

STRAIGHT-A GUIDE

LESSON FOUR: CHOOSING THE RIGHT ATTITUDE

In the first lessons of this course, I wrote about defining success and setting goals. Those steps are prerequisites. They establish direction and structure. Once you know what success looks like and how you plan to move toward it, one question remains:

- » Will you commit to the process long enough to see results?

To answer that question, we should get a good understanding of what it means to develop “the right attitude.”

When I began writing *The Straight-A Guide*, I was still locked inside a prison, with many years remaining to serve. Inspired by one of my mentors, I wanted to build a body of work that other people could use to carve their own pathways through the crisis of confinement.

While *The Straight-A Guide* has special relevance for people in prison, I do not think the lessons are limited to incarceration. One fact that unites us all as human beings is that we all face crisis, and crisis can appear in many forms.

- » People can face a crisis because they lost freedom.
- » They can face a crisis because they struggle with financial reversals.
- » They can face a crisis because they have complications with family members.
- » They can face a crisis because they lack fulfillment with work or career.

What determines outcomes is not the crisis itself, but the attitude a person brings to confronting it.

During my 26 years in prison, I learned that progress required more than clarity and goals. It required a 100% commitment to success, however I defined success at that stage of my life. Attitude became the difference between stagnation and momentum.

WHAT I MEAN BY THE RIGHT ATTITUDE

When I refer to the “right attitude,” I am not talking about blind optimism or positive thinking detached from reality. I am referring to a disciplined decision:

- » A commitment to keep moving forward, even when progress is slow and outcomes are delayed.

People in prison strengthen themselves when they focus on their attitude. They may not be able to control what others do, but they can always control how they respond to the challenges around them.

- » Confinement tests patience.
- » It can erode confidence.
- » It tempts people to lower expectations or disengage entirely.

With the right attitude, we determine whether to pursue our goals actively. Active, intentional decisions stop us from allowing goals to fade into wishful thinking, with excuses for the reasons beyond our failure.

A values-based, goal-oriented life only works if a person is willing to invest in personal development consistently, even when no one is watching and no reward is immediate.

LESSONS FROM A MENTOR I NEVER MET

I first learned about the power that comes with developing the right attitude by studying leadership lessons from Jim Collins. In his book *Good to Great*, he introduced two concepts that shaped the way I approached my prison journey:

1. The Flywheel
2. The BHAG (Big Hairy Audacious Goal)

Although I never met Jim Collins, he became one of my mentors through his writing. That experience reinforced an important lesson:

- » We can find mentors regardless of our circumstances.

THE FLYWHEEL: BUILDING MOMENTUM DURING CONFINEMENT

The flywheel describes how small, consistent efforts compound over time. Collins asks readers to imagine a massive wheel mounted on a vertical rod. At first, pushing the wheel requires tremendous effort. Despite the energy invested, it bare-



ly moves. But with persistence, each push builds on the last. Gradually, momentum increases. Eventually, the wheel begins to turn on its own, powered by the energy already invested.

This metaphor described my experience in prison perfectly. During confinement, I focused on small, repeatable actions:

- » Writing 1,000 words every day.
- » Studying leadership principles.
- » Using journals to document all that I learned.
- » Keeping my focus on the future I wanted to build.

None of these actions produced immediate results. But taken together, day after day, they created momentum. One completed task made the next easier. One success reinforced belief in the process.

Attitude is what keeps the flywheel moving when results are invisible. It helps us accept and anticipate the power of incremental progress.

THE BHAG: SUSTAINING HOPE OVER THE LONG TERM

Collins also introduced the concept of a Big Hairy Audacious Goal. A BHAG is not a short-term target. It is a long-range vision that provides meaning and direction over years.

He describes a BHAG as emerging from the intersection of three questions:

1. What are you deeply passionate about?
2. What can you become exceptionally good at?
3. What sustains your resource or economic engine?

While in prison, these questions helped me define a future beyond confinement.

- » I became deeply passionate about learning from leaders and sharing those lessons with others.
- » I believed I could become exceptionally good at translating complex leadership concepts into practical strategies for people facing crisis.
- » And I understood that those strategies could create value far beyond prison walls.

That long-term vision nurtured hope when daily progress felt slow. The BHAG did not replace short-term goals. It gave them meaning.



Attitude Connects Daily Action to Long-Term Purpose

- » The flywheel and the BHAG work together.
- » The flywheel governs daily behavior.
- » The BHAG provides long-term direction.

When we develop the right attitude, we empower ourselves to connect both short-term and long-term goals.

My commitment to volunteering my time, writing daily, and building this nonprofit without compensation reflects the same values and goals I developed years ago in prison. I never ask anyone to do something I am unwilling to do myself. That consistency reinforces credibility and accountability.

We do not develop the right attitude once and move on. We must check our attitude daily, and show our pursuit of excellence with the decisions we make, regardless of external influences.

SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING EXERCISE

Complete the following exercises in writing:

- » Describe the attitude you believe your current stage of life requires.
 - » Be honest about the challenges you face.
 - » Identify one small, repeatable action you can commit to daily or weekly that supports your goals.
 - » This is your flywheel push.
- » Write one long-term aspiration that gives meaning to those daily efforts.
 - » This does not need to be perfect. It needs to be motivating.
- » At the end of each week, ask yourself:
 - » Did my actions reflect the attitude I committed to?
 - » If not, what adjustment will I make next week?

Attitude transforms effort into momentum. Momentum makes progress inevitable.



PRISON PROFESSORS CHARITABLE CORPORATION

Prison Professors Charitable Corporation / PO Box 50996 / Irvine CA 92619

IRS 501c3 #85-2603315 / www.PrisonProfessors.org

Email: Interns@PrisonProfessors.org