Add Value at Every Turn

By *Harrison Barnes*

At the start of my career in the employment industry, I worked primarily with attorneys who'd come from some of America's top law firms, and who were seeking the highest-paying jobs at the best firms. In working with these individuals, many of whom held top credentials from prestigious law schools, I very quickly identified two types of people: (1) people who worked hard to get where they were, and who would continue to do so because of their work ethic, and (2) people who believed that, because of what they'd already achieved – admission to a top school, securing a job in a top law firm – they were owed success.

Over the years I became very astute at identifying these different types of people. Generally, people who feel they're owed success often act as though they don't need to impress their superiors, or work as hard. Their careers tend to be marginal and organizations often eventually cast them aside.

Before I go any further, I want to let you in on what I feel is the best, and perhaps the oldest, career advice I know. It doesn't matter who you are, or what work you've done in the past, it's something everyone should know, but few understand: you will never arrive at a place where you will be treated with massive deference, all due to your past achievements.

This situation simply does not exist. At each stage of the game you will be called upon to prove yourself even more than before. By realizing this, you will become aware of opportunities to improve, and therefore, to advance your career and life.

One needs only to observe how the media treats presidential candidates, movie stars, and other celebrities. As they become more successful, the scrutiny they undergo becomes tougher and tougher. The price for past success is greater, and expectations for further achievement become increasingly higher. People's generosity tends to diminish in relation to others' success. Successful people get less of a break as compared to others. Each of their subsequent endeavors is expected to surpass the prior achievement. Therefore, as a successful individual, you never ultimately arrive. The journey simply continues.

The primary purpose of any job is to add greater value than the cost for which you were hired. The same premise applies to every business, service and industry. In the course of your job, you are selling your skills, and your employer tries to make money from those skills. Just like a retail product that is sold for a profit, your services are goods from which your employer needs to make a profit.

To give an example, when I bought my last car, I had two choices – one American made, the other German manufactured. The predicted resale value of the German car convinced me to purchase it. Incredibly, after two years of ownership, I ended up selling it for only $2,000 less than it had cost me to purchase it new. Had I purchased the American car, I would have lost $10,000 or more in resale value over those two years. Clearly, the German automaker provided more value in its product than the American automaker–on many levels.

This concept is relevant to employment as well. At work, I'm sure you know people who work diligently and don't waste time on the job. I'm also sure you know people who are clock watchers, and who perform marginally. Companies want to surround themselves with people who work hard and who are willing to give more than they take. The worst thing you can do at any job is to focus on performing at the minimum level for what you are earning.

I have heard salaried employees talk about how much they make per hour. These employees obsess over how much they are getting paid for each hour of work, and they only do the absolute minimum. When you're paid a salary, you should think in terms of being part of a team – a team which values and rewards you for your efforts by providing you with a steady paycheck.

Your goal in every job should be to add as much value as you can to your employer's business, and to the customers whom your employer services. Essentially, if you do not add value, you may not keep your job. If your team does not add value, everyone on the team could get laid off. If your profession does not provide value in the marketplace, your entire industry could cease to exist altogether.

No matter what your job, service, or industry is, it must always be about adding value beyond all expectations.

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