

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.

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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

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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.

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,

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- » 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?

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- » 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.

