

## **CHAPTER 1: INTRO—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.

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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.

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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.

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## **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

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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?

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- » 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 con-

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sequences 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.

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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.

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