



You Need to Be Self-Managing and Responsible

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

Several years ago our company was operating in downtown Los Angeles. At less than a year old, the company was very small at the time; however, the people I was working with were nothing short of extraordinary:

- I had one computer programmer who had gone to Columbia Law School and had come to work with me after deciding that he did not want to practice law.
- I had a girl who had graduated at the top of her class at Boston University Law School and decided that she did not want to practice law.
- I had another guy who had gotten a perfect score on his LSATs and a perfect grade point average. He was working for me a few years before deciding which law school to attend. They all ended up offering him scholarships.
- I had a guy who was extremely intelligent and hardworking, who had gone to law school with his wife, and ultimately decided against working in a [law firm](#). He had followed his wife out to Los Angeles while she took a job practicing law.

One guy might come in at 5:00 am and work until 4:00 pm and then work from home later in the evening. Another guy might come in at 11:00 am and then work until 1:00 am. People often worked on weekends because they liked being together. Everyone seemed to keep unusual hours, working very hard. They were always applying themselves fully and I never needed to worry about them. We offered vacation time but people hardly ever took the time off. If someone wanted to go away for a week or so they would just announce they were going on their vacation and no one was too concerned. I knew the sort of people I was working with would never abuse any privileges.

What I remember most about this group of people was that everyone had done extraordinarily well in college, getting almost all A's. I have noticed throughout the years that the very best employees are often those who did incredibly well in college. The reason for this, I think, is that the best college students are always self-motivated, disciplined individuals who enjoy their work. You have to find a way to enjoy what you are doing in order to do well at it.

To get good grades in college you generally need to work hard and set up routines, rituals, and so forth to make sure you study at the right times. In examining the hundreds of employees I have worked with throughout the years, with very few exceptions, the longest lasting and best performing people were always those who had performed very well in college.

In contrast, I have known numerous people who, when they grew up, were forced to follow massive amounts of procedures and rules by their parents. They were told when to study, when to go to sleep, and more. Many of these kids ended up getting into great colleges because of their grades, but when they got there and did not have the structure, they fell on their ass. I saw this happen countless times. It is important that our rituals and sense of responsibility is internal, and something we learn to do naturally--not something we only do when it is imposed on us by people on the outside.

This "core group" of four people performed incredibly well for my company and our revenues very quickly grew. Within less than a year of hiring this group, we had moved locations together. After hiring numerous new employees, we took over the largest office in our building at the time. Then the company underwent a huge hiring spree; every single day of the week I found myself interviewing various people for one job or another. The process of massive and rapid hiring occurred constantly for the next several years.

What was so remarkable about this group of people was that they were entirely self-motivated and self-managing. They instinctively knew what needed to be done and they made it all happen. They were excited about and enjoyed their work, which was more akin to *play* for them. Their efforts helped build our companies to what they are today. Indeed knowing these people gave me a tremendous amount of respect for the self-managing person, who knows what needs to be done and how to do it. This type of person is rare--and is the sort of person you need to be. The more self-managing you are, the better you will ultimately do at everything you undertake, the more employers will want to hold on to you, and the better future you will create for yourself.

I met with a man yesterday who has been partaking in transcendental meditation every day for the past 30 years. He told me that for him it is just like getting up and brushing his teeth or taking a shower. He simply would not be able to get up in the morning without having his daily meditation. Many people have their special routines, which they follow each day. They eat lunch at a certain time, get up at a certain time, go to sleep at a certain time, walk the dog at a certain time, etc. We integrate all sorts of rituals and responsibilities into our daily lives. We need to do the same with our job and work life. We need more responsibilities and rituals. We should not have to rely on others telling us what to do. A grown up does not need to be told when to eat, when to take a shower, and so forth. So it should be at the workplace. There is nothing more important than being self-managing.

Within a few years, our company had bought its own building and then another, and then another. The growth just kept continuing. Revenues increased and things seemed to be going very well.

However, I remember just before we moved to the first building we had purchased, that many of our key employees began quitting. Very smart people started dropping off, people who had been core employees, who had greatly assisted in growing many of our businesses. As the company grew, I began noticing that certain new people were not as self-motivated as the ones we had hired previously. My hiring standards had dropped somewhat, and many new people I brought in were just not of the same caliber to which I had become accustomed. I was not the only one in charge of hiring anymore, either. In some cases people were apparently hired more based on looks than skills. Others were hired because they knew someone working in the company. The atmosphere of the company began to change rapidly. I became increasingly frustrated because as the company was branching out, it became necessary for me to create all sorts of new procedures, handbooks,

and so forth to control many of the new people. I absolutely hated this. I am somewhat of a "creative type" and cannot imagine spending my time trying to control people through various procedures and protocols.

Here are some of the employee issues I faced while the company expanded:

- People would begin disappearing for long periods of time during the day.
- Some employees would call in sick every few days.
- Other people would do slipshod work and have to be reprimanded.
- Various employees would circulate memos claiming that labor laws were being violated because certain employees were working too hard.
- People began requesting "reasonable accommodations" for various psychological ailments with which they had somehow been diagnosed.
- People started stealing from the company and getting caught red handed.

A whole host of other problems developed, far too numerous to delineate here. In response to all these problems the company started cracking down, establishing new bureaucracy and rules.

- I began hiring anal retentive people to be [human resources administrators](#), and to create various rules that people would need to follow.
- We came up with employee manuals.
- We began circulating memos with rules.
- We began having various meetings to discuss employee procedures.

The self-motivated employees hated all of these rules because they were working hard to begin with. For example, if a self-motivated employee got "written up" for getting into work at 12:00 noon when they had worked until 3:00am, they were pissed. I hired an in-house lawyer to draft contracts for the new employees to sign, which demanded arbitration instead of allowing them to sue us if they believed something had gone wrong. The in-house lawyer stayed busy fielding calls and having meetings with people who were aggrieved in one way or another with all these rules and procedures. The lawyer also became responsible for firing people who were not following the rules, and spoke with the [human resources manager](#) on a daily basis about problem employees, having closed door meetings, and more.

All of the rules and bureaucratic procedures the company had created were made specifically to compensate for the inadequacies of the weak hires--people the company would not have even hired at all in the past. I noticed that while the star performers could tolerate working with weaker performers (after all, they had probably been doing this their entire lives), they absolutely could not tolerate being governed by all sorts of rules and bureaucratic procedures. For example, we passed one rule that said people could not go barefoot in the office. This made a brilliant guy from Stanford who did great work for us almost quit on the spot. We passed another rule about dress codes (shirt and pants required in the office--no shorts allowed) that made another few people quit.

As the best people left and more and more people were hired to replace them, the need for more and more bureaucracy kept developing, and I found myself passing more and more rules in order to insure that the new people were actually working. What ended up happening, of course, was that the company changed over time. While the culture of the workplace was still entrepreneurial, rules and regulations began to dominate. One time we had an incident where one of our offices tried to unionize. An increasing amount of managerial effort went into babysitting and keeping files and reports on the staff, as opposed to starting new projects and getting work done. Much of my experience running the company turned into a watchdog position, wherein I constantly had to insure that people actually did their jobs.

I also started to notice another alarming trend with numerous employees:

- People would come into work and clock in and then disappear. They would do this for days at a time and do no work whatsoever.
- Others would manufacture fake on-the-job injuries and sue the company for damages.
- Still other people would come in late repeatedly and after a series of 10 or 12 warnings in the space of few months they would be fired. Then they would then bring lawsuits against the company claiming they were fired because they were old, young, whatever.

It was always the people who needed to be managed who caused the most problems. You would not believe how many people out there make a game out of creating fictitious problems.

The best people in every job I have ever had and in every company I have ever supervised are self-managing and responsible individuals. Also, the more self-managing people are there working for an organization, the stronger the organization generally is. I cannot overstate the importance of being able to self-manage; this is an absolutely essential quality to possess if you wish to achieve success in whatever you do. Instead of creating problems in the workplace, you should seek out responsibilities, and ritualize your work routine. These responsibilities will drive you forward in your daily work, in your career, and in your life.