

## LESSON 13: STAYING AWARE

The ultimate value of life depends upon awareness and the power of contemplation rather than upon mere survival.

—Aristotle

In the previous module, I pledged to reveal how accountability logs led to my building an extensive support network before I got out of prison. At this stage, participants have worked through seven modules. Every lesson encourages participants to work toward developing better verbal, writing, and reading skills. If people also work toward mastering critical thinking, they'll also become more intrinsically motivated with a self-directed work ethic, realizing how:

The decisions a person makes today influence prospects for success in the months, years, and decades ahead.

With each revision I make to this module, I reflect on those earliest days of my journey when authorities first locked me in prison. On August 11, 1987, the system replaced my name with registration number 16377-004. For the first several months, I fantasized about getting out instead of reflecting on the bad decisions that led to my criminal charge.

Following the criminal trial, members of the jury convicted me. That's when my eyes, my mind, and my heart opened. I became aware of my responsibility to understand more about my role as a citizen. Reading stories about Frederick Douglass and Socrates' life changed my perspective, helping me to ask better questions.

Dreams of the system releasing me vanished. Instead, I became more aware of how others perceived me. Then I began introspecting on all the decisions that led to my demise, asking different questions, such as:

- » What, if anything, could I do from prison to reconcile with society?
- » What actions could I take to make amends?
- » How does preparing to live in prison differ from preparing for success after release?
- » How could I make others aware of my commitment to change?



- » How could I develop a network of supportive people that would have a vested interest in helping me to succeed after release?

Lessons on the value of staying aware of my surroundings proved especially valuable, and I'm confident it will also help all participants.

We can start with a question:

- » What does awareness mean to you?

When I think of awareness, I think of coaches. Coaches frequently tell athletes to keep their heads in the game. When they give such guidance, the coaches encourage the players to stay aware of every opportunity. When we keep our head in the game, we see opportunities, and we seize those opportunities. The concept of awareness is central to our series on Preparing for Success After Prison; we're always looking for options that can accelerate progress on our goals and our end game.

In prison, we must be indefatigable in our commitment to overcome the challenges and complications that keep many formerly incarcerated people in the cycle of struggle. Regardless of what goes on around us, we must keep our heads in the game.

As a young man, I lacked awareness. I didn't consider how early decisions could influence my future. My parents tried to put me on the right track, though I ignored them. Both teachers and guidance counselors warned me about the problems likely to follow my decisions. I dismissed those admonitions, thinking I could avoid problems.

I didn't keep "my head in the game," and ignored the possible consequences of my actions, telling myself I didn't care.

I may not have been aware of the sanctions associated with my criminal behavior. Still, my lack of awareness didn't absolve me of the consequences that would follow the government's charges against me.

In contrast, the DEA agents kept their heads in the game. Once they became aware of my crimes, they were relentless in their pursuit. They worked behind the scenes to arrest me. With the evidence gathered, prosecutors worked to convict me.

Awareness: You and Others



## **PRISON CHARITABLE CORPORATION**

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

IRS 501c3 #85-2603315 / [www.PrisonProfessors.org](http://www.PrisonProfessors.org)

Email: [Impact@PrisonProfessors.org](mailto:Impact@PrisonProfessors.org)

With awareness, we should consider two perspectives. We can choose to become aware of opportunities around us or choose to remain ignorant of those opportunities. Either way, every day, we're making decisions that advance us closer to a triumphant return to society or a lifetime of continuing struggles. Many people leave prison to face further problems with the law, unemployment, or homelessness.

Regardless of our choices, other people become aware of us and make judgments about who we are. To use a metaphor, "we live in a fishbowl," with others watching and assessing our judgment or how we spend our time. Our choices will influence how others perceive us and what opportunities open in our future.

Regardless of where you are right now, start preparing for success.

## TAKE 30 MINUTES

13-1: What level of awareness do you have about opportunities around you?

13-2: How do your actions show that you're keeping your head in the game?

13:3: How will your decisions influence your future?

Your responses to those questions influence how others perceive you. Based on what other people see, they become more "aware" of who you are and whether you're a worthy candidate for their time and attention. Your daily choices and behavior determine whether other people will want to invest time, energy, or resources to help you develop.

Consider the wisdom of Zig Zigler, a mastermind who developed training materials for sales professionals. Zig Zigler said:

"If you can help other people get what they want, you can get everything you want."



A person who is less committed to preparing for success may show signs of being intellectually lazy. In prison, I frequently heard others say, “There aren’t enough programs here,” or, “no one cares about rehabilitation.”

## TAKE 15 MINUTES

13-4: How do your daily activities relate to your values and goals?

13-5: In what ways do my actions show that I want to succeed upon release?

13-6: How would a well-developed release plan show my commitment to succeed?

13-7: What accountability metrics can I show that I adhered to my release plan?

Since my release from prison, I have spoken to many audiences. When giving presentations in universities or professional conferences, I strive to help influential people understand why we need to collaborate in ways that will improve outcomes for justice-impacted people.

Frequently, I refute arguments from people who tell me that others cannot do what I did. My response is always the same. Anyone who served time with me could have opened the same opportunities that I opened. The only difference is that Socrates, Frederick Douglass, Nelson Mandela, Viktor Frankl, Mahatma Gandhi, and Malcolm X inspired me. They helped me grasp the importance of keeping my head in the game. Leaders like Bill Gates and Steve Jobs helped me understand the power of being aware of opportunities and making others aware of me.

I offer examples to show how being aware changed my life, hoping others will see the value of introspection and projection.

### Sowing Seeds with Awareness:

As described in earlier lessons, I started selling cocaine after high school. A jury convicted me, and a judge sentenced me to serve 45 years. I kept



#### PRISON CHARITABLE CORPORATION

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

IRS 501c3 #85-2603315 / [www.PrisonProfessors.org](http://www.PrisonProfessors.org)

Email: [Impact@PrisonProfessors.org](mailto:Impact@PrisonProfessors.org)

my head in the game from the start of my sentence. I didn't want to repeat the same types of bad decisions that I had made when I was in school.

The custody and classification system that the Bureau of Prisons developed had a scoring system. Among other factors, the scoring system considered sentence length and offense type. Based on my sentence length and high-severity offense, administrators designated me to serve my sentence in a high-security US penitentiary.

During my first meeting with the unit team, I asked whether I could ever transfer to a lower-security prison. Based on my sentence length and offense, the unit manager told me that I would remain in high-security prisons until my release.

He judged me based on the papers before him. But he did not know the depths of my commitment to preparing for success. Decisions while in prison led to my gradual transition to medium-security, low-security, and minimum-security camps.

When we keep our heads in the game, we become aware of opportunities we can seize or create. As described in *Earning Freedom: Conquering a 45-Year Prison Term*, we can convert our adversaries into advocates when we make others aware of our commitment to change.

Besides avoiding problems while in prison, I also prepared for a better future. By training, I opened opportunities to grow and orchestrate a pathway that I anticipated would lead to success. I was always aware of opportunities I could seize. My term with the Bureau of Prisons ended on August 12, 2013, after 26 calendar years. But I wasn't finished with the criminal justice system.

Once I finished the prison portion of my sentence, I had to serve time on probation. First, there would be seven years of Supervised Release. Then I would start parole. My sanction required 26 years inside and 19 years on parole—but I couldn't begin the parole portion of my sentence until after I finished Supervised Release. When I finished Supervised Release and parole, three years of special parole would follow. Federal probation officers would oversee me through the entire post-release term.



## **PRISON CHARITABLE CORPORATION**

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

IRS 501c3 #85-2603315 / [www.PrisonProfessors.org](http://www.PrisonProfessors.org)

Email: [Impact@PrisonProfessors.org](mailto:Impact@PrisonProfessors.org)

My term required 29 years of supervision from federal probation. Day-to-day life would be the same on Supervised Release, Parole, or Special Parole.

I put a plan in place to terminate that supervision early. The same strategy that got me through prison would help. I had to stay aware of how every decision would matter. I had to keep my head in the game. I stayed mindful of what I could do to make myself a good candidate for relief. I also stayed aware of the efforts I could make to earn support from others.

I couldn't control what others would do. Yet by being aware, I could always keep my head in the game. I could create ways to make my case stand out in a more favorable light.

## **Double Concept:**

Each previous lesson only had one concept to grasp. With awareness, we need to consider two perspectives. We can make different choices, yet each option comes with a cost. If we assess the cost, we can make the best choice. We should remain aware of how each choice relates to our prospects for success or the threat of failure.

Our choices make others aware of us. They see how true we are to our values and goals. As a result of our work, they begin to believe in us. Then they offer to help us on our path.

Awareness perspective 1: We become aware of opportunities,

Awareness perspective 2: Others become aware of our commitment to success.

## **Preparing for Supervised Release:**

Early in the journey, I identified the values and goals that would characterize my adjustment through prison. I wanted freedom as soon as possible. I wanted to build a career and stability upon release. I would need support from the probation officers supervising my release to succeed.



### **PRISON CHARITABLE CORPORATION**

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

IRS 501c3 #85-2603315 / [www.PrisonProfessors.org](http://www.PrisonProfessors.org)

Email: [Impact@PrisonProfessors.org](mailto:Impact@PrisonProfessors.org)

Many years before I finished my term, I began preparing to build a record that would result in the best experience on Supervised Release. In prison, I stayed out of trouble. A clean disciplinary record would have a positive influence on my probation officer. To validate my preparations for success, I earned two university degrees, many certificates, published books, and built a strong support network. In its totality, I hoped my prison record would make a favorable impression on the probation officer assigned to my case.

By 2011, I had more than 23 years of prison behind me, and I had advanced to within a few years of my release date. I set a goal of writing a monthly letter to the federal probation office, hoping to influence the probation officer that would supervise me. I didn't know the probation officer, but if I wrote the letter, I hoped to reach someone of influence.

In the initial letter, I introduced myself. I told the probation officer how hard I worked to prepare for a law-abiding, contributing life from the start of my sentence. I also explained the career that I wanted to build. The subsequent 24 monthly letters provided an update. As an example, the following followed a pattern:

Dear Probation Officer:

If you've read my previous letters, you know about my commitment to prepare for success upon release. While I work through these final months of my lengthy sentence, I consider it important to connect with the leaders that will supervise my release. For that reason, I'm continuing to send these updates.

If you haven't done so already, I encourage you to review my release plan. I published my release plan on my website, at [PrisonProfessors.com](http://PrisonProfessors.com). It shows the way that I began to architect a plan for release at the start of my journey. It led to my following a principled path, including:

Earn academic credentials,

Contribute to society,

Build a positive support network of mentors.

Those strategies influenced a release plan that I'm still building upon today. It influenced the books I read, the courses I completed, the friends



## PRISON CHARITABLE CORPORATION

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

IRS 501c3 #85-2603315 / [www.PrisonProfessors.org](http://www.PrisonProfessors.org)

Email: [Impact@PrisonProfessors.org](mailto:Impact@PrisonProfessors.org)

I chose. Because of that plan, I opened a broad support network that will support me upon release. It even led to my getting married inside a prison's visiting room.

Since writing you last, I've opened new opportunities with universities. Relationships with people in academia are part of my strategy to work toward prison and sentence reform upon release.

Although I know that rules prohibit people who leave prison to interact with other justice-impacted people, I am hoping to earn your support. I will seek permission to build a career around my journey. That career will require me to travel and interact with others who have criminal backgrounds.

My release plan clearly shows how hard I've worked to prove worthy of your trust. I am hopeful you'll support those efforts.

I look forward to discussing my release plan with you further when I'm released.

Respectfully,

Michael Santos

Number 16377-004

Probation officers didn't write back. I didn't have any way of knowing whether anyone read those letters I sent. But in August of 2013, I concluded my term with the BOP. When I went to meet with my probation officer, she was aware of how hard I worked. Those efforts I made to influence her yielded a great return on investment of time and energy. The probation officer gave me a much higher level of liberty. She allowed me to travel, and she approved my request for permission to build a company that would necessitate my interaction with other people that had criminal charges or convictions.

That is an example of how the Straight-A Guide got me through prison and led to my success upon release. As I became aware of opportunities, others became aware of my efforts to succeed.

From a prison cell, I could choose what I wanted to learn. Like anyone else, I could learn from people I would never meet. Leaders offered valuable lessons.



## PRISON CHARITABLE CORPORATION

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

IRS 501c3 #85-2603315 / [www.PrisonProfessors.org](http://www.PrisonProfessors.org)

Email: [Impact@PrisonProfessors.org](mailto:Impact@PrisonProfessors.org)

I chose lessons that would put me on a path to success. I wanted to learn the patterns of people with a record of succeeding in their chosen fields. They knew what they wanted and made deliberate choices. Aware of opportunities, they marketed themselves in ways to make investors aware of their work. The more aware investors became of leaders, the more resources investors provided.

## TAKE 15 MINUTES

13-8: What would you like your future probation officer to know about you?

13-9: In what ways could you develop a release plan that would help you influence your probation officer?

13-10 How will your accountability logs reflect your commitment to your release plan?

### Examples of Leadership and Awareness:

Bill Gates started Microsoft with his partner, Paul Allen. Bill Gates and Paul Allen were great examples of masterminds. Together, they built and led one of the most influential companies in the world.

Unlike me, Bill Gates and Paul Allen made good decisions when they were young:

- » They studied on their own to learn and master computers,
- » They knew their values,
- » They set clear goals,
- » They worked on writing software code in a short time.

They wrote the computer code that would launch Microsoft in less than a week. As they succeeded, investors from all over the world invested resources to help Microsoft grow.



### PRISON CHARITABLE CORPORATION

Prison Professors Charitable Corporation / PO Box 50996 / Irvine CA 92619  
IRS 501c3 #85-2603315 / [www.PrisonProfessors.org](http://www.PrisonProfessors.org)  
Email: [Impact@PrisonProfessors.org](mailto:Impact@PrisonProfessors.org)

Bill and Paul's early preparations put them on a path to success. When an opportunity of a lifetime opened, they were ready. We all can make choices today that will allow us to take advantage of opportunities later. We need to sow our seeds.

We see many examples showing us how people succeed. The only question becomes whether we want to learn from them. By studying their patterns, I learned a great deal. I wrote the Straight-A Guide's principles to convey what I learned to others.

As a case study, let's consider more about the story behind the founders of Microsoft.

### **Attitude:**

They committed to success with 100% effort. Bill Gates studied independently, learning as much as he could. When he saw an opportunity to start his company, he went all in. He quit Harvard and moved to New Mexico to work with his first client. Gates did not allow anything to get in the way of his success.

### **Aspiration:**

They had a vision, wanting every office and every home to use personal computers. They wrote the codes that would drive computers and taught others how to use the code to write programs. It was all part of a grand vision to build Microsoft.

### **Action:**

They took incremental action steps, first writing the code. Then they got the client, generating resources to hire staff to help them find more clients. Then they repeated the process. Then they found investors that would provide resources to accelerate success.



## **Accountability:**

They set clear goals. Each goal had a timeframe to complete. A timeline let them know how much progress they needed to make each day. By meeting timelines, they earned the trust of their partners.

We see these kinds of examples all around us. We should follow the clues. The Straight-A Guide shows us how to follow a pattern of success. Define success and commit to it, then make decisions to deliver success. Those who follow this pattern know that their choices rather than chance led to success.

Hence, we see the first prong of Awareness.

But there's a second prong. Others become aware of people that put themselves on pathways to success. Everyone wants to be a part of success.

## **Being Aware in Prison and Life:**

I didn't get this concept of awareness as an adolescent. My lack of awareness had a bad outcome. I chose friends poorly, and I made terrible decisions that locked me in conflict with authorities. Then I went to prison for multiple decades. While inside, from the masterminds I studied, I learned that I could step onto a path to success regardless of where I was. Or I could stay unaware and follow the path that derails success and leads to further demise. I had to choose and pursue success regardless of my environment.

What are you choosing?

To follow patterns of success, we may need to change how we think. We need a new mindset. To change how we think, we should start by thinking of our teachers. Learn to think like people who succeed. They leave clues that show how they became successful. Reject patterns of failure that we see so frequently in jails and prisons.

The example of Bill Gates and Paul Allen shows how we can reap big rewards if we prepare early. They studied science and math. When they began, neither Bill Gates nor Paul Allen knew they would start a valuable company. They applied themselves, and they learned. As a result, they were ready to seize the day when others could not. They were "aware"



of opportunities. Later, others became aware of their success and joined them.

People in prison could follow the same steps. In the Straight-A Guide, we list those steps as follows:

- » Values: Identify values to define success.
- » Goals: Set clear goals showing how you commit to your values.
- » Attitude: Show that you have the right attitude with 100% effort.
- » Aspiration: See the success that you're going to become.
- » Action: Take small action steps each day.
- » Accountability. Use clear timelines to measure your progress.

Awareness. Stay aware of opportunities to seize, and more people will become aware of you.

People who follow the principled steps of the Straight-A Guide are more aware. They know a lot of negative energy exists in prison, but their mindfulness helps them triumph over that energy. They choose friends carefully, knowing they can control their behavior but cannot control others' behavior. Accordingly, they make choices that will lessen their exposure to problems. They are aware of the power of each choice they make. The choices they make today put them on a path to success tomorrow. Every choice matters.

It's never too early—and never too late—to start preparing for success. The earlier we prepare, the more we can accelerate prospects for success, as we define success.

Leaders know how decisions matter. They understand how actions matter. They are aware of how their choices, their decisions, and their efforts will influence others. Make choices today to prepare for a better life tomorrow. Every decision can affect success.

- » If problems erupt from table games, be aware. Avoid table games. Read instead of playing games.
- » If sports teams lead to tempers flaring, be aware. Avoid playing on sports teams. Exercise alone or with people who share the mindset of success.



- » If people value seating rules in common areas, be aware. Avoid common areas. Spend time introspecting, thinking about the future you will build.

If you follow principled steps, you will become aware of opportunities. Because of your awareness, you can seize those opportunities to achieve increasingly higher performance levels. Simultaneously, others will become aware of your commitment. They, too, will want to invest in your success. They will help you, assist you, and encourage you.

That principled strategy works everywhere. It works in prison and beyond. It worked for all the leaders who inspired me and kept me climbing toward the goals I wanted to achieve through the 9,500 days I lived as a prisoner. The strategy allowed me to return to society successfully. Because I followed the patterns of successful people, income opportunities opened. For example, before I finished serving my time, San Francisco State University hired me to teach as a professor.

People provided me with resources to begin investing in real estate when I was still in a halfway house. By being resourceful while I served my sentence, I influenced the value they perceived in me. The strategy that guided my decisions through prison opened opportunities to build my career upon release.

Remember my pledge to all participants of this course: I never ask anyone to follow any strategy I am not using. The Straight-A Guide strategy powered me through prison. It enhances prospects for me to succeed in society, as evidenced by the fact that you can access this course. Imagine the courage it takes for prison administrators to contract with me—a man that served 26 years in prison.

By living this guide's values-based, goal-oriented strategy, I open business relationships and income opportunities. I can open deals that few would think are possible for someone with my background. I've received purchase orders from federal judges, probation officers, US attorneys, and leaders of prison systems. Business leaders purchase products or services from companies I build. By keeping myself aware, I always keep my head in the game. And others are aware of the efforts I'm making to succeed. They invest alongside me, allowing me to create new opportunities.



## **PRISON CHARITABLE CORPORATION**

Prison Professors Charitable Corporation / PO Box 50996 / Irvine CA 92619  
IRS 501c3 #85-2603315 / [www.PrisonProfessors.org](http://www.PrisonProfessors.org)  
Email: [Impact@PrisonProfessors.org](mailto:Impact@PrisonProfessors.org)

The assets I accumulated continue to grow. Yet despite the business opportunities around me, I continue to invest time and energy to share these lessons with people in jail and prison. I hope others will use these lessons to transform their lives. No one should work harder than you on your preparations for success—but all people need to stay aware and keep their heads in the game.

I finished serving my sentence in August of 2013. But I continue living by the same principles that powered me through confinement. I feel a duty to teach the strategies I learned from leaders and masterminds to people in prison.

At the beginning of this lesson on awareness, I wrote how I used this strategy to deal with probation. Remember, I began preparing for probation at the start of my prison term. I lived a values-based, goal-oriented life through all the years I served. My avatars influenced me to focus on education, contributing to society, and building a support network.

At the end of my sentence, I could show that I made a 100 percent commitment to preparing for success. I avoided problems in prison. I rejected advice from people that told me to forget about the world outside. Instead, I prepared for my return to society.

When I came to the end of my term, I could report my progress to the US Probation Department. By writing the monthly letters from prison, my probation officer became aware of my commitment to succeed. She authorized me to build the career I wanted. She allowed me to travel. I kept her in the loop with all my efforts.

After one year, my probation officer joined a US Attorney in submitting a motion to a federal judge. They asked the judge to terminate my seven-year term of Supervised Release. The judge granted the order, allowing me to begin serving my 19-year term on Parole. After one year, my probation officer urged the US Parole Commission to terminate the remainder of my parole. I then began serving my three-year term on Special Parole. After another year, I received notice that the US Parole Commission had set me free—as I'll reveal more about in the next module.

This strategy of adhering to the Straight-A Guide has helped other justice-impacted people we feature on our podcasts and webinars. I am convinced that it can help anyone in prison.



## **PRISON CHARITABLE CORPORATION**

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

IRS 501c3 #85-2603315 / [www.PrisonProfessors.org](http://www.PrisonProfessors.org)

Email: [Impact@PrisonProfessors.org](mailto:Impact@PrisonProfessors.org)

Be aware of opportunities. Understand and accept that the decisions you make in prison directly influence your prospects for success.

Keep your head in the game of success—through prison and beyond!



**PRISON CHARITABLE CORPORATION**

Prison Professors Charitable Corporation / PO Box 50996 / Irvine CA 92619  
IRS 501c3 #85-2603315 / [www.PrisonProfessors.org](http://www.PrisonProfessors.org)  
Email: [Impact@PrisonProfessors.org](mailto:Impact@PrisonProfessors.org)