

CHAPTER 15: INCREMENTAL ACHIEVEMENTS

When going through a long struggle, work toward a series of incremental achievements. Those achievements put a person on the pathway to new opportunities and prove that progress is real. That lesson became very important to get me through multiple decades in prison.

When a person faces a long sentence, he cannot depend on one distant future event to sustain motivation. He cannot live only for the day of release, especially if that day sits years or decades away. If he depends on one giant victory at the end of the journey, he may spend too many years feeling that progress is invisible. He may lose confidence, lose discipline, or lose faith in the value of every effort he makes.

While in the struggle of being separated from family and community, work toward incremental achievements. They show that you're not living a fantasy or offering vague hopes about what the future may become.

In the context of the Straight-A Guide, achievement means practicing the discipline of earning incremental results that confirm whether the earlier principles are working. It shows whether the person has truly defined success, set goals, developed the right attitude, taken action, built accountability, strengthened awareness, and begun living authentically. If those earlier principles are sound, the smaller wins begin to surface. If no measurable progress appears, the person should reassess the plan.

When achievements are real, they help a person restore confidence, build credibility, and momentum. They may also open new opportunities.

MEASURE ACHIEVEMENTS

Many people talk about what they want to become. Fewer build achievements that prove progress. That distinction often determines whether a person becomes successful in the present and in the future.

In prison, and at every stage of the criminal justice process, it is easy to confuse effort with achievement. A person may believe that because he has good intentions, participates in programs, stays busy with his job, he is moving forward.

That's a prison mentality, and in the context of this course, we wouldn't consider it the same as making achievements. Be intentional, with each achievement being part of the plan. If that's the case, each achievement will include a measurable result that relates to what you say you're building. As the saying goes, an overnight success is often 20 years in the making.

A person may earn an achievement by finishing a degree, completing a book report, writing and refining a biography, building a stronger release plan, creating a consistent journal record, earning the trust of a mentor, publishing a body of work, or developing the routines that make larger success possible. The point is to show results that clearly relate to the larger plan you engineered. A person who wants to become stronger should ask a series of daily questions:

- » What did I finish?
- » What did I improve?
- » What did I build?
- » What proof exists that my plan is producing movement?

Those questions help a person assess whether the plan is creating visible results or whether he is merely living in a fantasy that will never materialize. Rather than striving to be a "model inmate," strive to be a person who gets things done with incremental achievements that lead to higher levels of success.

INCREMENTAL WINS

With a 45-year sentence, I could not wait until the end of the journey to assess whether I had become successful. I needed measurable victories along the way, and I began setting the course of action while still in solitary confinement, before my judge sentenced me.

That is one reason I focused so heavily on educational milestones, writing milestones, relationship-building, and the visible record I was creating over time. Each achievement reinforced the idea that the effort was producing something tangible. I could point to a completed course, a finished manuscript, a developed relationship, a published article, a stronger plan, or a new skill. Each result reminded me that the years did not have to disappear into nothingness. Those incremental wins kept me moving toward the larger vision, and the results that followed once I got out.

A long sentence becomes easier to endure when a person can point to evidence that the years are producing value. The sentence will include real obstacles, and uncertainty may feel heavy. But measurable achievements help a person restore confidence and avoid despondency during long stretches when external recognition may be absent.

That principle applies outside prison as well. A person building a business does not wait until the company becomes profitable before recognizing progress. He learns to value the early achievements that make profitability possible. He forms the entity, secures the first customer, develops the first product, refines the process, strengthens the systems, and learns from the setbacks. Each step becomes part of the foundation.

The same principle applies to a person rebuilding life after a criminal charge. He should learn to value the smaller wins because they are what make the larger outcome possible.

VALIDATE THE PLAN WITH SMALL WINS

When a person earns measurable results, he develops credibility in showing that the plan is working. That does not mean all problems have been solved, or that setbacks won't come. It means the effort is producing something tangible, moving the person toward the intended outcome. He doesn't rely on platitudes, intentions, emotions, prayers, or optimism. He accepts that God helps those who help themselves.

The prison system may not recognize the progress that a person makes. Yet the plan, together with incremental achievements, will keep him moving in the right direction. A person may read, write, study, train, plan, and adjust for years before the outside world notices anything. Incremental achievements help him resist despair during that long period of invisible preparation.

Incremental achievements show that discipline is producing results, regardless of whether anyone else notices.

In that sense, achievement functions the way data functions in a business. A responsible executive does not rely on hope. He reviews numbers and studies indicators, looking for evidence that the plan is producing movement toward the intended result. If the numbers show progress, he builds on the momentum. If the numbers show weakness, he recalibrates. A person in prison should do the same with his life.

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LOGIC OF INCREMENTAL ACHIEVEMENT

Lee Nobmann helped reinforce this lesson for me in a practical way. Before getting out of prison, I knew I wanted to build a career around real estate. I began writing letters to real estate developers, and I connected with Lee. We developed a friendship, and Lee created a soft landing for me after release. He gave me a job and a place to live rent-free for a year. He also taught me about real estate development.

As I listened to Lee talk about building real estate projects, I heard repeated confirmation of the importance of incremental achievement.

A person may identify land that he believes can be developed. That is only the beginning. Then he must acquire the land, secure zoning and permits, retain engineers and architects, create blueprints, obtain construction estimates, arrange financing, negotiate contracts, and move through years of work before collecting a single dollar of income. That sequence reinforced a lesson I had already learned in prison: large outcomes are built through long chains of smaller achievements.

No developer says, “I want the completed project,” and then starts looking for the drapes he is going to hang on the windows of the ninth floor. He does not skip the stages that make the project possible. Developers know they must pour the foundation before they start building the roof. They don’t go after financing by announcing a dream without plans, numbers, or due diligence. Real progress requires sequence.

That is true in the Straight-A Guide as well. A person does not build credibility by declaring that he has changed. He builds credibility by producing smaller achievements that make change and progress more believable. He continuously assesses, and he improves the plan as circumstances change. Over time, his profile will show a series of incremental wins that show he is capable of building the future he talks about creating.

Small Achievements Build the Next Opportunity

This may be the most practical lesson in the chapter: an achievement is something to build upon.



In my own journey, I focused on earning academic credentials. Through studying, I developed a better understanding of the prison system. That deeper understanding led me to write for publication. By publishing my work, I built a stronger coalition of support. Those people began advocating for me. That advocacy opened opportunities to reach higher levels of success in prison and after release. I leveraged each accomplishment to open the next opportunity.

Many people underestimate the strategic value of a small win. A person may think, “It is only one journal entry,” or “It is only one book report,” or “It is only one course.” But if that entry strengthens self-awareness, if that book report develops vocabulary and critical thinking, if that course leads to a new credential, if that credential leads to trust, and if that trust leads to support, then the smaller achievement becomes the first link in a much larger chain.

Achievement should therefore be viewed strategically. It is not merely proof that a person did something worthwhile. It is also an asset that a person can leverage to create the next stage of progress.

Achievements Restore Confidence and Credibility

A person who earns measurable progress begins to trust the process and develops more confidence that he can navigate the complications ahead. And every person in the criminal justice system will face more complications ahead. Confidence grows when a person can say:

- » I did this.
- » I completed this.
- » I followed through here.
- » My effort produced a result.

Such statements will help a person build a coalition of support that can advance the plan. These incremental wins lead to confidence, not arrogance.

Prison can weaken a person’s ability to believe that his actions will produce a result. It can make him feel that life is happening to him, which is not nearly as empowering as knowing that his life is the result of the actions he takes. By recognizing the importance of incremental achievements, he disrupts the pattern of failure that living in prison brings for many. Good decisions lead to results. Even under constrained conditions, a person can build something a verifiable path to success.

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That record may influence judges, probation officers, family members, employers, mentors, case managers, and others who may have a role in the person's prospects for success. Achievements help show that a person is no longer only speaking about preparation. He is producing results.

DOCUMENT EVERY ACHIEVEMENT

In the Prison Professors framework, an achievement becomes stronger when a person builds a profile that documents the effort.

- » Biography updates can reflect new milestones and show how a person's thinking continues to evolve.
- » Journals can show progress toward specific wins and reveal how discipline develops over time.
- » Book reports can show completed reading goals, lessons learned, and intellectual growth.
- » Release plans can show how achievement is strengthening readiness for the next stage. The broader profile can show that progress is not random, but part of a coherent body of work.

The profile should become part of a comprehensive strategy to show that a person is a good steward of time, talent, treasure, truth, and relationships. Never stop building.

SELF-DIRECTED QUESTIONS

1. What measurable achievements have I earned during the past month?
2. Which of those achievements connect most directly to my long-term plan?
3. Where am I confusing activity with measurable progress?
4. What achievement can I complete during the next seven days?
5. How can I document that achievement in my profile?
6. Which small win today could open a larger opportunity tomorrow?
7. What evidence shows that my current plan is working?
8. Where do I need to recalibrate because the results are too weak?
9. How have my achievements strengthened my confidence or credibility?
10. What body of work am I building that others will be able to verify?

The little achievements prove whether the earlier principles produce results. They strengthen confidence, build credibility, and open the next opportunity. In the next lesson, we will focus on appreciation and on why gratitude strengthens the life a person is trying to build.

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