

LESSON 12: PERSONAL ACCOUNTABILITY

Great companies operate with high cultures of accountability. Those accountability metrics help us determine whether we are succeeding. Accountability systems let us know when we must correct course and pursue new strategies.

—Steve Ballmer

Sometimes we feel like we're trying to accomplish a task that we deem essential to our preparation for success. The system may not allow us to progress, bogging us down with all types of red tape or bureaucratic procedures. From our perspective, the reasons don't make sense.

People can get in our way, obstructing or discouraging us. Authority figures may vehemently argue that we won't ever be able to succeed in the ways we want due to our past decisions.

When preparing for success after prison, we must stay on the path, holding ourselves accountable daily, even though we encounter obstacles. Going through the challenges or responding responsibly to them is another step in our preparation.

If we're determined to succeed, we can learn a great deal from the mindset of the Stoics. They teach us the importance of personal accountability.

Either we blame ourselves for not achieving our goals, or we don't blame anyone at all. If we look for excuses, we're not going to lead a very productive life. Although we may face challenging circumstances that limit our progress, we always have the power to choose how we respond.

Rather than allowing other people's decisions to anger us, we can focus on our deficiencies and push ourselves to do better. If other people refuse permission that we may need, ideally, we've invested enough time and energy to develop the art and skills of persuasion. If rules are stopping us, consider the ways that those rules could potentially work in our favor. We must be tolerant of other people's mistakes or bad decisions.

Remember that each of us has made plenty of mistakes and bad decisions in the past.



We may live in an environment that makes us feel like everyone is conspiring or plotting our demise. Yet, we grow stronger when we hold ourselves accountable, accepting that we have the power to focus on what matters.

Leaders, or masterminds, taught me this lesson on personal accountability:

Our attitude, decisions, and actions determine whether we succeed—not the decisions of others.

Accountability metrics aren't new. Whether we're fathers, mothers, sons, or daughters, we've relied upon accountability tools to track progress. For example, parents expect school-age children to bring home report cards. What purpose do report cards serve? They help us assess progress, showing what students are doing well and where they can improve. The report cards hold students accountable.

Sports enthusiasts, either coaches or fans, use accountability logs to assess how well players or teams are doing. They help us measure performance. We count wins, losses, batting averages, passing, or rushing yards. Depending on the sport, we count runs or points. Each metric gives us an idea of future performance.

Investors rely upon accountability logs to assess how stocks perform in different time frames. They measure whether the pace of sales will meet growth targets. Financial reports let us know whether a company is poised to lead the market.

An investor or business leader may rely upon accountability metrics to ask Socratic questions.

For example, in what ways would merging with a supplier or a competitor increase efficiencies?

Those types of questions give investors an idea of the company's health. Investors hold themselves accountable by assessing all sorts of metrics. Similarly, accountability metrics can help us determine whether we're on the right track, personally. By creating accountability metrics, we can examine our choices and performance.



Aristotle, another teacher from ancient Greece, wrote that we should always examine performance. Many scholars of the Hellenic period credit Aristotle with saying:

“The unexamined life is not worth living.”

If people of wisdom use accountability metrics to examine their past decisions and project future performance, shouldn't we do the same?

TAKE 10 MINUTES

12-1: What takeaways on personal accountability do you get from the leaders around you?

12-2: In what ways have you examined your choices?

12-3: How have the choices you've made in the past influenced who you are today?

12-4: What choices can you make today to influence the success you want to achieve tomorrow?

I examine past choices a lot. When I think about past decisions, I also think of costs. How would you respond to the following questions:

- » What did I gain or lose from my past decisions?
- » If I made a different choice, would I be better off today?
- » What options can I choose today?
- » Which choice will put me on track for the best future?

These types of reflections cause us to examine our life. They help us make better choices. From inside jail cells, I started assessing how my past decisions led to my confinement. Then I began thinking about tools I could create to measure progress. Those thoughts helped me to develop a release plan that I could use to leverage my way into new opportunities.

I needed to create accountability logs to keep me on the path to success. I used that strategy throughout the entire 26 years that I served. I still use



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that strategy today, even though I completed my obligation to the Bureau of Prisons on August 12, 2013.

Starting Over:

Being in prison gave me a chance to start over; ironically, since writing the first version of this Preparing for Success After Prison course in 2017, I've found that I routinely use the lessons in this course. I use them in my business, and I use them in my life. They always help me to recalibrate and get back on track.

While stuck in a jail cell, I knew that I wanted to change. In some ways, being in jail opened opportunities to recalibrate. I had a place to sleep, and the system would provide for all my necessities, including food and water. Institutions would provide clothes. Access to financial resources would ease the pain of confinement, but I did not need money. Had I not been incarcerated, I would need an income to provide for myself.

I needed tools to measure my progress. Progress would help me build a powerful case, showing my commitment to personal development. By making accomplishments from prison—despite the obstacles—more support could follow. That support might prove essential to my preparations for success.

I could count the number of months that passed. Each month would lead me closer to my release date. But a release date wouldn't set me free. Sadly, when many people conclude their prison term, they find enormous struggle on the other side. While going through my journey inside, I listened to many people who told me about the challenges they faced when they got out from previous terms:

People that served time and then returned to prison told me they could not overcome:

- » employment hurdles,
- » challenges finding housing,
- » feelings of being unwelcome in society,
- » the need for resources to make a clean start,
- » the pull from a criminal lifestyle.



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Some people told me that they preferred to live in prison than live with all the challenges in society.

Those people could change their life if they wanted, but they adjusted in ways that conditioned them to live in prison. They believed in prison maxims:

“The best way to serve time is to forget about the world outside.”

Later, they learned the disappointing reality that their choices in prison made them less able to fit in with society. They developed a tone, mannerisms, and attitude while living in the prison adjustment. In the broader community, the prison vibe didn't bode well for people who said they wanted to get on the pathway to success.

By the time I returned to society, the lessons I had learned from masterminds had left an indelible impression on me. Books I read about leaders and masterminds or the lessons I learned from listening to those people taught me the importance of personal accountability.

When I finished serving my sentence, I wanted to pay it forward by showing others how they could grow by learning the same lessons that leaders taught me. Any person could choose how to adjust in prison. If they understood the power of creating personal accountability tools, they might develop new resources to restore confidence. The accountability tool would show the relationship between decisions, actions, and prospects for higher levels of success.

To become more persuasive in helping people see the potency of accountability metrics, I needed to develop the credibility that would come from a successful reentry. To paraphrase a well-known cliché, when we give a person a fish, the person eats for a day, but when we teach a person to fish, the person eats for a lifetime. Assisting others would be one way to be the change I wanted to see in the world.

I truly believed that other people could build better lives if they learned the same lessons masterminds taught me. All of us could work to:

- » define values,
- » set clear goals,
- » improve our attitude,



- » visualize aspirations,
- » take small action steps, and
- » hold ourselves accountable.

As I studied, I read the work of John Locke, a philosopher. John Locke lived during the late 1600s. In his epoch, the world was coming out of the Dark Ages and into an era of hope. People referred to the new era as The Enlightenment. People were learning more.

Locke wrote that all humans came into the world with “a blank slate.” He said that human beings were neither good nor bad. We saw things and heard noises. Those things we saw and noises we heard made an impression on our minds. Some people had positive role models all around them, and they learned to make good decisions. Others lived in environments that taught them destructive habits. We became the product of what we learned.

Many of us can appreciate the wisdom in the saying: “But for the grace of God, there go I.” That mindset may make us more critical of our decisions and more tolerant of the choices that others make.

John Locke said that even if we made bad decisions in the past, we could learn new concepts. We could start at any time to make good decisions. Leaders know we must hold ourselves accountable to make changes and better decisions.

From the writings of John Lock, I learned a great deal. Early “learning” led me into a criminal lifestyle. Reading John Locke’s work taught me that what I “learned” could also be “unlearned.” I could build a better life by following clues from successful people.

With certainty, people who achieve high levels of success hold themselves accountable. They don’t wait for others to tell them whether they’re on the right path. They know where they’re going. They engineer success, and they don’t make excuses. Accountability metrics inform them about making acceptable progress to succeed or whether they need to adjust.

Successful people taught me how to create my tools and measure progress. To build an accountability metric, I had to:

- » define success,



- » set a timeline, and
- » measure progress on the timeline I set.

It's the same as what we see in others:

- » Like a parent who uses a report card to hold his child accountable, I could hold myself accountable.
- » Like a coach who uses statistics to measure athletic performance, I could create an accountability metric to grow from one goal to the next.
- » Like an investor assesses the pace of a stock's growth, I could measure if I were on track to succeed.

In what ways can accountability tools help you emulate the habits and performance of successful people?

Why Use Accountability Metrics?

My avatars spoke the language of accountability. They understood that “we get what we measure.”

My actions would influence whether avatars would believe in me or move on. By holding myself accountable, I anticipated that I could earn their trust, despite the bad decisions of my youth.

At the start of my sentence, I thought of how I could use my time in ways to persuade people to believe in me, even though my past included the following record:

- » I sold cocaine.
- » A jury convicted me.
- » A judge sentenced me to 45 years.
- » I would complete my sentence in 26 years if I didn't lose credits for statutory good time.

Accountability metrics could help me overcome challenges. I simply had to begin with a clear understanding of what I wanted, and then create a plan. Setting clear values and goals was essential to my personal growth and development plan that would guide me to release. I needed to be clear



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about how my decisions would influence the opportunities I could open in prison and when I came to the end of my sentence.

I thought about my avatars to set my strategy and the growth I would make.

TAKE 15 MINUTES: DEVELOP CRITICAL THINKING WITH YOUR RESPONSES

12-5: In what ways does your past record or decisions influence the way that others perceive you?

12-6: How will your life change when you finish serving your sentence?

12-7: What could I do in prison to ease my path to success after I got out?

All people serving time should ask similar questions. Then they should build accountability metrics that will help them stay on track. In my case, I considered how my avatars:

- » would consider me worthy of their trust if I earned a degree from prison,
- » would find it easier to employ me or extend me credit if I could show that I gave back to society while I was in prison,
- » may be willing to invest in me if they saw that others believed in me.

With accountability logs, I could measure daily progress and work toward the goals I set daily.

Since I went to jail at age 23, I didn't know how to grasp 26 years inside. Instead, I thought about what I could accomplish in the first ten years. When I hit the ten-year mark, I wanted a record of accomplishments that would speak louder than words:

- » I wanted a university degree.
- » I wanted to publish something.
- » I wanted a support network of at least ten people.



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I had to hold myself accountable to achieve those goals and not blame anything on my environment. I could succeed or fail based on the chart I set out for myself, and everything would matter. From leaders, I learned that I should:

- » Visualize success,
- » Create a plan,
- » Prioritize goals,
- » Develop tools, tactics, and resources, and
- » Execute the plan.

The accountability logs I created could show whether I was making sufficient progress or whether I had to adjust.

If I could define success at ten years, I could reverse engineer and figure out how far along I should be in five years. If I knew where my progress should be at five years, I could reverse engineer my progress at two and three years. An accountability log would show where I should be when I hit my first year. With that insight, I could figure out where I had to be in six months. I could extend that process back to the next month, the next week, and the next day.

How To Create Accountability Logs (from anywhere):

I had to accept that I could control some things in prison, and I could not control other things. Staff members would determine where I served time. They would order where I slept. Rules would dictate how many contacts I had with society. Other people would determine what, when, and how much I ate.

Despite the external controls of every prison where I served time, I could control my adjustment. I could set values and goals, take incremental actions that would lead me closer to my aspirations. And I could create accountability logs to measure progress. I believed that using those accountability logs wisely would lead me out of the prison labyrinth.

In a previous lesson, I described how I wrote more than 100 letters to schools, hoping to persuade a university to admit me. I wanted a university degree. I had to convince those universities to overlook my crimes and allow



me to enroll, even though I didn't have any financial resources. Although I did not control how a school would respond, I could control how hard I worked to persuade administrators that I was a worthy candidate. With my accountability logs, I could measure progress.

My accountability log would resemble something like the following:

- » Value category: Education
- » Goal: Earn a university degree
- » Purpose: A university degree would persuade my avatars to respect and invest in me.
- » Action Plan: Write five letters daily until I sent 100 letters to 100 schools.
- » Accountability Metric: Write letters to five different schools each day.
- » Timeline: Connect with 100 universities over 20 days.
- » Intended Outcome: Persuade at least one university to admit me.

The accountability metric gave me a clear plan. I had to set priorities and execute the plan. The project gave me a deliberate path. I didn't know whether a school would admit me. But I could measure whether I followed the plan. If I executed the plan, I would increase my chances of getting into school.

The plan worked. Ohio University accepted me. I then began to track my progress through school, measuring the number of lessons I completed and the credits I earned. By May 1992, I met the requirements for my undergraduate degree. Then I followed the same plan to get into graduate school. And in 1995, Hofstra University awarded my graduate degree.

As described in a previous lesson, The Autobiography of Malcolm X influenced me. Reading that story gave me hope. I could increase my value by learning how to communicate better. By building my vocabulary, I could become a better writer and speaker.

I needed a plan and an accountability log. I thought about my avatars. I could learn to communicate like the people I wanted to meet in the future. I could refrain from using language, syntax, or inflections that left others with the impression that I had served decades in prison.



With a more advanced vocabulary as my goal, I chose my words carefully. I would avoid words like “homie” when referring to friends. I would not refer to a woman in my life as my “old lady.” I set a clear path to build my vocabulary:

Value Category: Education

Goal: Add 500 words to my vocabulary within 100 days.

Purpose: Communicate in the language of my avatars.

Action plan:

- » Keep a sheet of paper beside me while I read each book.
- » Write down each word that I didn’t understand.
- » Learn to define each word on my sheet.
- » Write and define each word and part of speech (adjective, noun, or verb).
- » Create flashcards.
- » Write the word on one side of the flashcard; define the word and name part of speech on the other side of the flashcard.
- » Carry a stack of flashcards with me at all times.
- » While waiting in lines, I would test my knowledge by flipping through flashcards. Make each word a part of my vocabulary.
- » Accountability metric: Incorporate an average of at least five new words into my vocabulary each day.
- » Timeline: 100 days.
- » Intended outcome: Build my vocabulary by more than 500 words within 100 days.

I could measure progress with accountability metrics, and the tools kept me on track. Other people in prison advised me to slow down, saying it didn’t make sense to obsess over making such rapid progress when I served such a long sentence. They ventured unsolicited advice, telling me that progress toward goals would not result in my getting out earlier.



Success requires people to know when to accept advice and when to dismiss what others tell us about what we should or should not do. Instead, we should rely upon our values and goals.

I thought carefully about where I would turn for advice. We get a sad story if we use recidivism rates to define success or failure after release. Statistics tell us that more than half of the people that go into prison fail after release. We cannot ignore that accountability metric.

We should ask whether our adjustment patterns mirror successful people. If they mirror the habits of people who fail, we should change. Choose a deliberate path. Use accountability metrics to make progress toward goals. Leaders teach us the strategy to follow if we want to embrace the mindset of success.

By using accountability logs, I beat timelines that I set at the start:

Instead of earning one college degree within ten years, I earned two university degrees within eight years.

Instead of becoming a published author within my first ten years of imprisonment, I published more than 20 articles or book chapters within my first ten years.

I set a goal of finding ten people to believe in me during my first decade of imprisonment. Yet, the published writings allowed me to bring many mentors into my life during those first ten years. Those people were community leaders who visited me in prison and opened more and more opportunities.

In the next lesson, I'll reveal how accountability logs led to my building a vast support network before I got out of prison. Then, I'll show how that support network influenced my liberty and income opportunities from when I transferred to a halfway house in 2012 to the present day.

The takeaway: every decision we make in prison influences prospects for success upon release.



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TAKE 10 MINUTES

12-8: How does waiting for calendar pages to turn influence prospects for a triumphant return to society?

12-9: How would creating accountability logs and measuring progress influence confidence and self-esteem?

