

STRAIGHT-A GUIDE
LESSON TEN: ACHIEVEMENT

In the previous lesson, I wrote about authenticity. Living authentically means showing your work. It requires building a visible process so others can see how effort turns into progress. Authenticity builds trust.

When authentic effort compounds over time, achievement follows.

Achievement is not luck. It is not a single breakthrough. It is the cumulative result of small, disciplined actions repeated long enough to create momentum. As the old saying goes, overnight success is usually 20 years in the making.

The harder we work, the more opportunities we create. Along the way, confidence grows, restoring meaning, relevance, and dignity to our lives.

WE BUILD ACHIEVEMENT INCREMENTALLY

On August 13, 2012, I woke up for the 9,135th time in federal prison. It was the last morning I would spend inside a prison facility. Although I walked out before 11:00 a.m., I was not yet free. I still had another year to serve in a halfway house. Even so, I marked that day as an achievement.

I had reached the end of one phase of my journey.

It felt like finding the exit to a long maze. I had not yet reached open ground, but I could see the path forward. Everything I had worked toward inside prison prepared me to accelerate toward a better life.

Many of our most meaningful achievements happen quietly. No one else may notice them, but we do. That awareness builds confidence.

ACHIEVEMENT FOLLOWS A PATTERN

From the beginning of my sentence, I committed to living a values-based, goal-oriented life. I did not perseverate over what I could not control. A judge had sentenced me to serve 45 years. That framed my reality.

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Instead of complaining, I focused on building a strategy. The strategy required me to create tactics and incremental actions I could repeat. I committed to a simple sequence:

- » Earn academic credentials
- » Use those credentials to build relationships with mentors
- » Leverage those relationships to contribute to society in measurable ways

Each step created the conditions for the next.

I thought of achievement as climbing out of a deep pit. It was dark above me. I could not see the top. I could only see the next rung on the ladder I would continue building.

As the lyrics of a great song by the Rolling Stones advised:

- » *We can't always get what we want, but if we try sometimes, we just might find, we get what we need.*

I always reminded myself that progress does not come from wanting more than the moment allows, but from building what the moment requires.

REDEFINING ACHIEVEMENT AT EACH STAGE

As I transitioned from prison to community confinement, I had to adjust. The goals changed, but the strategy remained the same. I had to take incremental steps. I had to:

- » Define success for the new stage.
- » Adjust the plan, reflecting the higher level of liberty I would have in the halfway house.
- » Build tools and accountability systems to accelerate progress.
- » Execute the plan consistently, opening new opportunities along the way.

I set new SMART goals, just as I had inside. One of those goals was financial. Within five years, I intended to build assets worth at least \$1 million. If I could reach that milestone, I believed subsequent growth would come more quickly.

Decades in prison had trained me to ground projections in habits, learning, relationships, and measured progress. I understood that true success would be a moving target, rising as my capacity grew.

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ACHIEVEMENT BEGINS WITH INTERNAL CHANGE

In *Earning Freedom*, I describe how my journey began with denial and resistance. After conviction, I experienced a reckoning. I began to understand the pain I had caused my family and the responsibility I carried.

I spent my first year in solitary confinement. During that time, I got to know Officer Wilson, a correctional officer who passed my meals through a locked steel door.

- » He also brought me books.
- » Through reading, I learned to think differently.
- » By thinking differently, I opened myself to new possibilities.

As I reflect on that period, I realize that reading those books was foundational to my adjustment. No one else may ever know the role that reading played in my adjustment.

Achievement often begins internally before it becomes visible externally.

A STRATEGY FOR EARNING ACHIEVEMENT

After sentencing, authorities transferred me to a high-security penitentiary. With my plan, I developed confidence to navigate obstacles. Instead of feeling hopeless, I believed in my efficacy to influence change. I began writing letters to universities, determined to enroll in academic programs.

Drawing inspiration from lessons I learned by reading about Socrates, I adopted a three-part strategy I believed would lead to reconciliation and opportunity:

- » Educate myself,
- » Contribute to society in meaningful, measurable ways,
- » Build a strong support network.

Had it not been for the support of my sister and father, I might have abandoned hope. Had it not been for Officer Wilson feeding my mind with books, my adjustment might have gone in a very different direction.

Achievement requires a plan. The plan gives direction. Execution gives momentum and momentum creates opportunity.



CELEBRATING INCREMENTAL WINS

I learned to celebrate incremental achievements. While locked in a solitary cell, those achievements looked small:

- » Reading a book
- » Writing a book report
- » Explaining how new ideas influenced my thinking
- » Receiving a letter of encouragement

Frederick Douglass taught me that investing in ourselves is always possible, regardless of circumstance. We can develop knowledge and skills by reading, writing, and critical thinking. I may not have been able to attend a class, but I could always work to improve my vocabulary.

Growth comes not from what we are given, but from how we apply what we learn. Success and achievement favor those who prepare.

HOW ACHIEVEMENT COMPOUNDS

By my tenth year in prison, I had earned two university degrees. Publishers brought my work to the attention of others. That attention led to meaningful relationships. Those relationships developed into a coalition of people who trusted me and supported my preparation for success after release.

Each achievement reinforced the next.

When I completed my time in the halfway house and concluded my obligation to the Bureau of Prisons on August 12, 2013, new opportunities emerged:

- » Teaching at San Francisco State University,
- » Advocating for reforms that allow people to earn freedom through merit,
- » Building businesses and investment strategies that led to financial independence and greater freedom of time.

Those opportunities did not appear suddenly. They were the result of preparation meeting timing. Incremental achievements compound like interest. Warren Buffett famously described that phenomenon of compounding interest as the eighth wonder of the world. Small, consistent gains grow into major milestones over time.

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ACHIEVEMENT AND THE STRAIGHT-A GUIDE

This is why the Straight-A Guide dedicates an entire lesson to achievement. Not to celebrate outcomes, but to reinforce the importance of recognizing progress. Small wins matter more than we realize. They build confidence, credibility, and capacity. Over time, they open doors we could not have predicted.

SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING EXERCISE

Complete the following exercise in writing:

1. Identify one small achievement you can complete this week.
 - » It should be specific, measurable, and within your control.
2. Explain how that achievement supports your long-term goals.
3. Show the connection between today's action and tomorrow's opportunity.
4. Decide how you will record and acknowledge this achievement.
 - » Progress must be documented to compound.

At the end of the week, ask yourself:

5. What did I accomplish?
6. What did this achievement prepare me to do next?
7. How will I build on this momentum?
 - » Achievement requires continuity, not comparison with others.

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