

CHAPTER 9: DEVELOP THE RIGHT ATTITUDE

If a person wants to succeed in prison—or anywhere else—he must begin with the right attitude. In the context of the Straight-A Guide, attitude means making a 100 percent commitment to success, as the person defines success. That distinction is crucial for a person who is self-directed and focused on becoming the CEO of his life.

Let me provide an example. While presenting in a high-security prison, I opened the floor for Q and A. One young man raised his hand to ask question, which led to the following interaction:

- » Questioner: “What can you do for me if I get out of prison?”
- » My response: “What would you like me to do?”
- » Questioner: “I’d like you to get me a job.”
- » My response: “I can get you a job, so long as you make a 100% commitment to living as a law-abiding, contributing citizen.”
- » Questioner: “But I’m not going to leave my gang.”

Such a statement would not be consistent with making a 100 percent commitment to success. It may work for some in a prison setting, but people in society would consider such a statement as being inconsistent with the right attitude to pursue success.

When you don’t show the right attitude, you don’t get the result that you want.

A person can define success clearly. He can build a plan. He can set goals that make sense. Yet if he lacks the right attitude, the plan does not deliver the result. Goals become platitudes rather than meaningful, action-oriented steps. Without the right attitude, a person won’t develop the record.

A person with the wrong attitude may become discouraged, bitter, passive, resentful, or trapped in excuses. A person with the right attitude continues moving forward, even when the environment offers little encouragement.

Defining success and setting goals are the prerequisites of the Straight-A Guide. The right attitude helps a person stay committed to those goals when the journey becomes difficult.

MEASURE THE RIGHT ATTITUDE WITH COMMITMENT

In our course, we measure the right attitude by commitment. If a person defines success and then makes a 100 percent commitment to that definition, he is showing the right attitude.

- » The world around him may not change quickly.
- » Other people may not recognize the work he is doing.
- » Stakeholders may remain negative, hostile, or discouraging to his efforts.

Yet he continues adjusting in ways that align with his plan. That is the right attitude. The right attitude does not mean:

- » waiting for others to become fair,
- » complaining until conditions improve,
- » blaming the system for every setback,
- » or expecting progress to come without effort.

The right attitude means:

- » changing what can be changed,
- » accepting what cannot yet be changed,
- » and continuing to build with discipline.

That way of thinking harmonizes with the Serenity Prayer. It also aligns with the lessons I learned from leaders who taught me that growth begins within. If I wanted a better future, I had to stop waiting for prison to become easier. I had to become stronger.

FAITH AND ATTITUDE

My understanding of attitude began with faith. As I wrote earlier, during my first year in solitary, I read the Bible to get through the hours. Those stories helped me understand and accept that God wants us to live as servant leaders, always developing. If we develop ourselves, more opportunities come our way. If we fail to develop, or if we live as victims, making excuses for what we cannot achieve, we lessen the likelihood of growth and opportunity.

That understanding influenced my attitude.

I came to see that developing the right attitude required discipline. I hated being in prison, but like anyone else, I had to live in the world as it existed rather than as I wanted it to be. That commitment could become a pathway to showing God, my-

self, and the world around me that I would continue developing, regardless of conditions. I had made bad decisions that led to the loss of liberty. I lost my money, I lost my girl, and I lost my ability to live independently. The system controlled what I ate, when I ate, what I wore, and with whom I could communicate. Yet I still had responsibility. If I worked on the gifts that remained within my control, I believed more opportunities could come in the future.

This was not optimism detached from effort. It was discipline rooted in stewardship, understand that prison would bring pressures every day. A person in prison will deal with:

- » disappointment, apathy, and indifference,
- » distance from family,
- » rules that seem arbitrary,
- » people who complain constantly,
- » lowered expectations,
- » delays in every process,
- » and a culture that celebrates mediocrity.

If a person is not intentional, that environment can shape the way he thinks. He may fail to see the dangers that come with complaining, bitterness, and lowered expectations. They can lead a person into patterns that suggest a bad attitude.

I understand how those patterns develop. Prison can exhaust anyone, especially if a person does not know how to live intentionally and deliberately. If he surrenders his attitude to the environment, he weakens his prospects for success. That is why I consider it crucial to develop the right attitude. A disciplined attitude helps a person keep asking:

- » What am I building here, and what have I gotten done?
- » How should I respond to complications and obstacles, because more will come?
- » What would a person with a 100 percent commitment to success do next?
- » What should my written record reveal about the way I handle adversity?

Those questions pull a person out of reaction and back into self-governance.

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JIM COLLINS AND THE FLYWHEEL

Years after my first lessons in solitary, I continued studying leaders and ideas that could help me build a stronger life. One of the writers who influenced me was Jim Collins in his book *Good to Great*.

Collins taught me that great results do not usually come from one dramatic breakthrough. They come from sustained effort applied consistently over time. His analogy of the flywheel helped me understand the role of attitude. A person pushes and pushes, and at first the wheel seems not to move very much. But each disciplined push builds on the last. Over time, momentum grows.

That idea helped me think differently about prison.

I knew prison would be hard. I knew I would not receive immediate rewards for many of the decisions I was making. Decades might pass before I would see results. Still, if I kept reading, writing, documenting, preparing, and building relationships, those efforts would build upon themselves. The right attitude kept me pushing even when no one else noticed the efforts I was making to grow, improve, or prepare for success.

Collins also wrote about a BHAG, a Big Hairy Audacious Goal. That idea helped me think about working toward something bigger than my life. I aspired to build a pathway to influence reforms to help thousands of people in prison grow stronger, and earn freedom through merit.

Those ideas helped me feel as if I was living as a servant leader, a good steward of the blessings I received from God. They led to the right attitude, which doesn't mean pretending the system is fair, that prison is easy, or that setbacks do not matter. But a person with the right attitude does not allow hardship to define the limits of his effort.

Some people hear language about attitude and think it means superficial positivity. In the context of the Straight-A Guide, the right attitude means:

- » accepting reality,
- » refusing victim thinking,
- » staying committed to growth,
- » and continuing to do the work.

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The right attitude is one of the clearest ways a person can show maturity, and I've seen the results from many people who became successful after prison, including Josh Smith.

JOSH SMITH AS A CONTEMPORARY EXAMPLE

The right attitude is not only something I learned from historical figures or from books written long ago. I have also seen it validated in the lives of leaders who are with us today. One example is Josh Smith, the Deputy Director of the Bureau of Prisons.

Josh's story reinforces my belief that the harder a person works on himself, the more opportunities can open. In listening to his story, I learned that he'd only made it through the 10th grade, and by the time Josh was 16, he had accumulated ten felonies. He went to federal prison as a young man. Rather than hanging around people who had a criminal mindset, or the wrong attitude, he made a choice to learn from leaders around him. They taught him to focus on what he could become rather than letting his past define his future.

Ironically, in prison, Josh had his first opportunity to learn from college-educated professionals and businessmen. They influenced his thinking, and helped him appreciate the importance of building a process, one that could lead to higher levels of success.

I have had opportunities to participate in several presentations with Josh, and I admire the way he speaks about his faith in Christ. While incarcerated, that faith led to a turning point in his development of the right attitude. Instead of dwelling on the fact that he had a difficult youth, or that his family was living in poverty while he served his sentence, he made a commitment to change. He worked toward personal development and building an extraordinary work ethic. Rather than simply waiting for calendar pages to turn, he invested energy to learn from the people around him and from the books he read. From bankers who were serving time, he learned about credit. From investors, he learned about real estate and stocks.

Those lessons, together with the right attitude, helped him overcome the complications and collateral consequences of a criminal conviction. Starting with the lessons he learned in prison, a \$500 loan from a friend, and a pickup that was worth

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less than \$500, Josh built a company. It was easier to earn a living from building a company than it would be to ask for a job. He provided a service. People paid the bill. In his first year, he said that he earned less than \$15,000. Five years passed before he ever earned more than \$30,000 in a single year. Yet by his tenth year, he'd grown his business into a successful residential waterproofing and foundation repair business.

During the first decade after his release, he went from poverty to wealth. He created jobs for people who, like him, had come out of prison. The company grew to employ more than 180 people, with locations in Knoxville, Indianapolis, and Winston-Salem. In 2019, investors became so impressed with the company that Josh built that they offered him a sum that would be incomprehensible to many people, measured in eight figures. According to an article I read, he committed several million dollars from his proceeds to launch the 4th Purpose Foundation, a nonprofit organization focused on prison reform.

I didn't know that story when I met him. The more I learn about his story, and the more changes I see happening under leadership from him and the Director, the more inspired I feel to work harder. It's a great story that shows how the right attitude can lead a person into becoming a multi-millionaire, and then a servant leader. What inspired me most is that instead of choosing a life of leisure, he accepted a position of leadership within one of the most troubled agencies in the U.S. government, the Federal Bureau of Prisons. The job would pay less in annual wages than he likely made in a single month from dividends and profits. Yet he took the job with hopes of helping people in prison prepare for success, and that inspired me.

Josh's life story validates a lesson I learned from many leaders: the harder a person works on himself, the more opportunities may open. Start by defining success, set goals, and then demonstrate commitment with the right attitude. Without the right attitude, the effort collapses before it compounds.

After participating on a prison tour with Josh, I had the privilege of meeting Dave Worland, who now serves as an executive with Josh's foundation for prison reform. In talking with Dave, I got a lesson from one of his mentors, Ken Boa, a theologian. In his book called *Conformed to His Image*, Mr. Boa taught about the importance of being a good steward of time, talent, treasure, truth, and relationships. Being a good steward of the blessings we have can lead us into having the right attitude.

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When we have the right attitude, it becomes apparent in:

- » the way a person writes,
- » the way he reflects on setbacks,
- » the books he chooses to read,
- » the way he updates his release plan,
- » the consistency of his journal entries,
- » and the seriousness with which he develops his biography and profile.

A person may claim to have the right attitude. The record should show whether that claim is true. If a person's journals are filled only with complaint, blame, or passivity, the writing reveals something about attitude. If the journals show discipline, reflection, honesty, and effort, they reveal something else. If the biography shows denial, complaining, and excuses, others will see it. If the biography shows accountability and growth, others will see that as well.

Over time, our attitude will show up in our conduct, the work we produce, and the opportunities that open for us.

ATTITUDE AND THE PROFILE

The profile is one of the best tools a person can use to show the right attitude. By developing a profile over time, a person shows that he is intrinsically motivated. He is not waiting for a program to do the work for him. He is carving his own path.

- » His biography can show that he has reflected on how earlier decisions led to the current predicament.
- » His journals can show how he responds to setbacks, frustrations, and daily stress.
- » The books he chooses to read show a commitment to self-directed learning.
- » A release plan can show how he intends to carry disciplined thinking into future challenges, including through a continuous SWOT analysis.

All of those records can show whether the person's attitude aligns with the way he says he defines success. That is why I encourage readers to ask:

- » What does my written record reveal about my attitude?
- » Do my journals show discipline or complaint?
- » Does my writing reflect bitterness, or does it reflect a commitment to growth?

Attitude Protects the Future

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The right attitude does more than help a person feel better today. It protects the future he is trying to build. The criminal justice system will test patience, discipline, and whether a person can continue doing meaningful work while living in an environment that obliterates hope. A strong attitude helps him keep building, even when nobody seems to notice. The right attitude matters at every stage:

- » Before choosing how to plead,
- » Before sentencing,
- » Before going to prison,
- » While serving the sentence, and
- » While preparing for release.

Circumstances change. The need for the right attitude does not.

SELF-DIRECTED QUESTIONS

1. How do I usually respond to adversity?
2. In what ways is my attitude helping or harming my future?
3. What patterns of complaint, passivity, or bitterness should I confront honestly?
4. What would disciplined attitude look like in the stage of life I am in now?
5. What lessons from faith, from books, or from leaders have helped me build a stronger attitude?
6. What does my written record reveal about the way I respond to setbacks and pressure?
7. How can I show, through my conduct and my profile, that I am making a 100 percent commitment to success?

The right attitude is not a mood. It is not a slogan. It is the disciplined decision to keep adjusting, building, and preparing in ways that align with the future you say you want to create.

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