

CHAPTER 7: DEFINE SUCCESS

One of the courses that became central to all our work at Prison Professors is The Straight-A Guide. It gave me a framework to think more clearly and make better decisions through 9,500 days in federal prison. I still rely on those lessons today, and I am confident they can help every member of our community.

At its core, the Straight-A Guide begins with a simple question:

» How do you define success?

Unless a person answers that question with honesty and clarity, it becomes difficult to make disciplined decisions or build a meaningful plan. Many people move through life reacting to circumstances. The Straight-A Guide taught me to think differently. It taught me to begin with values, to define success deliberately, and then to make decisions that align with that definition.

As I have written before, I credit Lee Nobmann with inspiring me to develop this framework. Lee leads a massively successful private company that employs more than 1,000 people. As I neared the end of my sentence, he asked what I wanted to do when I came home. I told him I wanted to build a career that would help change the prison system. He encouraged me to create a framework that others could understand and apply. That conversation led to the Straight-A Guide and to the incremental steps we continue taking to become the change we want to see.

I believe there is a real possibility to influence change by showing what disciplined, values-based preparation looks like. Through the Straight-A Guide and our profile system, members of our community build records that show commitment, growth, and accountability. That work strengthens the argument for a system that rewards excellence and opens more pathways to freedom through merit.

I hope every member of the Prison Professors community recognizes a role in that effort. I cannot promise that the system will change. I can promise that I will continue working every day to build stronger arguments for a society that incentivizes responsibility, preparation, and excellence.

INCREMENTAL STEPS

When authorities arrested me, the only thing I wanted was to get out. What I wanted, however, had very little relevance. The machinery of the system would do its thing, and I'd have to do my thing. I had made decisions that exposed me to criminal charges, and I would now move through a process as if I were a cog in a bureaucracy. Defense attorneys, prosecutors, probation officers, and judges all had influence over how I would live. While they sorted through the process, I sat in solitary confinement, feeling like a puppet while others pulled the strings.

From studying leaders, I learned that I would have to live in the world as it existed, not as I wanted it to be. After the jury convicted me on all counts, I faced the prospect of spending multiple decades in prison. The reality of that predicament opened my mind. The Bible had already begun shaping my thinking, and the books Officer Wilson brought me while I was in solitary helped me begin shaping a plan.

Leaders taught me that if I wanted to change the course of my life, I would have to begin by defining success. I would have to know what I was trying to build.

When I was 20, I had not given serious thought to what a successful life would actually require. My decisions reflected appetite, ambition, and rationalization more than reflection, discipline, and purpose.

The year I spent in solitary confinement forced me to think differently. I began reflecting on the decisions that had led me there. I could see more clearly that I had ignored lessons my parents, teachers, and coaches tried to teach me during my teenage years. The friends I chose influenced my decisions. Those decisions led me into breaking the law, and those crimes led to confinement.

While in solitary, I did not know much about what to expect. I hated being away from my family and community, but I could not change the past. I would have to start sowing seeds that could lead to the next chapter of my life.

To write that chapter, I would have to define success.

- » What would success look like in five years, or ten years?
- » In what ways would I be able to use time in prison to prepare, or advance possibilities for success at every stage?
- » How would the decisions I make going forward influence future opportunities?

- » What obstacles would I have to overcome to succeed?
- » What should I expect in the way of support or interference from the environment where I was going?

I came to understand that a person must decide whether he will define success by what has been taken away or by what he can still build. Like the leaders I read about, I wanted to become a builder.

Instead of reacting only to the sentence I would receive, I wanted to lay out a plan that would lead to the best possible outcome.

As you complete the exercises in this workbook, consider how you will define success. It is the first lesson in our course. The responses you give to the prompts can become part of a written record by which others judge your seriousness, your preparation, and your ability to follow through. Defining success became one of the first disciplines that helped me build a better future, and I am confident this tactic can lead to a better outcome for every member of our community. As you work through these lessons, consider how they can become a part of your story, showing your commitment to building a better future.

DEFINE SUCCESS FOR THE STAGE YOU ARE IN

One of the biggest mistakes people make is defining success too vaguely, too emotionally, or too far into the future.

A person may say:

- » I want to be successful.
- » I want a better life.
- » I want to get out of prison.
- » I want to make my family proud.
- » I want to rebuild.

Those statements lack the specificity to guide daily action. They do not provide a clear definition of what success means in the stage he is living through. To be the CEO of his life, he must know precisely what he wants, and develop a plan that will lead to results.

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During that first year in solitary confinement, I learned how to define success differently from the way I had thought about it before. I was no longer thinking about money, fast cars, or fancy watches.

By reading about Frederick Douglass, I became inspired to think about changing the system in ways that could benefit thousands of people. Since I did not expect to earn a living from that work, I also thought about ways to become financially independent. Financial independence didn't mean living in luxury. It meant generating sufficient resources that would allow me to support my family, to pay insurance and prepare for retirement. In the end, I wanted to work toward making an impact, or changing laws that would open more pathways for all people to earn freedom through merit.

To succeed, I had to learn how to think differently, accept responsibility, and use time in ways that advanced the plans I was starting to develop.

I explain those steps more fully in books such as *Earning Freedom: Conquering a 45-Year Prison Term*. We'll distribute those books to those who actively participate in our program, building their own profiles to show how they're preparing for success upon release.

Each person will define success differently, based on the values he lives by and the stage of the journey he is in. The way I defined success during the first ten years of my sentence put me on a path to redefine success during the second ten years. I continued making those adjustments as I developed. Those developments opened opportunities I could pursue once I completed my sentence on August 12, 2013. They led to the early termination of my supervised release, to business opportunities, and ultimately to financial independence.

Because I defined success early, even before my judge imposed sentence, I could take methodical, deliberate, intentional steps that carried me through each stage of the journey. I encourage everyone to do the same.

- » If You Do Not Define Success, Circumstances Will Define It for You. You may not like the results.

This lesson connects directly to everything I have written in the earlier chapters.

- » If you do not govern your life, other forces will govern it for you.
- » If you do not build a plan, time will pass without structure.
- » If you do not memorialize your journey, the official record may become the only record others see.

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The same principle applies here. If you do not define success, then your mood, your environment, your fears, and the expectations of other people will define it for you. Without a plan, a person squanders opportunities. Instead of thinking about the success he intends to build, he:

- » takes the term one day at a time,
- » fails to make measurable progress,
- » allows others to tell him how to live,
- » and complains about the environment rather than seeing opportunities to grow.

Such adjustment strategies do not lead to favorable results. Through the course of my work, I have learned that one of five outcomes awaits every person in prison:

- » unemployment,
- » underemployment,
- » homelessness,
- » further problems with the law,
- » or success.

The decisions we make while we are inside determine which result is most likely to await us on the other side of the journey. By defining success clearly, in my view, a person takes a meaningful step toward getting the outcome he wants. It gives him a reference point. It helps him ask:

- » Does this action align with the future I am trying to create, or does it pull me away from it?

SUCCESS AT EVERY STAGE

A person facing charges may define success as:

- » learning more about each stage of the judicial system,
- » developing a framework for making more informed decisions,
- » creating a comprehensive mitigation strategy,
- » writing a personal narrative that will help the judge learn more about him,
- » and establishing a written record that will help stakeholders evaluate him more fully.

A person preparing to surrender may define success as:

- » creating a plan that will empower him along the way,
- » strengthening family communication so loved ones know what to expect,
- » organizing reading and writing plans,
- » and entering prison with a framework instead of confusion.

A person in prison may define success as:

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- » achieving measurable, incremental goals,
- » developing a self-directed learning plan,
- » writing an evolving biography to show progress,
- » building a record through journals, book reports, and plans,
- » and preparing for the next level of opportunity.

A person close to release may define success as:

- » refining a release plan,
- » strengthening support systems,
- » demonstrating consistent preparation,
- » and showing that he has considered all strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, then reverse engineered a strategy to succeed.

All of these may be valid definitions of success. The key is that the person must define success consciously, deliberately, and with a commitment to live as the CEO of his own life.

Restoring Confidence

After my judge sentenced me to 45 years, I could accelerate the plans I had already begun making to prepare for success. Defining success helped me restore confidence. Instead of living as a puppet, I felt a sense of urgency to build the ladder that would lead me from where I was to the next opportunity.

If I defined success clearly for a given stage, then I could make better decisions about:

- » how to use the day,
- » what to read,
- » what to write,
- » what habits to strengthen,
- » what distractions to refuse,
- » and what kind of evidence I wanted to build.

By defining success, I gave myself direction that helped me make better decisions. I could live more deliberately, knowing that I would be responsible for the future I built.

Become a builder. Use this framework to begin building the next chapter of your life. By defining success clearly, you should develop more confidence in your ability to answer practical questions such as:

- » What would a successful week look like?
- » What would a successful month look like?
- » What conduct would show that I am moving in the right direction?

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» What written record would prove that my effort is real?
Those are the kinds of questions that turn success into strategy.

FREDERICK DOUGLASS, FRANKL, AND DISCIPLINE

Leaders I studied reinforced this lesson in different ways.

Frederick Douglass did not define success merely as escape from slavery. He wanted to help liberate the people he had left behind. To succeed, he first had to develop himself. He had to learn how to read, write, and communicate so that he could turn his personal story into an asset that would influence others.

Viktor Frankl did not define success in suffering as comfort or escape alone. He understood that he could still create meaning while living in extreme deprivation. That definition changed the relationship between suffering and human dignity.

From their examples, I learned that a person who defines success acts differently because he recognizes the relationship between his decisions and his prospects to get the results he wants.

DEFINE SUCCESS TO GAIN CLARITY

By writing out the ways you define success, you create a record. If you publish that definition in your biography, in your journals, and in your release plans, you create a written record that our system time-stamps. In the years ahead, you will be able to point back to what you wrote. You will be able to show that success did not come by accident. Rather, you laid out a plan and moved through a series of deliberate steps.

You are the CEO of your life. Your written record can show that you are intrinsically motivated, and every entry you make on your profile can become another asset in your portfolio. Use those assets to create more opportunities.

- » A biography should reflect how a person understands the life he wants to build.
- » A journal should show whether daily conduct aligns with that definition.
- » Book reports will show a commitment to self-directed learning.
- » A release plan should show how the definition of success changes by stage and becomes more concrete over time.

I encourage people to use the questions at the end of each chapter as prompts. Write answers and publish them on the profile to develop a written record that will strengthen your future.

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RESIST THE PRISON MINDSET

I understand the challenge of living away from the people you love. For that reason, I encourage you to engineer a strategy that will empower you. Start restoring confidence by showing that you are not allowing current circumstances to dictate your future. Be a builder. Build the next chapter of your life.

Prepare for a life that extends beyond prison. That does not mean denying current reality. It means refusing to let current reality define the whole scope of possibility.

START WHERE YOU ARE

Consider the following questions:

- » What would success look like for the stage I am in now?
- » What should my conduct show if I am serious about that definition?
- » What should I be building?
- » What should I be documenting?
- » How would I know if I were moving in the right direction?

Definitions will evolve as you advance through the different stages of the journey. But be deliberate, always in alignment with how you define success. In the next chapter, we'll get into goals that show your commitment to preparing for success.

SELF-DIRECTED QUESTIONS

1. What does success look like for me at the stage of life I am in right now?
2. How is my current definition of success different from the one I held before this crisis?
3. What would a successful week look like in practical terms?
4. What habits or actions would show that I am serious about the future I say I want?
5. What written record would prove that I have defined success clearly enough to guide my conduct?
6. In what ways have I allowed fear, shame, or circumstances to define success for me instead of defining it for myself?
7. What can I begin writing now that would help make my definition of success more visible and more real?

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A person begins changing his life when he stops allowing external circumstances to serve as an excuse to the pursuit of success. By defining success, it's easier to evaluate commitment, progress becomes easier to measure, and you enhance the likelihood of getting results you want.



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