

Why You Will Never Succeed at Practicing Law Until You Understand This One Thing

By Harrison Barnes from Los Angeles Office Managing Director

One of the most persistent misunderstandings of attorneys is why they are not more successful in practicing law. Whether it is the solo practitioner, large firm attorney, or small firm attorney, at its heart, there is almost always one significant, underlying cause for the lack of success of most attorneys and the corresponding success of other attorneys.

The reason for this success is so fundamental and should be so apparent--however, it is missed by almost every attorney throughout their career. Because it is missed so often, many attorneys end up unfulfilled, unsuccessful, and unable to advance and be happy when they should be.

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[The Only Way to Be Happy Practicing Law: How to Immediately Find Happiness Practicing Law](#)

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You can learn what these attorneys are doing wrong by looking around you. There are examples of this everywhere you turn. The [cause of why attorneys succeed or fail](#) can be seen just by watching businesses in whatever area of the country you are.

My office is in an upscale shopping mall in the center of Malibu, California. Since Malibu is a small town of no more than 10,000 full-time residents (probably far less) and the rent is expensive, this mall cannot support many stores--and the stores that open there need to know exactly what to do to appeal to customers. While there are summer tourists and people who come out on the weekends, Malibu is about an hour from most areas of Los Angeles with traffic, so the majority of shoppers there are local.

Most of the stores in this mall are overpriced clothing stores from France and New York, expensive restaurants, real estate agencies that sell very expensive homes, a few art galleries, places that sell natural juices for \$12 a bottle, and the like. Unless they have an extremely high markup, these businesses cannot survive. I have seen tons of businesses open here in the ten years that I have worked in this mall, and most of them fail. Unless they can attract full-time residents or the visitors who spend money on the weekends and during the summers, they close very rapidly. Some fold after just a few months.

Recently, right beneath my office, a French motorcycle shop opened that is staffed by a man from France. Each day he sits there, and I walk by him several times a day and never see anyone in the store. Most people who live in Malibu do not have motorcycles. It is one of the most bizarre things I have ever seen. It is inconceivable that there is a need for this in Malibu. Why would someone open a tiny motorcycle shop in a small town of 10,000 people, one hour outside of a large city, where no one even owns motorcycles? To make matters worse, the shop is in a small outdoor mall with no street visibility.

See also: [How Much Do You Want Your Dream?](#)

"My boss likes Malibu, and he wanted a shop here," the man who runs the shop told me one day. He was brought over from France to talk to people in Malibu about his motorcycles. The shop is beautiful and very

nice inside. I estimate it must have cost at least \$100,000 to build it out. This poor man sits behind a laptop computer all day surfing the net. As far as I can tell, he has never sold a single motorcycle. I have no idea how long this shop will be open--but I do not imagine it will be that long.

Before I tell you the huge mistake this man made, I need to tell you that he is not the first, nor will he be the last. I have seen people open candle shops, budget clothing stores, meditation studios, and all sorts of other businesses that were destined to--and did--fail. [These businesses failed for the same reason that most attorneys fail](#). But before I explain the thought process behind these failures, I need to tell you another story first.

Are You a Giver or a Taker?

One of the most interesting things about holidays, birthdays, and other events is that they often bring out the best and worst in people. On one hand, many people go over the top and do a lot for others to show how much they care about them. People who make a big effort to celebrate others seem to attract friends naturally. People like them, include them, and they are empowered by the care and affection they receive in return. This is not always the case, of course--but most often it is. [Many people are natural givers who truly enjoy doing nice things for others](#).

On the other hand, many people do not. They feel entitled to receive gifts and attention on their birthdays--despite the fact that they do not do the same for others. On holidays when people are giving gifts and helping others, they give little yet often expect much in return. This is another very common personality type--arguably just as common as the natural giver. These personalities typically do not have as many friends and are not cared about as much as the givers, although there are always exceptions.

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[Givers, Takers, and Equalizers](#)

[Why Attorneys Need to be Exploited to Succeed](#)

Someone I often see on holidays and birthdays falls into the entitled category. For other peoples' birthdays, he does things like purchase books he wants and then reads them himself before giving them as gifts. He also frequently forgets birthdays. However, when it is his birthday, he is sure to make plans to visit his relatives with the expectation that simply by showing up, he will be treated to a nice dinner, gifts, cake, and a celebration. When he is invited to someone else's birthday event, he will always take more than he gives--either in food or by insuring that he is the center of attention by talking about himself.

On holidays like Christmas, he will go to a dollar store and purchase all sorts of gifts that people could not possibly want. A 40-year old woman with no interest in math might be given an old book about math equations that originally cost \$30 but is now \$1, so it looks like he is generous (the \$1 price tag will be peeled off, but the original price is left visible). A child might be given a \$1 jar of Play-Doh that originally cost \$5 but is now hardened and worthless. At the same time, the child will give him a shaving kit that cost \$20 even though she is only seven years old.

To highlight this man's selfishness, one year I bought him (among many gifts) a fake lottery ticket where everyone was a winner. I put the envelope in a card and told him that if he won, I expected him to split the earnings with me. When he scratched off the numbers, sure enough, it showed he "won" \$100,000 (every ticket was a winner!). When I asked him how much he won, he told me the ticket was not a winner--then he very quickly put it in his wallet and squirreled it away. The last thing in the world he was going to do was share his winnings.

See also: [The Importance of Sharing](#)

It is not the idea of giving nice gifts that is important--it is putting thought, effort and care into those gifts. While this man could surely afford to do more, it is his sense that others should do for him without him ever contributing in return that is the problem. There are too many people who expect a lot to be done for them without contributing to others.

There are also people who give and contribute based on their own needs, not the needs of others. It is making contributions based on your own needs--not what others need-- that breeds unhappiness, a lack of success, and other problems in your professional and business life.

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As you might expect, this man who gives such bad gifts has never had much of a career because he is always concerned with taking and not giving. He does not have long-term relationships or friendships because they are also characterized by taking, manipulation, and getting as much as possible for as little as possible. People exist to serve him. When he does contribute, he does so based on his own rules and what he wants--not what others want or need.

The French man who wanted a motorcycle shop in the center of Malibu in a boutique shopping mall did it for his own vanity. He gave absolutely no regard to what the market wanted or would support. The only person's interest he is serving is his own.

The man who does not give gifts, but expects so much in return, is also only capable of serving his own interest.

What Are You Willing to Do?

When social media first came along, I did not understand exactly where it was going to go. To me, it just seemed to be something that people could use to serve their own vanity and post their stories and interests for others. However, in reality, social media is about much more than this. Social media is about making others feel validated, connected, and part of a community. It is about being a contributor--not just one person and their selfishness. If you can make others feel good by liking the things they say and do, then this will come back to you. Social media is a way for others to show how selfless or selfish they are. When you [give others what they want](#) (such as attention or validation), they are likely to give the same to you.

One of the most interesting things about the [careers of attorneys is that their success](#) is often directly in proportion with how willing they are to contribute to others in a selfless fashion. They do this by anticipating and doing what other people want and need--not just clients, but people they are working for in their firms, their peers, people they are close to, and others around them. If someone is continually selfish and only does what is only best for them, they will experience all sorts of problems in their personal, professional, and even their financial lives in the future.

In my [first position after law school, I worked for a judge](#). When I started working for him, I realized that another clerk who was leaving got his mail each morning and put it on his desk for him. This was not something that was part of her job description, or something that any other clerks did, but he appreciated it. It saved him a trip to the mailbox and additional time out of his day, but it was also a sign of respect. Getting mail was not something I wanted to do, but I believed it was an important part of the job--so I made a point to

do it each morning.

When I started practicing law, I heard other attorneys say things like "I did not go to law school to make photocopies" and the like. Some even quit positions over stuff like this. However, these statements are not really about the tasks at hand--they are about themselves. They are not about what other people need, and they are not selfless.

Many young attorneys quit jobs and/or move firms when they are not given depositions and other responsibilities early in their careers, because they feel they are not being challenged enough. Instead of realizing they may be in a firm that will give them massive potential to succeed in the future, these attorneys unwisely show their unwillingness to contribute in the ways they have been hired to contribute. They end up leaving to go someplace they believe will better fulfill their needs when it does not.

I know of one associate who joined a [major law firm](#) out of law school. He worked very hard, but there was never anything extraordinary about the quality of his work or his interpersonal skills. He kept his head down, however, and continued to do what was asked of him. He was a litigation attorney and never got a lot of experience doing depositions, arguing motions in court, or performing other tasks that are par for the course for young attorneys trying to advance. One day he was tasked with going to a trial with arguably the most powerful partner in the law firm. His job was to make sure the partner had the documents needed to argue the trial, anticipate any issues the partner needed to be aware of, and more. Essentially, his job was to be a gopher. No one expected anything spectacular out of the attorney other than being there and doing what he was told.

A lot of senior associate attorneys would be angry about having to be a gopher for a senior partner in a trial. This position is behind the scenes and has none of the glory of making opening and closing statements, writing motions during the trial, examining witnesses, and so forth. Despite this, [the attorney chose to do the best job he possibly could](#). He threw himself into it and decided he would be the best gopher anyone had ever seen. He studied the case files in depth. He spoke with other attorneys who had been busy writing briefs on the case. When he got to the trial, by all accounts he did everything he possibly could to make sure the partner was as well-prepared as possible--even going so far as to write memos for him each day, discussing the case in-depth with him each morning and having an incredible set of files prepared each day that went far beyond what any normal gopher would do.

As a consequence, the partner felt extremely grateful and taken care of. When he returned from the trial, the partner made sure that someone who had been a gopher was made a partner in the firm. To the astonishment of associates who believed they worked harder and were more valuable to the firm--and had more and better experience--the gopher showed that [when you give people what they want and need, they will help you](#).

See related posts:

[The Importance of Being Well-Liked in Your Job](#)

[The Importance of Being Extraordinary](#)

Remember, It's Not about You

Giving people what they want and need is always about others and never about you. You should always anticipate what clients need and give it to them. Regardless of the type of client, every client needs something--and the better the attorney is at giving it to them, the happier the client will be. A divorce client may need someone to listen to them and take their side, no matter how ludicrous it may seem. A litigation client may also need someone to believe in them and take their side about what may be possible. A business client will need someone to tell them that a certain type of deal is possible and they will do whatever they can

to get it done. An entrepreneur will need someone who believes in them and in their business. The [law firm partner](#) who hires you will need someone they feel will support them and help them as well. [The world is about others helping others.](#)

In general, your personal, professional, and economic success will always come down to [how well you meet the needs of others in the world](#). If you are able to meet the needs of others effectively, they will do what they can to keep you around and meet your needs in return. You need to think of how you can best meet the needs of others and do so in the most effective way possible.

The people who are the best in any profession have the ability to anticipate what others want and need. A good portion of their waking day is spent thinking about the people they are serving and what they can give them--not the other way around. The [law is a service business](#), and service means trying to understand what others want and fulfilling their needs constantly. If you are able to fulfill others' needs, you will succeed--if you are not able to, you will not succeed. It is as simple as that. People only open their pocketbooks to pay you and reward you if you are giving them what they need.

Everyone in the law firm world needs something:

Law firms need associates who are smart, willing to work hard, make others feel important, impress clients, and make partners look good to these clients.

Law firms need partners who are able to bring in business, train associates, work hard, and generate revenue.

Clients need attorneys who are able to anticipate their needs, protect them, charge them fair prices, make them look good, and keep them out of trouble.

Clients also need law firms that are well-run, protect their reputations, hire the best people possible, and have a culture and way of operating that produces the best possible results.

Each step of this process is about what others need, anticipating these needs, and then fulfilling them. The attorneys who understand their role in this process and work to fulfill others' needs do well. Attorneys who do not anticipate what others need or do the necessary work do not do well. The more you think everything is about you, the more issues you will have and the more you will hold yourself back.

Since before I was even in law school almost three decades ago, potential attorneys and others have been obsessed with salaries and how much they can make working inside of law firms. [Motivated by money and not the practice of law](#), many of these people do not succeed. They believe very early on that it is all about them, and they do not consider what they need to contribute to succeed in the process.

See also:

[Never Focus on the Money: Focus on Your Higher Purpose and Contribution](#)

[Why You Should Find Your "Tribe" and Not Just Focus on Money in Making Law Firm Job Decisions](#)

Remove Selfishness from the Equation

Some attorneys who are selfish always think about what they can take from others and how to manipulate others to get what they want. I have seen many people go to solo practitioners and end up spending far more money than they would have if they had used a large, reputable law firm. The reason they ended up spending more was because the solo practitioner was all about himself, did as little work as possible, and took as much as he possibly could, as fast as he could. This is probably why he is a solo practitioner in the first place. He could not get along with groups where giving and making contributions was expected of everyone. He wanted to work on his own terms and take everything for himself. These attorneys never have long-term clients because their clients run after they are taken advantage of and their problems are not solved.

The very best attorneys and the ones who succeed at the highest levels have learned how to eliminate selfishness from their practices. The [most successful attorneys in the largest law firms are often much better team players](#) than it might appear. They may develop a reputation in some quarters for being ruthless-- however, they still [contribute far more than they take from their law firms](#). Their clients respect them, and their relationships with their clients are very strong. They are not out to gouge clients, but to help them the best way they possibly can.

See also: [Can You Be Trusted? Why Credibility is One of the Most Important Characteristics of the Most Successful Attorneys](#)

The attorneys who get in trouble in their careers and do not succeed are often driven by self- seeking and the belief that they must take or they will be taken from. They are calculating and invariably step on the toes of others, who eventually retaliate in different ways. Many attorneys try to run their lives doing only what they want based on what is most important to them. They do not think about what is important to their clients, superiors, fellow attorneys, or others. They believe that they can be successful through games, manipulation, charm, and gamesmanship. When it does not work, these attorneys becomes bitter and angry. They may try harder the next time, but they are rarely sincere in what they are trying to achieve and become even more bitter and angry.

If you are going to succeed at practicing law, you need to understand that it is all about pleasing others and giving them what they want. You need to provide a product that others want, and you need to give them this product exactly the way they want it--and never make it about you.

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