

You Need to Be Seen as an Authority

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

Several years ago I learned about the power of authority while operating an asphalt business in Michigan. When I initially started the company, it was called something like "Barnes Asphalt Service" or something along those lines. When I showed up at people's homes, since I am Harrison Barnes, they would know the company was intimately associated with me and that I was a kid seeking to do asphalt work on their home. I was also around 18-years old when I started doing this and since the biggest purchase of most people's lives is their home, not many were all that enthusiastic about letting me loose on their driveways.

I had great plans for what I wanted to do, however. I wanted to grow a large asphalt company and I knew very early on that I was having a very difficult time because the name of my company didn't convey the authority needed. I would give estimates at churches, bowling alleys, school systems, and other large owners of asphalt and would never win the bid. I'm sure people must have thought to themselves, "There is no way I am giving a kid an important job like this!"

It was very depressing not being able to get work for so long. If you are in sales, you know how difficult it is to go through a "down streak" like this. I wanted to work so much and each evening I'd do everything within my power to really look the part. I even started putting on a tie in the middle of summer and made sure my hair was perfectly parted and combed. I still had an incredibly difficult time getting work. In my first season in the asphalt business, I did very little work. It was incredibly depressing. In fact, I was absolutely ready to give up.

This slump I was in is no different from being unemployed. However, in my case, I knew a great part of the problem wasn't the economy or the business I was in, it was me. I was too young and too inexperienced. I had nice flyers and brochures made up with the name of the business and what I did on them. Nevertheless, this wasn't enough to convince homeowners, business owners, and others that I was the right man for the job.

The asphalt business in Michigan is seasonal. You can only work in the spring and summer because it's cold, raining, and snowy the rest of the year. The nice thing about this was that each year I had time to "hibernate" and think about what I'd do in the business the next year. In this respect, I want to point something out for you: the chance to hibernate and rethink your career *is a blessing and something you should make work for you and not against you.*

I looked forward to my annual time of unemployment each year because I knew I could use this time to come back stronger the following year. During the winters, I always thought through what I would do differently the following year and how I'd improve and get better. I played out what I'd done the previous year in my mind and learned lessons. I took the lessons I learned and made sure I applied them in the next year. Over and over and over again I incorporated the lessons about what had happened the previous year into my way of thinking.

This "hibernation" I had from work is something you may be able to benefit from as well. If you're currently unemployed, your time away from work may be giving you extremely valuable time to think through your next steps, what you would do differently the next time, and what steps and actions would benefit you the next time you act. This is something that's extraordinarily powerful and for me, each year of "hibernation" from the asphalt business enabled me to think through the lessons so I could come back even stronger the following year.

After my hibernation in my second year in the asphalt business I realized the name of my business was holding me back. As "Barnes Asphalt," I was just a kid doing asphalt work around the neighborhood. I needed something that sounded official and really portrayed strength and confidence to consumers and potential customers. I thought about this issue most of the winter and when I started the next year, I had new brochures and signs made for my truck. I made sure the signs were giant. They said:

MICHIGAN INDUSTRIAL ASPHALT SERVICES

Based on nothing but the name, the entire operation sounded to potential clients as if it was a giant conglomerate. When I rolled into residential neighborhoods, people thought I was doing them a favor since they'd been used to dealing with much smaller companies. Suddenly, the confidence of having residential asphalt work done by a giant company had come to the suburbs of Detroit and people no longer needed to rely on a small neighborhood company. Most importantly, this changed how I was perceived when I started selling the service door to door. People no longer thought I owned the company. Instead, these people assumed I was a young "go getter" sales kid who'd miraculously risen throughout the ranks to become a top [salesman](#) in the asphalt business.

The situation was actually quite humorous on many occasions. I started to get larger and larger projects when I went out to sell them. Some of these projects included giant parking lots for funeral homes, bowling alleys, and churches. I was doing this work in the early 1990s and my communication set up was pretty basic. I had an answering service that would answer the calls that came in with a [professional receptionist](#) then forward the live calls to my cell phone. It seemed like a very substantial operation.

One day we were doing a church parking lot and horrified members of the congregation had been watching us. I was doing one of my first "hot tar" jobs and it was going very poorly. I'd lit a giant trailer full of hot tar on fire by not preparing things properly and there was smoke that could be seen for miles. The fire department had shown up and I explained there was nothing unusual going on as I battled some flaming tar that crept along the ground like flaming hot lava. One of my workers was so horrified that he announced he had to go to the bathroom and never came back. We were at least 40 miles from home. It was a bizarre scene.

I answered the call coming in from the answering service. I could hear my own worker screaming in the background. If you can imagine the scene, there was a priest standing there in a robe and several people from the early morning church service

all flames of hell creep all over their parking lot. Several fire trucks had just left and traffic was backed up in the street watching the entire spectacle. I was very upset because around \$1,200 of tar was on fire and that was all the money I had in the world at the moment. As a matter of fact, it was probably more money than I had in the world. The check I'd written for it was going to bounce if I didn't get paid for this asphalt job at the end of the day.

"This is the least professional operation we have ever seen! These are kids out of here! We thought we were getting INDUSTRIAL WORK. These are not CRAFTSMEN."

No, we were not.

Since I had smoke in my lungs from the fire, I realized I must have sounded like a 60-year old man. When I picked up the phone and started talking, the man thought he was speaking with an adult, likely much older than he was. I then proceeded to explain to the man I was standing right there in his parking lot and would stand behind my work and so forth.

Over the next several years, my asphalt business thrived, in large part (I am almost entirely sure) due to its name. The idea with its name is that it conveyed authority and made people trust the company. The name held more authority than my young face and age. People wanted to have the work done and they wanted to have the work done from a company they could trust. Having a name behind the product they could trust was something that was quite powerful. I learned a lot from this lesson. Authority means a lot.

I learned a tremendous amount from this on multiple levels. My confidence grew because of this. For example, if I walked up to a girl at a party and she didn't seem that interested in me I might say something to her along the lines of "If you knew who I was you would not be acting like this." Incredibly, this line worked and young women would turn from cold to interested in seconds. Simply hinting at presumed authority, fame, or something along those lines can dramatically change how we are perceived.

Several years ago, I was starting my career in legal recruiting and I was sitting in a small office behind my garage by myself. I was on the phone with a candidate who was questioning me very aggressively and giving me a hard time about potentially representing them. I was taking the abuse fairly well; however, I realized at some point the abuse had gone a bit too far. The candidate I was speaking with was extremely arrogant and being quite mean to me. I knew the only way to turn the situation around was to assume an air of authority and put the person in their place.

"Listen. I have more people who want to work with me than I can count," I told the candidate, "I am pretty sure I make more placements than any other recruiter in the United States and I am incredibly good at what I do. I really do not have time to listen to you and would rather not work with you. So I think it is best if we just end this conversation now. It is clear to me that you need to find an average recruiter who is going to kiss your ass. There is no recruiter out there who can even come close to the results I can get you. Find someone else."

I believed this at the moment and it was true. However, you need to understand I wasn't working with a big [recruiting firm](#) and was literally sitting inside my garage. After I assumed control, the candidate said, "Wait, wait ... I'm sorry!!" The candidate called me back within 30 seconds and begged me to take him on. I told him I'd have to think about it. Then he wrote me a 10+ paragraph email begging me to take them back. They did all of this due to my presumed authority and being someone who was very good at what they do.

Several years ago, I used to look at people's college and [law school](#) degrees as a credibility indicator and something that was an excellent reflection of their authority. If I saw someone who went to [Yale Law School](#) or Harvard Law School, for example, I'd do my best to hire them in almost all instances. Why was I putting so much faith in these degrees? I was doing this because I believed people out of these schools must be extraordinary due to the credibility of their degrees and what they meant. I was fooled many times. In fact, I ended up hiring one person who was mildly schizophrenic and sat in the office mumbling to himself (presumably hearing voices) all day long. What I was hiring was presumed credibility and the belief that a degree meant something. We take credibility extremely seriously and give authority to many things.

How does authority relate to you and your [job search](#)? Here are some things that will give you presumed authority among hiring personnel:

- Where you worked last and the "prestige" of this employer.
- How long you worked for a given employer.
- The size of the employer you worked for last.
- What your last salary was.
- What social class you are.
- Where you went to school.
- Awards, certifications, and other honors you might have.
- Who your parents were/are.
- How many jobs you've had.
- How much you've studied your discipline on your own.
- Your responsibilities with your last employer.
- How confident you seem about the job you are being hired for.
- Where you grew up.
- The reviews you may have had at your previous employer.

There are numerous other potential authority indicators an employer is looking for. In addition, your current employer may be holding you in higher esteem due to things you've done in the past, even before you showed up at the job that give you authority. For example, if you attended a great university, you may be getting the benefit of the doubt. If you formerly held a very important job in another company, this will also give you authority. For example, General Electric ("GE") for years has been considered the top training ground for [Chief Executive Officers](#) ("CEOs") of other major American companies. Every several years, GE makes a new CEO and there are typically numerous individuals who compete for this position within the company. The people who don't get the [CEO position](#) typically leave to become CEOs of other major American companies. An April 18, 2005 article from *Money Magazine*, "Get Me a CEO from GE," relates:

When a company needs a loan, it goes to a bank. When a company needs a CEO, it goes to General Electric, which mints business leaders the way West Point mints generals. Had you visited GE ten years ago, you'd have found Bob Nardelli

running transportation Jim McNerney running international, Larry Johnston in appliances, and a pair of VPs named David Cote and Jeff Immelt. Today they run companies like Home Depot, 3M, Albertsons, Honeywell, and GE--with combined revenues of \$311 billion. Before Harry Stonecipher was ousted at Boeing last month, five of the Dow 30 were headed by GEers.

Anywhere else such an outflow of talent would be cause for alarm; at GE it's just a strong graduating class. One headhunter estimates the company harbors another dozen execs of FORTUNE 500 caliber. Immelt guesses the number is double that. "I'm disappointed" to lose talent, he says, "but we march on."

Given the authority that GE has in management circles, people who come out of this environment are typically thrust into important leadership roles at other companies. The environment people come out of is something that holds a great deal of authority.

Establishing your authority is something that should be done in every interview and at every job you have. When you're going out to the market to purchase things, you want to deal with businesses and others who have authority in certain fields. Virtually every single person I know has told me how their doctor received this or that award, or is the head of a certain hospital group. People want to do business with people who have authority. When we purchase goods and anything of value, we typically brag about some aspect of the product, which gives the product a certain amount of authority. We may purchase a Volvo because it has the authority of being "safe" or a Mercedes because it has the authority of being "well engineered." We purchase products and services due to their presumed authority in given fields. When we go to the grocery store, most people purchase name brands over generic brands due to the presumed "authority" a particular good or service has in a field.

Last summer, our neighbors a few houses down rented out their house to a group that hosted all sorts of parties for MTV and a bunch of celebrities. We even were in an episode of *The Hills* that was filmed there. Because these parties made a lot of noise, the producers of these parties invited my wife and I to them so we wouldn't call the police on the party. My wife couldn't have been more enthusiastic because she reads all sorts of magazines like *US Weekly*, *People*, and so forth, where she learns about the lives of celebrities all day long. What was so interesting about going to these parties is that on more than a couple of occasions, a star of some sort walked up to her and made a positive remark about something she was wearing. "I love your dress!" one might say to her. My wife was incredibly enthusiastic after getting such compliments. In fact, she was ecstatic. After all, if someone with an incredible amount of "fashion authority" walks up to us and says something positive like this, we are bound to feel good about ourselves. This is just how it works. It also, of course, works the opposite way as well.

Many people have very little self confidence and are constantly asking others questions and seeking the approval and authority of other people. In fact, one of the main functions of friends and acquaintances for many people is to provide us with "outside authority" and judgments that we are okay and everything is fine.

- "I was right saying that, don't you think?"
- "It was not very nice of that person to say that to me, don't you agree?"
- "I did a nice thing by offering that to them, right?"
- "That was a really nice thing they did for me, right?"
- "I look good in this dress don't you think?"
- "I am doing a [good job](#), don't you think?"
- "I have every right to be upset, don't you agree?"
- "This is a really nice room, don't you agree?"
- "I think I made the right decision purchasing this car, don't you?"

We look for other's opinions in an effort to give authority to our decisions and our lives. We use authority to govern our relationships and interactions with the world.

One of the most amusing things to me is how we use titles to reflect authority. I've made job offers to people before and they've come back and wanted to negotiate titles on numerous occasions. In some cases, these titles have been for jobs that are relatively unimportant. I've had people working in an administrative capacity want to be called a "[Vice President](#)" and I have even been called on several occasions for reference checks on former employees who had no title when they were working in the Company.

"President of sales and marketing of our company?" I might ask someone doing a reference check on someone who was simply a salesperson earning around \$12 an hour, with no title, and now interviewing for an important position in another company by virtue of using this title. I hate to say this, but the cold hard truth is that we give titles an incredible amount of merit, and give them a massive amount of authority. By virtue of calling yourself something, or having a title, people will often feel you're far more important than you are. Titles carry a lot of authority:

- We would consider someone with a Ph.D. more important than someone with a masters degree.
- We would consider a professor at Stanford to have more authority than a professor at Utah State.
- We would consider a medical doctor to have more authority than a chiropractor.

We also use age as an indicator of authority. We consider the older to be far wiser, know more, and have more authority than someone who is younger.

We use dress as an indicator of authority and are influenced by this a great deal. The mother of one of my best friends growing up died when he turned 18-years old, leaving him several million dollars in inheritance. He had an incredible amount of money at his disposal that he could use for anything he wanted, but never really spent very much at all. I will never forget going into a Paul Stuart store with him in New York one summer. At that point in his life, despite being in his early 20's, my friend didn't even shop in traditional stores like Paul Stuart. Despite the fact that Paul Stuart was one of the more expensive stores in New York City for men's clothing, he actually got most of his suits handmade, which is a completely different level. He was wearing a tie dye t-shirt and flip flops while we were in the store looking around. We were snooping for perhaps no more than five minutes when a salesperson came up to us:

"I see you guys are doing a lot of looking and not purchasing. Are you in town for a clothing convention?" It was an incredibly arrogant statement and something that was pretty outrageous. The man wouldn't have said this to my friend had he been wearing a \$5,000 custom made suit. However, he was saying it because how he was dressed didn't give him authority. He

didn't look like he could afford to be shopping in such an expensive store.

In order to [get a job](#), stay employed, and succeed in the world you need to have authority. You can do this through titles and all sorts of other ways but having authority is something that is crucial. The more presumed authority you have to offer your employer, the bigger difference it will make. Authority matters if you're trying to sell something. Authority matters. It has a giant impact on your success and what ends up happening to you in your career and job. You need to always cultivate authority.

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