

Relationships, Commodities, and Making Connections

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

Several years ago, I was at a wedding rehearsal dinner with a man who was one of the several owners of a very famous New York and Los Angeles sushi restaurant called Nobu. I had never met the man before that night. I was seated right next to him and both of us were for some reason not at the "popular" tables at this event. We seemed to be isolated from the rest of the people, who all seemed to be having a very good time. The man was very wealthy and had a lot of very good business experience, which we discussed. I was actually excited to be seated directly next to him because I figured he could teach me a lot about business.

This fellow had a very serious demeanor about him, and you could pick up a sort of *calculating* vibe from him. He was dressed very casually, as if he had been by the beach earlier in the day, and he seemed a little disappointed that he was seated next to me, since I was in my early 30s at the time and did not have much in common with him. His eyes darted around to see what other notables at the dinner were doing the whole time.

We made some idle chitchat for a while and then I started to ask him more personal questions:

"Are you married?" I asked.

"No, I have never been married," he told me.

Since he was probably at least in his mid-50s I found this somewhat unusual so I prodded a little further. We were at a Mexican restaurant, and once the man was into his second Cadillac margarita--a strong drink--he seemed to be really loosening up. He was drinking pretty fast and he was starting to smile. His intense vibe seemed to be disappearing.

"Why not?" I asked.

"Frankly, I never plan on getting married. What's the point? I am wealthy and I live in Los Angeles where there are tons of young, beautiful women all around."

That made some sense.

"You should have brought a girlfriend with you to the dinner," I said.

"Oh no, I do not have any girlfriends. Who needs that aggravation? I work too hard. I prefer prostitutes."

"Are you kidding?" I said, laughing. I really thought he must have been joking.

"No, I am not. I have a different one stop by three or four times a week. I have a couple of services that send the girls by, and I pay on my charge card. Who needs a relationship and all the trouble that goes along with that? It is actually cheaper to get prostitutes than to be married or have girlfriends."

As I am sure you can imagine I was really taken aback by that statement. In fact, I did not really believe him. I questioned him further and he calmly went into the reasons why he had made this "lifestyle choice" over a decade ago, and how he thought it was the smartest thing he had ever done. He was completely serious, and I remained astonished. Later that evening, I figured out a way to politely drop this into a conversation I was having with the man's friends and, sure enough, everything the man had told me was true. In fact, the guy had the habit of showing up to dinners and events with his friends and saying things like:

- "I just had an Australian girl who told me she had some Aborigine in her. It was the most exotic experience I've had in months."
- "I'm sick of all these girls from the Midwest. I have started requesting that they only send girls with an attitude from the New York area."

Stories like this are hard to believe. I watch plenty of television, but I did not realize this sort of thing actually happens in real life. Interestingly, I do not think you would ever see someone like this living in a smaller town in the United States. People like this, I imagine, can only exist in big cities, where there is tons of trade going on and people are buying and selling things in a frenzy--places like Los Angeles and New York. Only this kind of environment can possibly produce people like this.

I am not going to get into moral and other reflections about this because that is not the point of my story. What was so fascinating to me, though, is that here I was speaking with an incredibly [successful businessman](#)--and he had a view of relationships, love, and life that completely contradicted everything I had ever known. He had turned everything that seems to be so personal and sacred into a commodity, something to charge on his American Express and pay for at the end of the month.

The more I thought about this, the more I realized that this method of thinking about people is extremely common among many people out there: They simply look at other people as commodities. A commodity is something basic that can be bought, sold, or traded. In fact, the entire goal and pressure of a capitalistic society is to essentially make everything into a commodity. Since people work so hard, they want to feel that the money they make can satisfy every possible need they might have, and because of this, everyone's needs are able to be filled by commodities, which our society constantly churns out in one form or another.

In your career and life you need to escape the world of being considered a commodity. When you are a commodity, you can be replaced at whim and you have no value independently of others in the market and world. You need to do something that differentiates you from others and protects you from becoming seen as a commodity. If you are unique, you are not something people can just *purchase* on the open market--and you are not a commodity.

The man with the prostitutes was really missing out, as far as I am concerned. If he ever allowed himself to get close to a

woman, the woman would

- give him love and make him feel needed,
- support him when he is in trouble,
- allow him to make an impact on others,
- understand where he wants to go with his life,
- understand what is holding him back,
- understand what he has done that has worked, and what has not worked for him,
- be his cheerleader, and want him to do well all the time,
- provide him direction when he is on the wrong course, and
- help him make the right decisions about his life.

There would be a *bond* there that would be incredibly different from anything else; that woman could not be considered a commodity. A woman who understood the man so well would never be a commodity. She would be *far beyond* being put on a charge card. She would be precious to the man and altogether intangible. And if he were ever to lose her, the man would have a very difficult time ever replacing her.

What is conspicuously absent in the way most people think about their careers is an understanding that they need to escape the forces that are constantly seeking to make them commodities. If you are a commodity you are no different from a prostitute in the following sense: *You show up and do your work and get paid*. There is not much there to differentiate you from others who do the same work. In fact, just like a prostitute, most people in their work and jobs can be replaced with a simple phone call. What you need to do is move beyond this; you must establish yourself as someone with unique skills, talents, and value who could never be replaced.

In order to create real value for an employer, or anyone, you first need to understand them and where they want to go. You need to understand what motivates them and what is important to them. Regardless of whom you are dealing with, virtually every single person in the economy is in the business of trying to help others become better and have better futures. Once you connect with someone and understand where they want to go with their life and career, you have set yourself up for success. All people want someone behind them who can help them have a better future than they have today.

Knowing what people want and where they want to go is an incredibly powerful piece of knowledge. If the people you are working for cannot tell you where they want to go, there is a real danger. You should always know where the people you are serving in your profession want to go. If the people you are working for share with you where they want to go, then they are showing you that they want to have a relationship with you and view you as part of their plan. If the person will not share this information with you, then they probably do not want to have a relationship with you. Nothing is more important for your long-term success than understanding this piece of information.

There is a particular sort of scene that I have witnessed in the movies more times than I can count. The scene typically involves a young man and a woman sitting on a car hood in a field, or lying in an open field, looking up at the stars while talking about the future and what they want to do with their lives. The reason I think we see this so often in movies is that when we tell another person what the future looks like to us, we are forming a bond with that person and saying, "Here is what we can have together." This is quite powerful.

When two people come together and form a vision for how their future should look, they form an incredible bond that cannot be replicated. If two people have this bond and connection, they have a much better relationship and a stronger prospect of a long-term future together than if they do not. It is about trust, progress, truth, and connection.

We need to appeal to the people we work for on an emotional, not just on a practical level. If you do not appeal to people on an emotional level, you are just a commodity and you are no different from anyone else out there. Ultimately, we will never distinguish ourselves and have any level of employment security unless we can make people feel protected, help people maximize their experience and effectiveness in the world, and create some sort of special connection with those around us. If certain people do not share with you where they want to go, it means that they have no interest in having a long-term relationship with you. This is a warning sign, and it often indicates that it is unlikely they are envisioning a future with you.

The man who is involved with prostitutes is generally not going to take a lot of time to get to know the women--their hopes and dreams; nor will he share with them about his own hopes and dreams. In this situation, neither the client nor the service provider is interested in getting to know one another on this level. Both parties are simply commodities to one another. It is only when we make a true connection that we are able to move beyond the world of being commodities.

When you see advertisements for fast cars, for example, it is no mistake that the advertising company will often show a beautiful woman standing next to the car. That is a depiction of where the young men, who purchase such cars, typically *want to go*. The car is portrayed as something that will take men to this woman. In fact, all good advertising is about nothing more than linking a product or service to where the intended purchaser wants to go. The more effective the advertising is, the more likely it is that consumers will associate a product or service with where they want to go, and will therefore purchase it.

The goal of advertisers should be no different from the goal you have in your relationships, at work, and in your business: To get to where you ultimately want to go. One of the easiest ways to get ahead in any organization is to understand where your supervisors and the company you are working for want to go. You need to understand things like what strengths people have--which they want to see leveraged--what they most fear losing, and what they are most excited about accomplishing.

There are countless attorneys, teachers, mathematicians, doctors, tool and die makers, and other sorts of people who can fill any position. All an employer needs to do is put an advertisement out somewhere and countless people will appear at their doorstep within hours, ready to work. The only way you can differentiate yourself from others in the [job market](#), and in this world, is to (1) make a personal connection with others, and (2) be seen as someone who can help people get where they want to go. Once you are seen as an ally and a confidant, you will move beyond the world of being a commodity.

When you understand where the people you work for want to go, they will form a bond with you and you will suddenly become much more than just your "average hire" who can be replaced easily. Instead, you will become a tool in their arsenal for their success. The worst thing you can do is be seen as a commodity who does not understand your bosses, your clients, and so forth. Instead, you need to be seen as someone who understands and knows where the people with whom you do business want to go.

All success in the business world depends on this understanding. The more and greater your understanding of where the

people you work for want to go, the better off you will be. You need to work with people who will let you in and allow you to form this connection with them, in terms of where they want to go. If you do not form this connection, you will just be a commodity. And if the people you are working for do not allow you to form this connection, it is because they see you as a commodity.

How can you make this connection in the real world? You simply need to ask. You need to sit down with the people you work for and say to them that you want to talk about what the future looks like to them, how you can help them get there, and how you can be the most effective in getting them there. This will set you apart from other employees, and it will also tell you if your employer sees you as part of the future of that company.

THE LESSON

When you are a commodity, you can be replaced on a whim and have no value beyond anyone else in the market. Do something that differentiates you from others. When you are unique, you are no longer someone whom employers can easily find on the open market and your value will increase. Establish yourself as irreplaceable due to your unique skills. Understand your employers' needs and desired direction in order to create value for them.

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- [Why You Should Never Miss a Company Holiday Party or Invitation to Your Boss's Home](#)
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<https://www.harrisonbarnes.com/>