

CHAPTER 12: MEASURING PROGRESS—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.

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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.

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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 who tracks:

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

will understand much more about whether he is truly preparing. Accountability tools help a person distinguish between being occupied and being productive.

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.

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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,

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- » 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,
- » and other stakeholders.

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.



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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?

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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.



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