

Control Your Environment

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

Have you ever known someone whose life seems to go wrong at every turn?

I have known several people like this. Here are some examples of things that have gone wrong for them:

- They sign up for a course in school, forget they are enrolled, and get an F in the class--crushing their chances of getting into a good graduate school.
- They constantly have strange health problems.
- People around them seem to constantly be dying or having accidents for no apparent reason.
- They are robbed and beaten up, even in good neighborhoods.
- The sewer pipes explode in their house and destroy their home a week after they forget to pay their home insurance.
- They get fired and dismissed from jobs after being accused of things they did not even do.
- They touch a microwave oven to heat up some food and the microwave breaks.
- Their cars keep breaking down--even new ones--and they are always late and missing out on this or that.
- They have strange auto accidents, like being directly behind a truck making bottled water deliveries, which suddenly discharges its load onto the freeway, causing them to drive into a ravine.
- They have a couple of drinks and go for a bike ride, then get arrested and thrown in prison for drunk driving.
- The companies they join go out of business.
- They lose an important sporting competition because they have a bizarre accident right before they are to compete.
- They constantly lose purses, keys, and other personal articles.

I could go on and on about various people like this whom I have seen bad things happen to over and over again. However, the most interesting thing about these people is that they just seem to swim in a *constant stream of bad luck*. Like clockwork, one issue or another continually affects them in a negative way. As these issues affect these people, they become resigned to a belief that the world is an unfortunate place, and that it is just difficult to make things work. In the job and career realm, these people always have a difficult time. Rather than getting ahead, they are plagued with one thing after another that seems to make the workplace extremely difficult.

If you think that none of the above (extreme) examples relate to your own situation, or that you cannot learn anything from the examples above, you are wrong. Your effectiveness in the world is largely based on the level of control you are able to exert over your surroundings. *Some people are controlled by their surroundings and others control their surroundings.*

Your sanity, success, and happiness in the world will come in direct proportion to your ability to control your surroundings. The person who is affected by one negative occurrence after another is typically someone who is unable to control his or her surroundings. The person who thrives in any environment is one who is typically able to control his or her surroundings.

What is competence? When we say someone is competent, what we are essentially saying is that the person has the ability to control his or her environment and what happens around him or her. A competent surgeon is able to control her instruments and perform an effective surgery. A competent proofreader is able to proofread work and correct any errors that may occur. Competency means being able to control the outcome and effectiveness of our work, rather than being controlled by external factors. When we call someone incompetent, what we are essentially saying is that the person cannot control the outcome and effectiveness of his or her work. An incompetent individual is someone who is unable to do a good job. The idea of incompetency is that the person's work and environment dominates him or her, not the other way around.

Over the years we have had lots of people work in our various companies whose jobs were to fix computers, phone systems, and so forth whenever they went down. Right now we have someone absolutely fantastic doing the job. These systems hardly ever break down around this guy, and when they do, he fixes them instantly. Before he joined our team, we had another person in his position, and the computers always broke down. There were viruses on the computers. The phone system was always having problems. With this new person, everything works perfectly and almost all the time. The reason is competence. This man has taken preventive measures to make sure that everything is working all the time. He is aware of what could or might go wrong at any given time--before it actually does. When he fixes something, he puts it back together and does not leave any aspect of his work unfinished. If he does not understand something fully, he speaks with as many others in the field as he can, and he makes every effort possible to fix the problem.

This person is, in a word, competent at what he does.

His work area is clean. There are no unfinished projects. He knows his business and does not take on work he does not understand.

The opposite would be if he did not finish assignments completely, and let his work pile up. If he disassembled a computer and then did not reassemble it, and just moved on to something else. If he failed to read up about the latest developments. If he were not out there networking and exchanging information with other computer engineers. What would happen to him in this case is that his work would eventually take control over him, not the other way around:

- Phone systems and networks would be going down all the time.
- People would be yelling at the person, and he would eventually be at the mercy of his work and the world.
- He would not receive any pay raises.
- He might lose his job.

- He would be agitated all the time.
- He might start drinking too much.
- He would make justifications for the problems he was having at work due to old computers or phone systems, and use these excuses in discussing his performance with management.
- He would begin searching for another job to relieve the pressure--and then another one after that.
- The process would repeat itself at each [new job](#).
- He might yell at his wife and kids at night.
- He might be angry with his employers--and the world at large.
- He might sue an employer for firing him.

You see, all of this would be caused by this person's inability to control his environment. Controlling your environment is among the most important things you can do. People who are exceptional at their jobs and in their lives are generally able to control their environment and to resist *being controlled* by their environment.

When I joined my first law firm with a group of around fifteen other recent law school graduates in 1997, there was a young partner in the law firm who was a little bit insane, I think. I suspected the partner was a cocaine addict but I was not sure. You see, this guy rarely came into the office, and when he was there, he would grab an associate and give some cryptic instructions to do this or that. He might tell the associate that it would take "at most three to four hours"--when in reality it was a twenty-five-hour job. The associate would do the work and might find herself being berated or humiliated by the partner for not doing some task that was not part of the original assignment. The partner would then *lie* about having assigned the task, when he had not. The entire process of working with the guy was quite exasperating for everybody in the firm, because of his outrageous behavior.

As a young attorney starting out in a [law firm](#), the most important thing you can do is complete assignments and impress the partners you are working for. I remember that a very talented young associate was given a workload by this particular partner, and after a few days the associate flat-out refused to work with him anymore. He made a point of going to the head of the law firm at the time, John Quinn, and telling Quinn that he would no longer be able to work with this particular partner. This was something that people just did not do, and everyone in the office was very impressed that the young associate had done this.

The guy who refused to work with the partner was one of two people in this class of fifteen who ultimately ended up making partner in this law firm. He never got flustered and was always respected by his peers. I think that the reason he was so effective and able to do so well was that he knew the importance of controlling his own work environment. He refused to work with a partner who did not allow him to control his own work.

A few years ago, I had a very talented assistant working for me. She had gone to an excellent college and had finished near the top of her class. Her work ethic was exceptional and she did a really good job in everything that she undertook. She was working on a real estate matter with me, and the real estate agent she was dealing with kept lying, not showing up for appointments, and telling me and others that the young woman had said things she did not. It was a bizarre situation, and the real estate agent eventually ended up losing his license for similar behavior. I remember one day my assistant took a stand and refused to work with the agent.

"I've had it. I am not going to work with someone who lies and changes things around. It makes it impossible for me to do my job. You can fire me if you want, but I simply cannot continue like this."

This girl was controlling her environment. By controlling her environment she was able to make sure that she could do her work effectively. Because the lying, scheming, and so forth of the real estate agent was making it impossible for her to control her environment, she refused to have anything to do with him.

You need to control your environment at work. This means lots of things--like not taking on more work than you can handle and making sure you do everything with competence.

One way of not controlling your environment is by just being plain lazy. Being lazy means letting work pile up, not doing your job, being preoccupied with things besides work and so forth. I do not have a lot of sympathy for lazy people, and neither does the rest of the working world. Lazy people never end up doing all that well at anything. These sorts of people are let go from organizations rapidly and frequently. Darwinian forces in most organizations typically take over quickly, and the lazy end up having major problems. The lazy and the careless are people who perpetually fail to control their environments--probably because doing so requires energy and focus. These people can create major problems for organizations and themselves.

Another, more unfortunate example of failing to control your environment is taking on too much work or, similarly, doing work you do not really understand. This is a huge problem that affects countless individuals in the workplace. When you are good at something, people may give you more and more work. You need to know when to say no and you need to develop a keen ability to politely decline any assignment that is beyond your scope of expertise. Many people come into jobs and soon get in way over their heads--trying to take on too much work. I have seen this time and time again. When you have more work than you can handle, or you are doing work that you do not understand, you are not controlling your environment; instead you are being controlled by it.

When I started the same [legal job](#) I mentioned earlier, there was a girl a few doors down from me who had recently graduated from Yale Law School. The girl was absolutely brilliant and very hard working. We shared secretaries who worked at the same station, and I used to see this woman's time sheets, which she would turn in every day. After I had been at the firm for around six months, I started noticing that the time sheets she was turning in each day were adding up to a full twenty-four hours. This meant, effectively, that she was working entire shifts of twenty-four hours without a break. I would notice these hours adding up to twenty-four hours at least a few times each week, and it was astonishing to me. I could not imagine, at the time, working this many hours on anything. Within several months of this woman's starting these twenty-four-hour shifts, she had left the firm and gone to work for the government. I do not know why she did this; however, my guess is that she simply had taken on too much work. She had become unable to control her own work environment. Had she been able to turn down work and refused to work such long hours, she would have been controlling her environment--and she might not have burned herself out of what promised to be an illustrious law career.

Control of your environment starts with you. I know of employers who will not hire people who are grossly overweight, drink

too much, or smoke. People have actually said this to me before. *Why?* The reason is that the employer figures that people who are grossly overweight, drink too much, or smoke are unable to control themselves, their urges, and their body and therefore will be unable to control their work. I knew of an attorney once who had a job offer from a major law firm and was invited out for drinks with an important partner a few weeks before he was supposed to start. The partner ordered two drinks over a few hours and the prospective new associate ordered four drinks. He was not hired on account of this, for the reasons mentioned above. I will never forget that one.

You show your ability to control your environment by the way you dress and carry yourself. I have heard of people not being hired for important jobs due to their collars being frayed. I know of contractors who will not hire people who do not organize their tools well. All of this translates into an ability to control your environment. The person with the frayed collars is showing that he does not care about having a professional appearance, evidenced by his refusal to update his wardrobe or to get new clothes. Having a professional appearance is important in many lines of work. The contractor who is unable to keep his tools organized is not controlling the tools of his trade; therefore he looks weak to the potential employer.

If you have ever known someone who seemed a little crazy, it is likely due, at least in part, to an inability to control his or her environment; chaotic surroundings often lead to a chaotic state of mind. The stresses of the world impact this person over time and to an extraordinary degree, and things are constantly going wrong in this person's life, all because this person is acted upon by the environment--not the other way around. People who are chronically stressed out and upset are typically being acted upon by the environment, not the other way around.

One of the greatest dangers (and opportunities) out there is when an individual gets a promotion or a company starts to expand when things are going well. This is always a giant opportunity for the individual or group to move to a higher standard. With more responsibility and growth often comes the challenge of controlling more variables in the work environment. In this case your standards, your attention to detail, your desire to do a good job, and your ability to exert control over your work environment, all determine if you will succeed.

If you have watched films about the military, or if you have ever been in the military, you know that there are countless procedures that are in place. People are always communicating back and forth, seeking clearance for this procedure or that procedure. Certain high-level military personnel may even call the president to seek clearance for one thing or another. The reason so many procedures exist in the military is that it would be impossible for the military to control its environment without the procedures. An absence of procedure would equate complete chaos. The larger a company or organization is, the more procedures you are likely to see. There may be multiple levels of management, legal divisions, marketing teams--and all sorts of procedures in place for every one of these groups. All of this enables the company to control its environment so that it is optimized for continued growth and expansion. Organizations cannot function without numerous procedures and various methods to assist them in controlling their environment.

- A lack of procedures, standards, and ways of controlling incoming work can lead to major difficulties and problems, and often lead to **individuals** having stress, emotional problems, career difficulties, and more.
- A lack of procedures, standards, and ways of controlling incoming work can lead to major difficulties and problems, and often lead to **companies** having stress, organizational problems, severe business difficulties, and more.

An interesting trend happens in the economy: There are "booms" and then there are "busts." During a boom cycle, lots of people are being hired in a short amount of time. In short, there is a lot of opportunity. During a "bust" the exact opposite starts occurring. People are let go and fewer people are hired. The people who remain inside of organizations are given more and more tasks, and their work is made more efficient. Productivity typically increases during a "bust." All that is occurring here, essentially, is that the organization is exerting more control over its environment in order to survive. Control means having fewer workers, monitoring what each worker is doing, having higher hiring standards, and so forth. Those who are the most efficient at their work are generally kept on.

When a group is rapidly expanding during a boom, a lavish and decadent sort of culture often sets in: Expenses are not overseen very carefully, and there is a great deal of unnecessary spending. Things get out of control, and the company starts to lose profits. When the bust cycle occurs, control is brought back. The ability of an organization to exert control over its workers, expenses, and so forth has a direct connection to its ultimate success in both good and bad times.

Poorly run organizations are unable to control their workers, they are unable to control their expenses, and they are unable to control their products--and they ultimately go out of business. Everything in terms of an organization's success is about control.

Just as an organization's success depends on effective control, your own ability to succeed in your career and life depends on your ability to control your environment, and to not be controlled by it.

THE LESSON

You need to control your work environment. People who are successful in their work and personal lives are generally able control their environment, and resist being controlled by it. Do not take on more work than you can handle, and make sure to competently handle the work that you do take. An organization's success depends on its control over its assets, and your own success similarly depends on your ability to control your environment rather than the other way around.