

STRAIGHT-A GUIDE

LESSON SEVEN: ACCOUNTABILITY

In the earlier lessons of this course, I explained the framework that helped me make better decisions. I hope that participants are learning how:

- » defining success gives direction,
- » setting goals creates structure,
- » choosing the right attitude sustains effort,
- » aspiring to the life we intend to lead allows us to see beyond present circumstances, and
- » acting intentionally leads to better results.

In this lesson, we'll get an idea of how measuring incremental progress with accountability tools holds all those principles together.

Without accountability, success becomes vague, goals lose urgency, attitude weakens under pressure, aspiration drifts into fantasy, and action becomes inconsistent. Accountability is the discipline of measuring whether we are doing what we said we would do.

ACCOUNTABILITY IS PERSONAL BEFORE IT IS EXTERNAL

Accountability does not begin with rules, supervisors, or systems. It begins with ownership. It requires us to accept responsibility for outcomes, even when circumstances are unfair.

I developed this lesson of personal accountability over time, as shown through my relationship with Carole.

Carole came into my life more than two decades ago, in early 2002. Although we attended the same schools from fifth grade through high school in Lake Forest Park, near Seattle, we were never close friends. She was disciplined and focused. I lived recklessly, always in pursuit of immediate gratification. Our paths diverged long before prison became an integral part of my life.

We both had graduated from Shorecrest high school in 1982.

Our life story began in 2001, when Carole was coordinating the 20-year reunion for Shorecrest High School's class of 1982. An unknown student in a university had been assigned to read one of the books I wrote while I was in prison. While writing a report on me, he reached out to Shorecrest to inquire if it was the same school where I graduated.

Carole received the letter and she asked the student about his interest in me. He explained that he was writing a report on my early life, the student wanted to know what kind of student I had been in high school.

That student's question prompted Carole to write a letter to me. The letter began our correspondence. Over time, our writing turned into visits. She traveled from her home in Oregon to visit me in the Fort Dix Federal Prison, which led to a romance. Through regular visits and writing, we fell in love.

We were married inside a prison visiting room on June 24, 2003.

Getting married in prison was an unusual outcome for a person who still faced another decade in prison. Carole hoped the system might bend. She expected to work with me in ways that would lead to my early release from prison. I did not have such hopes. President George Bush was in the White House, I didn't expect any changes that would advance my release date. But I pledged to Carole that I would continue working while inside, and once I got out, I could push for changes that would lead to thousands of people getting out of prison.

Rather than resent the reality of my sentence, we made a decision: we would use time intentionally to prepare for success.

I promised her that if she joined me in living according to a disciplined plan, we would build a meaningful life together.

ACCOUNTABILITY REQUIRES SHARED SACRIFICE

As I described in *Earning Freedom*, our marriage unfolded inside a system that was not designed to support families. Administrators transferred me repeatedly. Each transfer required Carole to uproot her life and relocate so that we could remain connected.



She moved more than 20 times during the years we sustained our marriage through prison visiting rooms.

Those moves were not symbolic. They were costly. They required sacrifice, planning, and resilience. Accountability meant that neither of us blamed circumstances. We focused instead on what we could control.

We lived according to the Straight-A Guide:

- » Aspiring to the life we would build together upon my release, including changing laws that would open more mechanisms for people to earn freedom through merit.
- » To focus, I had to maintain the right attitude.
- » I had to take consistent action, writing books that would build upon my credibility.
- » I set clear goals of what I would get done weekly, and record progress through my journals.

Carole's professional growth reflected this discipline. Step by step, she pursued a career in nursing. She became a certified nurse's aide, then a licensed vocational nurse, a registered nurse, and eventually a master's-educated clinical nurse leader. Each advancement was the product of accountability applied daily.

From inside prison, I held myself to the same standard.

LESSONS FROM A MENTOR

I also learned the principle of accountability from mentors inside prison. One such mentor was Greg Reyes, the former CEO of Brocade Communications.

From Greg, I learned a difficult but valuable truth: the marketplace does not care about excuses. Leaders are judged by results. Radical accountability—accepting responsibility for outcomes regardless of context—raises performance standards. That lesson reinforced what others had taught me. Clear goals require measurable follow-through. Accountability is how progress becomes visible.



PERSONAL ACCOUNTABILITY

I still rely upon this principle of personal accountability today. I keep daily logs for fitness, finances, and work. I track what I do, not what I intend. I review results regularly.

I never ask anyone to do something I am unwilling to do myself.

Accountability is not punishment. It is feedback. It tells us whether our actions align with the future we say we want.

SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING EXERCISE

Complete the following exercise in writing:

1. Identify one area of your life where accountability is weakest.
 - » This may relate to education, health, finances, relationships, or preparation for release.
2. Define one measurable behavior you can track daily or weekly.
 - » Examples include hours studied, workouts completed, pages written, or money saved.
 - » Create a simple tracking method.
 - » This can be a notebook, calendar, or log.

At the end of each week, ask yourself:

3. Did my actions match my stated goals?
4. What evidence do I have?
5. What adjustment will I make next week?

Accountability turns effort into proof. Proof builds credibility. Credibility opens doors.

