

STRAIGHT-A GUIDE
LESSON ONE: DEFINING SUCCESS

Regardless of what challenges we're facing, at any given time, we can define success. Success does not require freedom, money, or favorable circumstances. To succeed, we need to begin with clarity of where we are, and what we're trying to achieve.

At its core, success is working toward the best possible outcome, given the circumstances we're in. When we define success, we can be more deliberate at moving toward the solution we want to achieve. Even in prison, where so much is taken away, this remains one of the few choices that no one can take from us.

When you define success, you reclaim agency. You take a step toward living as if you're the CEO of your life. Instead of being defined by external circumstances, you're defining yourself with the plans you make, with the commitment you make, with your ability to execute a plan.

While serving decades in prison, I studied CEOs and leaders from many walks of life. From those observations, I learned that all effective leaders share one discipline. Before solving problems, before taking action, they define what they are trying to achieve. That single act shapes every decision that follows. I adopted that same discipline while serving my prison term. The strategy changed how I experienced every stage of confinement.

This first lesson in the Straight-A Guide emphasizes a simple but powerful truth: If you define success clearly, you can begin building a better life from wherever you stand today.

This principle guided my decisions while I served my sentence, and ever since I finished my time in the halfway house, and my obligation to the Bureau of Prisons in August of 2013. I try to share the strategy with others because it had such an influence on opening opportunities, leading me from crisis to liberty and a higher quality of life.

DEFINING SUCCESS RESTORES CONTROL

Prison distorts time. Days blend together. Motivation erodes. Without a clear definition of success, it becomes easy to drift, react, or surrender to hopelessness. Defining success restores control.

Consider this thought as a practical guide:

- » Success means knowing what a good day looks like before the day begins.

If you can explain what a successful day, week, or month looks like:

- » You can write it down.
- » You can explain it to someone else.
- » You can measure it at the end of the day.

Then you are defining success correctly.

LESSONS FROM A MENTOR

I credit my mentor, Lee Nobmann, with inspiring me to write the Straight-A Guide. Lee visited me often while I was incarcerated. He is a self-made billionaire businessman, but more importantly, he lives with humility and strong values.

Early in his career, Lee shared a story about a conversation that shaped him. At the time, he owned a single store selling building supplies. He told a friend of his father that one day he wanted to own ten stores, each producing \$10 million in annual sales. He set a goal of building a business that would generate \$100 million in annual revenue.

The response was dismissive.

- » “Talk is cheap,” the man said.

Lee ignored the negativity. He had clarity. He defined success before opportunity existed. He took methodical steps forward. More than 30 years later, the family-owned company he founded has generated billions in revenues, and routinely exceeds \$500 million in annual sales.

- » Lee’s advantage was not money or connections.
- » He had the wisdom to seek clarity, which put him on the pathway for more



opportunity.

That lesson taught me a great deal during the crisis of my confinement. Prison strips away opportunity. Defining success prepares you for when opportunity returns.

APPLYING THE LESSON INSIDE PRISON

During Lee's visits, he asked how I would define success upon release. If I wanted to build a business around the lessons I was learning, he encouraged me to create a mechanism to share those lessons with others.

Those conversations planted the seeds for the Straight-A Guide, a course I began writing during my 22nd year of confinement. It became a ten-part framework designed to guide decisions when circumstances are difficult and uncertain. Success, however, is not static. It changes by stage.

When I was held in solitary confinement, before I was even sentenced, I read about Socrates and realized I had to think differently. At that stage, success meant enduring my sentence and preparing myself to return to society without limitations that would prevent me from realizing my highest potential.

Later stages required different definitions:

- » Survival and stabilization.
- » Preparation and skill-building.
- » Transition and reintegration.

You do not need the perfect definition of success forever. You need the right definition for now.

THE PURSUIT OF SUCCESS IS A MINDSET

To serve the final year of my sentence, I transitioned from prison to a halfway house in August, 2012. The habit of defining success daily remained central to my life. As circumstances changed, so did my definition.

As I write this today, success looks very different from what it did in solitary confinement or during my first days of freedom. Each stage built upon the last.



This aligns with what I later learned from Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience. In plain terms, meaningful progress often comes when we lose track of time while doing purposeful work. Prison can make time feel endless. Defining success turns time into progress.

Success is not a finish line. It is an evolving target that keeps us moving forward.

SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING EXERCISE

Take time to complete this exercise in writing:

- » Define success for your current stage of life in one clear sentence.

Be specific and realistic.

- » Identify one small but intentional action you can take this week that supports that definition.

At the end of the week, ask yourself:

- » Did my actions align with how I defined success?
 - » If not, what needs to change next week?

This practice, repeated daily, becomes the foundation for everything that follows in the Straight-A Guide.

