

The Dangers of Complacency

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

The most important thing you can do in your pursuit of success is avoid complacency. Never allow yourself to settle down and accept your results as finite. You need to surround yourself with people who will continue to challenge you to become better. Whom you choose to surround yourself with plays a major role in what you will achieve and what will happen to you in your life. Surround yourself with mediocre people and you will likely face mediocrity in your own life; surround yourself with people who accept nothing but the best from themselves and others, and you are likely to become exceptional as well.

When I was growing up outside of Detroit, I had lots of friends who dreamed of things like [getting a job](#) in a post office or becoming a fire fighter. The reason for this was that they wanted a *steady paycheck* and dreamed of the sort of life this would provide. They envisioned themselves having a decent-sized house, a nice wife, and a nine-to-five job that would enable them to go home, drink beer, and watch sports on television most evenings.

Most men who have a dream like this end up achieving it. If you surround yourself with people who have similar dreams as you, then you will all empower one another to achieve these goals.

We tend to associate with people who make us feel comfortable in pursuing our dream. Although I had diverted onto a different path from most of my friends by the time I was around 17 or 18, I still kept in touch with them, even after I moved away to another city. By this point, they were talking about things like the best months of the year to apply to the fire department due to lower application rates, and other things that related to the achievement of their dreams. These guys all ended up "making it," in that they all attained the sorts of lives that they wanted.

I had had similar dreams when I was growing up as well, for a time. Mostly I had been influenced by my peer group early on. When you are around people who have similar dreams and aspirations, you will notice that they continually judge each other by what each person in the group is doing. Men who have such dreams and live such lives, they typically spend their time with other men who have such dreams and live such lives.

I still know many of these men who grew up with these dreams. I have not seen them for at least five years, but I ran into a group of them at a bar one Thursday night when I was visiting the town. They all constantly compared houses, yards, cars, and so forth, and seemed to be measuring each other by these things.

These guys are stuck in a world in which they judge themselves by what their peers have and do. According to one of my old friends, if one of their peers purchases new rims for his car, the others will all go out and look at rims, review them online, and start talking about them and whether or not they should get car rims as well. The same thing happens if one of them purchases a new dishwasher. They all work in okay jobs and make okay livings, but they are stuck in a *cocoon* of sorts, living in the same neighborhoods and still judging their progress in life by what their childhood friends are doing.

When I last saw these men, they were in their mid-30s and already looking toward retirement. Most of these guys are now overweight and look much different from how they appeared when I knew them twenty-five years ago. At least one I know of has already had a heart attack, and another has had cancer. Their faces are pretty dull and there is not a lot of excitement in them about the future--let alone the present. These fellows have been chasing complacency since they were teenagers, and they have attained it. They have isolated themselves from the world. They are comfortable and not unhappy because they are judging themselves by the accomplishments of their peers.

Is this what it is all about? Is life about being complacent, and just settling down, and staying that way forever? What happens when we go into a *cocoon* and surround ourselves with others who only expect mediocrity out of us?

The reason I am so fascinated by these guys I went to grade school and middle school with is that some of them are much smarter than me and more talented than me in many ways. When we were younger, some of them had a much easier time with certain classes, others were better socially, and others could have certainly accomplished more than me, just due to their God-given talents. However, in my case, by eighth grade I had been pulled out of their world and put into a series of private schools in which my peers were high performers in all respects. The bar was suddenly set much higher and the people I newly associated with were dreaming of things like going to Princeton and then Johns Hopkins Medical School. My new peers all wanted to be the very best at their chosen fields, and they would accept nothing less from themselves. It became difficult to have goals of working in some kind of nine-to-five job when I found myself surrounded by people with much higher goals.

The sorts of peers you associate with will help you determine the level of achievement that is acceptable for you. If you go to a poor college, you are likely to be surrounded by people with lower expectations and goals than if you go to a first-rate college. The level of people you surround yourself with will in large part determine the sorts of goals you set for yourself and what you will achieve. As an example, kids who have grown up in bad neighborhoods typically achieve less than kids who have grown up in good neighborhoods. They achieve what is expected of them.

If your worst enemy walked by your cup of coffee and dropped two lumps of sugar in it while you looked the other way, you may never know. However, if your best friend walked by and put a couple of drops of poison in your drink, you might end up very sick--or dead. The people we associate with can have a profound effect on our lives. All around us, every day, there are people dropping bits of *poison* in our coffee and affecting our thinking in a negative way. The most important thing you can do in your career and in your life is to watch your coffee, and see how the people around you are affecting you.

One of the guys I used to dislike the most at work would walk around every Friday, pop his head in everyone's office, and say "Happy Friday!" He would also tell everyone he saw in the hall and other areas throughout the office the same thing. All day long he did this.

I really disliked this and did not think it was all that cool. To me this guy seemed to be like someone who was *dropping poison*

into everyone's coffee because his message connoted that there was something wrong with work, as if it is something we all just tolerate until we finally get to the blissful, work-free weekend. This guy used to find himself enormously funny, and he was very excited to tell everyone he saw "Happy Friday!" each week. However, to me this sent the wrong signal.

I have always viewed the work that we do as something to look forward to: If you do not like your job, then typically you do not like your life. It is important that you can view your job as something in which you are always growing, always becoming something.

The other thing about this guy that annoyed me was that whenever he would talk to others, his focus was on retirement and not having to work anymore--despite being in his mid-30s at the time. It reminded me of my old elementary school friends back home. Throughout my life, I have heard person after person tell me that they want such and such amount of money so they can retire and no longer have to work. There are so many people out there who do not want to work and who look forward to doing nothing for the rest of their lives.

The following story appeared on CNN on June 17, 2000:

LOS ANGELES (CNN) -- Mark Hughes, the founder of Herbalife International, one of the world's leading distributors of herbal products, died of an accidental overdose after mixing alcohol with a "toxic level" of antidepressants, authorities said Friday.

Scott Carrier, of the Los Angeles County Coroner's Office, said final autopsy results found that Hughes, 44, had high levels of both alcohol and an antidepressant in his blood.

The cause of Hughes' death recalls that of his mother.

Hughes' mother died of an accidental overdose of prescription diet pills when he was 18. He often cited her death as motivating him to succeed in the herbal products industry--to provide millions with products that were not available to his mother.

Carrier attributed the death to "alcohol-Deoxpin intoxication." Deoxpin is an antidepressant, which Hughes was taking to "treat insomnia," the coroner said.

Hughes' blood-alcohol level was recorded at .21 percent. A "toxic level" of Deoxpin was also found in his system at 2.1 micrograms per milliliter, Carrier said.

Hughes was found dead in his Malibu mansion May 21.

The initial autopsy, conducted on May 23, was inconclusive and required additional tests.

In February 1980, Hughes founded Herbalife International. It has since become one of the world's largest distributors of herbal products, with sales of about \$1.7 billion annually.

At the time of his death, I knew people who were working at Hughes's Malibu mansion, including people who were installing incredibly ornate marble floors--and even Hughes's personal trainer. For people who knew Hughes, it was no mystery that he had been headed down the wrong path. His personal trainer would sometimes show up at 8:00 a.m. and find that Hughes had been up drinking all night and had not yet gone to sleep. Another time, the personal trainer allegedly came over in the early afternoon; Hughes was drunk and made himself vomit so that he could exercise. It is definitely surprising that a guy like Hughes had a serious drinking problem, since he was running one of the largest health food companies in the world at the time. Someone going out there promoting health and wellness, who became incredibly rich doing so, seems unlikely to become a raging alcoholic.

Hughes did not need to work. He had all the money he would ever need and seemed to have it all. The guy who would walk around telling everyone "Happy Friday" actually used to work for Hughes at Herbalife. He wanted to be someone like Hughes, who had all that money and power, so that he could sit around and do nothing. I wonder, however, what he thought of when he learned that Hughes had died such a tragic and senseless death. Did he still see the value of having nothing to do?

The interesting thing about success is that once people have achieved incredible goals, they often become complacent, and then they start having the most problems. There is a huge danger to complacency because when you reach this state, everything in your life can end up going to hell.

You are never truly happy because of the things you get; instead, you are happy because of what you become. If you are not becoming something (i.e., progressing toward a goal) you will generally not be happy. What makes people happy is the process of continually becoming something and growing. If we are not growing then we are dying.

Regardless of what your dreams may be, most people are not and can never be happy being complacent. Some of the guys I knew growing up made complacency their goal in life. They are complacent now--and fat and boring. Their lives revolve around things like looking forward to *Happy Fridays*. They live for the weekends.

One of the greatest challenges in your career and in your life is to learn how to handle, or more specifically, how to *avoid* complacency. Complacency can literally destroy your career and life. You are either moving up or you are moving down. You cannot afford to move down, but when you are complacent, you will most certainly end up moving down.

You need to learn to judge yourself by your potential rather than by what your peers are doing. Also, you need to surround yourself with people who have high expectations for themselves so you too can have high expectations for yourself. Pay very close attention anytime you are not challenged and any time you feel like you might be getting too content. A good coach does not allow a player to rest on her laurels and you should not rest on your laurels either. You need to be your own coach and constantly push yourself forward. If you do this, you will achieve more in your life.

THE LESSON

Avoid complacency, as it can literally destroy your career and your life. You are either moving up or moving down, and complacency will always place you on a downward trajectory. Surround yourself with people who will continually challenge you to become better. Surrounding yourself with mediocre people will introduce mediocrity into your own life; when you surround yourself with people who accept nothing but the best, you are likely to become exceptional as well.

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