believed that my interest in writing, combined with my “look”, would translate into national greatness.

He told me that he anticipated getting me a talk show on a major network in a few years, and that this could lead to roles in movies, an important career in politics (he told me he believed I would soon be a United States Senator) and other great honors and national prominence.

He invited me to his Hollywood studio for a few hours and showed me “promos” he had created for various television shows. “I can see the future of entertainment and know what’s coming! I’m going to do the same for you. You are the next big thing!”

We went to lunch at a Hollywood hotspot, and he introduced me to the heads of a few cable networks. He told me we would “connect” in a few days, and he asked me to put some of my articles together and send them over to him.

“We’re going to get you a best-selling book for sure!” he told me.

This entire episode was certainly very flattering. I directed a few people working for me to organize some of my material into a book and told my wife and family about the entire experience. Everyone was quite excited.

In my mind, though, I had a sneaking suspicion that none of this made a lot of sense. How could this man predict my career as a “star” after just reading a few articles and meeting me? It did not make a lot of sense.

A week or so later, and after spending over \$2,000 of my employees’ time organizing some of my material into a book, I received a call from the producer. “I need you to come down to my studio. There is someone I want you to meet! A real power broker!”

A few days later, I went down to the producer’s office in Hollywood accompanied by the recent college graduates who were helping me put together the book. When we got there, we were ushered into a room with the producer, a woman, and a 22-year old kid.

The woman was a former attorney who had recently left the practice of law to start a public relations firm. For the next hour or so, she gave me a “pitch” about her services. The producer told me that she needed to “make me famous” before he could get involved. This woman would really get the word out about me.

“You might start out by giving interviews in some kid’s garage for a podcast, but that is just the beginning. Things will grow from there!” he told me.

I was a little surprised by this. The producer did not appear to know much about me. In fact, something like this would be a complete waste of my time.

When I asked the woman what type of publicity she had gotten her clients, she was quite vague. I did not know any of the people she had represented in the past with the exception of a tattoo removal clinic (that was owned by her husband). She told me she wanted me to give her \$24,000 for some public relations work.

“What if you do not get me any publicity?” I asked her.

“Well, I still need to be paid for my time,” she replied. “There is a lot of work involved with this.”

The producer then spoke up and told me that if I gave this woman \$24,000, and she got me some publicity, that he would then work with me. In the interim, he was too important to get involved, and I should just work with this woman.

Despite the fact that we had brought a book of my articles for him to review, he had no interest in it. “We’ll talk about that in a few months after she gets you some publicity,” he told me.

When I got into the car to drive home with the two young writers from my office, one of them immediately spoke up.

“That is the biggest scam I’ve ever seen. That producer does not want you. He is just helping that woman get your \$24,000 and doing her a favor.”

I thought about this for some time and then realized that this probably was true.

A couple of days later, I tried calling the woman. She seemed to be using an answering service to take her calls. It took her awhile to call me back. We had an interesting chat. During the call, she told me she had been representing the producer for quite some time.

“Have you gotten him any publicity?” I asked.

“We got him one interview a few months ago, but he and the reporter were unable to connect,” she told me.

When I looked at this entire situation, I began to realize that someone was taking advantage of me. While I may be good at some things, these people were pumping me full of hot air and making me promises that were simply not accurate. It was all about my \$24,000.

Most people are very susceptible to flattery. I am not alone. Telling people positive things about themselves is a surefire way to get them to open their wallets. In contrast, making negative comments to people about themselves is a surefire way to make enemies and have people dislike you a great deal.

Several years ago, I was working with an attorney in Phoenix who desperately wanted to move to Los Angeles. He was at a small law firm and had gone to an average law school where he received average grades. He also had not taken the California Bar Exam. He was making about \$55,000 a year in Phoenix, and I got him a job paying \$100,000 in Los Angeles.

"This is an insult!" he told me. "Market rate at the big firms is \$160,000!"

"You do not have the qualifications to get a job at a big firm," I told him. "This job is a blessing. The only reason this firm is giving you such a good offer is because I have conveyed to them how serious you are about relocating. They are going to need to wait for you to pass the bar. They need to pay to relocate you. They could hire someone from a large law firm, from a better law school, with better grades if they wanted to. You may never get an offer this good again."

Not only did the attorney not take the offer, he also proceeded to yell at me and tell me what an awful person I was. He said something to me I will never forget.

"I expect someone who is helping me find a job to be nice to me and encourage me. I do not need someone to give me negative feedback. I expect you to only say positive things."

That was ten years ago. Since that time, I have watched this attorney's career, and he has worked at a succession of increasingly smaller firms in Arizona. He's now with a three-person law firm in Tucson as an associate.

This guy refused to listen to any form of bad news and only wanted positive news and flattery. Many people are like this.

Most people do not want to know the truth. The truth hurts and is discouraging to a lot of people. When they hear the truth, many people either (1) attack the source, or (2) ignore the source of the comments.

Many people go through life avoiding the truth and choosing to believe things like:

- they are not fat,
- they are successful,
- they are not depressed,
- they are doing as well as they can,
- they are not an addict,
- and they are making the most of themselves.

In fact, this is the norm for most people. Most people are able to ignore the truth and go through life like this. They also avoid people who tell them the truth.

At work, some people may constantly be aware of their own weaknesses and do everything they can to correct them.

However, these same people may be completely blind to other problems that are occurring in their personal lives or with their health.

On a daily basis, I receive emails from people seeking career advice. I enjoy reading these emails and make an effort to respond to every single one of them. Since people want "email advice," I generally cut right to the point and tell people exactly what they are doing wrong and what they need to fix.

- You need to stop changing jobs.
- You need to stop being so entitled in your work.
- You need to work harder than others.
- You need to get along better with your peers.
- You need to be more committed to your job and stop spending all of your time looking at the Internet during work.
- You need to stop looking for a job when you have a job.
- You need to stop taking so much time off.

Instead of a "thank you", I generally do not hear anything back at all. People do not like the truth.

In contrast, the people that I compliment and tell how great they are have remained in contact with me over the years. People love others who say nice things to them and make them feel good about themselves.

I am such a sucker for this sort of thing. When I was in my mid-20s, I wrote a short book that detailed my various adventures in the asphalt business in Detroit, my love interests and disappointments I had experienced. In addition, I also wrote about going to law school.

If this sounds like a boring read, you're probably right. However, after taking some acting classes, I caught the "script bug" and decided that I would turn this book into a script in the hopes of making a major motion picture starring someone like Leonardo DiCaprio or Reese Witherspoon.

Without giving it too much thought, I went to Craigslist and looked at advertisements for writers who turned manuscripts into movie scripts. I sent my book to a woman and paid her some money to read it, and she came back with some good news!

"This is a masterpiece! This is the best piece of work I have ever read. It is so good. It is certain to be a script that will be sold, and I would not be surprised if you received well into the six figures for it."

The woman went on and on. She had been reading scripts for years, knew all sorts of famous people ("I have to show this to a couple of people in 'the industry'. Have you seen *Good Will Hunting*? I know Matt Damon. I'm going to call him about this.")

Who would have thought asphalt in Detroit was so interesting? Who would have thought my romantic life was so interesting?

The woman stated that for a fee of \$20,000, with \$2,000 down, she would turn my manuscript into a movie script. I was very excited by this and sent her a check.

A woman I work closely with (and who is very good at telling me the way things are) told me very clearly.

"There is no way your manuscript is as good as this woman says it is. This is too weird—you wrote this book over 20 years ago. I think you are being conned."

**"Screw her!"** I thought. **"Someone important says I wrote a great manuscript! I'm going to have the last laugh on this one! She's just jealous!"**

Because I wanted to make sure I fully understood how to write a script, I enrolled in a \$1,000 class at a place called The Writer's Workshop in Santa Monica and started taking a course there. The course was set up for beginners so that you could start from scratch and write a script over a three-month period.

I enrolled in the class and started emailing the woman working on my script but did not hear back. (She later reported she had been sick. Then she sent another bill.)

A few weeks into the class, the teacher went around the room and asked each person what their script was about. To my astonishment, a girl who could not have been more than 25 years old announced:

"My script is about a young man in the asphalt business in Detroit and his various adventures with women during law school."

**HUH!?!?**

I spoke to the woman, of course. She told me that she had found a job on Craigslist and was being paid \$5,000 to write the script—my script! She told me she had never written a script before.

I am so embarrassed I fell for this. I fell for flattery.

Most people make a conscious effort to surround themselves with people and environments that do not remind them of the truth of who they are. This is understandable.

Most people do not like, or enjoy, people who come and flat out tell them like it is.

A few years ago, I met someone who created an EMPIRE based on flattery and telling people what they wanted to hear. Here is what he did.

He hired people to go up to women in malls and other public places and tell them they looked like they had the potential to be a model. Then, he would have these women come into his office where they were told this again. In order to pursue their modeling careers, he told them they needed to photographs taken, which would cost \$400, and have their headshots put on a website for a monthly fee.

Old, young, attractive, unattractive, fat, thin—you name it. Everyone was model material. This turned into a giant company all based on people being told what they wanted to hear.

This sort of stuff goes on all the time. I've known several women who wanted to be singers. Generally, once someone says they are interested in being a singer, the women will be approached by a "producer" who will offer to put together a record deal for them in exchange for a fee. Some of these women are horrible singers with no real talent. I heard one woman sing a song that was so bad I walked out. Nevertheless, there are always people trying to take advantage of women and others interested in a dream.

Here is one email I sent a woman who thought she was on the verge of stardom this morning. The woman was being asked to pay a producer who "discovered" her \$35,000:

I have reviewed the contracts and other information you sent me and here is my opinion:

Unfortunately, I have seen many girls and people I know get taken advantage of with schemes like this. It is very common for people that are not wealthy and interested in getting into the music business to be preyed upon by people making promises like this. It is unfortunate there are people out there doing this.

**This is not a legitimate record deal. They are trying to take advantage of you and get your money.**

If this was a legitimate record deal, they would be doing all of the up-front investment and so forth. These people also do not have a very solid track record in this business. They are selling you their time (at a high price) in exchange for an album.

That said, there is nothing wrong with paying someone to help you record an album; however, if you do this, you should shop around. You can do this for less money than these people are charging and probably also find a more highly-regarded producer to record you.

I could be missing something, and I hate to be the bearer of bad news. If you want to pay someone to make you an album, you should shop around. You also do not need to spend this much money to have this sort of work done.

--Harrison

This person, of course, did not respond. They wanted my blessing that someone willing to charge them a bunch of money to record their music was legitimate—the first step toward stardom. When I did not back them up on this, I became a *persona non grata*.

**Conclusion**

It is never pleasant to hear the truth about something—that someone is taking advantage of you, or that you are not on the verge of stardom. However, the best news you can often hear is bad news.

If someone is giving you very good news, but stands to profit from giving you this good news, then you should be very careful. We are often so eager to hear compliments and praise that we fall victim to it. While criticism is not fun, it is often more important to know the truth than be taken advantage of by flattery and lies.

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