



Are You More Motivated by the Opinions of Others-or Your Own?

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

When I first moved to Los Angeles, I found myself spending the occasional Saturday or Sunday going to Beverly Hills with a girlfriend to look in clothing stores. One of the stores that I usually ended up in was a store like Barneys, which carries both men's and women's clothing. Instead of sitting idly on couch near a dressing room, reading fashion magazines with the other occasional bored male, I typically would go upstairs and look at men's clothing. What always fascinated me about the menswear I saw during these trips was that it seemed drastically different each year. One year baggy pants would be *in* and the next year pants that fit men like gloves would be *in*.

It is always funny going into the men's sections of these clothing stores because you typically will see men in their 50s with pot bellies, for example, trying to fit into the latest styles. They seem to me to be guys who have finally "made it" and can buy whatever they want, and they have decided it is important to be wearing the latest styles. They will typically be "brand whore" sorts of people that are more likely to be wearing Bvlgari glasses, Gucci belts, and other designer accessories than not. And then there are just other fashion-conscious men wandering around the stores.

It is incredible to watch the men here because they are always throwing around the names of the [latest designers](#), and buying clothes that are ripped, bleached, and all sorts of things--for incredibly high prices.

- \$500 tee shirts that are ripped? I've seen these.
- Men's jeans made out of fur? I've seen these.
- A \$3,000 men's denim jacket? I've seen these.

Barneys has nice suits and normal clothing, of course, but it is the section of their stores that carries the trendy fashions that is most interesting to me, because there they are selling clothing that is here and "in" one minute, and gone the next. I have no idea who the people are that buy this stuff because I have never met one of them in my entire professional and personal career, but they are apparently numerous, and out there waiting to be found. They are intimately familiar with all sorts of fashion labels, and probably in most cases they spend tens of thousands of dollars per year on these fashions. There is an energy in Barneys as these men shop, because they move around with a certain discrimination and enthusiasm, which is unique to Barneys itself.

In Los Angeles, at the end of the season these fashions become so undesirable that Barneys rents out an airplane hangar in Santa Monica and takes all of the "undesirable" old fashions there to sell at fire sale prices of 30% or more off of retail. The undesirable fashions are so *tainted* after a season that they do not even merit being sold in the store itself, and must be relegated to an industrial airline hangar far away from Beverly Hills. I can only assume that *second-rate* customers, who could not afford \$500 for a tee shirt when it was "in-style" are flocking to airline hangars to, instead, purchase the tee shirts for \$350.

An even more interesting thing about Barneys is that the salespeople also take themselves quite seriously. They seem to think that it is perfectly normal for a grown man to spend \$8,000 on a leather coat, and they fastidiously follow their patrons around, complimenting them on one choice or another. In addition, Barneys even offers a *personal shopper* service to assist men in repeating this insanity year in and year out, as new wardrobes are brought in to replace the old ones.

One year I was standing around like an anthropologist, in absolute amazement as I watched a couple of men trying on \$400 designer scarves that looked like pieces of white ripped sheets on an 80-degree day, and a salesman came up and started speaking with me. I have no idea what happened, and must have been overcome by the energy of the place, because within a few minutes I had given him my email address, telephone number and address. For the next few years *Robert* sent me email after email about new collections. He called my wife after I got married to tell her that there were "pre-sales" I should go to. He sent me cards in the mail too, and when he figured out how to use the attachment device in his AOL account, he started emailing me grainy pictures of shoes, strange looking ties and so forth. These communications from Robert were among the most entertaining I have ever received in my life, and I always looked forward to them.

One day I got a mass email from Robert, which was sent to around 1,000 other people, stating that he was "making a lateral move", and going to work at a men's clothing store called Joseph A. Bank. It was a conservative men's clothing store. It made no sense because the new store he was going to work in could not have been any more different from the sort of stuff that Robert had been selling at Barneys. Robert called me a few months later from Joseph A. Bank to tell me about a special upcoming event involving sport coats:

"How's it going?" I asked Robert.

"Ok," he said.

"Listen, I do not know a lot about men's fashion, but I think you are in the wrong sort of clothing store and should go back to Barneys. Your customers want *hip*, like from Barneys, and you went to about the most conservative men's clothing store imaginable. Your customers are not going to follow you to the new store."

"I never thought about that. Maybe you're right," he said. "I do not know if you know this, but Barneys was recently sold. They have changed the whole commission structure there. Morale is really low."

I was not expecting to get into a long conversation with Robert about his job especially when, as of yet, I had never actually purchased anything from him. In fact, I was quite sure he did not even remember introducing himself to me while I had been standing, mesmerized, watching perfectly normal looking grown men flinging scarves over their shoulders and primping in front of mirrors several years ago. Robert and I spoke for several minutes and he admitted to me that, even with the commission adjustments at Barneys, he had been making far more money there than he was currently making at Joseph A.

Bank. He thanked me for my career advice.

A few months later I got another mass email from Robert, stating that he had made another lateral move, this time to another men's clothing store, Saks Fifth Avenue.

"NICE WORK!" I responded to the email.

They have marked down all of the Roberto Cavaleri's 20% until the 1st. Please see me. He responded. Since I had only a vague understanding that Roberto Cavaleri was a designer, I figured Robert must have been doing well, especially since, in this case, the name of the designer was Italian and sounded quite high fashion.

My experience with Robert and Barneys gave me a real understanding of people because the world of men's clothing says so much to me about who people are. In the world there are essentially two types of people: Externally motivated people and internally motivated people. People who are motivated internally will typically be motivated by the things that they believe are correct and right. In the realm of clothing, for example, they are likely to make decisions based on the things that they feel are right and correct, and not necessarily based on others' influence. Someone internally motivated would pick out clothes that they like without being too influenced by the opinions of others, for example. They would not feel like they were doing something wrong if they were not wearing the latest fashions.

The second sort of person makes decisions in large part based on what others believe is the appropriate or correct thing to do. If the fashion powers declare that tight men's pants are in, these sorts of people will wear tight pants. If the fashion powers declare that loose fitting, baggy and wrinkled pants are in, they will wear these. People who are highly motivated by others' opinions often have an extremely difficult time making any decisions *without* relying upon the opinions of others.

In my experience, people out there are generally either motivated by others' opinions, or motivated by their own opinions.

I have always had a fascination with artists because, in large part, the difference between a good and an average artist is that the better artist often tries to completely ignore the opinions of others. In high school I went to a school called Cranbrook-Kingswood, which also had an art academy attached to it, and lots of graduate students were studying art there. It is actually a pretty good art school, and it was always interesting to see the projects the artists worked on around campus. One thing that I noticed is that the artists were always trying to do projects that were completely shocking and different from anything else out there. For example, one day I might be walking through the campus and see a car painted all different colors and a man lying face-down on the car, wearing nothing but a swimming suite. This sort of thing would be considered an "art" project of some sort. The idea was that these artists were all really "thinking outside the box", and were trying to do things that were completely unexpected and of their own making. They wanted to be doing a form of art that was informed by what was inside of them, not something that copied the opinions of others.

The pressure to conform to others' opinions is a major one in our society. Numerous people out there are constantly trying to conform to what others think and believe is the right thing to do, and for this reason, most of their actions are chosen based upon what others feel and believe is the most important thing to do. The experience of the people who shop and spend their time in the "high-style" areas of Barneys is a perfect example of this. These people are trying to largely do something (in this case, follow styles) based on what other people declare to be the "in styles" of the moment. They base much of their decisions about how to be and act on the opinions of others, and not necessarily on what they are likely to be comfortable doing. They are likely to constantly ask others for feedback about how they are doing.

- They may choose a restaurant and eat at a restaurant because it is considered the best place at the time, and they want to tell others that they ate there--but they may not necessarily really want to eat at the restaurant.
- They may choose a place to work because it is considered a good place to work by others, not because they feel comfortable working there.
- They will ask for approval at work in order to understand whether or not they are doing a good job--less so than simply understanding this internally.
- They purchase things that are recommended more so than the things that appeal to them, or which they like.

People who are *external-focused* always use sources of reference outside of themselves to understand whether or not they are doing a good job in work and in life. If you are an external-focused person, the chances are very good that:

- You prefer [working in jobs](#) in which you are constantly getting lots of feedback and being told how you are doing.
- You like it when people help you set performance goals.

People who are externally motivated look to what others are saying, and to the outside world for guidance in their life, and to understand reality. This is how a large proportion of the world is.

In contrast, people who are more motivated by their own opinions are more like the artists I described earlier. They simply judge the world and their own lives based on their own opinions about what is correct, or what is best for them--and mostly without referring to others' opinions for guidance. These people's opinions are generally based on what they believe, not on what others believe.

- They may seek out information from others when making decisions, but will ultimately make decisions for themselves.
- They are internally motivated, not motivated by others. They may not require management, for example.
- They resist feedback from others, and in fact, prefer little or no feedback.
- They know they have done a good job based on how they feel, not based on what others say.

In your career and life you are either more motivated by your own opinions about what is right and how things should work--or you are more motivated by the opinions of others.

I am sure you know of people who are always judging you, themselves, and others based on what other people say is the correct thing to say or do. I am sure you also know of people who do not judge themselves and others based so much on what other people say is the correct thing to say or do.

Regardless of which sort of person you are, it is important that you embrace this person. You are almost certainly never going to change the sort of person you are, and understanding what sort of person you are is something that can allow you to make full use of your strengths. You may be best in a job that does not require the approval of others--or, you may be best in one that does. It does not matter. What is important is that you understand the sort of person you are, embrace it, and make sure you are doing work that makes the most of your natural tendency to be one sort of person or the other.

THE LESSON

In order to make full use of your strengths, it is important to determine whether you are an internally or externally motivated person. While externally motivated people are directed by others' opinions, internally motivated people prioritize their own opinions and ways of thinking in their lives and careers. Decide which sort of person you are, embrace this identity, and seek work that makes the most of your natural tendencies.

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