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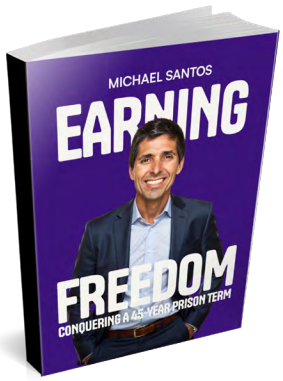
BECOME THE CEO OF YOUR LIFE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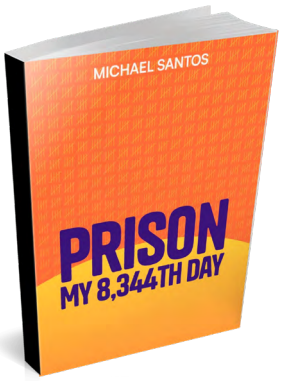
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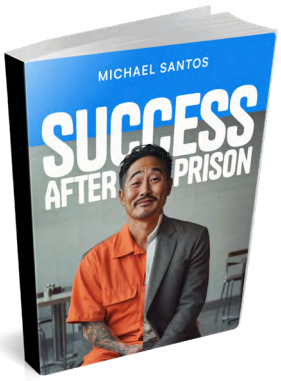
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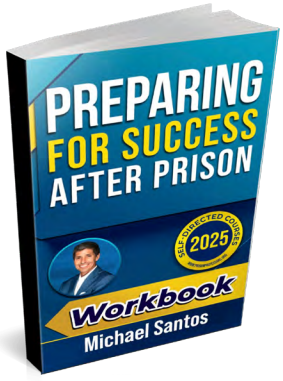
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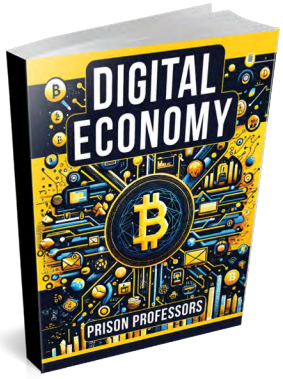
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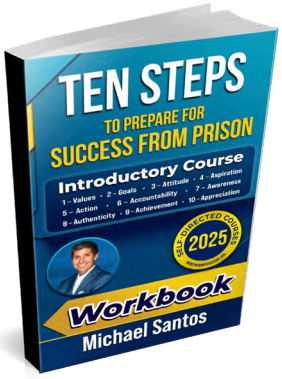
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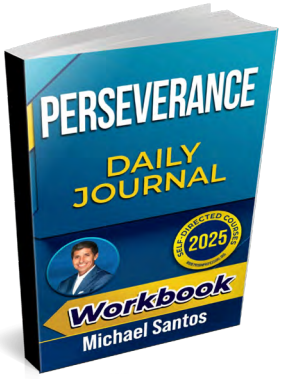
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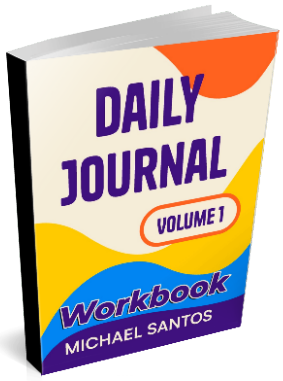
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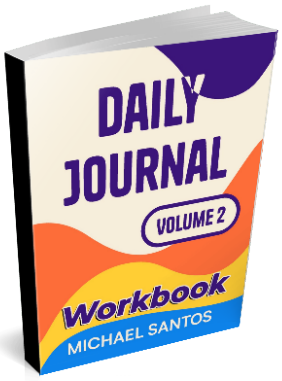
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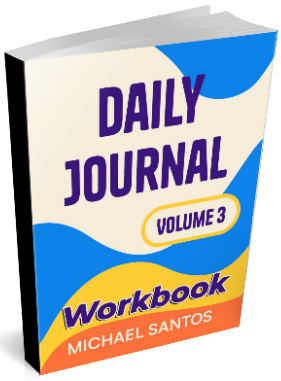
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Other Books by Prison Professors

Earning Freedom:
Conquering a 45-Year Prison Term
(Shows strategies to build strength and discipline through long term)

Prison! My 8,344th Day: Workbook
(Shows strategies to be productive through single day in prison)

Success After Prison: Workbook
(Outcomes for people who use time in prison to prepare for success)

Perseverance Workbook
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DISCLAIMER

The Prison Professors Charitable Corporation is a nonprofit, dedicated to improving outcomes for all justice-impacted people. We donate 100% of any revenues we receive to support our charity. We strive for systemic change that will open more opportunities for people to earn freedom through merit, including:

- Access to earned time credits for all.
- Access to work-release programs.
- Access to more opportunities for people to earn higher levels of liberty through merit.

As a not-for-profit entity, we do not have a staff to work on individual cases, and we do not offer legal advice. We base our work on personal life experiences, showing how decisions in prison influence prospects for success upon release. It's never too early, and never too late to work toward better outcomes.

For more information, visit our website:
www.PrisonProfessors.org.
Institutions or book orders: Playbook@PrisonProfessors.org

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Preface

My name is Michael Santos, and I am the founder of Prison Professors. I wrote this self-directed workbook to offer guidance to people who are moving through different stages of the criminal justice system. My hope is that readers will learn practical steps they can take to prepare for the journey ahead.

Too often, people believe they must hire professionals to guide them through every stage of the process. Obviously, a person needs a defense attorney to navigate the judicial system. But no one needs to hire a so-called prison consultant who promises insight without substance. In many cases, that is wasted money, except for those who want happy talk and hand-holding during the scary times.

In my view, people need a strategy. They need to learn how to build a body of work that can strengthen mitigation efforts, support self-advocacy, and show why they are working toward a better outcome at whatever stage they are in right now. In the era of AI, people can get much of that information for free through our website.

Each person should continue building through every stage of the journey. The stages may change, but the commitment to build should continue.

The lessons in this workbook come from many leaders who taught me how to think differently. I will share what I learned from them, and any errors in interpretation are mine alone. I will do my best to describe how those lessons shaped my life, and why I believe a sound strategy can help others through their own crises.

As readers will learn in the opening chapters, authorities arrested me on August 11, 1987. I was 23 years old. I didn't have any guidance on what to expect, and I entered the system at the beginning of the War on Drugs. Because of my role in leading a continuing criminal enterprise, authorities placed me in solitary confinement at the start of my term.

It was there that I began changing the way I thought. I learned that I could not expect a lawyer, or anyone else, to save me from the consequences of my decisions. If I wanted a better future, I would have to build the path myself. To do that, I relied on lessons from leaders whose ideas shaped the way I thought about responsibility, discipline, and preparation.

I concluded my obligation to the government after 9,500 days, on August 12, 2013. The lessons I learned in prison helped me return home with my dignity intact and with opportunities to serve others. Like anyone else, I had to learn how to become a good steward of time, talent, treasure, truth, and relationships; I credit Dave Worland for introducing me to the work of Ken Boa, who helped me crystallize those five categories of responsibility. This workbook is my effort to pass those lessons on to others.

In this preface, I also want to express gratitude to the many leaders who have helped me deliver these messages to people in prison. It takes courage to support a person with my history, and I must continue proving worthy of that trust.

First, I want to thank Andy Matevousian. As I prepared this manuscript for publication, Andy served as the Regional Director of the North Central Region of the Federal Bureau of Prisons. I met Andy many years ago, when he was a captain at the federal prison in Lompoc. At the time, I had served about 20 years and had six years remaining before I would conclude my sentence. Those who read Earning Freedom: Conquering a 45-Year Prison Term will get more detail about our initial interactions. Even from prison, I was writing to advocate for incentives that would encourage the pursuit of excellence.

After my release, I met Andy again. I was speaking at a judicial conference, in 2015, asking a room filled with federal judges and prosecutors to support the idea for reforms that would bring incentives into the federal system.

Andy was then serving as warden at USP Atwater. After my keynote, he invited me to visit the penitentiary to make a presentation. Rather than simply making a presentation, I asked whether he would allow me to build a program—one that would help more people develop skills they could use to prepare for success upon release.

That program led to our course: Preparing for Success after Prison. This workbook is a supplement to that course, but it is not a part of the First Step Act program that we offer. Although our course is in the BOP catalog for First Step Act programs, we do not control how administrators make it available. We offer the Playbook: Become the CEO of Your Life as a supplement for anyone who wants to begin building pathways to prepare for success upon release.

Andy Matevousian showed real leadership in allowing me to begin a program at USP Atwater. Back then, the Bureau of Prisons was not especially supportive of allowing people with felony convictions to return to federal prisons. Yet his decision marked the beginning of our program and the beginning of my relationship with the agency. Later, his career carried him to higher levels of responsibility, and he introduced me to several other leaders, including Regional Director Misty Starr, Regional Director Danon Colbert, Acting Regional Director Eric Williams, Acting Regional Director Deanna Baysore, and Acting Regional Director Bryan Birkholz.

As a result of the relationships Andy opened, I had the opportunity to meet more than 50 wardens across the agency. I have visited those institutions to make hundreds of presentations. Some people ask whether I ever get tired of returning to prison settings. For me, this work is part of a personal mission, rooted in the hope of encouraging leaders to support programs that reward discipline, preparation, and merit.

At Prison Professors, our mission is to improve outcomes in our nation's prison system. We want to encourage pathways that will allow all people in those institutions to earn higher levels of liberty, at the soonest possible time, through merit. We hope that staff members will support these initiatives, recognizing that they can improve the culture of confinement.

In addition to the support that staff members have given to our work, I am grateful to the many business leaders who believed in me and supported our mission. One of those leaders is Nino Jefferson Lim, founder of a large chain of supermarkets in the western United States, and an employer of more than 1,000 people. When I told Nino about the work I was doing to build pathways for people to earn freedom, he asked how he could help. Nino opened job opportunities for people who worked through our programs, and he introduced me to other business leaders who agreed to do the same.

In my view, I have had so many blessings, that I have a duty to share the lessons I learned on personal development with as many people as possible. Contrary to what many people in prison believe, the best way to serve time is to start preparing for the success they want to build upon release.

In my work, I don't use the word "inmate," or "convict," or even prisoner. I want people in prison to live as if they are the CEO of their life. They are people, and all people have the capacity to grow and to write the next chapter. It's in society's interest to encourage that growth.

I view Prison Professors as a public-private partnership, and I am grateful to all the people who support our mission. I met some of those people while serving my term in prison, and I wrote about some of them in the lessons that follow. They deserve far more credit than I could give them in this workbook. They taught me the importance of personal leadership, discipline, and living with a CEO mindset. It would take a full book to express my gratitude for all the ways they helped me grow.

I already have a working title for that book: Lessons I Learned from Billionaires and Millionaires While I served Time in Prison.

I owe a special debt of gratitude to Changpeng Zhao, known around the world as CZ. He is the founder of Binance, the world's largest cryptocurrency exchange. I encourage readers to study his book, *Freedom of Money*. In that book, he shares his life story, which I had the privilege of hearing directly from him. Since

releasing his memoir, CZ has publicly expressed support for Prison Professors, and he has made substantial donations to support our mission.

Through his example, many people learned more about Prison Professors Charitable Corporation and the work we do to provide free resources for people in custody. I am grateful for every person who chooses to support that mission. Those resources allow us to give away books, lessons, courses, and profile-building tools at no charge to people in custody, families, and government agencies.

Some members of the broader Web 3.0 community have also expressed support for Prison Professors and have made donations to our nonprofit. I appreciate that support. At the same time, I want to be clear: Prison Professors Charitable Corporation does not organize, manage, control, or endorse any outside token project, blockchain community, or investment opportunity. Neither CZ nor I know the people who organized those independent efforts. My responsibility is to keep our nonprofit focused on its mission.

That mission is straightforward. We work to provide free lessons and resources that help people prepare for success. We gather data that supports reforms to improve outcomes in the criminal justice system. We advocate for incentives that reward discipline, preparation, accountability, and the pursuit of excellence. We also advocate for alternatives to incarceration when civil remedies, home confinement, or other sanctions would be more appropriate to serve justice.

As the founder of Prison Professors Charitable Corporation, I do not take a salary for this work. Although we publish books through Amazon and other platforms, any revenues we receive go to support the nonprofit's mission. We reserve all donations and revenues for fulfilling the mission stated in our bylaws, which means we will continue giving books, lessons, courses, and profile-building resources away at no charge to people in custody and to the agencies that serve them.In May 2026, we expect to begin distributing Playbook: Become the CEO of Your Life to thousands of people in federal prison. We believe this resource will help onboard more people into our system, and we hope they will use our platform and free resources to show how they are working toward better outcomes.

All participants should develop a record showing why they are extraordinary and compelling.

Those who use our resources and platform can develop an asset that shows why they are serious, why they are preparing, and why they may be worthy of better outcomes. Every person in prison should strive to become a Prison Professor by developing a personal curriculum that advances him as a candidate for a higher level of liberty and for new opportunities.

If readers choose to develop a profile, as described in the chapters that follow, their stories may help us advocate for broader incentives under the First Step Act and other reforms that reward genuine preparation. I cannot promise that the changes we hope to see will come.

I can promise that I will work hard to build pathways that bring the change I want to see.

As a person who served 26 years in prison, I think often about the people who are still inside. I believe that by building our platform at Prison Professors, we show why society should support reforms that reward excellence, discipline, and preparation. We create pathways to employment for people who return home. We also hope to build resources that empower others and, through their stories, effort, and documented progress, contribute to ending intergenerational cycles of recidivism and poverty.

We need your help. Build your profile in ways that show you are much more than what the government wrote in a charging instrument or a PSR. You are the CEO of your life, and we believe in you.

Respectfully,

Michael Santos

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Incentive for Excellence

At Prison Professors, we are committed to helping people who want to help themselves.

At Prison Professors, we are committed to helping people who want to help themselves. This book contains many lessons, and each lesson includes a series of self-directed questions. There are no right answers or wrong answers to those questions. We offer the questions to help readers develop stronger critical-thinking skills and stronger writing skills with this self-directed workbook.

Critical-thinking and writing skills can serve a person in many ways. They can help him:

» self-advocate with personnel in the prison system,

» communicate more effectively with future probation officers, and

» become a stronger candidate for building income streams upon release.

Clear thinking and clear writing help a person explain who he is, what he is learning, how he is changing, and what kind of future he is preparing to build.

The writing also supports our broader advocacy. Through the Prison Professors profile system, we can track how many words participants write while developing their biographies, journals, book reports, and release plans. Those records, built over multiple entries, help us show that people in prison will work toward better outcomes when they have structure, incentives, and a clear path. To learn more about our self-directed profile program and point system, please review the index and the appendix of this Playbook.

The point system is simple. **The more writing you complete, the more points you earn**. We want to **incentivize the pursuit of excellence**, discipline, preparation, and accountability.

Incentives for Excellence: For that reason, we are offering the following opportunity:

» Work through this Playbook to launch your profile.

» Earn 10 points, and we will send you the next book in our series.

» Every time you earn another 10 points, we will send another book from our series.

» After you earn 50 points, we will feature you on our "Extraordinary and Compelling" page.

Be the change that you want to see. Start writing, keep building, and use your profile to show the work you are doing to prepare for success.

Chapter 1

The CEO of Your Life

When I speak in prisons, I often tell people that they should live as if they are the CEO of their own lives. Some people misunderstand what I mean with that phrase, thinking I am borrowing language from business and bringing it into a setting where it does not belong.

I understand that reaction.

A person in prison does not control the schedule. He does not control the institution. He does not control policy, counts, lockdowns, transfers, or release decisions. A person facing charges may feel the same loss of control. Lawyers, judges, prosecutors, probation officers, and systems of procedure may seem to move with a force that overwhelms individual choice.

That is exactly why the phrase makes sense to me. CEOs work to resolve problems. They consider the best possible outcome, and build systemic pathways to work toward that end.

Each person in prison has a problem to solve. It is his job to engineer a pathway that will help him overcome that problem. The goal is not to become a "model inmate." The goal is to emerge with dignity intact and with stronger prospects to recalibrate, rebuild, and live as a law-abiding, contributing citizen.

To work toward that result, a person should learn to think strategically and deliberately. That means creating a plan, prioritizing actions and the use of resources, developing tools and tactics to overcome the complications of confinement, building accountability tools to measure progress, adjusting when necessary, and executing the plan daily.

I learned those lessons from many leaders.

To live as the CEO of your life does not mean pretending that you control everything. It does not mean having money, status, or some special title. It does not mean trying to turn prison into a boardroom. It means accepting responsibility for the predicament you are in and engineering strategies to get the best possible outcome from the parts of life that remain within your control:

- the way you think,
- the way you define success,
- the way you use time,
- the way you prepare,
- what you choose to read and write, and
- the way you respond to adversity.

That shift in thinking changed my life.

The Moment I Had to Think Differently

When I entered the criminal justice system, I was young, reckless, defiant, and unprepared for the consequences of my decisions. I had been living without much regard for long-term outcomes. Then the government charged me with leading an enterprise that trafficked in cocaine. Although I knew I was guilty, I chose to go to trial. A jury convicted me, and a judge sentenced me to 45 years in federal prison.

I was 23 years old when authorities arrested me on August 11, 1987. During the first part of my imprisonment, they locked me in solitary confinement.

In that environment, I had little control over the world around me. I could not change the past, and I could not change the consequences that would follow from the crimes I had committed. But I could begin building a plan that would help me atone and reconcile with society during the years ahead.

I would like to say that I came to that decision on my own, but that would not be accurate. Before my arrest, I had not been religious. While in solitary, however, I read the Bible to get through the days. I started in Genesis, reading a few passages at a time. After finishing the Book of Revelation, I began again at the beginning. At that time, we were not allowed to have other books in solitary.

From Biblical passages, I came to believe that every person receives gifts. If we squander those gifts, consequences follow. If we develop them, more opportunities open. That understanding came slowly, as the days turned into weeks, and the weeks turned into months. Through reading, reflection, and introspection, I gained more insight into the choices I had made as a younger man, and the results that followed.

After the jury convicted me, I was ready to build a new plan, accepting that responsibility for change would be mine. Neither a lawyer, nor anyone else could do that work for me. If I wanted a better outcome later, I would have to begin building differently now. If I kept reacting emotionally to the system around me, I would waste the one resource I still had in abundance: time.

Responsibility meant more than accepting the sentence. I had to define responsibility as using the sentence productively.

» What would be the best possible outcome?

To answer that question, I had to start thinking about how I would educate myself, how I would prepare for the future, and how I would create a record showing that I was doing more than simply serving time.

Questions like those can lead a person to begin living as the CEO of his own life.

What a CEO Actually Does

Most people do not think of a CEO as someone who simply holds a title. A CEO is responsible for setting direction. A CEO must define priorities, allocate resources, measure progress, adapt to changing circumstances, and accept responsibility for results.

During the course of my term, I learned from many extraordinary leaders who built billion-dollar enterprises and had a massive impact on society. One of those leaders was Greg Reyes, who served as CEO and Chairman of Brocade Communications. Greg taught me that a CEO visualizes the best possible outcome, creates a plan to move toward it, and executes that plan every day.

» Visualize,
» plan,
» execute.

That rhythm stayed with me because it applied far beyond business.

Later, I learned from Changpeng Zhao, known around the world as CZ. In his memoir, *Freedom of Money*, CZ reinforced a related lesson: focus on goals and make the best possible use of time. I admired the way he thought about disciplined execution, clarity, and forward movement. His example helped me sharpen the way I thought about using time with intention rather than allowing time to disappear without purpose.

Those lessons apply to anyone, even people in prison.

» You may not run a company.
» You may not control a budget.
» You may not have employees or a board of directors.

But you do have a life, and your life still requires governance. If you do not govern it, circumstances, habits, fear, bitterness, and other people's decisions will govern it for you.

You won't like the results.

A CEO does not wait for perfect conditions before beginning to lead. A CEO looks at reality clearly, defines an objective, and starts making decisions that move toward that objective.

A person in prison can do the same.

In prison, allocating resources may mean allocating time, attention, energy, reading, writing, and relationships. It may mean deciding whether you will spend the next six months complaining, gossiping, and reacting to every disruption, or whether you will use those months to build discipline, learn, document progress, and prepare for the next stage of life.

A CEO can decide:

- how he wants to be known,
- what kind of record he wants to build,
- what habits he must strengthen,
- what weaknesses he must confront, and
- what work he must do now to prepare for opportunities that may come later.

That is leadership at the most personal level.

Lead Without Power

One of the mistakes people make is confusing leadership with power. They assume leadership begins only after a person gains authority, resources, status, or freedom. From the leaders I studied, I learned to develop a different perspective.

Leadership begins with self-governance.

That idea became clearer to me through reading. Socrates taught me that a disciplined life begins with disciplined questions. A person must learn to examine himself honestly. He must ask:

- What am I trying to become?
- What am I doing today that moves me toward that future?
- Where am I lying to myself?
- What decision should I make now that will improve the next stage of my life?

Without those questions, a person becomes vulnerable to passivity and excuse-making.

Marcus Aurelius reinforced another part of the lesson. He ruled an empire, yet the writings he left behind were not mainly about power. They were about governing his own responses, conduct, and obligations. His example showed me that a person may live in difficult conditions and still build internal order.

Viktor Frankl helped me understand that even when external control is stripped away, a person still retains the ability to choose his response. That choice may be constrained, but it still exists. It may become the beginning of dignity, meaning, and direction.

Those lessons helped me understand that I did not have to wait for freedom to begin leading my own life. I could begin through disciplined thought, disciplined choices, and disciplined preparation.

Reactive Thinking v. Strategic Thinking

When people do not think of themselves as responsible for direction, they tend to live reactively.

- They react to bad news.

- They react to prison politics.
- They react to staff decisions.
- They react to other people's negativity.
- They react to boredom.
- They react to fear.
- They react to time passing.

A reactive life may look busy, but staying busy is not the same as making progress.

I saw many people lose years because they focused on activity rather than a deliberate result. They talked about what they would do someday, but they built no record showing preparation. They complained about the system, but they did not create a plan for the parts of life they still controlled. They let disruptions determine their mood, and then let their mood determine their conduct. The days passed, but very little changed.

Direction requires something different.

It requires a person to decide what success looks like at this stage of life and then begin aligning conduct with that definition. That person may still feel anger, frustration, uncertainty, or regret. But he does not let those emotions govern the overall pattern of his life.

Direction turns time into strategy.

That shift can begin in a cell, in a dorm, in a halfway house, in pretrial confinement, or while a person is still out on bond preparing for sentencing. The location matters less than the decision.

CEO-of-Your-Life Mindset

One reason this framework helped me is that it taught me to stop treating my future as one giant, overwhelming problem. I was only 23, and I could not comprehend serving decades in prison. I learned to think in stages, following the pattern I had learned from CEOs.

- At one stage, success meant surviving solitary confinement without surrendering psychologically.
- At another stage, success meant building educational discipline.
- At another, it meant reading with intention and writing with consistency.
- At another, it meant documenting growth and creating a body of work that others could evaluate.
- Later, it meant preparing for release.
- Later still, it meant building income, creating systems, and using my experience to help others.

The stage changes. The responsibility to prepare does not.

That principle applies to every reader of this book. One person may be facing indictment. Another may be preparing for sentencing. Another may be getting ready to surrender. Another may be several years into a sentence. Another may be approaching release.

The stage may differ, but the responsibility remains the same. Define success for the stage you are in now, then start preparing for the stage that comes next.

That is why the phrase remains useful. It reminds a person that he must keep governing the next decision, the next month, and the next season of life.

A CEO Measures Performance

Another part of this lesson is accountability.

A CEO cannot rely only on emotion. He needs to measure progress. He needs records. He needs evidence that actions are aligned with stated goals.

The same principle applies here.

- If a person says he is preparing for success, where is the proof?
- If he says he is changing, what written record shows how?
- If he says he is building discipline, what habits demonstrate that claim?
- If he says he wants a different future, what has he done this week that supports that future?

Those questions should sharpen a person's thinking.

The system is already creating a record. Court filings, government reports, disciplinary history, and institutional records may follow a person for years. If that person does not create a record of his own, he increases the likelihood that others will define him only by the worst decision of his life.

That is why writing becomes part of being the CEO of your life. That understanding later influenced the way we built the Profiles section at Prison Professors. We wanted to give people a practical way to document their journey, and it is never too early or too late to begin.

Our Profiles encourage people to write the next chapter of their lives through:

- updated biographies,
- updated journal entries,
- updated book reports, and
- updated release plans.

A biography shows ownership of the narrative. A journal shows consistency. A book report shows self-directed learning. A release plan shows strategic thinking. Weekly goals, reading logs, and written reflections show whether effort is continuing over time. Those writings do not only help other people understand growth. They help the writer test whether conduct is actually matching intention.

Disciplined self-leadership should leave a visible record that others can evaluate.

Think like a CEO. A CEO identifies a problem. Then he envisions a solution. If he is effective, he builds a plan to bridge the gap, one step at a time. He uses tools, tactics, and resources. He creates mechanisms for accountability and ways to measure progress. Anyone can use that same strategy to build the next chapter of life.

Start Memorializing the Journey

If a person does not accept responsibility for governing his own life, he may never create the plan that can help him overcome the obstacles and collateral consequences of a criminal charge. If he does create a plan, however, he may begin developing a strategy that leads to better outcomes.

That process creates reasons to write about the steps he is taking. Writing can lead to better thinking, better strategy, and more discipline to avoid behavior that may worsen problems. Over time, it can create a body of work that strengthens credibility and supports better outcomes.

If participants make the decision to act as the CEO of their lives, the framework we offer in this course will make more sense.

- He begins defining success because he knows no one else should define it for him.
- He begins setting goals because direction requires structure.
- He begins documenting progress because responsibility should become visible.
- He begins preparing earlier because waiting feels less acceptable.
- He begins building a record because he understands that credibility does not appear by accident.

First: Decide on the Life You Want

A person becomes the CEO of his life when he starts making deliberate decisions, and taking actions that align with how he defines success.

- He stops making excuses.
- He stops blaming without also building.
- He builds a disciplined process, intended to produce better results.
- He constantly assesses direction, evidence, and preparation.
- He uses time effectively.
- He creates a written record that reflects the life he is trying to build.

The system may still feel overwhelming. Yet each individual has a duty and responsibility to prepare for the journey ahead, knowing that he alone is responsible for the results. Once a person begins taking responsibility for the next decision, the next page, the next plan, and the next stretch of effort, he is no longer living only in reaction.

- He is building credibility.
- He is creating evidence.
- He is preparing for better outcomes.
- He is leading his life.

Self-Directed Questions

1. What would it mean for me, at this stage of my life, to act as the CEO of my own life?
2. Where have I been reacting to circumstances instead of defining direction for myself?
3. What decisions would change if I began thinking more deliberately about the future I want to build?
4. What habits or routines would show that I am leading my life with greater discipline?
5. What kind of written record would demonstrate that I am taking responsibility for my future?
6. If someone reviewed my conduct over the next six months, what would show that I am governing my life rather than drifting through it?
7. What can I do this week that would move me from reaction to direction?

Becoming the CEO of your life does not begin when external conditions improve. It begins when you accept responsibility for the decisions that remain within your control, and then use those decisions to build a record, a plan, and a better future.

Chapter 2

Why Planning Must Begin Now

When people go through the criminal justice system, they often tell themselves that they will get serious later. They may want to wait until they:

- » get through sentencing.
- » get designated.
- » settle into prison.
- » know the environment.
- » feel release getting closer.

That kind of thinking is inconsistent with being the CEO of your life.

Many people postpone planning because they believe the right time has not yet come. They tell themselves that they need more certainty, more stability, or more emotional strength before they begin.

In reality, the opposite is usually true. Uncertainty is a reason to plan. A person should expect obstacles, resistance, and struggle, and he should plan to overcome them with a sense of urgency.

If a person waits until release gets close before he starts preparing for success, he has already waited too long. Ted Gray, a leader from whom I've learned, likes to say, "If you wait for the opportunity to present itself, it's too late to plan."

Begin planning now.

I learned that lesson while in solitary confinement during my first year inside. As I wrote in the previous chapter, I read the Bible to carry me through the days, weeks, and months. In the Parable of the Talents, I found an idea that changed the way I thought about responsibility. The lesson I drew from that story was simple:

- » Every person receives gifts, and every person has a responsibility to develop them.
- » If we squander what we have, consequences follow.
- » If we develop what we have, more opportunities may open.

That lesson forced me to confront reality. I had lost my liberty because of decisions I made. The responsibility for rebuilding would also be mine.

From that point forward, I began to understand something that still guides me today. If I did not create a plan for how I would use the years ahead, the years ahead would simply happen to me. Time would pass. I would react to whatever came at me. I might survive the sentence, but survival alone would not prepare me for success.

That is why I encourage people to start planning. Live with a sense of urgency, and work to get things done.

Waiting Carries a Cost

One of the most damaging habits a person can develop during a crisis is procrastination. He tells himself that planning can wait until the environment becomes more stable, until emotions settle down, or until he has more information about the opportunities ahead.

The problem with that thinking is that a person who delays planning does not avoid living through the days. He still wakes up. He still moves through routines. He still deals with frustration, uncertainty, and the passage of time. But without a plan, his effort lacks structure. Actions may carry him through the day, yet those actions do not add much value to strengthening prospects for success in the future.

That pattern disrupts progress. And a person going through any stage of the criminal justice system cannot afford to wait. He should use the stage he is in to work toward best outcomes, putting himself in a position for more opportunities. Stages will change, but the person should always sow seeds today for the success he wants in the months, years, and decades ahead.

The person falls behind and misses opportunities if he makes statements about preparing such as:

» I will start after sentencing.
» I will start after designation.
» I will start after I settle in.
» I will start when I get closer to release.

With that pattern of thinking, ten years can pass without meaningful progress. Uncertainty is one of the main reasons a person should plan. We all have the same 24 hours in a day, but we do not all put forth the same strategic effort. As a result, we do not all get the same results. Early plans make all the difference.

A Plan Is Rarely Perfect

Some people believe a plan is only useful when every variable is known. They want certainty before they begin. Real life does not work that way.

I did not know where authorities would send me after the judge sentenced me to serve 45-years. I did not know what policy changes might come. I did not know which books would influence me most, which mentors would enter my life, or how long it would take before my work would begin opening opportunities. If I had waited until every detail became clear, I never would have started. Begin the plan with questions such as:

» What will follow from the predicament I'm in?
» What am I trying to become?
» What does success look like at this stage?
» What daily habits would move me toward that future?
» What weaknesses should I address now?
» What skills, records, and support systems should I begin building?

When a person starts asking those questions, he is no longer waiting passively. He is preparing.

Planning Gives Structure to Time

One of the hardest parts of confinement is the way time can lose shape. Days repeat. Weeks blend together. A person can keep telling himself that he will begin doing something meaningful later, but later keeps moving.

Planning changes that.

A plan gives shape to time. It helps a person divide the future into stages and define priorities within each stage. It reduces the emotional burden of trying to solve everything at once. It gives a person a way to move, even if the overall journey still feels overwhelming.

When I began serving my term, I could not fully comprehend what a 45-year sentence meant. The number was too large. The future felt too distant. Through reading and reflection, I learned to stop thinking only about what I wanted in the moment and to start thinking about the people I hoped to influence in the future.

- What would they expect from me?
- What kind of work would earn their respect?
- What kind of record would show that I had used my time well?

Questions like those helped me build a plan.

I decided that I would use every day of my sentence to work in three directions. I would educate myself. I would contribute to society in meaningful ways. And I would build a support network. That framework gave shape to the next week, the next month, and the next season of life. It guided the books I read, the skills I worked to develop, the writing I produced, and the relationships I tried to build.

A plan made the sentence feel less like one giant wall and more like a series of stages through which I would have to move deliberately. That principle applies whether a person is:

- facing sentencing,
- preparing to surrender,
- adjusting to prison,
- or preparing for release.

The stages change. The responsibility to prepare does not.

Planning Turns Hope into Strategy

Hope by itself is not enough. Prayer by itself is not enough. A person must plan, and then he must work to execute the plan, regardless of external forces or conditions. Many people hope things will improve. They hope a judge will show mercy. They hope prison will go smoothly. They hope opportunities will appear later. They hope life will somehow come together after release.

Hope has value, but without a plan it does not lead to results. Planning turns hope into strategy. Strategy can lead to tactics, the development of resources, and better results. A person with a plan begins asking different questions:

- What am I doing right now that supports the life I say I want?
- What record am I building?
- What routines should become non-negotiable?
- What educational, vocational, or personal gaps should I start addressing?
- What should others be able to see if they review my effort months from now?

Once a person accepts responsibility for governing his own life, planning becomes the natural next step. To live as the CEO of your life requires you to think differently. It also requires you to plan differently.

Planning Is an Act of Self-Respect

When a person creates a plan, he is essentially living as if he recognizes the responsibility of organizing thoughts and actions. He understands that today's conduct leads to tomorrow's outcomes, and an opportunity cost comes with every decision.

People may feel ashamed, discouraged, or overwhelmed if they come into the criminal justice system. A conviction, a prison term, or even fear of what lies ahead can temporarily paralyze a person's confidence. He may dwell on the prospect of punishment, loss, and damage that cannot be repaired. Planning interrupts that erosion of self-confidence, because a planner starts to recognize:

- I am responsible.
- I must work to build a better future.

- I should become a good steward of time, resources, and truth.
- I must build.

A Plan Should Evolve

Plans give a person a working structure to think, act, measure, and adapt when situations change, and they will.

During the years I served, I had to revise my plans repeatedly. Some opportunities closed through no fault of my own. Others opened. Working toward some goals took longer than I expected. Other developments accelerated because one disciplined decision led to another. Those changes proved the value of planning. Even when things do not go our way, our plans should show how we are adjusting, advancing, and evolving.

At first, the plan may be simple:

- survive the immediate crisis,
- build emotional discipline,
- begin reading,
- begin writing,
- begin documenting progress.

Later, the plan may become more ambitious:

- pursue stronger educational goals,
- improve release readiness,
- build a support network that turns into a coalition,
- strengthen the quality of writing and memorialize the journey,
- prepare for the work you will do, and the contributions you will make, after release.

Planning is a living discipline, not a one-time exercise. Circumstances will change, and when they do, the plan should adjust.

What a Serious Plan Should Include

A plan does not need to be complicated to be useful. It does need to be intentional. My own plan had three simple parts:

1. I would work to earn academic credentials.
2. I would work to contribute to society in meaningful, measurable ways.
3. I would work to build a support network, a coalition that could help me get the results I wanted to achieve in prison and beyond.

By focusing on those three objectives, I believed I could strengthen my prospects for success. A serious plan should force a person to think about the results he wants and assess whether the decisions he is making will advance his prospects for success.

What does success look like at each stage?

Success while awaiting sentencing may look different from success in a high-security prison, a camp, a halfway house, or supervised release. A person serving a short sentence should not plan in exactly the same way as someone serving a decade or more. The plan should fit the stage.

What are my immediate priorities?

A person may need to focus on emotional discipline, educational structure, physical health, writing habits, relationship repair, or release preparation. Priorities bring order.

What habits must become consistent?

Without repeated habits, a plan remains a wish. Habits turn direction into pattern.

What record am I building?

The plan should not live only in the mind. It should show up in the profile a person develops, with updated biographies, journals, book reports, release plans, and other written records that show effort over time.

What obstacles should I anticipate?

A serious plan expects resistance. It does not assume smooth conditions. It anticipates delays, frustration, fatigue, distractions, and setbacks.

How will I measure progress?

A person should know what evidence will show that the plan is becoming real. Otherwise, good intentions can create the illusion of progress without producing much substance.

Questions like these transform planning from vague aspiration into visible preparation.

Planning and Writing

In the context of this book, planning and writing belong together. A person may have a vision in his mind, but until he writes it down, that vision often remains loose. Writing forces choices. It forces clarity. It exposes weak thinking, vague intentions, and contradictions between goals and habits.

That is one reason I place so much emphasis on documentation.

A release plan is one example. A journal is another. A biography can also reflect planning because it shows how a person understands his past, his present responsibilities, and the future he is trying to build. Over time, the written record turns planning into something others can evaluate and something the writer can refine.

Planning should begin now. It's never too early, and never too late to start the plan. By seasoning the plan over time, a person builds a body of evidence that will become useful in self advocacy. The chapters that follow will offer more insight into using a profile to publish the plan. For now, the key point is simple: planning allows a person to say what he is going to build, opening opportunities for others to assess the plan's effectiveness.

Plans build trust.

As an example, think of building a house. You have a better chance of getting the result you want if you provide a builder with blueprints than if you simply tell him what you want. A plan should work like a blueprint that guides you toward the life you want on the other side of this journey.

Another reason to begin early is that opportunities often appear before a person feels fully ready.

- A class may open.
- A mentor may appear.
- A program may become available.
- A supportive stakeholder may take interest.
- A family member may be ready to help.
- A chance to strengthen the record may arrive unexpectedly.
- A law or policy may change.

The person who has been planning is better positioned to respond. The person who has only been reacting often misses the opening. Planning does not guarantee opportunity, but it improves readiness.

That principle shaped the decisions I made in prison and after release. The relationships I built, the work I produced, and the opportunities I later received all depended on preparation that began long before those opportunities became visible. Even today, our nonprofit has received financial donations from thousands of people because they want to support our mission. It's a mission that began with a plan. That plan allows us to give resources away at no charge to people in prison. So long as they are working to execute their plans, we will keep working to build support for the mission.

Start Building Your Plan Today

Some readers may think, I do not know enough yet to make a serious plan. Start anyway. Do not wait for the perfect time. Start with the plan you can build today. It may be incomplete. It may change many times. It may begin with only a few commitments:

- I will read regularly.
- I will write regularly.
- I will define success for this stage.
- I will keep a record of my progress.
- I will begin preparing for release long before release arrives.

That is enough to begin. The key is not perfection. The key is direction.

Self-Directed Questions

1. What would a serious plan look like for me at the stage I am in right now?
2. In what ways have I been postponing planning because I am waiting for more clarity or better conditions?
3. What priorities should define this stage of my life?
4. What habits would help turn my plan into something real?
5. What obstacles should I anticipate rather than ignore?
6. What written record would show that I am preparing deliberately instead of just wasting time?
7. What can I begin planning this week that would make the next stage of my life stronger?

Planning is one of the first visible signs of a person's commitment to prepare for success. It requires discipline and courage to begin.

Chapter 3

Why You Must Memorialize Your Journey

When people first come into the criminal justice system, they usually focus on the most immediate problem in front of them. They worry about charges, sentencing, surrender, prison time, release dates, and the collateral consequences that may follow a conviction. All of those concerns are valid. Yet many people overlook something that may influence how others perceive them long after the formal process begins.

They overlook the value that can come from a new record a person has an opportunity to build.

From the moment a person is investigated, charged, or sentenced, a record begins to grow. That record likely grows with affidavits, indictments, plea agreements, trial transcripts, presentence reports, disciplinary history, news coverage, and other official documents. Those materials shape how stakeholders understand the person's past conduct. They may be detailed, damaging, and accessible for years.

What they usually do not show is how the person responds to such records. That is why I encourage members of our community to memorialize the journey. If you're working through our courses, develop a new record. Memorialize the steps you're taking to prepare for success by building a profile that you update regularly.

If you do not create a written record of what you are learning, how you are changing, and what steps you are taking to prepare for a better future, then the official record may have an influence on what opportunities open, or do not open for you.

Any person who hopes to rebuild credibility, strengthen self-advocacy, and prepare for better outcomes should anticipate the damage and collateral consequences that accompany a criminal record. Such an understanding should lead to better plans.

The Record Will Exist Either Way

After my conviction, I learned to accept that the government's record of my life would always exist. The indictment, judgment, sentence, and prison number existed. None of those records reflected the way I intended to live through the years ahead. I had to own what would come with that record. It led me to accept that I would likely be unemployable for the rest of my life.

That acceptance led to clarity, which helped me develop the plans that would carry me through the journey.

I could not change the judicial record, or go backward and erase the bad decisions that brought me into the system. I could, however, begin building another record. I could read, write, keep journals, and document goals. I could develop release plans, and create a body of work that showed I was preparing deliberately rather than simply waiting for calendar pages to turn so that I could complete the sentence. The record I built gave people another basis on which to evaluate me, showing that my criminal conviction did not tell the full story of my life. I started to build a new record that, I hoped, would influence how others perceived me. Rather than considering only the crime, conviction, and sentence, I wanted them to see how I responded and how I worked to make amends.

In this chapter, I hope readers will understand the opportunities that open for those who work hard to show self-directed preparation.

Writing Is More Than Reflection

Some people write to sort out feelings, reduce stress, or make sense of difficult circumstances. Writing can help a person think more clearly, process adversity, and measure progress over time. In the context of the criminal justice journey, writing can also create a body of work that becomes an asset for self-advocacy. A person who writes regularly is doing more than keeping busy. He is creating an accessible record that helps other people understand that he is not waiting passively for circumstances to change. He is taking responsibility for the future he hopes to build. That intrinsic motivation can lead to new opportunities, especially if he writes regularly about:

1. what he is learning,
2. how he is using time,
3. what books he is reading,
4. what goals he is pursuing,
5. what weaknesses he is trying to overcome,
6. and how he is preparing for release

Through Prison Professors, I place a heavy emphasis on memorializing the journey. Documentation gives form to growth. Without documentation, effort can remain invisible. With documentation, a person begins building a body of work that shows intentionality, discipline, and preparation.

Influence of Frederick Douglass

Frederick Douglass influenced the way I thought about the importance of writing and building a new record. To work toward abolishing slavery, he trained himself how to communicate, think critically, and write in ways that made his humanity, intelligence, and value self-evident. By writing, he could share his story and build credibility. He leveraged that credibility to influence change. Douglass took ownership of his narrative by documenting his experience. By writing his life story, he persuaded others to see the injustice of slavery, and the power of human potential. His story and actions made him a revered figure throughout the world.

That lesson inspired me. Like Frederick Douglass, I wanted to use my personal story and the lessons I learned in prison to influence change. I hoped to open more opportunities for people to earn freedom through merit. This lesson has practical relevance for anyone going through the criminal justice system.

I am not suggesting that every person will become a public writer or a historical figure. For those in our community, I am suggesting that the act of documenting your experience changes the way you understand yourself and may also change the way others understand you. A written record creates a fuller picture than court documents alone. It creates a place where accountability, reflection, and preparation can become apparent.

Douglass understood that communication could influence perceptions. The same principle applies here. A person who learns to write clearly about his life, his growth, and his plans increases the likelihood that others will see more than the charge.

Memorializing the Journey Is Preparing

Too many people treat preparation as something abstract. They may say they are trying to improve, or to do better. Such statements may be sincere, but sincerity becomes more powerful if it shows the preparations you make.

- » If a person writes a biography, that document shows how he understands his own story.
- » If he keeps a journal, that record shows whether his daily conduct aligns with the future he says he wants.
- » If he writes book reports, he shows that reading is helping him build judgment rather than simply pass time.
- » If he develops a release plan, he shows that he is thinking ahead about work, housing, support, discipline, and the collateral consequences that may follow release.

In every case, writing strengthens thinking and effectiveness.

Many people believe they should begin documenting growth only when someone asks for proof. That is backward. The written record becomes valuable precisely because it has been built over time. The person who waits until sentencing, release review, or a crisis point is already behind the person who began earlier. A record built slowly through repeated effort carries more weight than something assembled in a rush.

The Difference Between Intention and Evidence

The criminal justice system is full of people who intend to change. Some will. Many will not. Decision-makers do not always know which person is serious. That uncertainty is one reason documentation becomes so important.

- » A person may intend to become more disciplined. A journal can show whether the person is truly disciplined and self-directed.
- » A person may intend to become better educated. Book reports can show what he is reading, what he is learning, and how he is applying those lessons.
- » A person may intend to succeed after release. A release plan can show whether that intention is supported by thought, structure, and realistic preparation.
- » A person may intend to rebuild trust. Testimonials and sustained written effort can help others see whether trust is being earned.

Anyone can claim good intentions. By memorializing the journey, a person builds evidence that shows results. Results are more persuasive than intentions.

What You Should Memorialize

A person should write consistently, showing that he is intentionally committed to building a record of growth. We encourage members of our community to memorialize the journey through the following categories.

Biography

A biography explains who you are, what shaped your life, what you have learned, and how you are preparing for the future. It helps you take ownership of the narrative.

Journal

A journal documents effort over time. It shows how you are using your days, what you are learning, what obstacles you are facing, and how you are responding.

Book Reports

Book reports turn reading into visible evidence of self-directed learning. They show that books are influencing thought and conduct.

Release Plan

A release plan shows that you are preparing intentionally for life after prison. It reflects critical thinking and realism.

Other Written Artifacts

Letters, educational reflections, program notes, lesson responses, and testimonials may also become part of a larger body of work. You can include them in your journals or other areas of the profile you develop on Prison Professors. Preserve a pattern that shows who you are becoming.

You Are Writing for More Than One Audience

When people begin documenting their progress, they sometimes think only of themselves. That is understandable. The work often begins as a private effort. Over time, however, the writing may serve more than one audience.

You may be writing for:

- yourself,
- a future judge,
- a probation officer,
- a case manager,
- a family member,
- an employer,
- a supporter, or
- another stakeholder who wants to know whether your conduct reflects genuine preparation.

Rather than writing to impress people, create a record that shows you are serious about preparing for success. The body of work you build may later influence how others evaluate your discipline, credibility, and readiness for opportunity. This is why I encourage people to memorialize their journey from the beginning. The record becomes stronger when it shows consistency and reflects intrinsic motivation.

Memorializing the Journey Builds Judgment

Writing shows commitment to progress and helps the writer develop confidence.

When you sit down to explain what you are doing, what you are learning, what went wrong, what you want to improve, and how you intend to move forward, you are forced to think more clearly. Vague hopes become weaker. Excuses become more obvious. Contradictions become harder to ignore. Writing can expose self-deception, but it can also sharpen direction.

That is one reason I do not view writing as a side activity. I view it as part of the preparation process itself.

A person who writes regularly will often become more thoughtful, more deliberate, and more capable of explaining decisions. Those gains have practical value. They improve self-understanding. They improve communication. They improve planning. They also create a visible trail of effort.

I want to emphasize the value of developing the record over a sustained length of time. The worst moment to begin building proof is when you suddenly realize you need it. If sentencing is approaching, if release planning is underway, if a recommendation is being considered, or if someone asks what you have done to prepare, it is far better to have a record already in place than to begin scrambling for language.

The perfect moment will not arrive. The useful moment is the one in front of you. When people delay this work, they often imagine they will start later. In reality, if you begin today, you will have a better chance of advancing your prospects for success than if you wait.

Build a record that shows what you are doing with your time, what you are learning, what you are building, and how you are preparing for better outcomes.

Self-Directed Questions

1. If someone reviewed the official record in my case, what would they still not know about me unless I wrote it down myself?
2. What have I done in the past month that reflects growth, discipline, or preparation, but remains undocumented?
3. How would writing a biography help me take greater ownership of my narrative?
4. What could my journals reveal about the way I am using time right now?
5. How would book reports, release planning, or other written work help create evidence of self-directed effort?
6. If I continue through the next six months without documenting my progress, what opportunities might I lose?
7. What can I begin writing this week that would help me start building a stronger record?

Memorializing your journey is not separate from preparation. It is one of the ways you prepare. When you write, preserve, and organize the work you are doing, you create something more durable than intention. You create evidence.

Chapter 4

Build Your Profile from the Start

People going through the criminal justice system may feel like puppets. Other people pull strings that have an enormous influence on their life–and the lives of the people they love. Prosecutors write indictments, probation officers write presentence reports, lawyers make arguments without knowing much about the individual, reporters may write articles, and government agencies issue press releases. Those records shape how judges, case managers, employers, and even neighbors see a person. Once those documents begin circulating, a person can feel as if his identity has been reduced to the worst decision of his life.

I know that feeling.

After my arrest, the government had its version of my story. Judicial records reflected facts about the crime I committed, the prosecution's version of events, and the sentence I received.

Granted, I was guilty of participating in a scheme to sell drugs. Yet those reports or stories did not capture all that I had learned during that first year of solitary confinement. They could not reveal what was in my heart, or what I had learned from reading the Bible or from books on personal leadership.

Reading can change a person's life, but no one knows about those changes unless a person does something about it. Leaders taught me to think differently or how I would prepare for the life I hoped to build after prison. I wanted a different future, but the responsibility would be mine to build it.

That realization influenced the way I lived through 9,500 days in prison. I came to understand that the record I built through reading, writing, planning, and disciplined effort would shape opportunities long before anyone offered me a second chance. I could not erase the bad decisions that led to my conviction. I could, however, begin documenting the decisions I was making afterward.

That is the purpose behind the Profiles platform at Prison Professors. We built it to give people a practical structure for memorializing their journey from the beginning. Rather than thinking of a profile as a public-relations exercise, think of it as a disciplined record that shows how a person is preparing for better outcomes through self-directed effort.

It's our hope that through our Playbook, participants will come to the same conclusion:

» People strengthen their prospects for success when they document progress by developing a comprehensive profile.

Write the Next Chapter

One of the lessons I learned from reading Frederick Douglass was that a person gains strength by taking ownership of his own narrative. Douglass did not allow other people to define him entirely through the degrading system he had endured. He invested time to learn how to read, write, and communicate. Then he used his personal story to build a persuasive case that helped others see his life, his message, and his argument with greater clarity. He wrote. He explained. He gave people a fuller understanding of who he was, what he had learned, and what he intended to contribute. By developing his personal story, Frederick Douglass changed the way people thought.

The same principle applies to people going through the criminal justice system. We can all learn from reading about people who overcame obstacles larger than the ones we face and then emulate their commitment to personal leadership.

- » If you do not write your biography, other people will rely on court records, including your Presentence Investigation Report.
- » If you do not explain how you are using time, others may assume you are waiting passively or that you are not self-directed and intrinsically motivated.
- » If you do not document your progress, you leave no visible evidence of growth.

Stakeholders may not recognize or acknowledge your efforts at first. Building a record takes time. But the more you write, the easier it becomes for you to persuade others that you're worthy of consideration. Perhaps you can build pathways that will lead to a higher level of liberty sooner, a job that may await you upon release, or business opportunities that you cannot even imagine today.

By strengthening my body of written work, more opportunities have opened than I can remember. In Earning Freedom: Conquering a 45-Year Prison Term, I reveal many of those opportunities. In other books, I show how those decisions and actions in prison led to prosperity upon release, and then wealth. They allowed me to focus on being the change that I want to see in the world–and to give all resources away without charge to members of our community. These micro steps are essential to bringing changes that may expand President Trump's First Step Act so that all people in prison can benefit from those incentives, regardless of what country they're from, or what offense they have.

We want to incentivize excellence for all. To succeed, however, we need to collect data, showing how people in our community are working hard to prepare for law-abiding, contributing lives upon release.

A profile helps you begin building that record in an organized way. It gives you a place to show who you are, what you are learning, how you are changing, and what you are doing to prepare for success. Think about your profile as a living record of growth. It should evolve as you evolve. Step by step.

What a Profile Is Really For

Some people may hear the word profile and think of social media, self-promotion, or image management. That is not what I mean. As CZ writes in *Freedom of Money*, a leader must remain mission aligned.

A Prison Professors profile is a structured tool for self-directed learning and written accountability. It gives a person a practical place to store evidence of preparation. It turns private effort into visible effort. It creates an organized archive of growth that can later support release planning, mitigation strategy, reentry preparation, and self-advocacy. If you adhere to the lessons in our courses, you will see how a strong profile can influence prospects for employment or even a higher level of liberty sooner.

The well developed profile becomes an asset for self-advocacy. A person may say:

- » I am trying to improve.

That statement may be sincere, but it remains vague until the person shows what improvement looks like in practice and builds that record over time. A profile provides that record of growth. It also becomes time-stamped, allowing stakeholders to see a pattern of personal commitment. That pattern can show intrinsic motivation, which becomes a powerful force in preparing for success.

The major sections are straightforward, and I will write about them throughout this workbook. A person cannot think of a profile as a magic pill. It should become a record of personal growth that grows over time. No one plants a seed for an apple tree in the morning and expects to eat an apple in the afternoon. You've got to nurture that seed over time, and allow it to mature into a tree that provides fruit for a lifetime.

These are the lessons we offer at Prison Professors. Always remember that no one is coming to rescue you from the prison system. Expect obstacles, but work to succeed anyway.

Biography

This is where you take ownership of your story. You explain who you are, what led to your current circumstances, what you have learned, and how you are preparing for a better future. The biography is not a place to make excuses. It is a place to show self-awareness, accountability, and direction.

Think of the biography as your effort to write a fuller and more accurate account of your life. If you do not take the time to write it, other people may rely entirely on government records and press coverage to define you.

Journal

A journal documents your effort over time. It becomes evidence of consistency. Instead of making broad claims about who you want to become, the journal shows how you are using your days and weeks. The Straight-A Guide reinforces that growth becomes more credible when it is written down, tracked, and revisited over time.

It is easy to complain about what the prison system is not doing. Yet complaining does not move the needle in your effort to prepare for success. Use your journal to show how you are using time today to prepare for success tomorrow. Your journal can show self-directed learning, including the way you are developing vocabulary, writing ability, math skills, critical thinking, or a record of contributing to the lives of others.

Book Reports

Book reports show how you are using reading to build your thinking. They help prove that you are not only passing time. You are learning, reflecting, and applying ideas. When a person writes book reports, he creates a visible record of self-directed education.

The book report can be simple. Each time you read a book, include the following:

1. Name of the book
2. Author of the book
3. Why you chose to read the book
4. What you learned from reading the book
5. How the lessons you learned may contribute to your success, as you define success

This strategy of writing book reports shows that you are self-directed, that you know how to learn, and that you are becoming more intentional. Those qualities can help you build credibility and support.

Release Plan

A release plan shows that you are thinking ahead. It explains how you intend to live, work, contribute, and overcome the collateral consequences that often follow a criminal charge or prison term. A release plan demonstrates intention. It shows that success is not something you hope will happen by chance. You are engineering it.

You should update your release plan regularly. Show that you understand your strengths, your weaknesses, your opportunities, and your threats. By showing that you have thought through those complications, you demonstrate critical thinking. I recommend updating your release plan quarterly so the record reflects the way you are reverse engineering a pathway toward success.

Testimonials

Testimonials add outside credibility. They show that other people have observed your discipline, your character, your effort, or your growth. A personal narrative becomes stronger when others can confirm that the work is real.

Your profile offers a section where others can leave a testimonial for you. Think about the people you have helped, influenced, or encouraged. How much stronger would your record become if those people wrote about the work they have seen you do? What if you had a prospective employer willing to say that a job would be waiting for you upon release? A testimonial like that could strengthen your record. Ask people to write testimonials for you. The harder you work on building your profile, the more likely you are to build a meaningful collection of support.

Taken together, these sections create something much more useful than scattered notes. They create a body of work that may last a lifetime.

Start Early, Even If the Profile Is Imperfect

People often delay useful work because they think they are not ready. They may tell themselves that they need more clarity, more time, more support, or better writing skills before they begin. I understand that instinct, but it leads too many people to wait.

Do not wait. Live with a sense of urgency, knowing that the harder you work on yourself today, the more opportunities may open for you tomorrow. Even though I had a 45-year sentence, I always felt a sense of urgency. I believed that if I achieved goals early, more opportunities would open. By documenting my story, I used the record to build trust and credibility. You can do the same.

If you are facing charges, begin now. If you are preparing to surrender, begin now. If you are already in prison and years have passed, begin now. If your family is the one that must enter the material for you, begin now.

The point is not to produce a perfect profile on the first day. The point is to begin building the record and to show consistency. That effort restores confidence.

You may write a rough biography today and revise it later. Better still, you may write a new version later that shows how your thinking evolved. A short journal entry can lead to a stronger one later. A basic release plan can become more sophisticated over time. A person who begins imperfectly is still ahead of the person who continues waiting.

Prison Professors also uses a point system to measure written progress. If a person writes between 100 and 300 words, the system assigns one point. If a person writes more than 300 words, the system assigns two points. I encourage participants to write regularly and to aim for approximately 350 to 400 words per entry. A person may write more or less, but that range often proves long enough to develop a useful thought and short enough to sustain consistency. The more a person commits to writing words and sentences, the more skillful that person becomes at building a persuasive written record.

This Playbook is intended to show best practices. The chapters will include open-ended questions. There is no right answer or wrong answer. There is only your answer. Use those questions as prompts for self-directed learning. They can help you develop your profile. In that sense, this entire book can serve as a prompt for building the profile, one chapter at a time.

If you work through the exercises and build your profile, our team will send additional books when resources allow. We provide these books as lessons, and we want each one to lead to more writing, more reflection, and a stronger body of work.

The Profile as a Tool for Critical Thinking

Do not use the profile as a place to post polished statements that mean very little. Develop the profile to show a commitment to personal growth. You cannot wait for the government, or anyone else, to change your life. Consider the following questions to build a record that shows you are the CEO of your life:

- Who am I, apart from the charge or conviction?
- What decisions led me here?
- What have I learned from those decisions?
- What am I doing today to prepare for a better future?
- If a stakeholder reviewed my record six months from now, what would it show?

Those kinds of questions do more than produce writing. They develop judgment. They help a person move from passive reaction to deliberate planning.

That is why this chapter belongs so early in the book. It shows you how to build a profile over time. Start with one entry, and then write another. If you are sending entries by email, use the subject line to tell us whether you are submitting material for your biography, your journal, your book report, or your release plan. In the subject line, write one of the following:

- biography
- journal
- book report
- release plan

Over time, this strategy can help build a profile that supports self-advocacy and also helps us identify people who are working hard to prepare for better outcomes.

What You Can Begin Writing Right Now

If you want to begin immediately, start with these five moves.

Draft a short biography

Write a first version of who you are, what brought you to this point, what you have learned, and what kind of future you want to build. If you do not want to write about your crime in detail, that is your choice. But write what you would want a judge, a probation officer, a case manager, or another stakeholder to understand about who you are becoming.

Write one journal entry

Describe how you are using time right now. Be honest. Explain what you are doing, what you are struggling with, and what you are trying to improve.

Write one book report

Choose a book you have read and explain why you read it, what you learned, and how it may help you prepare for success.

Draft the beginning of a release plan

Even if you do not have every answer, begin outlining how you intend to live, work, and contribute after release. Show that you are thinking about your strengths, your weaknesses, your opportunities, and your threats.

Identify one person who can help

If you have access to the internet, you can begin your profile by visiting PrisonProfessors.org. If you are in prison, or preparing to go to prison, it may be helpful to identify someone who can help you build and maintain your profile. That person can become a profile partner and receive a user ID and password. A spouse, parent, sibling, child, friend, or supporter can all help in that role. Prison Professors built the system with the goal of helping as many people as possible at no cost to the community we serve.

Build the Record Before You Need It

I have always appreciated Ted Gray's phrase, "If you wait for the opportunity to present itself, it is too late to prepare." Do not wait. The worst time to begin documenting growth is when a person suddenly realizes he needs proof. It is like starting to floss the night before going to the dentist. If a hearing is approaching, if release planning is underway, or if a stakeholder asks what a person has been doing, it is far better to have an established record than to begin scrambling.

When developing a profile, think of it as a long-term asset. If you build it consistently, it may later help others see:

- that you accepted responsibility,
- that you used time productively,
- that you developed discipline,
- that you invested in self-directed learning,
- that you are intrinsically motivated, and
- that you prepared intentionally for the opportunities you hope to earn.

Obviously, I cannot guarantee results. Results will depend on the work you do to develop your profile and advance yourself as a candidate for a better outcome. A person does not control every decision-maker. A person does control whether the record exists. A person controls how hard he prepares and works. As Bobby Knight used to say, "Everyone has the will to win. Not everyone has the will to prepare to win."

Self-Directed Questions

1. If someone reviewed the official records in my case, what parts of my life would remain invisible unless I wrote them myself?
2. What would I want a biography to show about how I understand my past and how I am preparing for the future?
3. If I began journaling today, what would my first entry reveal about the way I am using time right now?
4. What book have I read, or could I begin reading, that would help me write the first serious book report for my profile?
5. What should a credible release plan say about the life I intend to build after this chapter of my journey ends?
6. Who in my family or support network could help me build or maintain my profile if I cannot do it alone?
7. If a judge, probation officer, case manager, employer, or family member reviewed my profile six months from now, what evidence would I want them to find?

A profile will not build itself. It begins when a person decides to stop waiting, start writing, and create a record that shows where he has been, what he has learned, and how he is preparing for the best possible outcome.

Chapter 5

The First Lessons I Learned in Solitary

The first year I spent in the criminal justice system was unlike anything I had imagined. Authorities arrested me on August 11, 1987. My case did not involve weapons, violence, or gang activity. Yet Ronald Reagan was in the White House, and we were at the beginning of the War on Drugs. Because prosecutors charged me as a kingpin, jailers in the detention center locked me in solitary confinement.

I was 23 years old. Until that point in my life, I had lived recklessly, with little regard for the long-term consequences of my actions. In solitary, I had time to think, though it took me a while to accept responsibility, even though I knew I was guilty.

The lawyer I hired told me what I wanted to hear rather than what I needed to hear. I knew I was guilty, but I still pushed the government to prove the case to a jury. During the trial, I took the witness stand and perjured myself by testifying that I was innocent. The jury convicted me on every count. Those convictions exposed me to the possibility of a life sentence.

Following my conviction, I began to accept that life had changed. I had lost my liberty, my normal routines, and all my ill-gotten gains. My wife at the time had gone her own way. I lost the illusion that my attorney, or anyone else, could save me from the consequences of decisions I had made. I was left with time, silence, and questions about the future.

That kind of isolation forces a person to think. If I did not learn how to think differently, the prison system would consume me. That first stage of confinement became the place where I began learning some of the most important lessons of my life.

What are you learning from your experience?

In that era, and in that facility, authorities only allowed a person to have a book of faith in the cell. I had a Bible. Still defiant, I spent the first seven or eight months doing pushups, running in place, and reading from Genesis to Revelation. I searched those pages for meaning and for lessons on what I should do next. Several stories had meaning for me, likely because of the predicament I had created for myself.

- The story of the Prodigal Son forced me to think about recklessness, separation, humiliation, and return. My grandparents did not want to speak with me anymore, and I hoped that, in time, I could make amends. That story gave me hope that even after making bad decisions, I could begin the difficult work of returning to a better path. It helped me accept that my actions had wounded people who loved me. I wanted to do better.
- The Parable of the Talents affected me in a different way. It helped me accept that I had an obligation to God and to others. I had used my energy, intelligence, and ambition in destructive ways, and those choices cost me my liberty. To atone, I would have to become a builder and write the next chapter of my life.
- The story of Joseph also gave me hope. An injustice led to his imprisonment, and yet he did not complain, even though he did not know whether his suffering would end. Still, he used adversity to become stronger, wiser, and more useful.

These stories helped me think differently about responsibility, loss, and the possibility of rebuilding.

Accepting Responsibility

Reading a few Biblical stories did not make me disciplined, patient, and accepting of the changes in my life. But those stories helped me stop living in denial, and they opened my mind to the possibility of change and accepting responsibility.

I accepted that if I wanted to grow, and reach my full potential, I would have to focus on what I could control, regardless of what decisions others made. I'd have to become a good steward of:

1. Time: Even from solitary confinement, I could use time to start crafting a plan that I could use to navigate the decades I expected to serve in prison.
2. Truth: If I genuinely believed that God expected me to develop myself and live with humility, I'd have to work toward that end and build a record that would speak louder than the bad decisions I had made which led me to prison.
3. Relationships: If I wanted to succeed upon release, I'd have to find ways to build a coalition of support, and prove worthy of the trust they placed in me.
4. Resources: Although the criminal charge resulted in the loss of all my ill-gotten gains, I'd have to rebuild resources that would help me transition into society when the time came.

Before my arrest, I failed to assess the magnitude of my crimes or the risks I was taking. The combination of solitary confinement and my conviction stripped away excuses. The steel door, the isolation, and the sentence I faced made it impossible to depend on an attorney, or anyone else, to solve problems that my own decisions had created.

I started accepting responsibility.

I began to understand that I would have to become the person responsible for rebuilding my future. Nobody else could think for me. Nobody else could serve the time for me. Nobody else could write the next chapter of my life. Either I could let my crime and imprisonment define me, or I could start learning how to recalibrate.

That understanding became the foundation for everything that followed.

Solitary Forced Me to Think About the Future

When a person faces life in prison, the future can feel too overwhelming. I remain grateful to an officer in the detention center, Officer Wilson. Although rules prohibited my family from sending books to me, he had access and discretion. I credit him for helping to change my life, because he brought me books that helped me learn from people who suffered through conditions far worse than mine. For the first time, I began reading about Frederick Douglass, Socrates, Viktor Frankl, Nelson Mandela, and others. Their stories helped me think differently. Instead of asking only, "How will I survive the sentence I receive?" I began asking smaller, more productive questions:

- What would be the best possible outcome?
- What steps can I take to influence the people who will influence my life?
- How can I emerge stronger rather than weaker?
- What kind of person do I want to become through this experience?
- In what ways can I build a pathway to reconcile with society for the crimes I committed?

Those questions forced me to think differently. Instead of dwelling only on the pain I would endure, I began to contemplate a better future. I had been feeling trapped in a dark maze. The discipline of thinking, and of asking Socratic questions, helped me develop a plan. While incarcerated, I would work toward a three-part plan:

1. I would educate myself.
2. I would contribute to society in meaningful, measurable ways.
3. I would build a support network.

I believed that commitment would help me make better decisions about the next week, the next month, and the next season of life. I could read intentionally and develop more skills, including writing, math, and critical thinking. I could document the steps I took to show progress. This plan, I believed, would help open new skills, relationships, and opportunities.

That plan became the compass that carried me through the journey.

While in solitary confinement, I learned a valuable lesson: a person may not be able to control the sentence, but he can begin controlling the response. He can decide whether time will become only punishment or whether it can also become preparation.

Self-Leadership

In solitary confinement, I began learning from people who changed the way I think–even though I would never meet them. They helped me understand that if I wanted a different future, I would have to become a good steward of resources, and govern the part of life that remained within my control:

- my thoughts,
- my reading,
- my reactions,
- my habits, and
- eventually my plans.

That did not mean life suddenly became easier. It meant I stopped waiting for lawyers or anyone else to create meaning for me. I stopped assuming that time alone would improve me. I began seeing that progress would require deliberate effort.

Many people enter prison, or even the pretrial stage, expecting that lawyers will solve the problem. They hope some external force will restore life as they once knew it. Some allow others in the system to dictate how they will serve the sentence, forfeiting their ability to engineer a strategy that may lead to better outcomes. Growth begins when a person responds to adversity with more honesty, more structure, and more intention.

Spiritual, Moral, and Practical Lessons

The first lessons I learned in solitary confinement were not only spiritual. They were also moral and practical.

- Spiritually, I began understanding that I had wasted gifts. To rebuild, I would need to become a better steward of time. I would have to make decisions that could lead to better opportunities.
- Morally, I began understanding that I had to stop shifting blame and start owning my decisions.
- Practically, I began understanding that if the years ahead were going to mean anything, I would need to use them deliberately. I would have to read with purpose, write with honesty, and build a framework that might eventually support a better life. I would have to memorialize the journey, keeping records that showed incremental progress.

Those lessons became the seeds that restored meaning in my life. As I describe in later chapters, growth through the journey would eventually lead to the Straight-A Guide, a ten-part framework for making better decisions:

1. defining success,
2. setting goals that aligned with how I defined success,
3. showing that I had the right attitude, measured by a 100 percent commitment to success,
4. aspiring to something more than the current status of my life,
5. taking incremental action steps,
6. holding myself accountable and measuring progress,
7. staying aware of opportunities to seize while making others aware of my pursuit of excellence,
8. living authentically,
9. recognizing small achievements because they open new opportunities,
10. and living with gratitude, appreciative of the blessings in my life.

Time in solitary forced me to sit with what I had done, what I had lost, and what I would have to become if I wanted the years ahead to mean anything. In that sense, solitary introduced me to a new way of thinking. Instead of dwelling only on the challenges I faced, I began thinking about the steps I could take to build a better future. That confrontation became the first step toward change.

The Written Record

Many readers may still be in the earliest stage of their own journey. Some may be pretrial. Some may be preparing to surrender. Some may already be in prison but still resisting the internal work of reflection. I encourage readers to begin where they are, but to begin. Start with the truth as you can presently see it:

- What decisions brought you here?
- What have you lost?
- What part of your thinking needs to change?
- What first lessons are emerging from this experience?
- What do you now understand about responsibility?

Those reflections may become the beginning of your biography. They may become journal entries. They may shape the way you later define success and build a release plan. The point is not to wait until the language is perfect, but to begin documenting the earliest stage of transformation honestly. By recording your pathway to change, you build an asset you may later leverage in many ways, as I did.

Participants in our courses should understand that the first stage of change may not look impressive. People may not notice, or they may not see you differently from the status you occupy now. That does not mean the act of writing your plans lacks value.

A person who begins accepting responsibility, learning from adversity, and documenting what he is beginning to understand has already started moving in a better direction. That movement may be slow, but it changes the foundation from which you will make future decisions. There are always more opportunities in the future than in the past, and I encourage every member of our community to become part of the change he wants to see.

The lessons I learned in solitary confinement gave me a different mindset. That new way of thinking influenced the books I later read, the plans I later built, the records I later created, and the opportunities I later pursued.

Everything that followed began there.

Self-Directed Questions

1. What losses or consequences have forced me to think differently about my life?
2. What truth have I been resisting about the decisions that brought me here?
3. What first lesson is this difficult stage trying to teach me about responsibility?
4. In what ways have I wasted gifts, opportunities, or time, and what would it mean to begin rebuilding now?
5. What part of my thinking must change if I want a better future?
6. How should I begin documenting the first stage of my transformation?
7. If this painful chapter of my life became the place where change began, what would I want the next chapter to show?

The first stage of transformation often begins in the hardest place. When a person stops resisting reality, accepts responsibility, and begins learning from adversity, he starts building the foundation for a better future.

Chapter 6

The Leaders Who Changed My Thinking

While in prison, I learned that a person can find mentors almost anywhere. Prison may cut a person off from normal life, ordinary work, and the relationships that once shaped his thinking. That does not mean he should stop being intentional about finding mentors or role models who can help shape the way he thinks. If a person is not careful, the prison environment itself will begin shaping the way he sees the world. That perspective can lead to intergenerational cycles of failure.

Although I accepted that I would serve decades in prison, I did not want the external forces in that environment to become my teacher. I needed books. They had a huge influence on my life, opening access to leaders I would never meet in person. Even so, those leaders influenced the way I thought, the way I planned, and the way I used time. Through reading, I began learning from people who had endured adversity, governed themselves with discipline, communicated powerfully, or built lives that reflected purpose and intention.

Those leaders did not all come from the same tradition. Some came from scripture. Some came from philosophy. Some came from history. Some came from business and innovation. Each leader helped me understand something important about how to live more deliberately.

That chapter of my life began in solitary. The Bible became my first teacher. Then Officer Wilson and others opened the door to more reading. I began meeting more mentors through books.

Jesus: Responsibility, Return, and Stewardship

The first and deepest influence on my thinking came from the Bible. It helped me accept that through my past decisions, I had wounded people who loved me. I had squandered trust, opportunity, and freedom. Although I could not erase what I had done, I could begin the difficult work of returning to a better path. Anyone, at any time, could develop abilities and use them productively. Opportunities open for those who do. To build a better future, I would have to work and develop.

That is one reason this workbook repeatedly returns to the importance of documenting the journey, reading with intention, and building a body of work. We should become good stewards of time, using this limited resource to work toward our highest potential.

Socrates: Ask Better Questions

Besides bringing me a biography of Frederick Douglass, Officer Wilson brought me Plato's Republic. For the first time, I read about Socrates. I could identify with part of what I read because, like me, Socrates had been confined. He helped me learn how to develop a strategy by asking disciplined questions. As I reflected on those questions, I understood that there were no simple right answers or wrong answers. Each response led to more questions, and those questions helped me develop an adjustment strategy.

Before prison, I had not spent much time introspecting. I had acted, rationalized, and moved on. Socrates forced me to see that we often make poor decisions when we do not examine the reasons behind them or contemplate the results they are likely to bring.

Questions began changing the way I thought:

1. Who will have influence over my future?
2. In what ways can I use time today to help stakeholders see me differently?
3. What kind of future do I want to create?
4. What are the first steps I should take to build that future?
5. If I want a different outcome, what must change first?
6. How can I record progress, or build a new record, to show that I do not want my crime or prison term to define me?

Those questions helped me build an adjustment strategy. A person grows when he learns to ask better questions of himself. Those questions can expose denial, clarify priorities, and begin shaping a strategy. In prison, where passivity can easily take over, disciplined questioning becomes one form of self-leadership.

Frederick Douglass: Own the Narrative

By reading about Frederick Douglass, I learned the power of self-education, communication, and narrative ownership. Douglass did not allow the system that oppressed him to define his life. He became a figure revered in history because, after escaping from slavery, he carved out a path to liberate others. By learning how to read, write, and communicate, he showed his humanity, his intelligence, and his story in ways that helped build a powerful case for abolition.

While serving my sentence, I aspired to emulate the lessons I learned from him. They brought meaning to my life.

In the criminal justice system, official records will always exist. Indictments, presentence investigation reports, judgments, disciplinary records, and press coverage may all help define how others see a person. Unless the person creates another record, those documents may become the only story people ever know.

Douglass taught me that writing can challenge that limitation. A biography, a journal, a book report, a release plan, or another written record can become part of the way a person takes ownership of the narrative. It can show growth, effort, and preparation that official records do not capture.

That lesson helped shape much of what later became Prison Professors Profiles. People need a place to document who they are becoming, not only a place where others preserve what they did wrong.

Viktor Frankl: Meaning Through Suffering

Viktor Frankl influenced me because he showed that suffering does not automatically create wisdom, but suffering can become meaningful if a person chooses his response carefully.

His work helped me understand that even in terrible conditions, a person retains responsibility for how he responds internally. Prison can easily produce bitterness, self-pity, and passivity. Frankl's example suggested another possibility. A person could use suffering as a context in which to develop more strength, more clarity, and more meaning.

Frankl helped me understand that if suffering was going to exist anyway, I had to ask what I would do with it. Would I allow it to harden me, or would I use it to deepen the seriousness with which I approached the future?

That lesson can help anyone facing confinement or another major life crisis. Adversity alone does not build character. The response to adversity does.

Marcus Aurelius: Self-governance

Marcus Aurelius reinforced the importance of internal governance.

He ruled an empire, yet so much of what survives from him concerns not external power but internal discipline. He wrote about governing his own responses, obligations, and conduct. Prison stripped away external freedom. If I could not govern my environment, I would have to become much better at governing myself.

Marcus Aurelius helped me think about:

- routines,
- self-control,
- daily discipline, and
- the importance of building inner order even when outer conditions remain unstable.

This is one reason the Straight-A Guide eventually became so important in my life. It gave structure to self-governance. Long before I had that framework, Marcus Aurelius helped me understand the principle: lead yourself first, and start by defining success.

Nelson Mandela: Dignity and Long-Term Discipline

Nelson Mandela demonstrated what long-term discipline looks like under severe confinement.

I did not compare my circumstances to his. Mandela suffered the injustice of wrongful imprisonment for 27 years, yet he refused to give in to bitterness or self-pity. From him, I learned the power of long-range discipline.

Mandela showed that a person grows stronger by refusing to surrender the ability to think and to serve others. Regardless of what authorities took away from him, he still wanted to make life better for the people around him. His example suggested that a person could endure confinement without allowing confinement to consume his identity.

That lesson shaped the way I thought about leadership. A leader must be able to hold a long vision even when immediate conditions feel discouraging.

Mahatma Gandhi: Become the Change

Mahatma Gandhi influenced me through a simple but powerful idea: we could always work to make our environment and community better, regardless of what external challenges are placed upon us.

That principle helped me stop waiting for systems to become fair, efficient, or merciful before beginning to build better habits myself. It reminded me that if I wanted a different future, then I would have to start living differently before that future arrived. I would not reach my highest potential by waiting for opportunities to present themselves. I had to prepare myself so that I could create or seize new opportunities.

In the prison context, that means:

- stop waiting for perfect conditions,
- stop saying that change will begin later,
- and start creating the discipline, the writing, the study, and the record now.

That principle remains central to Prison Professors. We are always encouraging people to build the change they want to see in their own lives first. Each person should be his own professor his own prison professor, writing the curriculum that will lead to success in his life.

Builders, Innovators, and Strategic Thinkers

Modern leaders also influenced me to think differently. I learned from builders and innovators because they helped me think about systems, long-term vision, and disciplined execution.

From people like Bill Gates and Steve Jobs, I learned that clarity, design, and focus matter. From other modern builders and strategists, I learned that a person can create extraordinary value by seeing possibilities others ignore and then doing the hard work required to make those possibilities real.

I do not study these people because they are famous. I study them because builders think in systems. They identify a problem. They imagine a solution. They build tools, structures, and processes that move from idea to reality. That way of thinking influenced my work in prison and after prison.

In his memoir, *Freedom of Money*, CZ wrote extensively about making principled decisions. From him I learned a great deal about structuring time in ways that bring results. Those lessons guide me as I work to build resources for people in prison. Anyone can learn from reading the story of his life, which took him from poverty to building successful businesses and focusing on using technology to improve billions of human lives. He taught me the importance of building systems and measuring progress.

Even now, when I think about how to help more justice-impacted people, I am thinking in systems:

- how to scale education,
- how to influence change in government bureaucracies,
- how to use technology more effectively, and
- how to help more people document progress and prepare for better outcomes.

That way of thinking came from studying leaders and builders.

Books Became Mentors

The larger lesson is that we can find mentors in the books we choose to read. Many of the people who shaped my thinking had died long before I was born. Yet by reading intentionally and reflecting on the lessons I learned from their lives, I could start thinking differently.

A person in prison is not cut off from mentorship if he is willing to study. Even while in solitary, a person can learn. A person facing charges is not cut off from wisdom if he is willing to read. A person who feels isolated can still begin building a council of mentors through the books he chooses and the lessons he records. If he records the journey toward wisdom, he may inspire others to become part of a supportive coalition.

Do not think of book reports as school assignments in the narrow sense. They are part of how a person shows what he is learning, what influences him, and how his thinking is changing over time.

Leaders can still teach you through their books, their lives, and their ideas. For that reason, I encourage you to read with intention. Ask:

- Why am I reading this?
- What does this person teach about adversity, responsibility, discipline, communication, or meaning?
- How does that lesson apply to my life now?
- How should I document what I am learning?

That is how reading becomes part of preparation rather than only distraction.

Self-Directed Questions

1. What leader, thinker, or writer has influenced the way I see my life?
2. What lesson from Frederick Douglass, Viktor Frankl, Mandela, Gandhi, Socrates, or another leader could help me now?
3. How can books become mentors in my own journey?
4. What am I reading right now that is changing the way I think?
5. How can I document what I am learning so that others can see the effort I am making?
6. What kind of worldview am I building through the books and ideas I choose?
7. If I became more intentional about reading and writing, how might that affect the next stage of my life?

The people who changed my thinking did not have anything to do with my sentence. They helped me learn how to live through it differently. When a person studies strong lives and strong ideas with seriousness, he gives himself a chance to build a stronger life of his own.

Chapter 7

Define Success

One of the courses that became central to all our work at Prison Professors is The Straight-A Guide. It gave me a framework to think more clearly and make better decisions through 9,500 days in federal prison. I still rely on those lessons today, and I am confident they can help every member of our community.

At its core, the Straight-A Guide begins with a simple question:

» How do you define success?

Unless a person answers that question with honesty and clarity, it becomes difficult to make disciplined decisions or build a meaningful plan. Many people move through life reacting to circumstances. The Straight-A Guide taught me to think differently. It taught me to begin with values, to define success deliberately, and then to make decisions that align with that definition.

As I have written before, I credit Lee Nobmann with inspiring me to develop this framework. Lee leads a massively successful private company that employs more than 1,000 people. As I neared the end of my sentence, he asked what I wanted to do when I came home. I told him I wanted to build a career that would help change the prison system. He encouraged me to create a framework that others could understand and apply. That conversation led to the Straight-A Guide and to the incremental steps we continue taking to become the change we want to see.

I believe there is a real possibility to influence change by showing what disciplined, values-based preparation looks like. Through the Straight-A Guide and our profile system, members of our community build records that show commitment, growth, and accountability. That work strengthens the argument for a system that rewards excellence and opens more pathways to freedom through merit.

I hope every member of the Prison Professors community recognizes a role in that effort. I cannot promise that the system will change. I can promise that I will continue working every day to build stronger arguments for a society that incentivizes responsibility, preparation, and excellence.

Incremental Steps

When authorities arrested me, the only thing I wanted was to get out. What I wanted, however, had very little relevance. The machinery of the system would do its thing, and I'd have to do my thing. I had made decisions that exposed me to criminal charges, and I would now move through a process as if I were a cog in a bureaucracy. Defense attorneys, prosecutors, probation officers, and judges all had influence over how I would live. While they sorted through the process, I sat in solitary confinement, feeling like a puppet while others pulled the strings.

From studying leaders, I learned that I would have to live in the world as it existed, not as I wanted it to be. After the jury convicted me on all counts, I faced the prospect of spending multiple decades in prison. The reality of that predicament opened my mind. The Bible had already begun shaping my thinking, and the books Officer Wilson brought me while I was in solitary helped me begin shaping a plan.

Leaders taught me that if I wanted to change the course of my life, I would have to begin by defining success. I would have to know what I was trying to build.

When I was 20, I had not given serious thought to what a successful life would actually require. My decisions reflected appetite, ambition, and rationalization more than reflection, discipline, and purpose.

The year I spent in solitary confinement forced me to think differently. I began reflecting on the decisions that had led me there. I could see more clearly that I had ignored lessons my parents, teachers, and coaches tried to teach me during my teenage years. The friends I chose influenced my decisions. Those decisions led me into breaking the law, and those crimes led to confinement.

While in solitary, I did not know much about what to expect. I hated being away from my family and community, but I could not change the past. I would have to start sowing seeds that could lead to the next chapter of my life.

To write that chapter, I would have to define success.

- What would success look like in five years, or ten years?
- In what ways would I be able to use time in prison to prepare, or advance possibilities for success at every stage?
- How would the decisions I make going forward influence future opportunities?
- What obstacles would I have to overcome to succeed?
- What should I expect in the way of support or interference from the environment where I was going?

I came to understand that a person must decide whether he will define success by what has been taken away or by what he can still build. Like the leaders I read about, I wanted to become a builder.

Instead of reacting only to the sentence I would receive, I wanted to lay out a plan that would lead to the best possible outcome.

As you complete the exercises in this workbook, consider how you will define success. It is the first lesson in our course. The responses you give to the prompts can become part of a written record by which others judge your seriousness, your preparation, and your ability to follow through. Defining success became one of the first disciplines that helped me build a better future, and I am confident this tactic can lead to a better outcome for every member of our community. As you work through these lessons, consider how they can become a part of your story, showing your commitment to building a better future.

Define Success for the Stage You Are In

One of the biggest mistakes people make is defining success too vaguely, too emotionally, or too far into the future. A person may say:

- I want to be successful.
- I want a better life.
- I want to get out of prison.
- I want to make my family proud.
- I want to rebuild.

Those statements may be true, yet they lack the specificity to guide daily action. They do not provide a clear definition of what success means in the stage he is living through. To be the CEO of his life, he must know precisely what he wants, and develop a plan that will lead to results.

During that first year in solitary confinement, I learned how to define success differently from the way I had thought about it before. I was no longer thinking about money, fast cars, or fancy watches.

By reading about Frederick Douglass, I became inspired to think about changing the system in ways that could benefit thousands of people. Since I did not expect to earn a living from that work, I also thought about ways to become financially independent. Financial independence didn't mean living in luxury. It meant generating sufficient resources that would allow me to support my family, to pay insurance and prepare for retirement. In the end, I wanted to work toward making an impact, or changing laws that would open more pathways for all people to earn freedom through merit.

To succeed, I had to learn how to think differently, accept responsibility, and use time in ways that advanced the plans I was starting to develop.

I explain those steps more fully in books such as Earning Freedom: Conquering a 45-Year Prison Term. We'll distribute those books to those who actively participate in our program, building their own profiles to show how they're preparing for success upon release.

Each person will define success differently, based on the values he lives by and the stage of the journey he is in. The way I defined success during the first ten years of my sentence put me on a path to redefine success during the second ten years. I continued making those adjustments as I developed. Those developments opened opportunities I could pursue once I completed my sentence on August 12, 2013. They led to the early termination of my supervised release, to business opportunities, and ultimately to financial independence.

Because I defined success early, even before my judge imposed sentence, I could take methodical, deliberate, intentional steps that carried me through each stage of the journey. I encourage everyone to do the same.

» If you do not define success, circumstances will define it for you. You may not like the results.

This lesson connects directly to everything I have written in the earlier chapters.

» If you do not govern your life, other forces will govern it for you.
» If you do not build a plan, time will pass without structure.
» If you do not memorialize your journey, the official record may become the only record others see.

The same principle applies here. If you do not define success, then your mood, your environment, your fears, and the expectations of other people will define it for you. Without a plan, a person squanders opportunities. Instead of thinking about the success he intends to build, he:

» takes the term one day at a time,
» fails to make measurable progress,
» allows others to tell him how to live, and
» complains about the environment rather than seeing opportunities to grow.

Such adjustment strategies do not lead to favorable results. Through the course of my work, I have learned that one of five outcomes awaits every person that gets out of prison:

1. unemployment,
2. underemployment,
3. homelessness,
4. further problems with the law, or
5. success.

The decisions we make while we are inside determine which result is most likely to await us on the other side of the journey. By defining success clearly, in my view, a person takes a meaningful step toward getting the outcome he wants. It gives him a reference point. It helps him ask:

» Does this action align with the future I am trying to create, or does it pull me away from it?

Success at Every Stage

A person facing charges may define success as:

» learning more about each stage of the judicial system,

- developing a framework for making more informed decisions,
- creating a comprehensive mitigation strategy,
- writing a personal narrative that will help the judge learn more about him,
- and establishing a written record that will help stakeholders evaluate him more fully.

A person preparing to surrender may define success as:

- creating a plan that will empower him along the way,
- strengthening family communication so loved ones know what to expect,
- organizing reading and writing plans, and
- entering prison with a framework instead of confusion.

A person in prison may define success as:

- achieving measurable, incremental goals,
- developing a self-directed learning plan,
- writing an evolving biography to show progress,
- building a record through journals, book reports, and plans,
- and preparing for the next level of opportunity.

A person close to release may define success as:

- refining a release plan,
- strengthening support systems,
- demonstrating consistent preparation,
- and showing that he has considered all strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, then reverse engineered a strategy to succeed.

All of these may be valid definitions of success. The key is that the person must define success consciously, deliberately, and with a commitment to live as the CEO of his own life.

Restoring Confidence

After my judge sentenced me to 45 years, I could accelerate the plans I had already begun making to prepare for success. Defining success helped me restore confidence. Instead of living as a puppet, I felt a sense of urgency to build the ladder that would lead me from where I was to the next opportunity.

If I defined success clearly for a given stage, then I could make better decisions about:

- how to use the day,
- what to read,
- what to write,
- what habits to strengthen,
- what distractions to refuse, and
- what kind of evidence I wanted to build.

By defining success, I gave myself direction that helped me make better decisions. I could live more deliberately, knowing that I would be responsible for the future I built.

Become a builder. Use this framework to begin building the next chapter of your life. By defining success clearly, you should develop more confidence in your ability to answer practical questions such as:

- What would a successful week look like?

- What would a successful month look like?
- What conduct would show that I am moving in the right direction?
- What written record would prove that my effort is real?

Those are the kinds of questions that turn success into strategy.

Frederick Douglass, Frankl, and Discipline

Leaders I studied reinforced this lesson in different ways.

Frederick Douglass did not define success merely as escape from slavery. He wanted to help liberate the people he had left behind. To succeed, he first had to develop himself. He had to learn how to read, write, and communicate so that he could turn his personal story into an asset that would influence others.

Viktor Frankl did not define success in suffering as comfort or escape alone. He understood that he could still create meaning while living in extreme deprivation. That definition changed the relationship between suffering and human dignity.

From their examples, I learned that a person who defines success acts differently because he recognizes the relationship between his decisions and his prospects to get the results he wants.

Define Success to Gain Clarity

By writing out the ways you define success, you create a record. If you publish that definition in your biography, in your journals, and in your release plans, you create a written record that our system time-stamps. In the years ahead, you will be able to point back to what you wrote. You will be able to show that success did not come by accident. Rather, you laid out a plan and moved through a series of deliberate steps.

You are the CEO of your life. Your written record can show that you are intrinsically motivated, and every entry you make on your profile can become another asset in your portfolio. Use those assets to create more opportunities.

- A biography should reflect how a person understands the life he wants to build.
- A journal should show whether daily conduct aligns with that definition.
- Book reports will show a commitment to self-directed learning.
- A release plan should show how the definition of success changes by stage and becomes more concrete over time.

I encourage people to use the questions at the end of each chapter as prompts. Write answers and publish them on the profile to develop a written record that will strengthen your future.

Resist the Prison Mindset

I understand the challenge of living away from the people you love. For that reason, I encourage you to engineer a strategy that will empower you. Start restoring confidence by showing that you are not allowing current circumstances to dictate your future. Be a builder. Build the next chapter of your life.

Prepare for a life that extends beyond prison. That does not mean denying current reality. It means refusing to let current reality define the whole scope of possibility.

Start Where You Are

Consider the following questions:

- What would success look like for the stage I am in now?

- » What should my conduct show if I am serious about that definition?
- » What should I be building?
- » What should I be documenting?
- » How would I know if I were moving in the right direction?

Definitions will evolve as you advance through the different stages of the journey. But be deliberate, always in alignment with how you define success. In the next chapter, we'll get into goals that show your commitment to preparing for success.

Self-Directed Questions

1. What does success look like for me at the stage of life I am in right now?
2. How is my current definition of success different from the one I held before this crisis?
3. What would a successful week look like in practical terms?
4. What habits or actions would show that I am serious about the future I say I want?
5. What written record would prove that I have defined success clearly enough to guide my conduct?
6. In what ways have I allowed fear, shame, or circumstances to define success for me instead of defining it for myself?
7. What can I begin writing now that would help make my definition of success more visible and more real?

A person begins changing his life when he stops allowing external circumstances to serve as an excuse to the pursuit of success. By defining success, it's easier to evaluate commitment, progress becomes easier to measure, and you enhance the likelihood of getting results you want.

Chapter 8

Set Goals That Create Structure

Once a person defines success, the next step is to set goals that support that definition. By defining success, a person starts the process of rebuilding. From there, he must engineer a series of incremental goals to achieve, with each one building on the last or working in harmony with the intended result.

A person may say that he wants a better future, that he wants to prepare for success, or that he wants to live differently. Those statements lack specificity.

- If a person says he wants "a better future," shouldn't he provide some context?
- What does it mean to prepare for success if he doesn't define what that means?
- What does living differently mean if he does not explain how he intends to live?

When we take time to clarify what we mean by defining success, we empower ourselves to set goals that can deliver the result. Our goals will change as we move through stages, because we will empower ourselves along the way. Goals translate intention into action.

After defining success, a person can set goals that lead him in the right direction consistently. Without goals, the person may come across as an individual who claims to want to succeed, but then comes with excuses on why he never makes it. Serious people want to see goals. They don't want to listen to fantasies or excuses.

Goals give a person something to work toward, regardless of external circumstances. They show that his actions align with the future he wants to build.

Goals Require Daily Action

A person may define success but still fail to make meaningful progress. For example, a person may say:

- I want to develop a skill that will advance me as a candidate for the job market.
- I want to find 10 people who will join my coalition of support.
- I want to persuade people that I am more than what my criminal record suggests.
- I want to live as the CEO of my own life.

Each of those statements may reflect a better way of thinking. But unless the person asks harder questions, the definition remains too broad to guide conduct. He should ask:

- What exactly will I do?
- How often will I do it?
- What work will advance my commitment?
- How will I measure my follow through and progress?
- What evidence will show that I am serious?

Those questions should lead to the behaviors, habits, and deadlines that validate commitment. In that sense, goals bring order to what might otherwise remain only a good intention.

The prison environment makes it easy for a person to delay, react, or live with broad hopes that never turn into a plan. For those who refuse to take responsibility, prison can become the land of excuses, or the deadly condition of "it's-not-my-fault-itis." When a person sets goals, he creates a structure that helps him use time more deliberately. He can own every decision he makes, becoming ruthlessly accountable.

Goals Lead to Incremental Progress

With a sentence that would confine me for multiple decades, I understood that I would have to adjust my perspective. I could not dwell on the 45 years my judge imposed. Rather, I had to break the journey down, understanding the smaller steps I could take to make incremental progress.

Unless something changed, I would remain in prison until I was 49. In my view, I considered myself an unlikely candidate for employment. By projecting into the future, I could see the parade of horribles that might follow. As I stated previously, I accepted the likelihood that unemployment or underemployment could become distinct possibilities in my future. For that reason, I began thinking about steps I could take to use time inside productively. I wanted to increase the likelihood of building financial resources. If successful, I intended to leave prison with enough resources to last at least one year, regardless of whether anyone employed me.

As I began thinking more clearly about success, I organized my strategy around three broad categories:

1. I would educate myself.
2. I would contribute to society in measurable ways.
3. I would build a support network.

Those categories were not goals by themselves. They were areas of focus that helped me think more clearly about what I needed to build.

- To demonstrate my commitment to education, I set a goal of earning at least one university degree during my first decade inside.
- To show my commitment to contribution, I set a goal of becoming a published author within ten years.
- To prove that I had a strong coalition of support, I set a goal of building relationships with ten people who could stand beside me and advocate for me through the journey.

Goals help a person take something large and break it into parts he can actually pursue. Since I understood what I wanted to accomplish during my first ten years, I could reverse engineer what I should achieve during the first five years, the first three years, and the first year. I could regularly assess whether my actions aligned with my plan or whether I needed to adjust.

Goals Build Confidence

The criminal justice journey leads to stress. A person facing charges may feel uncertainty about sentencing. A person preparing to surrender may fear the prison experience. A person in prison may feel trapped by routine, distance from family, and long periods of waiting. A person nearing release may feel anxiety about housing, employment, supervision, or reintegration.

When a person sets goals that align with how he defines success, he begins to restore confidence. The plan and the goals strengthen his ability to make decisions. He knows what he is trying to accomplish this week, this month, and in every stage of the journey. Today's goals will lead to new opportunities. That framework helps him keep moving, even when the pressures of prison feel difficult.

In that sense, goals convert uncertainty into structure. They help the person respond to the burdens of confinement more productively, in a self-directed way. If he develops his profile by recording the incremental goals he sets and achieves along the way, he builds a portfolio of assets that he can later use to advocate for better outcomes at every stage of the journey.

Goals Should Evolve

By achieving incremental goals, a person advances. He puts himself on the pathway to new opportunities. The goals should evolve as he moves through every phase of the journey. A person facing charges may need goals related to:

- learning how the system works,
- building a mitigation narrative,
- organizing records,
- starting a release plan,
- and creating stronger routines before sentencing.

A person preparing to surrender may need goals related to:

- preparing reading material,
- planning a writing routine,
- strengthening family communication,
- understanding prison realities,
- and entering confinement with a framework rather than confusion.

A person in prison may need goals related to:

- reading consistently,
- writing biography and journal entries,
- creating book reports,
- improving physical health,
- building educational discipline,
- and revising a release plan over time.

A person nearing release may need goals related to:

- strengthening support systems,
- clarifying employment strategy,
- refining reentry plans,
- anticipating obstacles, and
- showing a record of sustained preparation.

Goals become useful when they fit the person's present reality. If a person chases goals that belong to some other stage while neglecting the work he should be doing now, he may waste energy and lose direction. In Earning Freedom: Conquering a 45-Year Prison Term, and in many other books I wrote, I described the different goals that kept me climbing and making progress toward the plans I laid out.

Measure Progress / Own the Results

Your goals should support the commitment you made when you defined success. Make sure the goals you set align with that definition. Use them to answer questions such as:

- What exactly am I trying to complete?
- What habit am I trying to strengthen?
- What written record will show that I followed through?
- What would count as visible evidence of progress?

For that reason, useful goals often include some combination of:

» a time frame to complete,
» a measurable quantity,
» a routine,
» a written definition of the intended result.

For example:

» Write three journal entries this week.
» Complete one book report every two weeks.
» Revise my biography once a month.
» Update my release plan every quarter.
» Read for one hour each day.
» Exercise for a minimum of one hour every day.
» Build a reading list for the next three months.
» Write a book report for every book that I read and publish the report on my profile.
» Write letters to three people who may become part of my support network.

Those goals are useful because they make commitment self-evident. When a person can measure what he said he would do, he can compare intention with performance. Without that comparison, people often confuse hope with progress. That can lead to excuses, which does not advance the mission. Stay focused on the mission, which is to prepare for the next chapter of your life, regardless of what you're going through now.

By publishing on the profile, the person also builds a record that shows a commitment to being self-directed and intrinsically motivated. Each entry on the profile is time-stamped, creating a record that may lead to new opportunities. Such efforts align with living as the CEO of your life.

Use SMART Goals

One practical way to test a goal is to use the SMART framework. SMART goals are:

» Specific,
» Measurable,
» Achievable,
» Realistic and relevant, and
» Time-bound.

This framework is helpful because many people begin with goals that are too broad to guide daily conduct. A person may say that he wants to prepare for release, become more disciplined, or improve his life. Those goals point in the right direction, but they still need more structure before they can guide consistent action.

» A goal is specific when it clearly identifies what the person will do.
» A goal is measurable when the person can track whether he completed it.
» A goal is achievable when it fits the person's actual circumstances.
» A goal is relevant when it supports the larger definition of success.
» A goal is time-bound when it includes a deadline or review period.

Consider the difference between these two statements:

» I want to prepare for release.

Let's contrast that with:

» Over the next 30 days, I will develop my personal profile by publishing eight journal entries, one book report, an update to my biography, and an update to my release plan.

The second statement gives the person a standard by which he can judge his effort. It tells him what he intends to do, how much he intends to do, and by when he intends to complete it. It also creates a written record that may later support self-advocacy.

SMART goals are useful because they force clarity. They require the person to think beyond desire and into execution. A person still has to choose the right goals and follow through with discipline, but the SMART framework helps him test whether his plan is strong enough to guide action rather than merely express hope.

I encourage people to create goals that connect naturally to the record they should be building with the profile. A person's goals should show up in:

» biography updates,
» journal entries,
» book reports,
» release plans,
» and other written records that document growth.

For example:

» If the goal is to build self-awareness, the biography should become more thoughtful and complete.
» If the goal is to build consistency, the journals should show whether the person is following through week after week.
» If the goal is to grow through reading, book reports should show what the person is learning and how he plans to apply all that he is learning.
» If the goal is to prepare for life after prison, the release plan should become more detailed, more realistic, and more useful over time.

This connection between goals and documentation is important for a simple reason. A written record allows a person to revisit his commitments honestly. It also allows others to see whether his preparation is real. That record may strengthen credibility with family members, mentors, case managers, attorneys, probation officers, or any stakeholder who wants to know whether the person is using time productively.

Once the person develops consistency, he can revise the plan, expand it, or increase expectations. In the beginning, it is better to build a small number of goals that can survive real conditions. If a person is serious, he should review his goals regularly and ask:

» Did I follow through?
» What got in the way?
» Does this goal still fit the stage I am in?
» What should I change?
» What evidence do I have that the effort is real?

Review goals, compare progress against actual conduct, and adjust. That process helps a person become more self-aware. It also reduces the chance that he will continue telling himself a story about progress that the record does not support.

Self-Directed Questions

1. What goals fit the stage of life I am in right now?
2. Which of my current goals are too broad to guide daily action?
3. How could I rewrite one of my goals so that it becomes specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound?
4. What can I complete over the next week, month, or quarter that would show visible progress?
5. Which of my goals should become visible in my biography, journals, book reports, or release plan?
6. What habits do I need to strengthen if I want my goals to become part of my routine?
7. Describe three goals in "SMART" terms that would help you create stronger structure in the stage of life you are living now.

Defining success gives direction. Goals create structure. Once a person knows what he is trying to build and begins setting measurable commitments around that vision, he moves closer to living as if he is the CEO of his life.

Chapter 9

Develop the Right Attitude

If a person wants to succeed in prison—or anywhere else—he must begin with the right attitude. In the context of the Straight-A Guide, attitude means making a 100 percent commitment to success, as the person defines success. That distinction is crucial for a person who is self-directed and focused on becoming the CEO of his life.

Let me provide an example. While presenting in a high-security prison, I opened the floor for Q and A. One young man raised his hand to ask question, which led to the following interaction:

- Questioner: "What can you do for me if I get out of prison?"
- My response: "What would you like me to do?"
- Questioner: "I'd like you to get me a job."
- My response: "I can get you a job, so long as you make a 100% commitment to living as a law-abiding, contributing citizen."
- Questioner: "But I'm not going to leave my gang."

Such a statement would not be consistent with making a 100 percent commitment to success. It may work for some in a prison setting, but people in society would consider such a statement as being inconsistent with the right attitude to pursue success.

When you don't show the right attitude, you don't get the result that you want.

A person can define success clearly. He can build a plan. He can set goals that make sense. Yet if he lacks the right attitude, the plan does not deliver the result. Goals become platitudes rather than meaningful, action-oriented steps. Without the right attitude, a person won't develop the record.

A person with the wrong attitude may become discouraged, bitter, passive, resentful, or trapped in excuses. A person with the right attitude continues moving forward, even when the environment offers little encouragement.

Defining success and setting goals are the prerequisites of the Straight-A Guide. The right attitude helps a person stay committed to those goals when the journey becomes difficult.

Measure the Right Attitude with Commitment

In our course, we measure the right attitude by commitment. If a person defines success and then makes a 100 percent commitment to that definition, he is showing the right attitude.

- The world around him may not change quickly.
- Other people may not recognize the work he is doing.
- Stakeholders may remain negative, hostile, or discouraging to his efforts.

Yet he continues adjusting in ways that align with his plan. That is the right attitude. The right attitude does not mean:

- waiting for others to become fair,
- complaining until conditions improve,
- blaming the system for every setback,
- or expecting progress to come without effort.

The right attitude means:

» changing what can be changed,
» accepting what cannot yet be changed,
» and continuing to build with discipline.

That way of thinking harmonizes with the Serenity Prayer. It also aligns with the lessons I learned from leaders who taught me that growth begins within. If I wanted a better future, I had to stop waiting for prison to become easier. I had to become stronger.

Faith and Attitude

My understanding of attitude began with faith. As I wrote earlier, during my first year in solitary, I read the Bible to get through the hours. Those stories helped me understand and accept that God wants us to live as servant leaders, always developing. If we develop ourselves, more opportunities come our way. If we fail to develop, or if we live as victims, making excuses for what we cannot achieve, we lessen the likelihood of growth and opportunity.

That understanding influenced my attitude.

I came to see that developing the right attitude required discipline. I hated being in prison, but like anyone else, I had to live in the world as it existed rather than as I wanted it to be. That commitment could become a pathway to showing God, myself, and the world around me that I would continue developing, regardless of conditions. I had made bad decisions that led to the loss of liberty. I lost my money, I lost my girl, and I lost my ability to live independently. The system controlled what I ate, when I ate, what I wore, and with whom I could communicate. Yet I still had responsibility. If I worked on the gifts that remained within my control, I believed more opportunities could come in the future.

This was not optimism detached from effort. It was discipline rooted in stewardship, understanding that prison would bring pressures every day. A person in prison will deal with:

» disappointment, apathy, and indifference,
» distance from family,
» rules that seem arbitrary,
» people who complain constantly,
» lowered expectations,
» delays in every process,
» and a culture that celebrates mediocrity.

If a person is not intentional, that environment can shape the way he thinks. He may fail to see the dangers that come with complaining, bitterness, and lowered expectations. They can lead a person into patterns that suggest a bad attitude.

I understand how those patterns develop. Prison can exhaust anyone, especially if a person does not know how to live intentionally and deliberately. If he surrenders his attitude to the environment, he weakens his prospects for success. That is why I consider it crucial to develop the right attitude. A disciplined attitude helps a person keep asking:

» What am I building here, and what have I gotten done?
» How should I respond to complications and obstacles, because more will come?
» What would a person with a 100 percent commitment to success do next?
» What should my written record reveal about the way I handle adversity?

Those questions pull a person out of reaction and back into self-governance.

Jim Collins and the Flywheel

Years after my first lessons in solitary, I continued studying leaders and ideas that could help me build a stronger life. One of the writers who influenced me was Jim Collins in his book Good to Great.

Collins taught me that great results do not usually come from one dramatic breakthrough. They come from sustained effort applied consistently over time. His analogy of the flywheel helped me understand the role of attitude. A person pushes and pushes, and at first the wheel seems not to move very much. But each disciplined push builds on the last. Over time, momentum grows.

That idea helped me think differently about prison.

I knew prison would be hard. I knew I would not receive immediate rewards for many of the decisions I was making. Decades might pass before I would see results. Still, if I kept reading, writing, documenting, preparing, and building relationships, those efforts would build upon themselves. The right attitude kept me pushing even when no one else noticed the efforts I was making to grow, improve, or prepare for success.

Collins also wrote about a BHAG, a Big Hairy Audacious Goal. That idea helped me think about working toward something bigger than my life. I aspired to build a pathway to influence reforms to help thousands of people in prison grow stronger, and earn freedom through merit.

Those ideas helped me feel as if I was living as a servant leader, a good steward of the blessings I received from God. They led to the right attitude, which doesn't mean pretending the system is fair, that prison is easy, or that setbacks do not matter. But a person with the right attitude does not allow hardship to define the limits of his effort.

Some people hear language about attitude and think it means superficial positivity. In the context of the Straight-A Guide, the right attitude means:

- accepting reality,
- refusing victim thinking,
- staying committed to growth,
- and continuing to do the work.

The right attitude is one of the clearest ways a person can show maturity, and I've seen the results from many people who became successful after prison, including Josh Smith.

Josh Smith as a Contemporary Example

The right attitude is not only something I learned from historical figures or from books written long ago. I have also seen it validated in the lives of leaders who are with us today. One example is Josh Smith, the Deputy Director of the Bureau of Prisons.

Josh's story reinforces my belief that the harder a person works on himself, the more opportunities can open. In listening to his story, I learned that he'd only made it through the 10th grade, and by the time Josh was 16, he had accumulated ten felonies. He went to federal prison as a young man. Rather than hanging around people who had a criminal mindset, or the wrong attitude, he made a choice to learn from leaders around him. They taught him to focus on what he could become rather than letting his past define his future.

Ironically, in prison, Josh had his first opportunity to learn from college-educated professionals and businessmen. They influenced his thinking, and helped him appreciate the importance of building a process, one that could lead to higher levels of success.

I have had opportunities to participate in several presentations with Josh, and I admire the way he speaks about his faith in Christ. While incarcerated, that faith led to a turning point in his development of the right attitude. Instead of dwelling on the fact that he had a difficult youth, or that his family was living in poverty while he served his sentence, he made a commitment to change. He worked toward personal development and building an extraordinary work ethic. Rather than simply waiting for calendar pages to turn, he invested energy to learn from the people around him and from the books he read. From bankers who were serving time, he learned about credit. From investors, he learned about real estate and stocks.

Those lessons, together with the right attitude, helped him overcome the complications and collateral consequences of a criminal conviction. Starting with the lessons he learned in prison, a $500 loan from a friend, and a pickup that was worth less than $500, Josh built a company. It was easier to earn a living from building a company than it would be to ask for a job. He provided a service. People paid the bill. In his first year, he said that he earned less than $15,000. Five years passed before he ever earned more than $30,000 in a single year. Yet by his tenth year, he'd grown his business into a successful residential waterproofing and foundation repair business.

During the first decade after his release, he went from poverty to wealth. He created jobs for people who, like him, had come out of prison. The company grew to employ more than 180 people, with locations in Knoxville, Indianapolis, and Winston-Salem. In 2019, investors became so impressed with the company that Josh built that they offered him a sum that would be incomprehensible to many people, measured in eight figures. According to an article I read, he committed several million dollars from his proceeds to launch the 4th Purpose Foundation, a nonprofit organization focused on prison reform.

I didn't know that story when I met him. The more I learn about his story, and the more changes I see happening under leadership from him and the Director, the more inspired I feel to work harder. It's a great story that shows how the right attitude can lead a person into becoming a multi-millionaire, and then a servant leader. What inspired me most is that instead of choosing a life of leisure, he accepted a position of leadership within one of the most troubled agencies in the U.S. government, the Federal Bureau of Prisons. The job would pay less in annual wages than he likely made in a single month from dividends and profits. Yet he took the job with hopes of helping people in prison prepare for success, and that inspired me.

Josh's life story validates a lesson I learned from many leaders: the harder a person works on himself, the more opportunities may open. Start by defining success, set goals, and then demonstrate commitment with the right attitude. Without the right attitude, the effort collapses before it compounds.

After participating on a prison tour with Josh, I had the privilege of meeting Dave Worland, who now serves as an executive with Josh's foundation for prison reform. In talking with Dave, I got a lesson from one of his mentors, Ken Boa, a theologian. In his book called Conformed to His Image, Mr. Boa taught about the importance of being a good steward of time, talent, treasure, truth, and relationships. Being a good steward of the blessings we have can lead us into having the right attitude.

When we have the right attitude, it becomes apparent in:

- the way a person writes,
- the way he reflects on setbacks,
- the books he chooses to read,
- the way he updates his release plan,
- the consistency of his journal entries, and
- the seriousness with which he develops his biography and profile.

A person may claim to have the right attitude. The record should show whether that claim is true. If a person's journals are filled only with complaint, blame, or passivity, the writing reveals something about attitude. If the journals show discipline, reflection, honesty, and effort, they reveal something else. If the

biography shows denial, complaining, and excuses, others will see it. If the biography shows accountability and growth, others will see that as well.

Over time, our attitude will show up in our conduct, the work we produce, and the opportunities that open for us.

Attitude and the Profile

The profile is one of the best tools a person can use to show the right attitude. By developing a profile over time, a person shows that he is intrinsically motivated. He is not waiting for a program to do the work for him. He is carving his own path.

- » His biography can show that he has reflected on how earlier decisions led to the current predicament.
- » His journals can show how he responds to setbacks, frustrations, and daily stress.
- » The books he chooses to read show a commitment to self-directed learning.
- » A release plan can show how he intends to carry disciplined thinking into future challenges, including through a continuous SWOT analysis.

All of those records can show whether the person's attitude aligns with the way he says he defines success. That is why I encourage readers to ask:

- » What does my written record reveal about my attitude?
- » Do my journals show discipline or complaint?
- » Does my writing reflect bitterness, or does it reflect a commitment to growth?

Attitude Protects the Future

The right attitude does more than help a person feel better today. It protects the future he is trying to build. The criminal justice system will test patience, discipline, and whether a person can continue doing meaningful work while living in an environment that obliterates hope. A strong attitude helps him keep building, even when nobody seems to notice. The right attitude matters at every stage:

- » Before choosing how to plead,
- » Before sentencing,
- » Before going to prison,
- » While serving the sentence, and
- » While preparing for release.

Circumstances change. The need for the right attitude does not.

Self-Directed Questions

1. How do I usually respond to adversity?
2. In what ways is my attitude helping or harming my future?
3. What patterns of complaint, passivity, or bitterness should I confront honestly?
4. What would a disciplined attitude look like in the stage of life I am in now?
5. What lessons from faith, from books, or from leaders have helped me build a stronger attitude?
6. What does my written record reveal about the way I respond to setbacks and pressure?

7. How can I show, through my conduct and my profile, that I am making a 100 percent commitment to success?

The right attitude is not a mood. It is not a slogan. It is the disciplined decision to keep adjusting, building, and preparing in ways that align with the future you say you want to create.

Chapter 10

Aspire to Become Something More

After a person defines success, sets goals, and develops the right attitude, he must take the next step. He must not allow current circumstances, his predicament, or his environment to define the limits of his life. Instead, he should aspire to become something more.

Our aspirations can help us see the future. That vision can be especially powerful for a person living in difficult circumstances, including a prison cell.

Ask me how I know.

When a person goes through the humiliating and degrading process that accompanies criminal charges, a series of consequences follow. In my case, those consequences included conviction, confinement, stigma, and a lengthy prison term. Once inside, I had to pass through routines that extinguish hope and weaken ambition.

If a person doesn't look to the future, he may focus on getting through the day, enduring the sentence, or avoiding the immediate pain that comes with separation from family and community. When a person gives up hope of building a better future, a parade of horribles usually follows. On the other hand, if a person aspires to more, he develops the strength necessary to commit to continuous preparation.

In the context of the Straight-A Guide, aspiration is not fantasy. It is not "happy talk" about what we are going to do in the future. It is not the habit of wishing for a better life without preparing for one. An aspiration should lead to disciplined actions. Envision a better future and commit to all that you must do to build and build. Do not allow the obstacles and negativity of prison to blow you off course or send you in the wrong direction, away from the results you want.

Solitary Forced Me to Think Beyond the Cell

During the first year I spent in solitary confinement, I found hope in reading the Bible. Passages such as Micah 6:8 taught me that I could build a better life if I chose to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God. That message helped me focus on more than the 45-year sentence. Instead, I could think about how the decisions I made each day would influence the life I would lead on the other side of the prison journey.

I began reflecting on Socratic questions:

- What lessons can I learn from the experience ahead of me?
- What could I become if I used the years ahead deliberately?
- How could the lessons I learned serve others?
- How could I leave prison stronger, wiser, and more useful than when I entered?

Those kinds of questions lead to other questions. By reflecting on such questions, we can develop realistic aspirations. We begin to understand the future we want to build. No one can change the past. But the decisions we make every day determine whether our aspirations become reality or remain only something we talk about.

Without aspiration, prison can reduce life to routine and survival. To restore confidence, a person must imagine the life he wants to lead and then start reverse engineering the steps he can take to make himself a more likely candidate for success. Aspiration helped me imagine a life of contribution, service, and meaning. I could begin believing that the years ahead, though painful, did not have to be empty. Instead, they could

become a pathway to acquire knowledge and build credentials that would lead to the result I wanted. Aspiration, together with disciplined effort, helped me restore confidence during that first year I spent in solitary. Anyone can do the same.

Aspiration Is Not Fantasy

Some people hear words like aspiration, vision, or purpose and assume they belong to the world of slogans. They think aspiration means dreaming without discipline or talking about a future, without taking any intentional actions that lead to results. For the purpose of this course, please differentiate aspiration from fantasy. Aspiration becomes real when it strengthens present commitment. If it does not lead to better decisions, then it is only talk, or a fantasy about what a person dreams of experiencing. If a person aspires to something more, he should begin asking:

- What would that future require of me?
- What skills would I need?
- What sacrifices would I have to make?
- What habits would have to change?
- What record would I need to build to support that future?

Aspiration makes present hardship more bearable and the efforts a person makes more meaningful. Obstacles and resistance will remain, because they are part of prison. Yet aspiration can give a person the strength to keep moving forward.

A person who fantasizes becomes discouraged easily. He makes excuses, complains about what the system is not doing, or focuses on what is unavailable. A person who aspires with discipline begins turning vision into preparation.

Frederick Douglass and the Aspiration to Build Solutions

When I read about Frederick Douglass, I admired that he aspired to something larger than his own comfort. After escaping from slavery, he aspired to become the kind of man who could influence others, expose injustice, and help build a different future for people who suffered under oppression. To do that, he had to prepare himself first.

- He had to learn how to read.
- He had to learn how to write.
- He had to learn how to communicate.
- He had to develop himself before he could effectively contribute to something larger than his own immediate survival.

That lesson inspired me to work in ways that would help me emulate what I learned from him. I wanted to use the years ahead in a way that might eventually improve outcomes for people in prison and for people facing long-term confinement. I could not convert that aspiration into reality without preparing. My aspiration helped me recognize the small steps I would have to take, such as reading books about leadership, influence, and strategy, then working toward academic credentials. I would have to document everything, plan carefully, and develop a record of unimpeachable resources showing the work along the way.

Douglass helped me accept that if I aspired to something more than my current circumstances, I would have to organize my life and live productively, regardless of the obstacles I faced.

The Bricklayers

In Changpeng Zhao's memoir, *Freedom of Money*, I read a story about three bricklayers that explain the importance of aspiration.

- A passerby asks the first bricklayer, "What are you doing?"
- He answers, "I'm laying bricks."
- He asks the second, "What are you doing?"
- The second replies, "I'm building a wall."
- Then he asks the third, "What are you doing?"
- The third man says, "I'm building a cathedral."

All three men are doing the same physical task. The difference is not in the labor. The difference is in the vision.

The first sees only the task. The second sees the structure. The third sees the purpose. That story captures the importance of aspiration. It changes the meaning of present effort by connecting it to something larger than the moment.

Aspiration can become a foundational tool for building a new future, one that brings a person out of darkness and into a life of meaning, relevance, contribution, and even prosperity. Use a profile to develop that story, knowing that each entry can bring a person closer to the next opportunity. Vision should lead to work, and that work is essential for building a future. The labor may not be easy, but it becomes meaningful when aspiration is present. I want people in prison, including those in solitary, to understand that what they are doing today can belong to something larger than the pain of today.

Builders Prepare Before Results Appear

Leaders from very different worlds taught me that builders always prepare before results appear.

Bill Gates imagined a future in which every home and every business would use computers long before that vision became reality. To move toward that aspiration, he had to prepare, build, and think in terms of systems, teams, and daily progress.

In reading about Steve Jobs, I remember a phrase associated with him that inspired me: good artists copy ideas, great artists steal ideas. Since I was in prison, I stole ideas from great leaders, and they taught me the importance of aspiring to something more than the struggles I lived with at the start of my journey. That vision gave me strength, and I believe others can build strength if they aspire to the next chapter of their lives.

The Straight-A Guide comes from ideas I stole from leaders. They taught me how to think differently, and I applied their lessons to the conditions I faced. Jobs helped me see that builders study what works, take the best lessons they can find, and then apply them with discipline and intention.

More recently, I learned from the innovator known as Satoshi Nakamoto. He aspired to introduce a new form of currency during a time of financial crisis and distrust in existing systems. To turn his aspiration into reality, he wrote a white paper that introduced the world to bitcoin. Satoshi's story, like CZ's story, is a story of building.

Their stories share a common theme: aspiration requires more than dissatisfaction with the present. It requires methodical steps that move from concept to reality.

I study builders because they think beyond immediate limitations. They do not stop with wishing or fantasy. They prepare, and they become the change they want to see. If you aspire to something more, ask yourself what preparations are necessary to convert your aspirations into your new reality.

Aspiration and a Future Orientation

For those who do not aspire, imprisonment can lead to apathy, anger, hatred, and despondency. A negative mindset can contribute to intergenerational cycles of failure. Those who aspire, on the other hand, can use their time inside to prepare, and then write the next chapter, a chapter they engineered to position themselves for more opportunities.

Despite the long sentence I served, aspiration helped keep the future alive in my thinking. It reminded me that today's work could lead to a more successful life in the days, months, years, and decades ahead.

That is one reason aspiration and faith are closely related in my thinking. Faith helped me believe that the years ahead could still carry meaning. Aspiration helped me translate those beliefs into the life I am living now. I finished my prison term on August 12, 2013. Since then, I have been developing this ministry with hopes of helping more people build pathways to earn freedom through merit.

Aspiration and Financial Independence

One of the practical conclusions I reached while in prison was that if I wanted to devote my life to serving others, I would need financial independence. I did not want my ability to contribute to depend entirely on whether other people chose to employ me, approve me, or support me. That aspiration influenced many later decisions. It shaped the way I thought about:

- Reading,
- Education,
- Business,
- Documentation,
- Opportunity, and
- Long-term preparation.

Some people hear a word like aspiration and assume it is abstract. I do not see it that way. Aspiration should lead to practical thought. If I aspire to contribute to society, then I must ask:

- How will I support that work?
- What economic structure should support my independence?
- What skills must I build?
- What relationships must I develop?
- What record must I create?

Aspiration should stretch the imagination, but it should also sharpen discipline.

Aspirations and Memorializing the Journey

Just as with success and goals, by writing about our aspirations, we begin to sow seeds that can help us in the future. It is important to establish a timeline. We want to show the influence of today's decisions on the opportunities that open later. By memorializing the journey, we build a record with time stamps that show consistency and intrinsic motivation. That record helps us build arguments that we are valuable because we do not luck our way into success; we engineer it.

- A biography can reveal what kind of person you intend to become.
- Journals can show whether daily conduct aligns with that aspiration.
- Book reports can show what thinkers and builders are helping shape the vision.
- A release plan can show how aspiration becomes concrete through strategic decisions.

Without that documentation, people will not know all the work that went into building the life you intend to lead. Ask yourself:

- Is this aspiration serious?
- Does my conduct show commitment?
- Am I building toward it, or only talking about what I'm going to do?

The profile you develop gives people a window into your journey. Your aspirations and your profile should remind you:

- I am still building toward something.
- I am not only serving time.
- I am preparing for a future that should be larger than my current conditions.
- I do not have to let the walls become the limits of my identity.

In the context of our Straight-A Guide, aspiration leads to discipline, meaning, and sustained action, which we will cover in later chapters. You do not need to map out every detail of the future today. Start by asking:

- What kind of life would be worthy of the effort I am making now?
- What kind of person do I want to become?
- What would contribution look like for me?
- What future is large enough to justify present discipline?
- What should I begin building now if I want that future to become more realistic?

Those questions help aspiration move from fantasy into preparation.

Self-Directed Questions

1. What do I aspire to become?
2. What future would be worthy of the effort I am making now?
3. In what ways have my present circumstances limited my imagination?
4. What should I be building if I want that future to become more realistic?
5. What books, leaders, or stories are helping shape my aspiration?
6. What writing would show that my aspiration is serious rather than vague?
7. How can I connect my aspiration to the way I use time right now?

Aspiration is not an escape from reality. It is a disciplined vision of a better future that gives meaning to present effort and helps a person keep preparing, even while living through difficult conditions.

Chapter 11

Take Action

The first ten chapters of this playbook build a sequence.

1. First, define success.
2. Then, set goals that align with how you define success.
3. Next, develop the right attitude, which means making a 100 percent commitment to success.
4. Then, aspire to something more than your current circumstances.

But if a person stops there, he will not get the result he wants. He must act.

Action is the disciplined movement from intention into visible effort. It proves that a person is doing more than talking about change. Without action, the Straight-A Guide framework is nothing more than theory. A person may say all the right things, but if he never takes action, he will never build the future he claims to want.

Just as the community in prison does not respect people who only talk about what they are going to do, the world outside does not reward talk either. To build a life of meaning, relevance, and dignity, or to overcome the indignities of a criminal charge, a person must train himself to take incremental action steps and record the progress he makes.

Action Separates Serious People from Talkers

Many people know what they should do. They can describe the right strategy. They can speak about success, goals, attitude, aspiration, and discipline. Yet they fail to act consistently, and because they fail to act, they fail to get results.

- Some people talk about changing their lives.
- Some talk about rebuilding.
- Some talk about preparing for release.
- Some talk about becoming better men, better fathers, better citizens, or better providers.

Yet talking alone proves nothing. It does not lead to earning freedom, and it does not lead to prosperity upon release. Serious people want to see action, not happy talk. In prison, the environment is full of reasons to delay. A person can always say:

- I will begin later.
- I need more clarity.
- I am waiting for the right opportunity.
- The system does not offer rehabilitation programs.
- We are always on lockdown and no one cares.
- I will start changing my life once I get out of here.

That way of thinking does not lead to results that align with the way a person defines success. It may be consistent with prison culture, but it is not consistent with building a better future. I encourage members of our community to review the statistics. The longer a person spends in corrections without developing a disciplined adjustment strategy, the less likely he is to become successful in the real world.

Because the real world expects results.

And results come from taking action, not making excuses. Despite uncertainty, despite boredom, despite frustration, and despite the fact that the system may never offer ideal conditions, a person must develop a plan and then execute the plan. Good plans take obstacles into account.

My Three-Part Plan

After learning lessons from the Bible, and from leaders who overcame struggles to reach enormous levels of success, I began to think differently. Before leaving solitary confinement and transferring to prison, I organized my strategy around three broad categories:

1. I would educate myself.
2. I would contribute to society in meaningful, measurable ways.
3. I would build a support network.

Those categories helped me define direction. Yet a strategy without action is irrelevant. Do not become the kind of person who says, "I would have done this, but some external force blocked me, so it is not my fault." Empower yourself by building a record that shows you took incremental actions that aligned with how you defined success and that those actions accelerated your pathway to results, regardless of what others did.

- » If I wanted to show commitment to education, I had to read, study, write, and work toward academic credentials.
- » If I wanted to contribute to society, I had to produce work that others could measure, evaluate, and use.
- » If I wanted to build a support network, I had to communicate with people, earn trust, and show through my conduct that I was worthy of support.

Those action steps did not depend on anything the Bureau of Prisons would do for me. It did not matter whether I was locked in solitary, on lockdown in a penitentiary, or without financial resources. Success depended on what I would do.

That lesson empowered me through the 9,500 days that I served, and it continued helping me build prosperity and stability after my release. People inside often focus on what the system is not doing. I learned that I had to focus on what I could do.

Action Begins with Small Steps

People often misunderstand action because they assume it must begin with big steps. Let us discard that myth. Action begins with small steps. All those small steps should align with how a person defines success and with the aspirations he wants to pursue. Regardless of what the system does, a person can always:

- » Read a few pages from the Bible, from a book of faith, or from someone he admires,
- » Write one journal entry,
- » Develop his biography by sharing the lessons he is learning,
- » Develop a book report to show commitment to self-directed learning,
- » Update a release plan in ways that advance him as a candidate for better outcomes,
- » Write a letter to build his coalition of support,
- » Exercise with pushups, running in place, or squats for an hour, or
- » Document resilience by writing about the steps he is taking to overcome adversity.

Small action steps create momentum. With a 45-year sentence, I could not afford to think only in terms of serving multiple decades. I was only 23 and did not know how to process that length of time. I had to break the journey into manageable parts. Those thoughts led me to ask what the best possible outcome would be during the first ten years of the sentence, and then to challenge myself with questions such as:

» What can I do today?
» What can I complete this week?
» What can I record this month?
» What small action will make me stronger for the next stage?
» How will today's actions put me on the pathway to new opportunities that otherwise would not be available to me?
» In what ways would these action steps advance my efforts to build a record that would show I am extraordinary and compelling?

Those are the kinds of questions that turn a person from a passive prisoner into an active builder. Regardless of what stage you are in, be a builder.

Action Creates Evidence

Building a body of work is an essential component of the Straight-A Guide framework. A person does not build credibility by talking about what he intends to do. He builds credibility by acting and then preserving a record of that action.

That is why the Prison Professors Charitable Corporation invests so many resources in building the profiles platform. Always think of Prison Professors as a platform, much like Amazon is a platform. Amazon publishes books and sells products. It does not make the decisions about which books or products others create. It is a platform.

Similarly, Prison Professors is a platform. Each person who goes through the system should become a prison professor. By writing biographies, journals, book reports, and release plans, the person is designing his own curriculum to prepare for success. To the extent that he does a good job, he will use his profile to build a coalition of support. That support may lead to higher levels of liberty, income opportunities upon release, restored reputation, and greater trust.

Those records show that action is real, and that success did not come by accident. By memorializing the journey, the person shows that he engineered the pathway to success by the curriculum he developed.

For example:

» A journal entry can show that a person is using time intentionally,
» A book report can show that he is reading with discipline and applying what he learns,
» A biography can show that he is reflecting honestly on his past and his future,
» A release plan can show that he is preparing strategically rather than hoping vaguely, and
» A profile can show that all of this effort is consistent over time.

Actions become the bridge between a person's aspirations and internal commitment and the results that he builds.

Action Leads to Accomplishments

Prison is not designed to make action easy. Criminal justice literature offers the four goals of a sentence:

1. It should deter others from breaking the law.
2. It should isolate the person for the length of the sentence.

3. It should inflict punishment as a result of the person's failure to abide by the social contract that holds our federal republic together.
4. It should provide pathways for the person to rehabilitate himself into a law-abiding, contributing citizen.

During the 9,500 days that I served, I saw a great deal of emphasis on the first three goals. To succeed, a person must develop his own curriculum that shows commitment to the fourth goal, and no one should work harder than the individual to prepare for success. From prison, he should expect obstacles, anticipating repetitive routines, negativity, delays, bureaucracy, and apathy.

Those who run the prison may not care about your growth. That is exactly why a person must think about incremental action steps and the value they bring. When a person continues taking deliberate action despite those obstacles, he shows:

» Resilience,
» Maturity,
» Seriousness,
» Self-governance,
» Intrinsic motivation, and
» Discipline.

This is one reason I often tell people that prison can become the land of excuses. Many people surrender initiative and explain why they cannot move forward. Some blame the staff. Some blame policies that fail to recognize the pursuit of excellence. Some blame the institution and the other people serving time. Some blame the lack of resources. Some blame the past.

I understand those frustrations. Yet I also understand that excuses do not lead to the results a person wants. They lead to intergenerational cycles of failure, as shown by high recidivism rates. Disciplined, intentional action steps lead to results.

Joseph and the Discipline of Acting with Integrity

The story of Joseph in Genesis supports this lesson well. He faced injustice, betrayal, false accusation, and confinement. Yet wherever he found himself, he acted in ways that aligned with his values. He served. He interpreted circumstances through faith. He remained useful. He continued acting with integrity even when conditions were unfair. His actions always led to new opportunities that would not have opened if he had made excuses about why he could not advance.

That is an important lesson for anyone in prison.

We do not always control what happens to us. We control whether we will continue acting in alignment with the kind of person we want to become. We may endure injustice through no fault of our own. As I wrote in Earning Freedom: Conquering a 45-Year Sentence, it is all part of the journey.

If I wanted better outcomes, I could not wait for ideal treatment from the system. In fact, I expected obstacles, resistance, and indifference. I had to continue acting in ways that aligned with the values and future I was trying to build. I never aspired to become a model inmate. I aspired to become successful, earning enough resources to give me time to work toward aspirations that were meaningful to me, such as creating pathways for people to earn freedom through merit. All my work and actions align with those aspirations that I set during that first year I served in solitary confinement.

Greg Reyes and Incremental Action

Another influence that helped me appreciate the importance of incremental action was Greg Reyes, a self-made billionaire.

The government prosecuted Greg for violating securities laws, and a judge sentenced him to serve time in prison. He surrendered to serve that sentence in the same prison where I was serving time. We became friends while walking around a dirt track. In listening to Greg's story, I learned many lessons on the importance of visualizing success, planning the process, and executing the plan. Visualize, plan, execute summarizes the strategy he used to build his career and to create generational wealth while simultaneously building one of the world's most valuable technology companies.

As a high school student, Greg aspired to become the CEO of a publicly traded company. That aspiration did not become reality through wishful thinking. He took a series of action steps over many years. Those steps eventually led to his leading Brocade Communications, taking it from a startup to a company with a $25 billion market cap at a time when such valuations were rare.

Greg's story reinforced lessons that I learned in prison: results come from repeated action over time. Those actions must align with the bigger picture, or aspiration. A big vision matters. But the big vision only becomes real if a person does the work required to move toward it.

That lesson helped me continue building through imprisonment. My circumstances were different from Greg's, of course. But the principle was the same. I had to take repeated action steps that aligned with the life I aspired to build.

Action Builds Confidence

Action does more than create evidence. It also builds confidence. When a person takes consistent action, he begins to trust himself more. He sees that he can follow through. He sees that the future is not controlled entirely by external events. He sees that he still has agency and autonomy to make decisions. At any time, a person can choose to live as if he is the CEO of his life.

Prison weakens many people psychologically. Living apart from family and community can make a person feel powerless, dependent, and passive. In prison, the institution is more powerful than the individual. The institution dictates where a person will live, what he will eat, how much he will eat, and with whom he can communicate. The institution will assign jobs according to institutional need rather than the person's aspirations. That is reality. Own it.

If a person lives in accordance with the Straight-A Guide, he will have a framework to disrupt the failure that prisons seem conditioned to deliver. He will become the CEO of his life and prepare for success.

Every time a person reads with purpose, writes honestly, updates a plan, or completes a meaningful task, he strengthens the belief that his future is still being shaped by his decisions. By documenting his progress, he also builds a coalition of support. Those lessons, and the profile he builds, create reasons to avoid the disruptive behavior that leads to so much failure for so many people in prison.

Develop a story that validates commitment to living as a law-abiding, contributing citizen, and more opportunities will open. Repeated action steps that align with aspiration and with an individual definition of success build confidence. They advance prospects for success in an environment that often destroys hope.

Record Intentional Actions

A person should not only act. He should record the action steps and develop a story showing why those action steps align with how he defines success. By building that record, he shows commitment to accountability, momentum, and a time-stamped history of effort.

The profile a person builds will help others view him in ways that counter what the Presentence Investigation Report says. A well-developed biography can show how the person is changing, or growing in difficult circumstances. Multiple journal entries show that he does not wait for the system to change his life, but that he is intrinsically motivated to develop his own curriculum and advance prospects for liberty and prosperity. A series of book reports shows the person's commitment to self-directed, intentional learning. A release plan would show how he engineered his pathway to overcome the collateral consequences of a criminal conviction.

Since each entry is time-stamped, the more a person writes, the more he shows commitment and intentional action. He builds a portfolio of assets that he can leverage into new opportunities, regardless of what the system does. That portfolio can help him advocate for better outcomes. It can also help him build arguments supported by evidence showing that he engineered his pathway to success.

A person who depends only on motivation will not act consistently. He must become intentional, with documented routines that he designed. If a person wants to build a better life, he should create routines around the action steps that matter most:

- Reading,
- Writing,
- Exercise,
- Reflection,
- Planning,
- Communication, and
- Repeated behaviors that support a commitment to building the future he says he wants.

Prison can become a place of growth for those who are willing to act with discipline. The same days that destroy one person can strengthen another, depending on what each chooses to do with those days.

Start with Action That Fits the Stage

Not every action step belongs to every stage. A person facing charges may need to act by:

- Learning about the process,
- Beginning a mitigation strategy,
- Writing his narrative,
- Organizing documents, and
- Strengthening family communication.

A person preparing to surrender may need to act by:

- Building a reading plan,
- Starting journals,
- Preparing emotionally, and
- Organizing a framework for the early months of imprisonment.

A person already in prison may need to act by:

- Reading consistently,
- Writing biography and journal entries,
- Creating book reports,
- Improving health,
- Refining a release plan, and
- Documenting progress on the profile.

A person nearing release may need to act by:

- Strengthening support systems,
- Preparing for employment,
- Clarifying housing,
- Updating the release plan, and
- Preparing to demonstrate a record of consistent effort.

The key is not to imitate someone else's stage. The key is to act in ways that fit the stage you are in now.

Self-Directed Questions

1. What action steps am I taking right now that support the future I say I want?
2. Where is the gap between what I say and what I actually do?
3. What small repeated actions would create stronger momentum in my life?
4. What action should become visible in my journals, biography, book reports, or release plan?
5. What routines do I need to build if I want action to become consistent?
6. In what ways have excuses delayed action that I could already be taking?
7. What action can I begin this week that would strengthen both my confidence and my written record?

The first steps in our Straight-A Guide should push you to action. When a person acts with discipline and intention, then records that effort honestly, he shows intrinsic motivation, preparation, opening prospects for more opportunities in the future.

Measure Progress with Accountability

A person can define success. He can set goals. He can develop the right attitude. He can aspire to something more. He can even begin taking action. But if he never measures whether those actions are producing the intended result, he may deceive himself into believing that he is ready when he is not. Many people leave prison believing that by keeping a clean disciplinary record and accumulating a locker full of certificates, they have done something special.

Employers in the real world may not care about those efforts. They want to see results that advance the person as a candidate who can get the job done. They want to see intrinsic motivation, critical thinking, and commitment to the pursuit of excellence. For that reason, the Straight-A Guide includes this chapter on accountability.

Accountability is the discipline of measuring whether a person is doing what he says he will do. It is the process of comparing intention against conduct, plans against evidence, and aspiration against actual progress. Without accountability, a person may confuse activity with progress or effort with results. He may believe he is preparing well when the record shows something else. Do not stay busy for the sake of being busy. That is the equivalent of digging a hole and then filling it back up just to show that you are working.

Get things done that will matter. Think about whether your plan will advance you as a candidate for being extraordinary and compelling.

- What would that mean to you?
- If you succeed in executing your plan, will it lead to the results you aspire to achieve?
- How will you test whether you are making incremental progress that aligns with your plan, or whether you need to adjust the plan?

From leaders, I learned that if I wanted to become a stronger candidate for liberty, prosperity, and contribution, I needed a way to measure whether my effort was taking me in the right direction. Developing accountability tools that would help me measure progress became essential to opening new opportunities. Further, those accountability tools became powerful in the self-advocacy campaigns I had to launch at different stages in the journey. For more detail, I encourage participants to read Earning Freedom: Conquering a 45-Year Sentence. If it is not in your prison's library, reach out to our team, and we'll make sure to send you a copy–so long as the profile you're building shows that you're holding yourself accountable.

Good Intentions Are Not Enough

Many people begin with good intentions.

- They define success.
- They set goals.
- They work to develop the right attitude.
- They take action.

But if they never review whether their daily actions align with how they define success, or measure progress, they can deceive themselves into thinking they are making progress when they are not.

I encourage people to develop personal accountability tools to measure progress through every stage of the criminal justice process. The system may not give reliable feedback. The government is one of the few places in America that rewards mediocrity. People often receive praise simply for showing up or for seniority in a position. In the real world, a person must be ready.

Earlier, I wrote about Elon Musk because I learn a great deal by reading about how he makes decisions.

In one interview, a journalist asked Elon how he builds and runs so many innovative companies. He answered that he builds great teams. The journalist then asked what kinds of questions he uses in an interview to assess whether a candidate is worthy of the role.

Elon said he asks the candidate to tell him about his life, and then he listens carefully.

Next, Elon asks the candidate to describe one of the biggest challenges he has faced.

After listening to the person describe the challenge, Elon asks him to explain the specific steps he took to solve it.

It gives him a powerful detector for empty talk. A person who truly solves problems can usually describe the importance of every step. If the person shows strong critical thinking, he stands a better chance of getting the position.

In our course, we often say that we do not give ninth-place trophies. The real world does not celebrate mediocrity. It responds to results. Focus on building accountability tools that show the small steps that led you to solve meaningful challenges. A person should be ruthlessly honest in assessing the plan and the progress, because those who judge him may very well be demanding and skeptical. Your accountability logs can become effective assets to overcome obstacles and position you for the next stage of success.

Accountability Means Honest Review

If a person wants to prepare for success, he must ask:

- What is working?
- What is failing?
- What needs to change?
- What evidence supports my claim that I am progressing?
- In what ways will stakeholders view my progress?
- In what ways will my progress advance me as a candidate for the next opportunity?

Those questions strengthen a person's ability to act as an honest evaluator.

Without that kind of review, a person may stay busy without becoming productive. He may fill time, yet fail to move closer to the future he says he wants. Accountability protects against that trap because it requires a person to compare:

- what he planned,
- what he actually did, and
- what result followed?

That comparison provides instruction on what is working and what should change. If you are living as the CEO of your life, you place a high value on the tools you create to measure progress and hold yourself accountable. You will not need the system to tell you that you are extraordinary and compelling. Your accountability logs will produce results, and the results will speak for themselves.

My Accountability Tools Helped Me Stay on Track

During the decades I served in prison, I needed a way to evaluate whether the actions I was taking aligned with the future I wanted to build. I had already developed a three-part strategy:

1. I would educate myself.
2. I would contribute to society in meaningful, measurable ways.
3. I would build a support network.

Those broad categories helped me organize my effort. But if I wanted to know whether I was truly progressing, I needed more than broad categories. I needed accountability tools. So I created tools to measure progress.

» If I claimed to care about education, what evidence proved it?
» If I claimed I wanted to contribute to society, what measurable work showed that commitment?
» If I said I wanted to build a support network, what relationships was I actually developing?

Over time, those questions led me to build accountability logs of different kinds:

» journals,
» reading records,
» book reports,
» academic milestones,
» written plans, and
» later public documentation through a website.

Those tools helped me evaluate progress and determine what adjustments I could make to show commitment to pursuing excellence in all areas of life. I still use those kinds of accountability tools today.

Prison Celebrates Mediocrity

This is one of the dangers of confinement.

A person may feel that he is doing something all day. He moves through count, meals, movement, conversations, television, exercise, and routines. He may even tell himself that he is trying to improve.

In the real world, no one cares whether a person tries. They want to know whether he can deliver results. A person should be ruthlessly honest in assessing whether his actions are producing measurable progress and whether that progress will advance his candidacy for the success he says he wants to achieve. That is where accountability tools and measuring progress become essential. A person will understand much more about whether he is truly preparing if he tracks:

» what he read,
» what he wrote,
» what he completed,
» what he learned,
» what he changed, and
» how his conduct aligned with his plan

Elon Musk, CZ, and the Value of Measurable Output

Many leaders reveal the steps they take to measure progress and hold themselves accountable. I have learned by reading about them. Without exception, the leaders I admire show commitment to personal accountability. They always need to know whether effort aligns with mission. We can all learn from such leaders.

Elon Musk is one example. He is known for being a demanding leader who expects accountability from every member of his team. Periodically, he sends memos asking people to provide a bullet-point list of what they got done the previous week. If they respond, he assesses whether they are performing as expected or exceeding expectations. If they do not respond, he considers the silence a resignation and moves on. He expects people to account for what they accomplished. He wants to know what work was actually done, not merely what they discussed or intended. If a person cannot describe what he accomplished, Elon removes him from the team. That is the real world.

In *Freedom of Money*, CZ also wrote extensively about building accountability into a system. While building Binance, he created numerous ways to measure whether the exchange was developing fast enough and well enough to meet expectations. Those measurements helped his team understand whether they were truly on track to become a top-ten exchange. That strategy led to exceeding expectations, as Binance became the first company in history to earn more than $1 billion in profit, without debt, within six months, and it became the number-one crypto exchange in the world. Today, Binance has more than 300 million customers.

The broader lesson matters more than the personalities involved. Accountability requires metrics, review, and evidence. If a person wants results, he needs some method of measuring progress.

Justin Paperny and the Accountability of Building After Prison

Justin Paperny offers another useful example, although on a smaller scale than Elon Musk and Changpeng Zhao.

I met Justin in prison when he surrendered to serve a relatively brief sentence for violating securities laws. While we served our time, Justin and I became friends. We discussed his fear about returning to the labor market during the worst recession of our lifetime. His felony record would preclude him from earning a living as a licensed financial advisor. Like others in prison, Justin would have to reinvent himself, preparing for the challenges ahead.

When I told him that I intended to build a nonprofit to improve outcomes in America's criminal justice system, Justin said he wanted to help. We agreed that he would create a boutique consulting firm to advise non-criminogenic defendants on how to build effective mitigation strategies. Justin moved through all the steps we articulate in the Straight-A Guide. He defined success, set goals, and moved forward with incremental progress, using accountability logs to ensure that he used every day of his time in prison to prepare for the life he would lead after he finished serving his sentence. Those efforts led to his business, White Collar Advice, which has generated millions in revenue. I am grateful to him for being a regular sponsor of the Prison Professors Charitable Corporation.

His progress did not come from what he said he was going to do. It came from personal accountability that led to the result he wanted. Justin's story reinforces an important lesson for readers: a person can use accountability tools to advance prospects for a new career that can lead to success upon release.

The Written Record Makes Accountability Stronger

- A well-developed profile can become an accountability log.
- A biography can show whether a person is becoming more honest and more self-aware.
- Regular journal entries can show whether daily conduct aligns with the aspirations he wants to reach.
- Book reports can show whether reading is consistent, serious, and reflective of self-directed learning.
- A release plan can show whether preparation is becoming more realistic and more detailed over time.

Each of those entries becomes time-stamped evidence. They allow a person to compare what he said he would do against what he actually did. That is powerful. The more entries a person makes, the more clearly he can see his own progress. And the more clearly others can evaluate whether that progress is real.

Accountability Helps Build Credibility

The profile does more than help a person evaluate himself. It can also help other people evaluate him. If a person writes consistently over time, he shows:

- that he is serious,
- that he is intrinsically motivated,
- that he is willing to do difficult work without external reward, and that he is building a record rather than depending on excuses.

That kind of accountability can strengthen credibility with:

- family members,
- mentors,
- staff,
- attorneys,
- probation officers,
- case managers,
- other stakeholders, and
- people who may open income opportunities in the future.

A strong accountability record does not guarantee a desired outcome. But it gives a person something much stronger than vague claims about what he says he is going to do. It gives him a portfolio of assets that he can leverage to get the outcome he wants.

Accountability Requires Comparison

A person cannot become accountable if he never compares:

- what he intended,
- what he did, and
- what result followed.

That comparison is where growth becomes possible.

- If the record shows that he intended to read and write every day but did not, then he must ask why. What happened?
- If the record shows that he is setting goals that do not fit his stage, then he must adjust.
- If the record shows that his journals are full of complaints but low on evidence to show how he responded, then he must confront that truth.

Accountability tools can help a person refine the plan that may lead to higher levels of success.

Accountability and the Real World

Prison may reward compliance and participation in shallow ways. Anyone can get a certificate by signing a roster showing he sat through a class for a sufficient number of hours. But who really cares? In the real world, people want to know:

- Can you follow through?
- Can you do what you say?
- Can you build trust?
- Can you create value?
- Can you show evidence of discipline?

A strong accountability record should answer questions such as these. It helps a person prepare for the standards of the world he hopes to reenter.

Start Measuring Now

A person should not wait until release to begin measuring progress. He can begin by asking:

- What exactly am I trying to prove to myself?
- What would count as evidence of progress?
- What written record am I building?
- How often should I review it?
- What changes should I make if the evidence shows weakness?

The earlier he starts, the stronger the record becomes.

Self-Directed Questions

1. What evidence proves that I am making progress?
2. Where is the gap between what I claim and what my record shows?
3. What habits or actions need to change if I want better results?
4. How often should I review my effort honestly?
5. What would an honest review of my journals, biography, book reports, or release plan reveal?
6. Am I confusing activity with progress in any area of my life?
7. What accountability tools can I begin building now to strengthen my preparation?

Accountability is how a person tests whether his effort is real. It is the discipline of measuring progress honestly, adjusting when needed, and building a record that shows he is doing more than talking about change.

Chapter 13

Build Awareness

In the Straight-A Guide, we suggest people to always keep their head in the game. They have to be aware of the opportunities around them, and make others aware of their commitment to excellence.

Any person who wants to succeed must learn to move through the system with intention. Success does not come from drifting through the days without focus. Even in a negative environment, opportunities exist for those who train themselves to think strategically and act deliberately. We use the principle of awareness to encourage people to stay open to new ideas, alert to opportunities for growth, and conscious of the threats that can weaken progress. It is equally important to pay attention to the people who can strengthen prospects for success and to those who can undermine them. Awareness means maintaining the discipline to keep your head in the game.

And the game is to succeed in spite of every obstacle. Awareness is a disciplined habit of paying attention. It allows a person to make better decisions, avoid unnecessary harm, and position himself for better outcomes. It reminds me of the saying commonly attributed to Benjamin Franklin:

For want of a nail the shoe was lost.
For want of a shoe the horse was lost.
For want of a horse the rider was lost.
For want of a rider the message was lost.
For want of a message the battle was lost.
For want of a battle the kingdom was lost.
And all for the want of a horseshoe nail.

That passage shows how a small failure in preparation or attention can lead to devastating consequences. This concept of staying aware teaches us to recognize how small details connect to larger outcomes. Developing that level of consciousness helped me enormously in prison, and it continues to guide me today.

Anyone who fails to develop awareness places himself at risk. The environment of jails and prisons can weaken judgment, cloud priorities, and erode prospects for success. While I was in solitary confinement, the Bible taught me to think differently, opening my mind to the importance of awareness. Passages like the Parable of the Talents helped me to believe that God blesses every person with gifts, and that each of us has a responsibility to develop those gifts.

To grow in an environment that feels designed to extinguish hope, we must keep our minds, our eyes, and our ears open. With awareness, we begin to see both threats and opportunities more clearly. That awareness helped me identify what would help or hurt my prospects for success. It strengthened my commitment to prepare, to act with intention, and to seize every opportunity I could create.

Prison is full of forces that can pull a person off course. Some of those forces are obvious, such as violence, idleness, negative friends, institutional delays, and separation from family. Others are less obvious:

- Lowered expectations,
- Learned passivity,
- Apathy or indifference,
- Acceptance of mediocrity,
- Cynicism disguised as realism, and
- the habit of adjusting to confinement in ways that make long-term success less likely.

A person who doesn't embrace this concept of being aware doesn't even realize how much the environment is influencing him. He may think he is simply doing time, while in reality the culture around him is shaping his thinking, his habits, his language, his standards, and his expectations.

A person who develops awareness learns to ask:

» What is this environment doing to me?
» What patterns around me should I resist?
» What opportunities am I overlooking?
» What habits are strengthening my future, and which are weakening it?
» What should I be doing differently?

Those questions lead to practical and pragmatic decisions. They help a person take meaningful steps toward the future he says he wants to build.

Build Prospects for Success

I had to become much more observant to identify opportunities and commit myself to developing the plan I laid out at the beginning of my term. As I described in Earning Freedom: Conquering a 45-Year Prison Term, I had to learn how to read the environment, understand the influence of the people around me, recognize behaviors that would weaken my future, and identify opportunities that might help me build a better life. Awareness meant learning how to see the environment clearly and then making decisions that aligned with the life I wanted rather than the culture around me. That kind of awareness helped me make choices that eventually led to:

» Getting into college,
» Earning both an undergraduate degree and a master's degree,
» Becoming a published author,
» Transferring from a high-security penitentiary to lower levels of security, and
» Building relationships that later led to support, love, opportunity, and financial independence.

None of those developments happened by accident. They happened because I stayed alert to where I was, what was possible, and what steps might move me closer to a better outcome. Awareness helped me use prison instead of letting prison use me. Anyone can do the same.

I would like to say that I developed this principle on my own, but the truth is that I learned the importance of staying aware by studying people who built successful careers in business and in life.

Leonard Franques and Seeing Beyond the Limitation

For example, let me share the inspiring story of Leonard Franques. His life shows how successful people practice the principle of awareness. It begins with seeing more than the limitation someone else tries to place on your future.

While Leonard was in high school, he worked weekends driving a garbage truck. When he spoke with a counselor about college, she told him he was not "college material" and suggested that he should simply continue driving the truck as a way to survive. Leonard could have accepted that judgment as a fixed description of his future.

Instead, his mother intervened with a different message. She told him never to let anyone tell him what he could or could not do. That moment changed the way he looked at life.

Rather than narrowing his vision to the job he already had, Leonard became more aware of the larger range of opportunities that might open if he prepared himself for them. He took the SAT, enrolled in college, earned his degree in business administration, and kept adjusting as he learned more about the world around

him. He first pursued agricultural business, then moved toward banking, and later shifted into finance and accounting as he became more aware of where opportunities were strongest.

Awareness did not mean the road became easy. Leonard said he was not an outstanding student, and he worked constantly while attending school. But he kept paying attention, learning, and adapting. That combination allowed him to turn education into preparation rather than treating it as a credential alone.

After college, Leonard continued building that same pattern of awareness. While working in the restaurant business, he developed a reputation for reliability, initiative, and operational judgment. That reputation led others to become aware of him, as evidenced by one of his clients offering to provide financial backing so that he could take over his first restaurant. In other words, Leonard not only remained aware of opportunities. He lived in a way that made others aware of him. The trust he built through his solid work ethic became a form of capital that he could leverage to create prosperity.

From that single restaurant, he created new income streams and expanded into building one of the country's most successful franchise operations, with more than 150 Pizza Hut restaurants. By remaining aware of market conditions, he seized an opportunity to sell his chain of restaurants to a private equity company at the top of the market, opening opportunities to invest in new ventures that he also grew.

Leonard's story shows why awareness is so important in the Straight-A-Guide framework. Awareness requires us to interpret circumstances correctly, and it empowers us to refuse discouragement as a definition of identity.

We must prepare today so that when opportunities present themselves, we are ready to act. I am blessed to work with a group of people who commit their time to improving outcomes for all people in the criminal justice system. One of those men, Ted, frequently says, "If you wait for the opportunity to present itself, it is too late to prepare." I quote Ted Gray often because his guidance aligns perfectly with the principle of awareness in the Straight-A Guide.

Damon West

Another person with whom I've worked is Damon West, an author, motivational speaker, and Christian who built an entire career out of lessons he learned while serving a 65-year prison term in the state of Texas.

In his book, *Six Dimes and a Nickel: Life Lessons to Empower Change*, Damon describes how a man he met at the start of his prison term used a simple analogy to teach him an important lesson about survival and influence in prison. The man, Mohammad, told Damon to think of prison as a pot of scalding water. Then he asked him to imagine placing a carrot, an egg, and a coffee bean into that boiling water. Mohammad urged Damon to become more like the coffee bean than the carrot or the egg.

The lesson was clear. When a carrot goes into hot water, it becomes soft. A person cannot afford to become soft in prison, because the environment will exploit weakness. When an egg goes into hot water, it hardens. A person should not allow prison to harden him either, because hardness can grow into bitterness, hatred, and negativity. But when a coffee bean goes into hot water, it does something different. It does not simply change itself. It changes the water around it.

Mohammad wanted Damon to understand that prison did not have to define him. He could choose to respond in a way that transformed the environment rather than surrendering to it. By becoming like the coffee bean, Damon could strengthen himself, influence others, and turn adversity into a force for growth.

To become a coffee bean, a person must practice the principle of awareness, staying aware of opportunities to seize, and making others aware of his commitment to the pursuit of excellence.

Recognizing Both Opportunity and Risk

A person who wants to succeed in prison must become aware of both opportunities and risks. He must notice:

- The books that can sharpen his thinking,
- The people who can influence him positively,
- The habits that strengthen discipline,

- The opportunities that can open through education or writing, and
- The small decisions that can build momentum over time.

He must also notice:

- The attitudes that weaken him,
- The distractions that waste time,
- The relationships that create unnecessary risk,
- The bitterness that can take root if he is not careful, and
- The habits that quietly undermine the future.

Awareness means seeing both sides.

- Some people notice only threats and become cynical.
- Some notice only possibilities and become unrealistic.

A disciplined person becomes aware of both. That balance helps him remain serious without becoming hopeless. Consider external forces, but also be ruthlessly critical in assessing yourself. A person may believe that he is committed, disciplined, or preparing well. But awareness requires him to ask whether the evidence supports that belief.

- What am I telling myself that is not true?
- Where am I rationalizing?
- What weakness am I avoiding?
- What pattern in my behavior is still hurting me?
- What opportunity keeps appearing that I have not yet seized?

Without honesty, a person cannot make reliable adjustments. That is one reason awareness is closely connected to other principles of the Straight-A Guide, including accountability, which measures whether progress is real. Awareness helps a person see what that measurement means. Stay aware of your environment and learn to create opportunities through conversations, classes, mentors, books, writing projects, or relationships that can lead to a support coalition. An unaware person may overlook those openings entirely. An aware person notices them and asks:

- How can I use this?
- What does this make possible?
- What should I do next?

That kind of awareness helped me throughout my journey inside. I had to create opportunities to get into college, even when there was resistance and bureaucracy in prison. I had to create opportunities to become a published author while serving my sentence. I had to become aware of how to build meaningful financial resources that would ease my transition into society after I completed my term in confinement. Those efforts advanced my plan because I was paying attention.

Awareness Also Helps Others Become Aware of You

When a person stays aware and acts on what he sees, others begin to notice his commitment. Awareness does not only help him see the world more clearly. It can also help other people become aware of him.

- Write consistently,
- Study intentionally,

- Develop a profile, and
- Build a coherent record,

Those efforts may lead mentors, family members, staff, case managers, or future stakeholders to become more aware of your seriousness. That awareness can lead to trust, coalitions of support, advocacy, and better prospects for liberty and prosperity.

Awareness, in that sense, works in two directions:

- a person becomes more aware of the environment, and
- the environment becomes more aware of the person's commitment.

The harder a person works to develop a profile, the more likely he becomes to make others see him as something more than what authorities wrote in the Presentence Investigation Report. For example:

- By regularly updating the biography, a person can show an understanding of how past blind spots contributed to the current predicament.
- Publishing journal entries consistently can show what a person is noticing about the environment, himself, and the forces shaping his choices.
- By writing and publishing book reports, a person can show which ideas are sharpening judgment, and a commitment to self-directed learning and preparation for success.
- Updating a release plan can show awareness of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats.

If a person does not develop the profile, people will never know how hard he worked to become successful. He will squander opportunities to invite others into his life. That is one reason the profile matters so much. It gives a person a place to develop a visible record that others can see. A person should ask:

- What influences around me are shaping my future for better or worse?
- What risks am I underestimating?
- What opportunities am I overlooking?
- What habits, people, or routines are helping me grow?
- What blind spots should I confront honestly?

Those questions help a person prepare for life on the other side of the journey. And it's never too early to start preparing.

Self-Directed Questions

1. What influences around me are shaping my future for better or worse?
2. What risks am I underestimating?
3. What opportunities am I overlooking?
4. What habits, people, or routines are helping me grow?
5. What blind spots should I confront honestly?
6. What does my written record reveal about my level of awareness?
7. In what ways can I become more aware of both the opportunities and the dangers in my current stage of life?

Awareness helps a person see clearly enough to make better decisions. It protects him from moving blindly through prison, and it strengthens his ability to identify both opportunities and threats. When a person learns to keep his head in the game, he gives himself a better chance to build the future he wants.

Chapter 14

Live Authentically

Authenticity means living in alignment with truth. That definition may sound simple. In practice, it requires one of the most difficult disciplines a person can develop, especially for someone moving through the criminal justice system. Many people feel pressure to present an image that will satisfy others before they have done the work of genuine change. They want to sound credible, remorseful, disciplined, reflective, or prepared. They may believe success depends on finding the right words to impress a judge, probation officer, case manager, family member, or future employer. But words alone never carry enough weight. When a person's conduct, record, routines, and daily decisions do not support the message, the gap becomes impossible to hide.

The Straight-A Guide teaches a different path. It does not encourage people to perform, or live by the motto of faking it until you make it. It challenges them to build and demonstrate change. Authenticity begins when a person stops managing appearances and starts accepting responsibility for the reality of the situation. That process requires honesty about past decisions, present weaknesses, current obligations, and future consequences.

It also requires humility. Credibility does not come from saying what other people want to hear. Credibility comes from living in a way that allows other people to verify the truth through consistent action.

Authenticity requires discipline. A person must live as if he is the CEO of his life. That means recognizing the problem, accepting responsibility for decisions, and building a plan that responds to circumstances as they exist, not as he wishes they were. It means setting priorities based on the stage of the journey, developing tools and tactics that support progress, and measuring whether daily actions align with long-term goals. Authenticity leaves no room for excuses, masks, borrowed language, or image management. It requires a person to tell the truth, live the truth, and create a body of work that proves the truth over time.

Authenticity Begins with Reality

The criminal justice system differs from most other aspects of life in America. For those sentenced to prison, justice comes with the turning of calendar pages rather than an individual's efforts. A person receives a sanction, enters the system, and then waits while time passes. Inside that structure, many people begin to believe that the only thing that matters is staying out of trouble and serving the sentence. They may conclude that no one cares about the effort they make to prepare for success. In some environments, that perception may be accurate.

Still, a person should never surrender responsibility for building his future. It is not the system's job to help a person create a meaningful life after release. That responsibility belongs to the individual. For that reason, each person should engineer a plan that leads to the result he wants. That plan should anticipate obstacles and allow him to move forward anyway. Even if no one in the system pays attention today, the individual should continuously assess whether his current decisions are moving him closer to the life he wants to build. He should also ask what outcome will follow if he fails to execute the plan he put in place.

No one should confuse appearance with progress. A person may want to look better, or sound more thoughtful, more mature, more disciplined, or more prepared. He may ask others to help him write a polished letter, describing noble intentions. He may learn the language of remorse, rehabilitation, or self-improvement. But sounding better is not the same as becoming better. Looking prepared does not prepare a person. A script cannot substitute for substance.

An authentic life requires alignment. If a person says he values discipline, he should build a record that makes discipline self-evident. If he says he values honesty, his record should reflect honesty. If he says he is preparing for release, the evidence should show preparation. If he says he wants to contribute to society, he should begin building that contribution now, with the tools available to him.

In business, a company cannot survive by issuing beautiful press releases while its books are false, its operations are weak, and its leadership is disorganized. The same principle applies in a human life. A person cannot build a better future through image management alone. At some point, stakeholders will look beyond the language and examine the record. They will want to know whether the person's daily conduct supports the claims he is making. Authenticity prepares a person for that examination.

That is why we include the principle of authenticity in the Straight-A Guide. The framework does not ask a person to become impressive. It asks him to become real. It encourages him to confront the facts, build a plan, and create a record that shows commitment.

Living as the CEO of Your Life

A responsible CEO cannot solve a problem by pretending the problem does not exist. He cannot build a serious plan on false assumptions. He cannot persuade investors, employees, or customers for long if his internal systems do not support the message he presents to the outside world. Eventually, reality catches up.

The same principle applies to a person facing the consequences of a criminal charge or a conviction. A person may wish the conviction had never happened. He may resent the government, the process, the sentence, or the stigma. He may feel misunderstood, judged, or trapped. Some of those feelings may be valid.

Still, a CEO deals with conditions as they exist. He starts with the facts. Then he asks:

- What is the problem?
- What are the risks?
- What resources do I have?
- What steps can I take today?
- What record can I build that will improve the likelihood of better outcomes later?

That mindset is the beginning of authenticity. A strong CEO does not inflate numbers. Nor does he blame everyone else while refusing to assess his own decisions. He does not claim progress that the data cannot support. He studies reality, however unpleasant it may be, and then develops a strategy, setting priorities, allocating time, measuring results. If a plan is not working, he recalibrates.

A person in prison should do the same. He should identify the collateral consequences that accompany the conviction, thinking about how the conviction may affect housing, employment, relationships, finances, community standing, and self-confidence. He should identify which weaknesses require immediate attention. He should ask what habits, education, writing, routines, or service projects could help him build a better future. He should then document the effort.

That last point is essential. People judge authenticity through conduct and the record a person builds. If a person says he is changing, he should build a biography that shows accountability. If he says he is learning, he should produce book reports that reflect engagement with ideas. If he says he is becoming more self-aware, his journal entries should reveal honest reflection. If he says he is preparing for release, his release plan should show realistic goals, timelines, obstacles, and strategies.

In other words, he should operate the way a capable executive operates. He should identify the mission, build the plan, create systems, measure progress, and adjust when necessary. That is how authenticity moves from idea to practice.

Jerry Lundergan and Discipline

My friend Jerry Lundergan taught me a great deal about how successful people think through problems. Jerry built businesses that employed thousands of people. He began in food service and eventually expanded into ventures that served large public events, commercial enterprises, and disaster response efforts. He did not build those businesses through slogans. He built them by identifying needs, developing solutions, creating plans, building systems, and adjusting as conditions changed.

The value of Jerry's example is not that every reader should become an entrepreneur. The value is that he approached life and work by confronting reality directly. He understood that results come from alignment between vision and execution. If a company claims it can serve thousands of customers, it must build the infrastructure to serve them. If it claims it can operate during a crisis, it must prepare before the crisis arrives. That kind of leadership requires honesty. It requires discipline. It requires a willingness to see things as they are.

Those lessons shaped the way I learned to think about my own life. When I spoke with Jerry about my commitment to reforming America's prison system and creating pathways for others to prepare for success, he helped me think in incremental terms. A big mission becomes real only when a person identifies practical steps, builds systems, and advances the plan one day at a time. Authenticity requires that same discipline. A person identifies the mission, organizes the plan, and then lives in a way that supports it.

That principle applies inside prison as much as it applies in business. A person cannot say he wants a better future while refusing to do the work that "the future" requires. He cannot claim to value freedom while wasting the hours that could help him prepare for it. He cannot claim to be serious while avoiding the discomfort that truth requires. Authenticity means facing the facts, then building a response.

Matt Bowyer and the Practice of Recalibration

Matthew Bowyer provides another relatable example of authenticity in action. Matt grew up in difficult circumstances and eventually built a billion-dollar bookmaking enterprise. Authorities later charged him with crimes related to that operation and with conduct involving the interpreter for the baseball player Shohei Ohtani. When the case moved forward, Matt had choices. He could complain, minimize his responsibility or try to talk his way out of the problem his actions created. He could let lawyers do all the thinking while he remained passive, telling himself that preparation could wait until later.

Instead, he chose a different path. Before sentencing, he began working through the free lessons we offer at Prison Professors. He studied the journey ahead, learned about the stages of the process, and began building a mitigation strategy. He wrote Recalibrate, a book that reflected on the lessons he was learning as he moved through the criminal justice system. He accepted that the case would likely lead to a loss of liberty and that he would need to build a new life on the other side of the sentence.

Those decisions aligned with reality. Matt did not pretend that the problem would disappear. He did not rely on image management or charlatans who masquerade as prison consultants. He did not build a strategy around wishful thinking. He confronted the facts, accepted responsibility for the road ahead, and began documenting the effort to prepare.

That preparation showed that he was not merely speaking about change, but showing change through the work he produced. He was learning, writing, planning, and building a record before sentencing. His judge noticed those efforts. Rather than accepting recommendations for a much harsher sentence, the judge imposed a term that required Matt to serve less than five months in prison.

No one should read that outcome as a guarantee. Authenticity does not guarantee leniency, success, or immediate reward. But authenticity can improve the quality of a person's preparation, and better preparation can influence better outcomes. Matt's example shows that when a person owns the problem, builds the plan, and executes the plan with discipline, stakeholders may respond differently.

His authenticity did not end after he received a shorter sentence that prosecutors requested. While serving his term, Matt continued using his story to teach others. After release, he became an ambassador for Prison Professors Charitable Corporation. He shared his experiences to help others understand that they must prepare today for the outcomes they hope to experience in the months, years, and decades ahead.

That is what recalibration looks like. A person sees reality, accepts disruption, changes course, and starts building again. He does not hide behind excuses, or mistake explanations for preparation. He adjusts and builds.

- In developing a biography, consider how you can best present past choices, present growth, and the values that define your life. Don't create a sales brochure. Write as someone who accepts responsibility for what comes next.
- Journal entries should reveal truthful reflection. They should show the small steps you're taking to prepare for success, change habits, strengthen thinking, and build new opportunities. A good journal helps the writer examine conduct, measure progress, and identify what still requires work. If successful, he will become an asset to leverage and open new opportunities.
- Book reports should show genuine engagement with ideas. Write to show why you chose to read the book, what you learned from reading the book, and how the book will contribute to the next chapter of your life and success.
- Release plans should show realistic preparation. They should identify goals, timelines, risks, resources, and strategies. Consider all strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, then show the intentional steps you're taking to overcome them.

By developing a comprehensive profile, you allow stakeholders to compare the message with the record. Your profile should allow a judge, probation officer, case manager, employer, or family member to see credibility. For that reason, I encourage people to ask hard questions:

1. Does my writing sound real, or does it sound like performance?
2. Am I telling the truth about my past, my weaknesses, and my effort?
3. Does my record show consistency between what I say and what I do?
4. Have I built evidence of discipline, or am I relying on declarations?
5. If a stakeholder examined my profile carefully, would the record support the message I want to send?
6. Do I leave room for anyone to conclude that I am relying on talk more than proof?

Builds Credibility

Authenticity builds credibility. Judges, probation officers, case managers, and prospective employers will likely know about the criminal charge and conviction. Some may also know about the press release, the presentence report, or the public narrative that grew around the case. No one can erase those documents or records by pretending they don't exist. Begin building a record that helps counterbalance them. Create a strong profile that shows discipline, accountability, effort, and growth.

Leaders notice when the language in a profile matches the accomplishments. They notice when the writing reflects self-awareness rather than manipulation. They notice when the plan includes realistic priorities. They notice when the person no longer hides behind masks and begins taking responsibility for the work.

Build a stronger future with a foundation of truth. Without truth, goals become slogans. Plans become fantasies. Journals become theater. Book reports become assignments written for appearance. Release plans become wish lists. With truth, a person builds from solid ground.

Self-Directed Questions

1. In what ways have I been authentic or inauthentic with myself or others?
2. What truths have I been avoiding because they make me uncomfortable?
3. Where does my conduct still fail to match the values I claim to hold?
4. Does my writing reflect honesty, or does it reflect performance?
5. What parts of my record show real effort, and what parts still rely too heavily on words?
6. If a judge, probation officer, case manager, employer, or family member reviewed my profile today, what would they conclude about my credibility?
7. What habits or routines would make my life more aligned with truth?
8. Where do I still use excuses, borrowed language, or image management instead of accountability?
9. What specific changes can I begin making this week so my record becomes more authentic?
10. How would my life improve if I committed to building a body of work that others could verify as truthful, disciplined, and real?

Authenticity is the discipline of living truthfully enough that words, plans, records, and actions align. Once that alignment begins, the rest of the framework becomes more credible.

Chapter 15

Earn Incremental Achievements

When going through a long struggle, work toward a series of incremental achievements. Those achievements put a person on the pathway to new opportunities and prove that progress is real. That lesson became very important to get me through multiple decades in prison. When a person faces a long sentence, he cannot depend on one distant future event to sustain motivation. He cannot live only for the day of release, especially if that day sits years or decades away. If he depends on one giant victory at the end of the journey, he may spend too many years feeling that progress is invisible. He may lose confidence, lose discipline, or lose faith in the value of every effort he makes.

While in the struggle of being separated from family and community, work toward incremental achievements. They show that you're not living a fantasy or offering vague hopes about what the future may become.

In the context of the Straight-A Guide, achievement means practicing the discipline of earning incremental results that confirm whether the earlier principles are working. It shows whether the person has truly defined success, set goals, developed the right attitude, taken action, built accountability, strengthened awareness, and begun living authentically. If those earlier principles are sound, the smaller wins begin to surface. If no measurable progress appears, the person should reassess the plan.

When achievements are real, they help a person restore confidence, build credibility, and momentum. They may also open new opportunities.

Measure Achievements

Many people talk about what they want to become. Fewer build achievements that prove progress. That distinction often determines whether a person becomes successful in the present and in the future.

In prison, and at every stage of the criminal justice process, it is easy to confuse effort with achievement. A person may believe that because he has good intentions, participates in programs, stays busy with his job, he is moving forward.

That's a prison mentality, and in the context of this course, we wouldn't consider it the same as making achievements. Be intentional, with each achievement being part of the plan. If that's the case, each achievement will include a measurable result that relates to what you say you're building. As the saying goes, an overnight success is often 20 years in the making.

A person may earn an achievement by finishing a degree, completing a book report, writing and refining a biography, building a stronger release plan, creating a consistent journal record, earning the trust of a mentor, publishing a body of work, or developing the routines that make larger success possible. The point is to show results that clearly relate to the larger plan you engineered. A person who wants to become stronger should ask a series of daily questions:

- What did I finish?
- What did I improve?
- What did I build?
- What proof exists that my plan is producing movement?

Those questions help a person assess whether the plan is creating visible results or whether he is merely living in a fantasy that will never materialize. Rather than striving to be a "model inmate," strive to be a person who gets things done with incremental achievements that lead to higher levels of success.

Incremental Wins

With a 45-year sentence, I could not wait until the end of the journey to assess whether I had become successful. I needed measurable victories along the way, and I began setting the course of action while still in solitary confinement, before my judge sentenced me.

That is one reason I focused so heavily on educational milestones, writing milestones, relationship-building, and the visible record I was creating over time. Each achievement reinforced the idea that the effort was producing something tangible. I could point to a completed course, a finished manuscript, a developed relationship, a published article, a stronger plan, or a new skill. Each result reminded me that the years did not have to disappear into nothingness. Those incremental wins kept me moving toward the larger vision, and the results that followed once I got out.

A long sentence becomes easier to endure when a person can point to evidence that the years are producing value. The sentence will include real obstacles, and uncertainty may feel heavy. But measurable achievements help a person restore confidence and avoid despondency during long stretches when external recognition may be absent.

That principle applies outside prison as well. A person building a business does not wait until the company becomes profitable before recognizing progress. He learns to value the early achievements that make profitability possible. He forms the entity, secures the first customer, develops the first product, refines the process, strengthens the systems, and learns from the setbacks. Each step becomes part of the foundation.

The same principle applies to a person rebuilding life after a criminal charge. He should learn to value the smaller wins because they are what make the larger outcome possible.

Validate the Plan with Small Wins

When a person earns measurable results, he develops credibility in showing that the plan is working. That does not mean all problems have been solved, or that setbacks won't come. It means the effort is producing something tangible, moving the person toward the intended outcome. He doesn't rely on platitudes, intentions, emotions, prayers, or optimism. He accepts that God helps those who help themselves.

The prison system may not recognize the progress that a person makes. Yet the plan, together with incremental achievements, will keep him moving in the right direction. A person may read, write, study, train, plan, and adjust for years before the outside world notices anything. Incremental achievements help him resist despair during that long period of invisible preparation.

Incremental achievements show that discipline is producing results, regardless of whether anyone else notices.

In that sense, achievement functions the way data functions in a business. A responsible executive does not rely on hope. He reviews numbers and studies indicators, looking for evidence that the plan is producing movement toward the intended result. If the numbers show progress, he builds on the momentum. If the numbers show weakness, he recalibrates. A person in prison should do the same with his life.

Logic of Incremental Achievement

Lee Nobmann helped reinforce this lesson for me in a practical way. Before getting out of prison, I knew I wanted to build a career around real estate. I began writing letters to real estate developers, and I connected

with Lee. We developed a friendship, and Lee created a soft landing for me after release. He gave me a job and a place to live rent-free for a year. He also taught me about real estate development.

As I listened to Lee talk about building real estate projects, I heard repeated confirmation of the importance of incremental achievement.

A person may identify land that he believes can be developed. That is only the beginning. Then he must acquire the land, secure zoning and permits, retain engineers and architects, create blueprints, obtain construction estimates, arrange financing, negotiate contracts, and move through years of work before collecting a single dollar of income. That sequence reinforced a lesson I had already learned in prison: large outcomes are built through long chains of smaller achievements.

No developer says, "I want the completed project," and then starts looking for the drapes he is going to hang on the windows of the ninth floor. He does not skip the stages that make the project possible. Developers know they must pour the foundation before they start building the roof. They don't go after financing by announcing a dream without plans, numbers, or due diligence. Real progress requires sequence.

That is true in the Straight-A Guide as well. A person does not build credibility by declaring that he has changed. He builds credibility by producing smaller achievements that make change and progress more believable. He continuously assesses, and he improves the plan as circumstances change. Over time, his profile will show a series of incremental wins that show he is capable of building the future he talks about creating.

Small Achievements Build the Next Opportunity

This may be the most practical lesson in the chapter: an achievement is something to build upon.

In my own journey, I focused on earning academic credentials. Through studying, I developed a better understanding of the prison system. That deeper understanding led me to write for publication. By publishing my work, I built a stronger coalition of support. Those people began advocating for me. That advocacy opened opportunities to reach higher levels of success in prison and after release. I leveraged each accomplishment to open the next opportunity.

Many people underestimate the strategic value of a small win. A person may think, "It is only one journal entry," or "It is only one book report," or "It is only one course." But if that entry strengthens self-awareness, if that book report develops vocabulary and critical thinking, if that course leads to a new credential, if that credential leads to trust, and if that trust leads to support, then the smaller achievement becomes the first link in a much larger chain.

Achievement should therefore be viewed strategically. It is not merely proof that a person did something worthwhile. It is also an asset that a person can leverage to create the next stage of progress.

Achievements Restore Confidence and Credibility

A person who earns measurable progress begins to trust the process and develops more confidence that he can navigate the complications ahead. And every person in the criminal justice system will face more complications ahead. Confidence grows when a person can say:

- I did this.
- I completed this.
- I followed through here.
- My effort produced a result.

Such statements will help a person build a coalition of support that can advance the plan. These incremental wins lead to confidence, not arrogance.

Prison can weaken a person's ability to believe that his actions will produce a result. It can make him feel that life is happening to him, which is not nearly as empowering as knowing that his life is the result of the actions he takes. By recognizing the importance of incremental achievements, he disrupts the pattern

of failure that living in prison brings for many. Good decisions lead to results. Even under constrained conditions, a person can build something a verifiable path to success.

That record may influence judges, probation officers, family members, employers, mentors, case managers, and others who may have a role in the person's prospects for success. Achievements help show that a person is no longer only speaking about preparation. He is producing results.

Document Every Achievement

In the Prison Professors framework, an achievement becomes stronger when a person builds a profile that documents the effort.

- Biography updates can reflect new milestones and show how a person's thinking continues to evolve.
- Journals can show progress toward specific wins and reveal how discipline develops over time.
- Book reports can show completed reading goals, lessons learned, and intellectual growth.
- Release plans can show how achievement is strengthening readiness for the next stage. The broader profile can show that progress is not random, but part of a coherent body of work.

The profile should become part of a comprehensive strategy to show that a person is a good steward of time, talent, treasure, truth, and relationships. Never stop building.

Self-Directed Questions

1. What measurable achievements have I earned during the past month?
2. Which of those achievements connect most directly to my long-term plan?
3. Where am I confusing activity with measurable progress?
4. What achievement can I complete during the next seven days?
5. How can I document that achievement in my profile?
6. Which small win today could open a larger opportunity tomorrow?
7. What evidence shows that my current plan is working?
8. Where do I need to recalibrate because the results are too weak?
9. How have my achievements strengthened my confidence or credibility?
10. What body of work am I building that others will be able to verify?

The little achievements prove whether the earlier principles produce results. They strengthen confidence, build credibility, and open the next opportunity. In the next lesson, we will focus on appreciation and on why gratitude strengthens the life a person is trying to build.

Chapter 16

Live with Gratitude and Appreciation

In the Straight-A Guide, we urge people to live in gratitude and to appreciate the blessings that come their way. Even in confinement, or in crisis, we still have blessings, and it's our responsibility to prove worthy of the blessings we receive. A person may define success, set goals, develop the right attitude, aspire to something better, take disciplined action, hold himself accountable, build awareness, live authentically, and earn incremental achievements. If he does not live in gratitude, however, negative emotions such as bitterness, anger, hatred, or apathy can undermine progress.

A person may advance faster if he does not dwell on all that he has lost. If he does, he may fail to see and appreciate all that remains. He may become so consumed by what the system took from him that he loses sight of the people, ideas, opportunities, and disciplines he can still develop in order to keep building.

For that reason, the final lessons of the Straight-A Guide emphasizes the importance of living in gratitude. As one example, I am extremely grateful to the many people who taught and inspired me. It is one reason I built a personal ministry of sharing those lessons with others. I am grateful to administrators in the system who allow me to provide these lessons, and I am grateful to every member of the Prison Professors community. Each person is part of the change I want to see, and I believe we are aligned in wanting to open more pathways for people to earn freedom through merit.

In the context of the Straight-A Guide, appreciation is neither sentimentality nor weakness, nor does it deny the challenges of living in confinement. Appreciation is the discipline of recognizing that blessings come in many forms. They come with lessons, relationships, and opportunities we can create or seize, despite adversity.

A responsibility comes with those blessings. Each one allows a person to remain steady without becoming hard. It allows him to remain grateful without becoming naïve. It allows him to acknowledge pain without allowing pain to define the entire meaning of his life.

This lesson on living in gratitude helped me through prison, and has helped me since I finished my term, on August 12, 2013.

Gratitude is not Weakness

A person in prison loses a great deal, including liberty, income, privacy, comfort, reputation, time with family, friends, and community. Those losses can hurt. I would never suggest that a person should feel grateful for confinement, injustice, separation, humiliation, or the suffering that spreads through a family when someone enters the system. In my view, we confine too many people and they serve sentences that are far too long. When we measure justice by the length of time a person spends in prison, rather than by his effort to reconcile and rebuild, the system causes more harm than good. It contributes to intergenerational cycles of recidivism, and poverty.

Despite those challenges, I appreciated the blessings God gave me. I feel grateful that I have an opportunity to work toward changing the system. I'm also grateful that I get to work with other people who served lengthy terms in prison. The decisions they made while serving time opened opportunities for them, and now they're home. Consider the following people who are devoting so much time, energy, and resources to use their stories as a catalyst for change:

Adam Clauson:

A federal judge sentenced Adam to a sentence of 213 years in federal prison. Rather than complaining, or waiting around for the system to change, Adam invested in himself and in his community. When President Trump signed the First Step Act, an opportunity opened for Adam's judge to consider releasing him under the provision of compassionate release. He's now free. Since getting out, Adam has built a life and career in the service of others, striving to bring changes that will bring relief to all people in federal prison.

Michael "Harry-O" Harris:

The state of California and the federal government brought charges against Harry-O that resulted in a sentence of life imprisonment, plus 20 years. Rather than allowing the time to consume him, a commitment to God led him into a life of service. He became active in prison, building programs that would help others reach their highest potential. Recognizing his positive contributions, President Trump commuted his sentence, and then issued him a full pardon. To show his gratitude, Michael devoted his life to service, launching the Community First nonprofit, and he works tirelessly toward justice-related initiatives.

Charles "Duke" Tanner

A federal judge sentenced Duke to two life sentences for convictions related to the distribution of crack cocaine. While inside, Duke made a commitment to serve God and work toward advancing himself as a candidate for liberty. President Trump commuted his sentence, and then granted him a full pardon. Following his release, Duke built a career working to improve outcomes of America's criminal justice system, and opening more opportunities with community development.

Damon West

In an earlier chapter, I wrote about Damon and his inspiring story of the coffee bean. A judge sentenced him to serve 65 years in prison in Texas. Based upon his good works, the parole board allowed him to go home after seven years. Since then, he's built a career to teach and inspire millions of people around the world, and also people who are serving sentences in American jails and prisons.

Jason Bryant, Ted Gray, and Branden Terrell:

Jason and Ted were codefendants. A judge sentenced both Jason and Ted to serve life terms in California. Jason is black and Ted is white. They'd been best friends since childhood. Yet the politics of prison discouraged them from continuing as friends. Despite being on the same yard, they adhered to prison politics for several years, not talking to each other. Then, Ted and Jason realized that it was far more important to live in gratitude, appreciative of the blessings they have. They began building music and sports programs to bring people together, and improve the culture of confinement. Their friend Branden Terrell, who was also serving a lengthy term in prison, joined their initiative. The governor of California commuted sentences and each of them got out. Upon their release, Jason, Ted, and Branden collaborated. They developed nonprofit organizations that work to serve people in prison, and men who want to transition into successful careers.

Struggle Jennings:

William Curtis Harness Jr is an award-winning musician who is known professionally as Struggle Jennings. The music industry has recognized him with numerous awards, including several gold and platinum records. In his music, Struggle shares stories about the time he spent in state and federal prisons. Regardless of what bad decisions a person has made, or what challenges he faced, Struggle's music provides hope and shows that a person can always work to build a better life.

Each of the men above went through challenging times in prison. Yet the decisions they made in prison put them on a pathway to a life of meaning, relevance, and dignity. They did not leave prison to focus on themselves. Instead, they use their own time and money to visit prisons across the United States, showing their appreciation for the blessings that have come their way. They inspire with the energy and investment they make to open more opportunities for people in prison to earn freedom through merit.

I'm grateful for every opportunity I have to visit prisons with them.

Although I couldn't return to prisons until a few years after I got out, in my case, the efforts had roots long before I finished my term. If I reflect, I can trace that chronology:

1. While in solitary confinement, reading the Bible opened my eyes and changed the way I think.
2. I came to accept that I have a duty to develop skills that lead to a full life and to work toward improving outcomes for society.
3. By reading about Frederick Douglass, Socrates, and Gandhi, I developed a methodical, intentional plan that allowed me to work toward being the change I wanted to see.
4. By earning academic credentials, publishers opened opportunities to work with university professors who authored books.
5. By writing books, I could contribute to society and begin spreading ideas that would influence changes such as incentives in the First Step Act.
6. By building credibility, I could develop relationships with federal judges, U.S. Attorneys, and leaders in the Bureau of Prisons.
7. With those relationships, I could develop programs that others could use to prepare for success upon release.
8. By developing businesses and financial independence, I could create resources to memorialize how many people are working to prepare for success.
9. With the data I collected, I could build arguments showing that we could lessen intergenerational cycles of failure and poverty by incentivizing the pursuit of excellence.
10. By building transparency, I could persuade high-net-worth individuals, corporations, and Web 3.0 communities that are built on the BNB blockchain, to join me in supporting the mission. They participate by donating significant financial resources to further our mission and keep the cycle going.

I have always found reasons to live in gratitude, even though I had to spend my 20s, 30s, and 40s in prison. A person can acknowledge losses honestly while still recognizing what remains, what can still be built, who has helped him, what lessons he has learned, and what opportunities emerged because he chose to prepare rather than surrender.

More opportunities open when we live in gratitude than when we live in bitterness. I once heard an analogy that when we hold onto anger, hatred, or other negative emotions, it is like holding glass chips and squeezing our hands into fists. Those emotions only wound our own progress. In fact, I think it was Struggle Jennings, who told me that line.

Prisons Obliterate Hope

Prison culture makes it easy to focus only on what is being lost. The system may constantly tell a person what he cannot do, what he no longer has, and what others think of him. Such an environment can make present circumstances feel permanent and unfair. When those thoughts become the only lens through which a person sees life, bitterness begins to grow. Once bitterness grows, it affects everything, weakening judgment, discipline, relationships, self-advocacy, preparation, ambition, and the ability to recognize opportunity.

A bitter person may still talk about goals, but bitterness drains energy from the effort required to pursue them. He may still speak about plans, but bitterness makes it harder to execute those plans consistently. He may still say he wants a better life, but bitterness often leads him to interpret every setback as proof that effort is pointless.

Living in gratitude, appreciative of blessings, can remind a person that even in confinement, he can still build or develop assets. He may not have freedom of movement, but he may still have freedom of thought. He may not control the institution, but he can still control how he uses his time and the gifts with which God has blessed him. He may not erase the conviction, but he can still build a record that shows growth, effort, and preparation.

That shift in thinking leads to better strategies, and better strategies build confidence. With a plan, a person begins to focus on what he controls and has reason to keep building.

A person who learns to appreciate what remains becomes more capable of using what remains. He begins to think less like a victim of circumstances and more like the CEO of his life. He asks:

- What is still available to me?
- What can I build with the tools I have?
- Who can I learn from?
- How can I turn this difficult season into a period of preparation rather than waste?

Those questions strengthen a person.

Books, Mentors, and Discipline

When I was in solitary confinement, books introduced me to leaders, thinkers, and builders who helped shape the way I understood success, responsibility, and self-development. Those books helped me define success, set goals, develop the right attitude, aspire to something more, take action, hold myself accountable, and strengthen awareness. In that way, appreciation was not separate from the earlier principles. It helped me recognize the sources that nourished them. I cannot take credit for developing the Straight-A Guide. I learned lessons from leaders and then modified those lessons to fit the predicament of imprisonment. I learned to appreciate the ideas that changed the way I think.

I also learned to appreciate the discipline adversity forced me to build. I hated being in prison. Yet the necessity of adjusting to hardship forced me to become more reflective, more strategic, more disciplined, and more intentional. I learned to think in longer time horizons. I learned to create order where little external order supported the future I wanted. I learned to use reading, writing, exercise, and introspection as tools for shaping identity rather than merely passing time. I am grateful for the lessons I learned, as they contributed to opportunities that later led to financial independence once I got out.

I am grateful that I get to do what I want with my time and resources, irrespective of whether anyone ever pays a penny for the services or resources I provide. The more I learned to appreciate what I had received, the more strongly I felt an obligation to use my life in service of others. That connection can show up in many ways:

- A person who appreciates books should use what he learns.
- A person who appreciates mentors should honor them through disciplined conduct.
- A person who appreciates support should become more worthy of support.
- A person who appreciates opportunities should use them to create something useful for others.

For that reason, we encourage all members of our community to develop a profile to show how they are preparing:

- A biography can reflect gratitude for the lessons a person has learned and the people who helped him. It can show that he understands he did not reach his current level of growth by himself.

- A journal can show daily recognition of progress, support, opportunities, and insights. It can reveal whether a person is moving through the day with resentment or with disciplined perspective.
- A book report can show appreciation for authors and ideas that sharpened judgment. It can demonstrate that the person does not read merely to complete an assignment, but to learn from minds that expand his own.
- A release plan can reflect gratitude for what has already been built and clarity about how the person intends to honor those opportunities moving forward. Gratitude strengthens responsibility. If a person recognizes the value of the opportunities ahead, he becomes more careful about preparing for them.

A broader profile can show that the person is not only tracking achievements, but also recognizing the lessons, relationships, and disciplines that made those achievements possible. He is showing that he has developed a personal plan, a system that will help him overcome the complexities and collateral consequences of a criminal charge. He can build a record to advance arguments that he is committed to living as a law-abiding, contributing citizen. Such a record may lead to income opportunities, and to more values-based decisions in the future.

Questions for Reflection:

1. What do I still have that I should appreciate?
2. Who has helped me that I should acknowledge more openly?
3. What lesson or opportunity has emerged from hardship?
4. How can my writing show gratitude without becoming sentimental or performance oriented?
5. How can appreciation strengthen my relationships and my future?
6. In what ways has bitterness narrowed my perspective?
7. How can I recognize support, guidance, or opportunity more honestly in my profile and in daily life?

These questions help a person build a stronger way of carrying adversity. A person who learns to live with appreciation learns how to carry the past in a way that strengthens the future.

Chapter 17

Build a Body of Work

By the time you reach this chapter, you have already worked through the core ideas of the Straight-A Guide. You have considered what it means to define success, set goals, develop the right attitude, aspire to something better, take disciplined action, hold yourself accountable, strengthen awareness, live authentically, earn incremental achievements, and live with appreciation. Those principles can change the way a person thinks. They can change the way he uses time. They can change the way he prepares for the future.

But a lesson becomes much more useful when a person turns it into action.

In this final chapter of the workbook, we want to show best practices on how to start and develop your profile. If the lessons in this workbook remain only in your thoughts, they may still help you. Likewise, if your responses remain in a notebook that you keep in your locker, then you may have created some value in your life.

Yet in our view, each person can do better by building a profile. With a profile, he creates something more useful. He creates a record, or tool that may help him advocate for himself at different stages of the journey ahead. That is why I encourage people to build a profile through Prison Professors.

The profile is a place to document the ways that you are using time to prepare for success upon release. It allows you to show the work you are doing over time. Instead of saying that you want to change, you can show what you are doing to change. Instead of hoping that someone will believe in your future, you can create a record that allows others to see your effort, your discipline, your growth, and your preparation.

That record can become useful in many ways.

It may help a probation officer understand that you are taking preparation seriously. It may help a judge see that you are building a life with intention. It may help family members, mentors, or other supporters understand how to advocate for you more effectively. It may help Bureau of Prisons officials, halfway house staff, or a future probation officer see that you have spent time building a record rather than merely waiting for time to pass. It may help a prospective employer see that you are more than the worst decision of your life.

Most importantly, it can help you.

A profile helps you move from private intention to visible action. It gives you a place to develop a biography, publish journal entries, write book reports, and strengthen a release plan. It helps you create a body of work that shows how you are thinking, what you are learning, what you are building, and why you are worthy of consideration for higher levels of liberty and opportunity later.

That process aligns directly with the Straight-A Guide.

The Straight-A Guide is not a theory for sounding better. It is a framework for living better, as if you are the CEO of your life. Each principle pushes a person to become more deliberate, more disciplined, and more responsible. The profile gives a person a place to document what that framework looks like in practice.

- If you define success, the profile gives you a place to explain what success means to you.
- If you set goals, the profile gives you a place to show how you are pursuing those goals.
- If you develop the right attitude, the profile gives you a place to reveal that attitude through your writing and your consistency.
- If you take action, the profile gives you a place to document what you did.
- If you hold yourself accountable, the profile gives you a place to measure progress.

» If you build awareness, live authentically, earn achievements, and strengthen appreciation, the profile gives you a place to show how those principles are shaping the life you are building.

In that sense, the profile is not separate from the workbook. It is the place where your preparations for success become self-evident.

Many people talk about change. Fewer document the work of change. Many people say they are preparing for success. Fewer create a record that shows what they are doing to prepare. Many people hope that others will recognize their effort. Fewer build a body of work that allows others to verify the effort for themselves.

I want readers of this workbook to understand that documentation is part of preparation.

The profile becomes an asset, a place where your biography can show accountability, your journals can show consistency and intrinsic motivation, your book reports can show self-directed learning, and your release plan can show that you are preparing for the next stage with intention. Over time, those entries become a living record of the person you are becoming.

No one can build that record for you. Not your lawyer. Not your family. And certainly not anyone in the Bureau of Prisons.

Other people may help you. Family members may support you. Friends may encourage you. Mentors may guide you. Staff members may recognize your effort. Our team at Prison Professors may provide the platform and the lessons. But you must do the work.

That truth reflects one of the central ideas in the Straight-A Guide: live as the CEO of your life.

A CEO does not wait for someone else to solve the company's problems. He identifies the mission, studies the obstacles, builds the plan, and executes it with discipline. He measures progress. He adjusts when necessary. He creates systems that support the results he wants. In the same way, a person in prison should not wait passively for someone else to engineer a better future. He should begin building that future now, with the tools available to him.

The profile is one of those tools. It helps a person transform time into an asset for self-advocacy.

That phrase deserves emphasis because too many people in prison allow time to pass without creating a record of how they used it. Then, when the day comes to advocate for more liberty, they have very little to show beyond words. They may say they have changed. They may say they are ready. They may say they have learned from the experience. But if no record exists, others have little basis for evaluating those claims.

A strong profile gives the person a place to show that he has been building for months, years, or even decades. It allows him to demonstrate that his effort has not been random. He has been intentional and preparing with discipline.

That record can influence how others see a person, and it also can influence the larger mission of Prison Professors.

Every profile contributes to something bigger than one individual. When thousands of people build visible records of self-directed learning, preparation, and accountability, they create evidence that people in the system are willing to work toward better outcomes when they have structure, tools, and incentives. That evidence strengthens our argument for expanding opportunities tied to earning freedom through merit. It strengthens our effort to show that preparation should count. It strengthens our mission of opening more pathways to liberty and freedom through merit.

For that reason, when you build a profile, you do more than help yourself. You become part of a broader movement. You show that many people in prison are worthy of opportunities.

I do not work for the government, and do not have any power to tell the system what to do in an individual's case. For that reason, I cannot promise that building a profile will lead to any specific result. The only promises I make are these:

1. I will always be truthful,
2. I will never ask anyone to do anything that I didn't do.
3. No one will ever pay a penny for the resources that I provide through Prison Professors.

I built this system because I learned that a person who lives as the CEO of his life can create opportunities, even in difficult circumstances, by building a body of work that others can see. I hope this workbook encourages you to build your record. Become the CEO of your life.

Appendix

How to Build Your Prison Professors Profile

Your profile has four main written sections:

1. Biography
2. Journals
3. Book Reports
4. Release Plan

Each section serves a different purpose.

Biography

Your biography tells the story of who you are, how you got here, what you have learned, and what kind of future you are trying to build. A strong biography should:

- tell the truth about the past,
- show responsibility,
- explain what changed in your thinking, and
- show what kind of life you are preparing to build.

The biography helps other people understand the person behind the charge or conviction. It should not read like an excuse. It should not read like a sales pitch. It should read like the work of someone who is thinking honestly about his life and building a better future with intention.

Update your biography regularly. As you grow, your biography should grow with you.

Journals

Journals show what you are doing now. A good journal entry may describe:

- what you are learning,
- what progress you are making,
- what challenges you are facing,
- how you are responding to adversity, and
- how your daily conduct aligns with the future you want.

Journal writing helps you build a time-stamped record of your thinking and your effort. One journal entry may not seem important by itself. Over time, however, many entries can show discipline, consistency, reflection, and growth.

Book Reports

Book reports show your commitment to self-directed learning. A strong book report should explain:

- why you chose the book,
- what you learned from it, and
- how the book influences the decisions you are making.

Do not write book reports only to prove that you finished a book. Write them to show how reading is shaping your judgment, your values, and your plans. A strong book report shows that you are not reading to pass time. You are reading to strengthen your mind and prepare for a better future.

Release Plan

Your release plan explains how you are preparing for the next stage of life. A strong release plan should show:

- the life you want to build,
- the obstacles you expect,
- the strengths and resources you already have,
- the weaknesses you must address, and
- the strategy you will use to overcome collateral consequences.

A release plan becomes stronger when you update it regularly. As you learn more, develop more skills, strengthen relationships, or identify new risks, your plan should reflect those changes.

Why Consistent Writing Builds a Stronger Record

Consistency is one of the most important parts of the profile system.

A person does not build a strong record by making one good entry and then disappearing. He builds a strong record by showing up repeatedly. When entries appear over time, they show:

- discipline,
- intrinsic motivation,
- accountability,
- growth, and
- seriousness.

That is why we encourage regular writing.

A profile becomes more useful when other people can see that the work did not happen in one afternoon. They can see that the person kept building over time. They can see that he stayed engaged. They can see that his preparation is part of a pattern rather than a single burst of activity.

Try to write regularly. It is better to make steady progress than to wait for the perfect moment.

How the Point System Works

We created the point system to encourage meaningful participation, and also, to advance our advocacy for the changes we want to see.

The point system is designed to reward entries that show real effort. We made changes because very short entries do not advance the goal. A three-word entry or a five-word entry does not build communication skill, personal development, or a useful advocacy record. We want people to write enough to develop thought, discipline, and evidence.

The system awards individual points for the work a participant completes as follows:

- 1 point for entries of 100 to 299 words
- 2 points for entries of 300 words or more

That means a person can earn points by writing:

- biography entries,
- journal entries,
- book reports,
- release-plan updates,
- (and also for collecting testimonials from people who support you)

The point system gives us a way to measure participation. Instead of vague statements such as "I am trying," the profile can show:

- how often a person writes,
- how much he writes,
- what categories he is developing, and
- whether he is building momentum over time.

Points do not tell the whole story, but they do help quantify efforts. And we can show your efforts, with hopes that we will persuade stakeholders to introduce more changes that incentivize the pursuit of excellence. In theory, the more a person writes, the better skilled a person will become in overcoming complications. And if a person is working hard to develop his profile, in theory, that person is not disrupting staff, or operations.

For that reason, we encourage administrators and other stakeholders to use the point system as a filter. They can use it to ascertain who is worthy of a higher level of liberty. Who worked toward it. Again, I don't work for the government, and I don't have any power over the government. I am simply striving to create systems that people can use to help themselves, just as I had to do while going through 9,500 days in prison.

Build a Tribe

A second way to build points is by becoming an ambassador for the message of self-directed learning. Each person should become a force for good, helping others participate. To grow, build a tribe. Your tribe simply means that you're encouraging others to live responsibly and take interest in engineering their path for success. We call the act of bringing others into the program, "building a tribe."

A tribe grows when you encourage other people to participate. If someone joins and identifies you as the person who encouraged him, that person becomes part of your tribe. And if a person in your tribe introduces another person, he will grow his tribe and your tribe simultaneously.

When members of your tribe earn individual points, those points build your tribe score. The person earns individual points for doing the work, and you earn points in your tribe score because you're showing that you are not only working on yourself. You are helping create a stronger community. You are becoming an ambassador of the message.

An ambassador should explain the program to others, and help more people understand that preparation can lead to stronger outcomes. When you help others build profiles, you strengthen more than your own record. You help demonstrate what becomes possible when people prepare with intention and document their effort over time.

Monthly Points:Our system also awards points for the people who did the most work during a given month. That means, we have three ways that our system measures points:

- We measure how many words a person writes through the different entries.
- We measure the number of people a person brought into his tribe, and how effective those people are at preparing for success upon release–as shown by the quantity of words written.

» Monthly points, by how many points the person has accumulated during a given month. Every month, the system resets, and each person should strive to earn the most points. That is how a person rises to the top of our leaderboards.

Best Practices for Earning Points

A person can strengthen his point total by:

» writing consistently,
» making entries of at least 100 words,
» aiming for 300 to 500 words when he has enough substance to say something meaningful,
» developing all four sections of the profile, and
» avoiding long gaps in participation.

As a practical guideline, entries between 300 and 500 words often work well. That length usually gives enough room to explain an idea clearly while also helping you build points steadily over time. It is fine to write entries in multiple parts or to publish longer manuscripts.

Leaderboards and What They Show

We use leaderboards to show who is participating consistently and seriously.

The leaderboard helps us identify people who are building a body of work through disciplined effort. It also helps us show that participants in Prison Professors are willing to work toward better outcomes when they have structure, incentives, and a clear path. The system tracks several types of participation, including:

» Who earned the most points over the past 30-days
» Who has accumulated the most Individual points
» Who has accumulated the most Tribe points

These measurements help show:

» who is writing regularly,
» who is building all sections of the profile,
» who is helping others participate, and
» who is maintaining momentum over time.

Leaderboards can motivate people to continue building. They also help supporters, staff, and the larger community see who is doing the work most consistently.

Most importantly, the data helps Prison Professors advocate for broader reforms. When thousands of people build profiles, accumulate points, and document their preparations for success, that evidence helps us argue for policies that create more pathways to liberty through merit.

How Family Members and Friends Can Help

Family members and friends can become an important part of the process. They can help by:

» setting up and managing a profile,
» entering updates you send through letters, email, or calls,
» reading what you write,
» encouraging you to stay consistent,

- helping you build your support system, and
- learning enough about the profile so they can advocate more effectively.

When family members understand the profile, they can point to more than hope. They can point to your biography, journals, book reports, release plan, point totals, and participation record. That documentation changes the quality of the conversation.

Instead of saying only, "He has changed," they can show the work you have done.

How to Participate and Submit Entries

Because many people in prison do not have internet access, we built multiple ways to participate.

Option 1: Through a Family Member or Friend

The easiest way to build a profile is to have a family member or friend visit our website at PrisonProfessors.org. That person can enter your name and number and enroll you in the program. Once enrolled, the outside supporter can receive login information and begin managing and updating your profile.
This option works well for people who have a spouse, parent, sibling, child, or friend willing to help.

Option 2: Through Email

If you do not have outside support but do have access to the prison email system, you may send your entries to: Playbook@PrisonProfessors.org When you send an entry, make it easy for our team to process by clearly identifying the category in the subject line. Use one of these labels in the subject line:

- *Biography*
- *Journal*
- *Book Report*
- *Release Plan*

By labeling the entry clearly in the subject line, you help our team place the writing into the right category.

Option 3: Through Postal Mail

If you do not have access to email, you may send your entries by mail to:

Prison Professors
Profiles
P.O. Box 50996
Irvine, CA 92619

When mailing an entry, clearly identify the category at the top of the page:

- *Biography*
- *Journal*
- *Book Report*
- *Release Plan*

This step will help our team place your writing in the correct section of your profile.

How to Build a Profile

Do not wait until you think your writing is perfect. Begin where you are. A practical way to start is:

1. Write your first biography entry.
2. Write a journal entry about what you learned from this workbook.
3. Write a book report on something you are reading now.
4. Draft the first section of your release plan.
5. Keep building from there.

The profile becomes stronger through repetition. The more often you write with honesty and purpose, the more useful the record becomes.

A Simple Starting Pattern

A person who wants a simple starting pattern could aim for:

- one biography update,
- two journal entries each month,
- one book report each month, and
- one release-plan update each month.

That pattern would help a person build all four profile areas steadily.

Your Participation Supports a Larger Mission

Your participation helps more than your own future.

Every profile, every journal entry, every book report, every release-plan update, every point earned, and every tribe connection helps Prison Professors build stronger arguments for reform. With our point system, we can offer evidence to strengthen our arguments for:

- more recognition of self-directed preparation,
- more incentives tied to merit,
- more opportunities to earn liberty, and
- broader policy changes that encourage excellence.

When you build your profile, you are not only preparing for your own future. You are helping demonstrate what becomes possible when people choose discipline, and self-directed pathways of preparing for success upon release.

As of the writing of this workbook, approximately 7,000 people across the Bureau of Prisons are participating in the profiles program that Prison Professors offers. Cumulatively, they have written more than 11.5 million words. In theory, by writing, they are developing skills and turning words into sentences, and sentences into paragraphs. They are developing critical thinking skills, and they're thinking intentionally about how to prepare for success–which means they are not causing disruptions.

We need that data to advocate for the changes we want to see:

- All people qualify for incentives, regardless of what background they have or what country they're from.

- More pathways for people to earn a higher level of liberty, at the soonest possible time, based upon the work the person has done.
- Bridges for people to transition into income opportunities upon release, so that we can end intergenerational cycles of recidivism and poverty.

Final Encouragement

I want to close this appendix with the same message that runs through all of my work.

I do not work for the government. I do not control your case. I do not decide where you will serve your sentence. I do not promise that building a profile will produce any specific result. Again, all I can promise is that:

1. I will never lie to you.
2. I will never ask you to do anything that I did not do.
3. No one will ever pay a penny for the free lessons and profile-building opportunities that our team at Prison Professors provides.

When you are ready, submit your first entry. And remember, no one should work harder than you in preparing for your success.

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