

## Take Incremental Steps

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

When I was around sixteen years old, growing up in Detroit, my mother's boyfriend for several years was a tugboat (also known as a towboat) captain. Since the job was unionized, my mother was always trying to interest me in this as a good long-term career prospect. I did not grow up in the sort of environment wherein I was meeting and being introduced to attorneys, doctors, and so forth as role models; instead, I was meeting machine operators, towboat captains, and the like.

My mother took me down to watch this man and his crew hooking up giant freighters to tow them out to the lakes and sometimes all the way out to sea. She used to talk about how I could get a journeyman's card, working on these boats as a deck hand. Back then in Detroit, these sorts of jobs paid well, and people usually got them through people they knew. In fact, if you were from a middle-class family and got a job working on one of these boats in high school, you might seriously consider taking this job over going to college. You could make more money working on the boats as an 18-year-old than you might be making if you went to a decent college, graduated, and spent ten years working as a manager inside a big company.

These towboats typically towed freighters that were loaded with steel, coal, and so forth to River Rouge and to other factories along the Detroit River. Towing the loads back and forth was big business and it looked like a lot of fun. Towboats on the Great Lakes in Michigan will sometimes tow vessels that are as long as a football field down a river and out to the lake. In fact, these towboats are so large that on some of them the crew rides from one part of the boat to another on ATVs. The freighters are often enormously heavy, and the towboats muscle them along at a few miles per hour.

Years later, in thinking about the process that a towboat operator's job entails, I realized that this method of work is a metaphor for really what makes job seekers, salespeople, and others successful in virtually any profession. In fact, a towboat can even be viewed as a metaphor for your entire career and life.

In order for a tugboat to haul a giant freighter, it needs to be attached by a huge steel cable to the freighter. These cables are so large and heavy that you probably could not lift them if you tried. The process I have observed wherein a tugboat was attached to the freighter is a simple one:

- First, the tugboat operator throws a thin rope to the crew of the freighter.
- Attached to the thin rope is a heavier rope that the freighter crew pulls onboard.
- Attached to the heavier rope is a still heavier rope that the freighter crew will pull onboard.
- Attached to this heavier rope is a thin cable that the freighter crew will pull onboard.
- Attached to the thin cable is another heavy cable that the freighter crew will pull onboard.
- Attached to the heavier cable is an even heavier cable that the freighter crew will pull onboard.
- Finally, the final cable (perhaps as thick as your arm) is attached to the freighter that is to be pulled down the river.

In order to accomplish something meaningful, to get a job, or to do anything, you need to drop softly into a comfort zone. You cannot simply lay down roots instantly and get the result you want without taking many small steps to get there. The towboat is only able to attach its cable because it is progressively using a rope, then a cable, then a larger cable, and so forth.

One of the most important things you can do to reach any goal you want, is to take very small, incremental steps and then build upon these. Setting up a routine, and making sure that you are approaching some target on an ongoing basis, ultimately ends up assisting you in reaching your goal.

For example, if you were interested in running a marathon you would not start out by running 15 miles one day, 23 the next day, and then running the marathon. Instead, you would first run half a mile the first day, and you would probably be exhausted from this. You might do this for an entire week and then start running a mile five days a week. Then you might gradually move up to three miles, then four, then five, and so on. You would move incrementally toward your goal, and as you became more and more proficient along the way, you would put yourself in a better position to get to where you wanted to end up. However, if you had tried to run 15 miles on the first day you might have gotten so discouraged that you would have never tried running again; that would have been the end of it.

Unfortunately, this is what most people do with their goals. So many goals and potential achievements are thrown away on the first try because people become incredibly frustrated when they do not reach their goal immediately. And then they simply give up. This is so common, it is difficult to believe. Your ability to move gradually toward a goal is something that can make a massive difference in your life and career.

In the recruiting realm, for example, one of the most difficult things for recruiters to do is to track down candidates by calling them on the phone. The approach that 99% of all recruiters use is calling people in response to a job for which they are recruiting. Most of the people that they are speaking with, they have never spoken to before. Most of the people they are calling on the phone end up being suspicious, defensive, and so forth when the recruiter calls. The recruiter gets rejected a lot and may get frustrated because he or she is not making placements, getting enough candidates, and so forth.

The reason the recruiter is getting rejected is that he or she is requesting an immediate commitment. The person is trying to attach a giant cable to the candidate and tow the candidate over to a new employer before the candidate has even gotten comfortable with moving forward.

The very [best recruiters](#) spend the majority of their time not recruiting but, instead, creating mutual trust between themselves and numerous people out there whom they hope to work with in the future. This is a fun way to work because the recruiter is simply spending time developing relationships with various people, instead of constantly trying to sell something. Recruiters

may incrementally build trust with at first a simple phone call introducing themselves as a recruiter who is available to provide information about jobs, and later, with more phone calls, sending over articles about industry trends and so forth.

For the best recruiters, the job is not stressful at all because they are not trying to create "instant leads" and "instant sales" the moment they speak with someone. They are just making calls and "hanging out" with people. When prospective candidates do decide to look for a job, they are much more likely to use someone they *trust*, not someone who is approaching them out of the blue. All of the recruiters I know who follow this approach tend to do exceptionally well in the profession, regardless of the economic climate.

The incremental approach also works with job searches. I believe that the best interviewers are the people who are able to connect and relate to employers and people inside the company. They do not go into interviews with the idea of "closing" and getting the job right away but, instead, go in with a mind-set that they are going there to build a long-term relationship. It is not all about an instant "score" or an instant "offer"; instead, their behavior revolves around a less threatening series of ongoing overtures and so forth to build a relationship. These kinds of people are more concerned about what they can do in the interview to show they will add value than about what the employer can give them, for example. Their primary interest is concentrated on making small connections, instead of trying to push interviewers over to their side. People never want to feel threatened, and they also do not like being in a position wherein they feel they are forced to commit to something.

For several years, there have been numerous people who have called me once every several months to check in and see how I am doing, what I am up to, and so forth. These are various people I have met at business functions, who might have been [looking for a job](#) at one point or another. These people don't call to ask me for anything, and they never have; however, people who stay in touch like this are often the first people that I think of when I have a job to fill or need to hire a company to do something.

Software companies, copier companies, and others are masters at keeping in touch. They call and introduce themselves, and then ask to send information, just so you will know that they are around. Then they will schedule a time to meet with you and show you their product. Then they will call a few months later and see how you are doing. They may offer to do an analysis and see if you are spending more money than you should be on software, copiers, or other items. Then they will send an article about this or that. The point is that whenever I have purchased copiers, software, and the like, it has always been from the people who have taken months, or years, to build a relationship with me, not someone who just "cold called" me one time.

Incremental movement, going forward in small steps, can work wonders for you in every area of your life. You start out small and build from there--but always build on what came before. This works with everything. You can learn a new language and do whatever you want to do by simply starting small.

Watching [real estate agents](#) has always fascinated me. Where I live, in Malibu, California, there are some real estate agents who consistently make over \$10 million a year. Some of them are so good at what they do, they have foundations and charities set up in their own names, which they are funding with all the money they are making selling real estate.

This level of income truly boggles the mind. What makes it even more incredible is that many of these agents do not do things much different from other real estate agents. However, instead of looking at everyone out there in the market as a "sales prospect," they look at their entire community as a group of friends. Whenever I go to decent-sized parties in Malibu I always see one of the area's best real estate agents there. They are meeting people, hanging out, and having a good time. They are not there to sell anyone anything, yet people approach them to talk about real estate, among other things. The reason is that they are in an "nonthreatening environment," and people who approach them are comfortable there. If the same real estate agent called these people on the phone without introductions and asked them to sell their house, the agent would get a different reaction from the people. You need to put yourself in a situation where you are consistently throwing out small lines and making greater and greater bonds with people over time.

Keep in mind that you can only achieve your goals and reach your full potential if you are constantly building on a series of progressive steps. Most people fail to ever reach their potential because they believe everything should happen quickly and all at once. Success is about progressively building on what you have done before. The more you are able to build on what you have done before, the more you pull away from the "average" people in the world, who refuse to take a series of incremental steps before they demand greater results.

## **THE LESSON**

The best way to attain your goal is through small, incremental steps on which you can build. Establish a routine, and make sure you are consistently working towards some kind of goal. Start small, and always build upon what you have done before. Most people fail to achieve their goals because they believe everything should happen quickly and at the same time, instead of progressively building upon their past achievements.

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<https://www.harrisonbarnes.com/>