

CHAPTER 11: TAKE ACTION

The first ten chapters of this playbook build a sequence.

- » First, define success.
- » Then, set goals that align with how you define success.
- » Next, develop the right attitude, which means making a 100 percent commitment to success.
- » 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:

- » I would educate myself.
- » I would contribute to society in meaningful, measurable ways.
- » 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.

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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?

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- » 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.

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ACTION LEADS TO ACCOMPLISHMENTS

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

- » It should deter others from breaking the law.
- » It should isolate the person for the length of the sentence.
- » It should inflict punishment as a result of the person's failure to abide by the social contract that holds our federal republic together.
- » 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.

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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.

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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

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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,

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- » 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.

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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.

