

CHAPTER 14: LIVE AUTHENTICALLY

Authenticity means living in alignment with truth.

At first glance, 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.

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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

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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

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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:

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- » Does my writing sound real, or does it sound like performance?
- » Am I telling the truth about my past, my weaknesses, and my effort?
- » Does my record show consistency between what I say and what I do?
- » Have I built evidence of discipline, or am I relying on declarations?
- » If a stakeholder examined my profile carefully, would the record support the message I want to send?
- » 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?

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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.



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