

Change Your Thermostat

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

One day several years ago, I was sitting in my office in Los Angeles when two barefooted women walked in. Their feet were dirty, and I can assure you, it is not normal for women to walk around downtown Los Angeles without shoes. Both of the women had scabs on their face and were in their late 20s or early 30s. They were dressed like prostitutes and they both looked quite frightening, their eyes glassy and hair unkempt. They did not smell good. All it took was one look to see that the women had been living on the streets, using drugs, and almost certainly selling their bodies. They looked like the lowest form of streetwalker imaginable. There is no gentle way to say it.

I actually recognized one of the women. She had formerly been a candidate of mine. She had taught at Harvard Law School after graduating from there, and I had placed her at one of the best law firms in Los Angeles. She had worked at the law firm for less than a year and then, under mysterious circumstances, she had left the law firm suddenly. In addition, she had been in the process of divorcing her husband and had had her new Mercedes repossessed a few months previously. I had been following this woman's case with some interest, because her husband had called me several times, looking for her. Imagine: He was so desperate and out of touch with his wife that he even called her former [legal recruiter](#). Now here the woman was living on the street and doing god-knows-what to earn money. She and the woman she was traveling with looked absolutely horrifying. Seeing them sitting in my office was almost *epic*, and made for a highly unusual day, to say the least.

When the two women took a seat in my office, I did not balk. I simply acted as if everything was perfectly normal. They started telling me that they wanted me to open a checking account for them in the name of a company. They had found a check on the street made out to the company and wanted to cash it, but the banks refused to.

"You can figure out how to get a checking account opened in the company's name," they suggested. Without seeming too alarmed, I let them know that this was a felony and that I would go to prison if I were to do this. Since one of the girls had gone to Harvard Law School, she started telling me that she had investigated the matter and there was nothing illegal about it. The entire meeting was so bizarre that it left me in a bit of a haze, but I will give you a little more background as to why.

A little over a year before this encounter, I had met the girl from Harvard Law School for lunch at one of the nicest restaurants in downtown. I had made sure to choose a great restaurant because the young attorney was an incredible candidate. She was a former model and had shown up looking absolutely exquisite, in a very nice suit. She was personable and extremely professional—exactly what you would expect from a recent graduate of Harvard Law School who also taught there. As we ate our lunch, I began to get the sense that this young woman had "had a lot of fun" when she was younger. There was just something a little "hard" about her face. I do not know how to describe it, but I got the sense that beneath her extremely polished exterior was a young lady who had been around the block more than once. I asked her about her upbringing.

She told me that from the age of 15 until she was around 20 or so she had lived a crazy life. She had used a lot of cocaine and had been part of a scene wherein she and other models had traveled around doing a ton of drugs, and she implied that they had slept with a lot of men. She told me she had not even started going to college until she was around 20 and had gotten off cocaine. As a college student, she soon after had led an organization to help young girls get off drugs. She told me that she had gotten good grades (but not great) in the small, unknown college she had attended, and that she had done horribly on the Law School Admissions Test. She told me she believed that she had been admitted to Harvard Law School in large part because of everything she had done to help girls rehabilitate themselves from being addicts. I was shocked by what I was hearing because this woman was one of the best candidates I had ever seen.

A few weeks prior to the girl walking into my office with her friend in bare feet, I had received a telephone call from a graphic designer that she had referred to me to do some work for one of our companies. I had hired him and he was a really nice guy. He gave me an update on his attorney friend, which set me completely aback:

"She started using crystal meth at the law firm. She is totally out of control," he told me. "I think she got arrogant and did not think she needed to keep her drug use under control once she got the Mercedes and started making all that money. She seems to think she is invincible. She has come so far from where she had been, a onetime cocaine addict, and she now seems to believe that she can do whatever she wants."

I could not believe that the same girl I had seen earlier was now hooked on crystal meth and had put what should have been an incredible legal career on hold in order to join skid row in Los Angeles, as a drug addict. This story has haunted me for years, and I have tried for the longest time to make sense of it.

Now, six or seven years later, I feel as if I understand the situation more: *This woman could not handle success*. She wanted to *reset her thermostat* in order to be exactly the sort of person she had been before she had improved her life.

One of my favorite things in the world is finding very talented people who are unemployed and not making the money they should, or who do not have the opportunities they should, and offering them the chance to improve their lives. You would be surprised, however, how often people simply are not ready for a change—even for the better. When the opportunity presents itself to many people to change their lives in a positive or negative manner, they are simply not ready to accept all the responsibilities that come with the change. When confronted with an incredible opportunity for a better life, most people sabotage it or find reasons it will not work.

I want to tell you about someone I offered a job recently; however, before I tell you this story, I am going to tell you a quick story that I think you will learn something from.

When I was in college, I had a girlfriend who was always having severe money problems. She would get money and quickly spend it, and would then need more money a short time later. One day, I told her if she never had any money, she should apply for some student loans. She got [student loans](#), including checks for several thousand dollars to live off for the

semester. A short time later she was out of money again, having blown it all on hairdos, massages, expensive clothes, and other things. She spent so much money that she could barely afford to eat. To this day, the woman continues to live in this pattern: She will get money, spend it all, and then have to beg for more money. She can never be content with whatever amount of money she has, because she will always surely spend it. Her situation is chronic because her thermostat is set to *not having any money*.

Here is what I mean when I say the word "thermostat": People are comfortable being a certain thing. They lose weight and then quickly regain it. They get a bunch of money and spend it all right away. People get off drugs and turn their lives around, becoming incredibly successful attorneys--and then get back on drugs and ruin their lives a few years later. This is how people are. They will put themselves back at the level to which they are most accustomed, because they have set their internal thermostat there.

Your challenge in your life is to get your thermostat to the level you want it--and to keep it there. Do not allow your thermostat to change on you. This is how our internal thermostats work: When we change the temperature, our thermostats want to go back to where they were set before.

For example, if you were to start exercising every morning at 6:00, your mind and body would initially tell you that this is the wrong time to be exercising. Your mind and body would push you the first day, the first week, and the first several weeks to look for reasons and excuses why you should not need to rise every day at 6:00 a.m. to exercise. It might take you months, or years, before your body and your mind get used to the idea of getting up this early every day to exercise. Your internal thermostat would, however, eventually adjust so that exercising every single day would become the norm to which you are accustomed. A fascinating article, "Still Running After All These Years," ran in the Wall Street Journal in November of 2008, about people who have been running every day for more than thirty years:

Last month, my dad celebrated the 30th anniversary of his running streak.

In other words, he has run every day for 10,987 consecutive days. The last time he took a pass--he was feeling a bit sore after a marathon--was Oct. 30, 1978.

Obsessive doesn't begin to describe it.

Harvey Simon has run every day for the last 30 years. As of Halloween, he had run for 10,958 consecutive days. His daughter, [Stephanie Simon], details her dad's incredible streak and the life lessons she's gleaned from it. (Nov. 27)

When he travels overseas, my dad, who is 66, plans layovers so he can get in a couple miles around the concourse, lest he miss a day to the time-zone shift. During blizzards, he wraps his feet in plastic bags, pulls galoshes over his sneakers and screws in cleats for traction. Then he waits for a snowplow to pass his front door, so he can follow in the freshly cleared path.

My father, Dr. Harvey B. Simon, practices internal medicine in Boston and teaches at Harvard Medical School. Rationally, he knows that running 10 miles a day, every day, for three decades is not great for his ever-more-creaky body. He'd never advise his patients to do it. In fact, he's written several health and fitness books stressing the virtue of moderation in exercise. And yet...

He's run with broken toes and the flu and a nasty infected heel and near-crippling back spasms. He goes out before dawn in every kind of weather; he's become such a fixture in the neighborhood that a couple times when a freak thunderstorm has rolled in, strangers have driven out to find him. They didn't know his name. They just knew he'd be out there, plodding away, and figured he might appreciate a ride home.

The ability to go running every day is an example of someone *resetting his thermostat* to accomplish a goal, and then sticking with it. So too are achieving goals of losing weight, accepting nothing but the best for yourself, managing your money, and staying off drugs. If you are going to accomplish anything, you need to reset your thermostat. Only then will you start to realize all the possibilities in your life.

In the course of doing business, I recently met a woman who started telling me how rough her life was:

- She complained about not having health insurance for her and her family.
- She told me about how her husband has been unemployed for the longest time.
- She complained to me about how she had personally been underemployed and had not made very much money over the past year.
- She talked about how she and her husband could not afford a house, how they had to live in a bad neighborhood.
- She told me about how with the downturn in the economy, making money had become extremely difficult, and that she and her husband were lucky to make a couple of thousand dollars a month between them.

Over the course of a few business meetings, I got to know this woman fairly well and found her to be very intelligent, quick on her feet, and knowledgeable--someone who would do very well in a full-time job working for our companies. The problem, I learned in my discussions with her and after some probing, was that, although she was in her mid-30s, she had spent her entire career in [sales-type jobs](#), working as an independent contractor. She had never really worked at a job that required her to stay still behind a desk. Instead, she was used to always running around.

"Have you ever held a full-time job?" I asked her.

She told me about how she had once worked somewhere for a grand total of nine months, several years ago. I sat her down for an hour and started asking her all sorts of questions about her situation, and I determined after some time that I might have a job for her. The job would pay a salary (much more than the piecemeal wages she had been making at the time); it would give her and her family health insurance and the stability she currently lacked.

"My children have not been to the doctor in over a year because we cannot afford it," she told me.

The only catch was that she would have to do a lot of the work she was currently doing on the phone, rather than in person. To me it seemed like a no-brainer.

As I discussed the prospect of an offer with her, however, I could see that she was finding reasons why it would not work. These were not reasons about why she could not do the job, mind you, but stupid reasons relating to commuting, and other

excuses. The more I spoke to this woman, the more I realized that her thermostat was set to be someone who was constantly wandering around, who could never sit still. The life she had been living without health insurance, steady money, and so forth was something that she was so used to that she would, it seemed, *reset her internal thermostat* to get back to this place--even if she landed a steady job.

In order to really achieve your goals, one of the most important things you can do is push through your self-imposed limits as to what is possible. The ability to push through these self-imposed limits is something that can benefit you in incredible ways. Most of us have set our lives to operate at a certain level and within certain limits. We have a comfort zone, which is regulated just as strongly as our body temperature, and it is difficult for us to change the internal thermostat.

The chances are great when you have set a certain thermostat based on what you believe you can or deserve to achieve. You gauge when you are improving, or doing better in your life, and sometimes you may tend to push your thermostat back to where it was before. You need to discipline yourself in order to reach a new level of success, and to this end, the first step is to change your thermostat, leaving it at a level that pushes you to the very heights of what you are capable of.

THE LESSON

You must come out of your comfort zone, and realize that success and growth comes from change. Break through your self-imposed limits, and reset your internal thermostat to improve your life and career; this is the first step towards conditioning yourself for success and reaching your potential. Rethink what you consider to be possible.

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