

The Importance of Environment

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

I have decided that I do not like exercising in the gym in our building in Las Vegas anymore. The facility itself is very nice and new, and it has excellent equipment. It is also very clean and well maintained; in fact, it is one of the nicest gyms I have ever seen. The window views of the stratosphere outside are also pretty cool. However, it is what is going on inside the gym that bothers me.

Almost every time I have been to the gym I have seen men running with their shirts off on the treadmills. Beads of sweat fly off them onto the adjacent equipment. People just do not act the way they should in the gym. Other people talk loudly on cell phones while people like me are trying to get some exercise right next to them. I was working out there a while back and saw an old guy with headphones, singing very loudly to himself. Many people do not wipe the equipment off when they get off the machines, and people seem to loiter in a way that makes me uncomfortable. For example, there are a ton of kids in their early 20s who like to sit in the gym because they can pick up free Wi-Fi there.

Las Vegas is in the middle of a real estate meltdown. Condominiums in the building that might have been \$10 million a few years ago are now \$3 million, and condominiums that might have been \$650,000 are now \$150,000. Even at these massive discounts, however, properties are not selling all that well. I would estimate that my building is less than 20% full, and many of the units have been rented out for a short term by the banks, with the hopes that things will return to normal soon, and they will be able to sell them. When I walk up to this giant building at night, only a few lights inside the units can be seen from the street.

At least once every few weeks there is some sort of "sales event" at the condo, wherein the owners of the property bring in all sorts of free food and attempt to interest people in buying the vacant units. They have hired real estate agents that look like models to give tours. In front of the building, they have leased Bentleys, Porsche's, and so forth, which they park there to make people think these expensive vehicles are part of the *lifestyle* of the condominium. In reality, however, the garages are filled with primarily older model American cars, driven by 20-somethings who drive back and forth each day to their [jobs in hotels](#) and so forth around Las Vegas.

In front of the building, there are a couple of giant black signs that are at least 10 feet tall, which say: "Condos from the Low \$100s!!" The signs have been planted in the Astroturf (there is no real grass there) in front of the building. When you get close to the sign, you can see that the area that says "Low \$100s!" has been painted over several times after successive price cuts, which just keep coming.

Since there are so many younger people living in the building, and we are in Las Vegas, as I am sure you can imagine, there are also people who appear to be prostitutes and strippers living among us. A few months ago, I was in the elevator and there was a female midget standing there alongside a very tall woman. They were all dressed up, talking about how they had just charged some guy \$1,500 for a "fantasy hour"--whatever that meant--but that he probably would have paid \$2,000, if only the tall woman had not been in such a hurry. They were holding alcoholic drinks. (That's another thing about this building: people walk around with alcohol much more than they probably do anywhere else in the world.)

The elevators on the weekends are regularly filled with young kids exchanging quick innuendos about whatever craziness occurred the night before.

"Dude, I cannot believe you made me sleep in the hall. My neck hurts!" I heard a guy say to his buddy the other day in the elevator, as I stared at the numbers of the passing floors, waiting to reach the lobby.

"Sorry, man. I could not believe she came home with me! I would have done the same for you."

The few times I have been on the elevator during these sorts of exchanges, the people in the midst of them have looked over at me as if I were going to smile at them and give them some sort of nod of approval, or share a smile with them about this. I guess I must be getting old because I have realized that I have passed that point, and I no longer find these sort of things funny, as I once did. I see the humor in it, but it just is not that cool to me anymore--especially when I am pushing my two-year-old in a stroller and wondering about the sort of people she will be meeting and learning from a few years from now.

What is wrong with the building I am in? Nothing. It is a very nice building, and it appears to be very well constructed. I also think the management of the building is absolutely exceptional; they are really on top of most things going on there. Given the massive drop in home values in Las Vegas and the timing this recently completed building came to market, this has turned it into a "party building" and it is not filled with the sort of people I am comfortable living with at my age. It is not a family building. The people that are living there are not interested in living there, and they all plan on moving on at some point in the not-so-distant future.

It is not the income level of the people there either. Some of the nicest buildings I know of in New York City, for example, are luxury buildings that, as a condition of being built in certain neighborhoods, have low-income housing in them. I know someone who is a bartender with a master's degree from an Ivy League college, who lives in a studio in one of these buildings and pays \$250 a month for an apartment that probably would normally cost \$3,500. The thing is that he and the other low-income people that live there treat the place like a home and feel glad to be there. He has been there for more than 10 years and is extremely grateful. The people in our building in Las Vegas are just "passing through." They do not care what anyone thinks of them or how they behave.

Thus, the problem is the environment.

As we were coming back from Las Vegas yesterday, we stopped at the Mad Greek Restaurant in Baker, California (considered to have some of the hottest temperatures on earth), and I picked up the local real estate magazine. The magazine was filled with houses for \$30,000 and giant luxury houses in the middle of the desert for less than \$600,000,

which would easily cost millions in Los Angeles. As I started thinking about this, however, I realized that no matter how nice the house might be, the purchaser still would be stuck living in an environment that is among the hottest places on earth.

A few weeks ago, a friend of my wife invited us to an open house for a private school in Los Angeles. I sat there with at least 100 other people, learning about how competitive it is for parents to get their kids into this particular kindergarten. Parents were on their absolute best behavior as they learned about the many months it could potentially take for their kids to get accepted into the school. Some parents will happily and aggressively do everything they can to get their kids into kindergartens that cost more than \$20,000 a year--even when there are perfectly good public schools in many of the upscale neighborhoods they live in. Why on earth would someone do this?

The reason for all this nonsense is the environment: Parents want their kids to get into good schools because they feel this will lead to success down the road. People believe in the power of environments to shape their futures and the futures of their children.

The environment that you are in makes all the difference. It ultimately shapes who you become.

There has been an ongoing debate for some time about the importance of the intelligence characteristics we inherit genetically from our parents, versus what we learn from the people and circumstances around us. This debate is known as *nature versus nurture*, and it was ignited with a particular amount of passion with the 1994 publication of the book *The Bell Curve*. *The Bell Curve* was cowritten by the late Harvard psychologist Richard J. Herrnstein and American Enterprise Institute political scientist Charles Murray. The book quickly became a bestseller.

The Bell Curve's central argument is that between 40% and 80% of our intelligence is genetically inherited from our parents, and that genetics have more of an effect on us than our socioeconomic background (i.e., our environment), in the determination of whether we are likely to succeed in our lives going forward. In addition to stating that our IQ comes primarily from our parents, the book also argues that having a high IQ is extremely important for getting a good job, having a high income, and doing well in school and, similarly, that having a low IQ correlates with having a low income, not doing well in school, and other similar failures. The most controversial idea of *The Bell Curve* revolves around the idea that you cannot "reform" or help low IQ people by modifying their social environments.

When the book was originally published, as might have been expected, there was a great deal of debate set off by *The Bell Curve*, and many scientists, educators, sociologists, and others quickly came to the opposite conclusion. For example, studies of adopted children have shown that their IQs will increase if they are put in improved environments.

"Well-controlled adoption studies done in France have found that transferring an infant from a family having low socioeconomic status (SES) to a home where parents have high SES improves childhood IQ scores by 12 to 16 points or about one standard deviation, which is considered a large effect size in psychological research. ... The malleability of intelligence is not constrained by heritability." (p. 76, Wahlsten, D., in B. Devlin, S.E. Fienberg., & K. Roeder. *Intelligence, Genes, and Success: Scientists Respond to The Bell Curve*. New York: 1997).

There are also numerous other studies that show the effect of environment on IQ, success, and other areas of people's lives. Personally, I believe that it is next to impossible that our environment and the people that we live with, work with, and associate with can have anything less than a major impact on what ends up happening to us and the people we become. It would be incorrect to claim that a good environment has little impact on how successful we ultimately end up becoming.

Your career and your life will be largely determined by the environment you operate in. You need to seek out environments that support your becoming the person you want to be and the person you believe you can become. A strong environment can make all the difference. Put yourself in the most demanding [work environments](#) and you will likely develop a great number of skills you would not otherwise develop. Work around the smartest and most ambitious people and you too will likely become smarter and more ambitious. Your environment will shape you far more than you may realize. Your environment comes down to where you live, the people you associate with, where you work, and more.

When I picked a place in Las Vegas, I made a mistake that many of us make. I picked a place that had the best view and was the best deal. I did not consider the environment. I was blinded by things other than the environment. The environment I am in is so bad that every time I leave the confines of the condominium I am reminded of the mistake I made.

We lose sight of the environments of the jobs we choose as well.

We may [choose a job](#) that has the best salary. We may choose a job that has the best commute. We may choose an employer that has the best brand. We may choose a job that has the best benefits or vacation policy.

We choose places to work for all sorts of reasons; however, ultimately it is the environment and people we will be around every day that is the most important. We need to be focused on the environment in addition to all of the other things. It is the environment that will ultimately determine our happiness and shape who we become.

THE LESSON

Your environment ultimately shapes who you are, so you need to seek out environments that will help shape you into the person you wish to be. People choose their jobs based on all sorts of factors, but often overlook the environment itself. The environment and people that surround you every day, however, ultimately determine your happiness and shape your future.