

LESSON 11: ACTION AND PURPOSE

Successful people maintain a positive focus in life no matter what is going on around them. They stay focused on their past successes rather than their past failures. They also look to next action steps they need to take to get them closer to the fulfillment of their goals. They refuse to be distracted by obstacles that life presents.

—Jack Canfield

I updated this module while on airplane bound for New York City from California. I could choose to:

- » Sleep,
- » Watch a movie,
- » Read a book,
- » Listen to music, or
- » Work toward projects that align with my goals.

Since neither emails nor phone calls will disturb me while flying, I'll use this time to read and edit the remaining modules of this course. It's an example of acting and purpose—the very subject of this module.

We should always work to accomplish the goals that we say are important to us.

As a younger man, I didn't understand the importance of action. If we want to reach our highest potential, we've got to begin by taking small steps. With incremental progress, we put ourselves in a position for new opportunities. When we understand this lesson, we can more easily appreciate the urgency of making good decisions. A relationship exists between our choices today and our prospect for success in the weeks, months, and decades ahead.

This reality is as true after a person's release from prison as it is valid during the time a person serves.

When I transferred from the county jail to a high-security penitentiary, I didn't understand how the system operated. Since I defined success as emerging from prison strong, with my dignity intact, and with opportunities

to build a fulfilling life, I had to prepare. When I transitioned to the community after finishing my sentence, I wanted to work on projects that would have an impact on making a better community. But I also would need to earn a living.

With that vision, I could take the next step toward preparing, acting in ways that aligned with the SMART goals I set. For example:

- » I would earn a university degree within my first ten years of confinement.
- » I would become a published author within my first ten years of imprisonment.
- » Within my first decade, I would persuade ten mentors to help me prepare for success.

I could measure progress toward achieving each of those specific goals if I pursued them with a 100% commitment. That commitment would lead to my aspiration of getting out of prison successfully—as I defined success. On the flip side, if I didn't act in deliberate, decisive ways, I would have a plan that lacked follow through. Without action, I could not convert my aspirations into reality.

I would have to act, taking incremental steps every day.

People in prison face obstacles, just like everyone else. While incarcerated, people may spend weeks or months on lockdown or in the Special Housing Unit. From the time I served in solitary confinement, I know the limitations of living in isolation. I also know that regardless of where administrators confine us, we can always choose how we will act. We can advance our progress toward goals, or we can complain.

We take incremental action steps while locked in a cell, just like we can take incremental action steps if we're sitting on a cross-country flight in an airplane seat.

When we're locked in a cell, we may not be able to attend programs. We cannot connect with family as easily. I spent months in the SHU during the decades that I served in prison. While alone, I took small steps that aligned with my values and goals to keep productive. With small action steps, I could move closer to success.



When people act in ways that align with how they define success, they develop strength and confidence, knowing that they're taking another step toward reaching their aspirations.

People in prison must become comfortable with being uncomfortable. They should expect to pass through tough times now and in the future. Those tough times represent a part of the success journey, and we must accept reality: There is always more struggle to come.

TAKE 5 MINUTES

11-1: What does “being comfortable with being uncomfortable” mean to you?

The Mindset of Success:

To build strength in times of difficulty, I rely upon the Straight-A Guide as a sailor depends upon a compass. A compass can help a sailor navigate treacherous seas, and we can use the compass to stay on our course toward reaching the goals we've set for our life.

We sometimes need self-motivation to act when times are tough. Those action steps require the mindset of success. Without self-discipline, we leave ourselves vulnerable to influences from others.

I remember Wayne, a person I met in prison. Wayne told me about growing up in a community rife with crime, substance abuse, and gang prevalence. In that community, he said, people adjusted as if they were crabs in a bucket.

I asked Wayne to help me understand the crabs-in-a-bucket analogy. He said if you put a batch of crabs in a bucket, one would try to scale the wall and climb out. Before the escaping crab progresses, the other crabs would gather and try to pull the aspiring crab back inside.

People that lived in his community, Wayne told me, were the same way. They didn't want to act in ways that would help them succeed—but neither did they want others from their neighborhood to prepare for success. If



every person in the community failed, people wouldn't feel so bad about their inability to get their life together. On the other hand, if a person from the same community succeeded in making it out to a better life, he said, everyone else would realize the colossal disappointment of life—and failure stings.

People that want to conquer their environment must start by defining success. Then they should set clear goals and pursue them with a 100 percent commitment. It's one way to show they have the right attitude. We can always take small action steps to advance toward the aspirations we want to pursue.

This disciplined, deliberate strategy fundamentally differs from Wayne's crabs-in-the-bucket theory. Instead, it aligns with someone who commits to building a strong mindset.

In 2017, when I wrote the original version of this module, I was launching a health-care business with my wife. From my perspective, the health-care industry offered promising prospects to accomplish many goals. With an aging population, I surmised demand for homes with 24-hour caregivers would grow.

My wife's credentials as a registered nurse gave us a strategic advantage to succeed in this business; she could oversee staff while I would oversee operations. The business would generate revenues we could use to service debt on the real estate we would acquire. The end goal would become possible with a series of incremental action steps.

Consider the infinite number of incremental action steps that would have been necessary to reach the goal:

- » Write a plan to get a good understanding of how much capital the business would require.
- » Identify potential partners that could provide financial resources to build the business.
- » Make enough presentations to advance prospects for funding.
- » Locate the property and make the acquisition.
- » Complete modifications to the property.
- » Obtain licenses from regulatory agencies.
- » Create marketing campaigns to generate revenues.



- » Hire and train staff.
- » Operate the business.

Regardless of how much we plan, as captains of our ship, we must be flexible. When plans don't work out, rather than make excuses, we adjust.

Although I set out to build a health-care business with Carole, anticipating the venture would grow, I had to modify the plan. My felony conviction from 1987 proved more burdensome than I expected, complicating my ability to get the license I needed to operate the health-care business.

Fortunately, prison conditioned me to face resistance with equanimity. To overcome this hurdle, I could reflect on the action steps I had to take when I served my sentence. Those action steps did not seem relevant to other people around me in prison, but they put me on a pathway to develop business opportunities upon release.

When we connect the dots from yesterday's decisions, we can see how incremental action steps opened opportunities. That strategy leads to the mental fortitude necessary to overcome new challenges. Those challenges arise continually while serving a prison term or on the other side of the sentence.

We advance prospects to succeed over challenges when we take small, incremental action steps. We must prepare to climb hills to get where we want to go. We can develop tools, tactics, and resources to help us jump over gaps. We can wake early and work late into the night.

Since getting out of prison, I rely upon the same strategies that strengthened my mindset while serving portions of my sentence in special housing units.

When I reflect, I see the power and influence of my early decisions. I read about Socrates for the first time while inside a jail cell during that awkward transition between the day a jury convicted me and the day a judge sentenced me. That story changed the way I thought.

I began thinking of avatars. The avatars helped me think about values and goals. That process gave me the right attitude, and it gave me an aspiration. Action steps led me to the right programs. By finishing programs, I built my skillset. Each action step helped me get through prison. As a result, I ended my prison term with many opportunities to succeed.



The action steps we take today make a difference in our life. Regardless of what stage in the journey we're in or what eternal circumstances we endure, we can take small, incremental action steps that will lead to better outcomes.

For that reason, I encourage people to begin action steps that will advance prospects for success as they pursue their aspirations. This strategy helps to build a stronger mindset.

We can become more than past bad choices and more than tough times of the moment. By reading about leaders, I saw traits that they shared. Consider what you know about:

- » Socrates
- » Frederick Douglass
- » Nelson Mandela
- » Viktor Frankl
- » Mahatma Gandhi
- » Martin Luther King
- » Malcolm X
- » Steve Jobs
- » Bill Gates
- » Michael Jordan

They all spent time reflecting on past decisions and using those reflections to make projections on how they could improve. Those masterminds saw how small steps could lead them to their fullest potential. They never stopped acting in ways that aligned with their plan.

By thinking about our past decisions, we strengthen ourselves to climb our way through tough times. Introspection will help us make better decisions, giving us the energy to persist with the next step.

Leaders leave clues that teach us how to make progress, and we can learn from the clues they leave us:

- » Leaders know how to state their values.
- » Leaders set goals.
- » Leaders live with the right attitude.



- » Leaders have high aspirations.
- » Leaders act in ways that harmonize with what they aspire to become.

Leaders change the world by acting. They know how to prepare in ways that will lead to new heights of success. They make life better with every decision, with every thought, and with every action step they take.

TAKE 15 MINUTES

11-2: What can you learn from those leaders?

11-3: What's your release plan?

Make Good Choices:

Suppose we don't take action toward the goals we set. In that case, we risk deluding ourselves. Anyone can talk about what he wants to achieve. Those who genuinely aspire to build a life of meaning, relevance, and fulfillment after prison take daily action steps, regardless of what external influences may complicate their lives.

While in prison, I interacted with many people that waited for calendar pages to turn, saying they would make changes once they got out. They didn't act. They didn't pursue the small, necessary steps to succeed. They could have been:

- » advancing their reading skills,
- » developing their vocabulary, and
- » improving their ability to comprehend mathematical equations.

Every day, we should act in ways that align with our values and goals; those actions should advance our prospects for success.

- » Describe the effort you put into personal development.
- » How could reading books in the prison's library influence your prospects for success?



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- » What steps could you take to master arithmetic?
- » In what ways would learning algebra, geometry, and calculus open opportunities for you to earn an income upon release?
- » How would your income capacity change if you habitually write at least 1,000 words every day?

Incremental Action Steps

From Marshall Goldsmith, a mastermind teacher, I learned a great deal. He distinguished himself as one of the top business coaches in America. I read his influential business book, *What Got You Here Won't Get You There*. Besides writing books and articles for business, Dr. Goldsmith built a second career as a coach. People on the path to becoming CEOs hire him to learn the best action steps they can take to reach their potential.

People who had already achieved a high level of success hired Dr. Goldsmith to learn action steps. In his book, *What Got You Here Won't Get You There*, I considered how I could take those same action steps while serving my sentence. He didn't write the book for people in prison, but the message certainly applied to anyone that wanted to change.

If you want to influence people who can hire you, start acting today. If you contemplate what people might expect from you, take action with purpose. That process led me to think about avatars.

- » Who were my avatars?

They were people who could help me build a life after 26 years in prison. My avatars included:

- » My unit team and staff members in prison that could influence my future,
- » My future probation officer,
- » My prospective employer or business partners
- » My future creditors who could provide the resources I would need to start a new life.

Who can serve as your “avatars.”



Take action to prove worthy of their trust. That strategy worked well for me. If you take action, you will develop the strength to persevere through tough times and position yourself for success.

The action steps will change as time passes. First, you master a lesson at one level. Then you can advance to the next level. Growth comes from taking small steps. If you don't act today, you miss an opportunity to take a new action step tomorrow.

What action step can you take today?

- » Can you read?
- » Can you learn?
- » Can you write?
- » Can you do pushups?
- » Can you do leg lifts?
- » Can you do crunches?
- » Can you pray?
- » Can you ask for help?
- » Can you help others?

Align actions with values and goals.

TAKE 10 MINUTES

11-4: Who are the people you want to impress in a positive way?

11-5: Who should believe in you?

11-6: What steps will lead you through prison?

11-7: What steps will open options for you when the gates let you out?

I started acting with purpose toward change after a jury found me guilty. As I rested on the concrete slab of my cell, I stared at the ceiling and the walls and thought about the life I'd been living before prison, and how poor



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decisions led me into my predicament. I had to block out the noise and think about what I could do to change.

Asking that question was an action step.

The question led me to look for an answer.

I read about Socrates.

Reading was an action step.

By reading about a leader, I could start to think in different ways.

I thought about avatars, another action step.

By thinking about avatars, I could see the following action steps to take:

- » Avatars would want me to educate myself.
- » Avatars would like me to contribute to society.
- » Avatars would want me to build a support network.

By thinking about avatars, I devised a strategy to guide my journey. It led to my values: Education, contribution, and support. I set clear goals. I said I would achieve those goals during my first ten years.

- » I would earn a university degree.
- » I would find a way to publish
- » I would persuade 10 people to help me succeed.

To achieve my goals, I would need to take small action steps. First, I had to find a school that would allow me to earn a degree. I neither had the money for tuition nor an exemplary academic record that would qualify me for a scholarship. Still, I had to start somewhere.

As I wrote in a previous lesson, I took the following action steps:

- » I found a dictionary.
- » The book included the names of universities, and I wrote out the names.
- » The book also gave the cities and zip codes for the schools.
- » I wrote an unsolicited letter to each school.



Persistence:

We need patience, persistence, and perseverance. Since my struggles were in prison, I had to figure out ways to transcend the walls that separated me from the community. I wrote more than 100 letters, exercising patience. I might have to wait months for a response. Sending a letter would be one step, but sending 100 letters would be 100 steps. I might not have found the right person if I had only sent one letter. By sending more than 100 letters, I had a better chance. I had to keep acting intentionally, with purpose.

We all must be persistent with the action steps we take to prepare for success.

Small action steps each day would lead to my goal. I could not control whether a school would respond.

But I could control how many letters I wrote to different schools.

By hand, I wrote letter after letter. I bought stamps, and I wrote to as many schools as I could find. I wrote about four letters per hour. In eight hours, I wrote about 30 letters. In two days, I sent 60 letters. Then, I could wait, or I could write more.

Those small action steps brought me closer to my goal. Ohio University accepted me. Once I started school, I felt a change. At that moment, I felt as if I were transitioning from prisoner to a student on my way to earning a university degree.

I wanted more than a credential. A degree was a piece of paper. More than the degree, I wanted to learn. By learning, I could persuade avatars to invest in me. They would see me as something more than my bad choices when I was 20. Acting with purpose would influence avatars I would meet in the future.

Action Plans Lead to Success:

Marshal Goldsmith taught the leaders that hired him how to keep growing. We must keep growing, too. If we act with intentional purpose today, we will advance our preparations to succeed. Our growth will put us



in a position for new action steps. We cannot reach higher levels of growth tomorrow unless we take our first action steps today.

I am always looking back. When I reflect, I can see the pivotal points in my journey. I finished my prison term in August 2013. When I transferred to a halfway house in San Francisco, I started to grow my business with incremental action steps.

- » When did I begin sowing seeds that would lead investors to partner with me?
- » How did I start?

I started with small, incremental steps, such as reading a book in a jail cell. The book led me to think differently and helped me to develop a mindset of success. I started to think about avatars. I took small steps that would show I wanted to earn their trust. I wrote to schools, which led to my studies and earning degrees. I wrote articles, chapters, and books, opening more opportunities to grow my support network.

My commitment to preparing for success after prison gave me a reason to avoid problems with staff or other people serving sentences alongside me.

Each step led me closer. Now, when I face tough times, I look back. I see how small action steps got me through tough times before; there will always be struggles. The tough times are part of the journey. By focusing on success, I know I can take another action step. As in the past, the action steps I take today will lead to new growth. Countless action steps allowed me to pivot from struggle to prosperity:

- » I earned a bachelor's degree in my fourth year of imprisonment.
- » I published my first article in my sixth year.
- » I earned a master's degree in my seventh year of the term.
- » I published my first book in my 10th year.
- » By publishing, I built a massive support network.
- » The support network led to marrying the love of my life in prison.
- » Marriage allowed me to publish more, and the writing brought income.



- » Income from my writing supported my wife, who went to nursing school.
- » With my wife's degrees in nursing, I could learn about health care.
- » My track record led to job offers and income opportunities before I got out.
- » I became a professor at a university within three weeks of finishing my sentence.
- » As a professor, I could more effectively work toward prison and sentence reform.
- » I worked with law schools to build more influence with judges, prosecutors, and prison officials.
- » I leveraged those relationships to begin bringing products I created into jails and prisons across America.
- » I persuaded investors to partner with me.
- » Those relationships led to my building many different businesses.

TAKE 10 MINUTES

11-6: What incremental action steps can you start taking today?

