

STRAIGHT-A GUIDE

LESSON EIGHT: AWARENESS

In the earlier lessons of this course, I explained how defining success gives direction, setting goals creates structure, choosing the right attitude sustains effort, aspiration gives us something meaningful to work toward, action turns intention into results, and accountability measures whether we are doing the work we said we would do.

Awareness is what allows us to adjust intelligently as conditions change. It requires us to keep our head in the game, always focused on what we're striving to achieve. Further, when we're on this disciplined path, others become aware of us. They invest in us, becoming a part of our coalition, our network that we can rely upon to accelerate our pathways to success.

Without awareness, even disciplined people drift off course. They may work hard, but in the wrong direction. Awareness helps us understand who we are, where we stand, and what forces—visible and invisible—can either help or hinder our progress.

AWARENESS IS SEEING REALITY CLEARLY

While I served 26 years in prison, I learned that success does not come from optimism alone. It comes from accurate perception. The leaders I studied did not ignore reality. They lived in the world as it existed rather than they wanted it to be. By being aware, they were more intentional, and they could adapt as necessary.

In some of our other courses, I referenced many philosophers who reinforced the importance of personal accountability. Yet two simple ideas capture everything I learned about awareness:

- » Aristotle taught the principle often summarized as know thyself.
- » Sun Tzu emphasized know thy enemy.

Awareness requires both.

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Knowing yourself means understanding your strengths, limitations, values, and tendencies. Knowing your environment means understanding obstacles, incentives, risks, and opportunities. When we acknowledge the world as it is—not as we wish it to be—we can pivot effectively.

Awareness is like driving at night. Speed alone will not get you safely to your destination. You need headlights to see what lies ahead.

AWARENESS TURNS EFFORT INTO STRATEGY

Hard work without awareness is like rowing with your eyes closed. You may expend enormous energy and still drift off course.

During my imprisonment, I learned to practice ruthless pragmatism. If I wanted to work toward transforming the prison system into one where people could earn higher levels of liberty through merit, I had to develop credentials. I had to become an authority. At least I would have to work toward a pathway that would lead others to view me as an authority. I could not afford to complain, to live in denial or fantasy.

I had to learn, and work toward a better understanding of:

- » How the prison system actually operated.
- » How society would likely respond to my background.
- » How people—both supporters and detractors—might react to my progress.

Awareness allowed me to prepare instead of react.

USING SWOT ANALYSIS FOR STRATEGIC AWARENESS

As expressed in an earlier lesson, we can always use practical tools for developing awareness. The SWOT Analysis helped me. This framework helps translate reflection into strategy by examining four areas:

- » Strengths – internal advantages you can leverage.
- » Weaknesses – internal limitations you must manage.
- » Opportunities – external factors you can use to advance.
- » Threats – external forces that can derail progress if ignored.



Think of SWOT like a map. It doesn't move you forward by itself, but without it, you are navigating blindly.

MY EXAMPLE OF STRATEGIC AWARENESS

STRENGTHS

- » While serving my sentence, I developed a self-directed work ethic. I did not wait for instructions or permission. I identified outcomes I wanted and worked relentlessly toward them. That discipline allowed me to rebuild my life after release and reach a level of independence where I no longer work for a paycheck, but to make an impact.

WEAKNESSES

- » I carry the label of "felon." That history can be used against me. Ignoring that reality would be reckless. Awareness requires acknowledging how others may perceive or exploit perceived weaknesses.

OPPORTUNITIES

- » By focusing on contribution rather than compensation, I reduced vulnerability. I do not accept payment from individuals for my work. This choice allows me to build trust, expand reach, and limit exposure to people who might otherwise try to undermine my efforts.

THREATS (ENEMIES)

- » Enemies can include systems, and social dynamics, or anything that threatens our progress, including envy. Some people resent anyone who rises above mediocrity. They may not pursue success themselves, but they do seek to diminish others. Awareness of that reality allows me to make strategic decisions that protect my progress and reputation.

Awareness should prepare us to come up with better plans, strategies, and tactics to overcome the complications that hinder progress.

AWARENESS IN A CHANGING WORLD

The world does not stand still. Political, social, and economic conditions shift constantly. Leadership changes bring policy shifts, enforcement changes, and new opportunities.

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- » When conditions change, we must evolve.
- » Our strategies will change over time.
- » We must be ready to build, break, and build again.

Awareness means staying informed, not distracted. It means adapting without losing focus.

In prison or in society, people who succeed are not those who complain about change. They are the ones who anticipate it and adjust.

Awareness is like a chessboard. Every move changes the position. If you fail to notice how the board has shifted, you lose. It's not because you lacked effort, but because you lacked perception.

SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING EXERCISE

Complete the following exercises in writing:

1. Conduct a personal SWOT Analysis.
2. Identify one strength, one weakness, one opportunity, and one threat relevant to your current stage of life.
3. Choose one adjustment you can make this week based on that awareness.
 - » This may involve changing a habit, avoiding a risk, or pursuing an opportunity.
4. Explain how this adjustment aligns with your definition of success and goals.
 - » Awareness should always inform action.

At the end of the week, ask yourself:

5. Did increased awareness improve my decision-making?
6. What did I notice that I had previously ignored?
7. What will I pay closer attention to next week?

Awareness keeps effort aligned with reality. Reality, when understood clearly, becomes an advantage.

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