

Rules, Your Nature, and Your Career

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

I went into the basement today, and without realizing it, I pulled out an old list of goals and rules I created for myself around 15 years ago. I remember writing them down as I was completing a yearlong clerkship with a federal judge and preparing to move to California, where I would take the Bar Exam.

My entire experience in law school and working for the judge had exposed me to a profession with which I was not really that comfortable. The formality of law practice, the focus on detail, working in an office and behind a desk, the degree of formality and so forth were a lot for me to stomach. There was nothing wrong with this and there were certainly many nice people I had met while working for this judge and also practicing law. The thing is, I started to feel like it was not me. Since the age of 18 I had worked as an asphalt contractor. I experienced a ton of freedom, worked outdoors most of the time, and liked the job a great deal. I could swear when I wanted to, I could tell people who I did not like to screw off, and I loved the trucks, crazy machines, smells of tar, bartering, the variety of people I worked with, and more. The asphalt business was just way more fun--a total blast. The money was also pretty good, and I saw a future in it. Perhaps more importantly, I understood the rules.

The rules of being a successful asphalt contractor were pretty simple:

1. You would start out doing really small jobs (driveways), save some money, invest in equipment, and start working on larger jobs (small parking lots, etc.).
2. You would do good work on larger jobs, save some more money and invest in even bigger and better equipment, and do even larger jobs (auto dealerships, bowling alleys, etc.).
3. You would get bonded by an insurance company for even larger jobs and start doing work for cities (schools, small municipal roads), doing quality work. You would save some more money and buy even more serious equipment.
4. You would start bidding on asphalt jobs for states (roads and highways). From there you would eventually be bidding on work for federal highways and so forth (interstates).

I understood the rules of the game and to me they were pretty easy. I could always see where the next milestone was and I knew what I needed to do in order to get there. I thought about the rules of the business every single day. You need to know the rules. The rules are the most important aspect of any business and in any profession.

Several years ago I got into the student loan business. I started doing all of these student loans and did not really have any idea about the rules. I knew that if I were going to succeed I needed to understand how everything worked. This meant learning something like how much to pay the people who worked for me doing loans. I also had to learn a certain order of progression for that career path. Every type of business or job has its own rules, and in order to do well you need to understand them.

There was a real easy to follow progression in the asphalt business, and none of it involved kissing up, political games, or anything like that. For the most part, if you did good work and followed the rules you could do quite well. You needed to pay your taxes, pay your employees on time, maintain your equipment, make the payments on your equipment, and some other things; however, the path to success was pretty clear and the rules were not that hard to follow. There was no bullshit. If you could do the work according to specification, at the lowest cost, and within the specified timeframe, you would get the job and get paid. It was for this simplicity that I most appreciated the profession.

The thing about becoming an attorney for me was that it was just so backward seeming. There were dress codes. There was formality. You were judged on things like an absence of typos in your work, your seriousness, and all sorts of other intangibles. Your job and security came down to whether or not people liked you. The economy was often a factor. You then had to make partner in a [law firm](#) and would learn later that the prospect of becoming a partner is not secure. The entire profession did not make a lot of sense to me *because I did not understand the rules*.

So I started making list of rules the year I worked for the judge. I picked them up pretty quickly because there were certain behaviors that were obviously considered positive and others that were considered negative. Depending on how one looks at these goals, they can be perceived as either incredibly disturbing or inspiring. Here is the list as I originally wrote it:

- Act more professional.
- Become an ideal job candidate.
- Act more serious.
- Be a harder worker.
- Be more focused.
- Being serious will make me more respected.
- I must not talk about myself.
- Be good humored but taken seriously.
- I must put in a full effort.
- I must consistently study.
- I must be considered for promotion.
- I must be spoken well of.
- I must be respected by clients.
- I must have the respect of my peers.
- I must be highly esteemed.

- I must not make typographical errors.
- I must be extremely professional.
- I must appear and be extremely organized.
- I must be physically fit.
- I must fit in.
- Being thorough produces positive results.
- I must be a consistent thinker.
- I want to pass the bar.
- I want a good job.
- I want the respect of peers.
- I want to like what I am doing.
- I want to excel at what I am doing.
- I must learn to be more calculating.
- I want to make a good living.
- I want to feel that what I am doing is important.
- I need to believe that I really like the law and that it is the only thing for me and what I truly want to do.
- I need to have passion and enthusiasm for what I am doing.
- I must have drive.
- I must change because with no passion for the law I suffer in my daily life. If I do have passion for the law I will have limitless possibilities which are achievable.
- I would have to believe that the law has limitless possibilities and opportunities. I would have to believe that I can be respected, admired, and truly become happy practicing law.

Based on applying these rules and goals, I was able to [get jobs](#) with two of the top law firms in the world. I worked at these prestigious firms for years, and I continued to get better and better at practicing law. A lot of it had to do with setting goals and carefully and aggressively identifying all of my weaknesses. Writing it all down helped. I knew exactly what it would take for me to get better at my job, and to continually rise above previous expectations. I often referred to my goals, which helped me improve over time. Without these goals and continually expanding on them, success would not have been possible.

Many of the rules and goals I set for myself represented everything that I was not. I needed to create goals for myself to become a completely different person than I, in fact, am. Truthfully, I was in a profession I had no business being in, because this very concept goes against my entire nature. Nonetheless, I set a variety of goals for myself, all based on me being a different person than I really am. I had to refer to these goals often like a roadmap to reorient me. I was like someone in a foreign country, using a map to get around. I knew the rules but did not like them. It simply felt all wrong.

And this brings me to you.

First, you need to insure that whatever you are doing you know the rules. If you do not know the rules for what you are doing, you are never going to succeed. Every job--and in fact every person, has a series of rules that need to be followed if you want to see progress. If you follow the rules, you will do well and if you violate them, you will not.

I remember my girlfriend in college had told me she no longer wanted to speak with me after we had broken off our relationship. We had ended the relationship just before her mother came to town. She was from a conservative Jewish family and she told me that due to my Christian religion everything was wrong with our relationship. Somehow I had an instinctive realization that I should go over to her dorm when her mother was there, and tell her that I loved her and would not allow the religious issues to keep us apart. I just knew I needed to do this in front of her mother. I did this and it worked, and we got back together soon afterwards (right after her mother left town). See, she had a rule which I innately understood, which was that she could continue to date me, overlooking our religious differences--as long as I could stick up to her parents about the issue.

The thing about rules is there are certain professions and people whose rules we understand instinctively. There are also rules we do not understand instinctively or, sometimes, at all. These are the people we find ourselves having disagreements with out of nowhere, and these are the jobs that make us feel like we are so often completely out of place.

My parents are both artist/writer types, and I grew up with them constantly discussing literature and art. I always understood things that involved journalism, writing, art criticism, and so forth instinctively. When I was in college, I used to write papers for various classes without ever reading the book; I would turn them in and get good grades. I understood this stuff completely instinctively. I just knew those rules and how to do those things in a certain way.

You may understand accounting instinctively, architecture instinctively, carpentry instinctively, psychology instinctively, music instinctively, and more. I know a guy who sat down at a piano at the age of five for the first time in his life and could play anything and any tune. He just understood music and it came from a deep visceral level inside his brain. I do not understand it, nor do I have to, but here is an example of someone who understood the rules.

I became a [legal recruiter](#) precisely because, like the asphalt business, the second I encountered it, I understood the rules. Everything about legal recruiting made perfect sense to me. It came naturally. I understood the rules. Careers wherein you instinctively understand the rules will bring you a much higher chance of success.

The best thing you can do is put yourself in a situation where the rules are instinctive to you. Also, it can be extremely beneficial to make yourself a list of rules and goals like I once did, in order to learn the essence of your chosen profession.

Once you understand and *feel* the rules everything comes together easier because you seem to be following your own nature--rather than going against it. And if you follow your nature you will find success.

THE LESSON

Rules are the most important aspect of any business or profession. You must understand the unique rules in any situation in which you are a part if you are ever going to succeed. People instinctively understand the rules for certain professions, but there are others whose rules are opaque. You will achieve your greatest success by placing yourself in a situation where the rules are intuitive to you; doing so will make everything easier, because at that point you will merely be following your own

