

## LESSON 14: CELEBRATING ACHIEVEMENTS

Great achievement is born of great sacrifice. Happiness comes from the achievement of a difficult task that demanded our best.

—Napoleon Hill

Routinely, I revise the lessons and modules that constitute our Preparing for Success after Prison series. The more I create outside, the more I can show the authenticity of this message. To succeed, we must adhere to a disciplined, deliberate path. With the Straight-A Guide, I've tried to outline the compass I used to navigate the labyrinthine world of confinement.

- » It starts with defining success,
- » Create a plan that will take you from where you are to where you want to go,
- » Put your priorities in place,
- » Develop your tools, tactics, and resources,
- » Execute your plan and hold yourself accountable.

These principled steps show our authenticity. To stay on the plan for extended lengths of time, we've got to train ourselves to celebrate every achievement, no matter how small.

That's a concept that remains clear to me each time I revise. I wrote the original version of this course on February 22, 2017—several years ago, during my fourth year of liberty.

After my release, I began working to advance ideas on prison and sentence reform. Specifically, I wanted to persuade judges, prosecutors, and prison administrators to unite in a call for reforms. I worked with law schools and published in law reviews, arguing that we could improve outcomes of America's criminal justice system if we incentivized people serving sentences. Those incentives should encourage people to participate in programs that would help them:

- » Prepare self-directed pathways to success,
- » Build release plans, and



- » Obliterate the toxic message that “the best way to serve time was to forget about the world outside and focus on time inside.”

Through those efforts, speaking opportunities opened. After I gave a keynote speech at a judicial conference that the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals sponsored, opportunities opened to build relationships with prison systems, the federal courts, and even with the Department of Justice.

The seeds we sow early can lead to new opportunities many years later.

Being able to contribute to prison systems feels like a real achievement. Yet had I not set a release plan at the start of my journey, and worked toward incremental achievements along the way, I would not have opened so many opportunities after release.

A great deal has transpired since I wrote the first version of the Preparing for Success after Prison series. In revising this edition, I still recall the monumental importance of February 22, 2017, the day I wrote the first version of this lesson. I celebrated a significant achievement that day, and in this module, we emphasize the importance of celebrating our incremental achievements. I had to work through several decades to make the achievement possible. More than anyone else, I wanted to share the achievement with people in prison—I thought it might help illustrate the importance of celebrating incremental achievements.

We all make daily decisions that influence prospects for success. By developing the mindset of success, we avoid bad choices, such as those I made as a young man. Through this series, I’ve tried to show how all decisions influence the future we create. The Straight-A Guide may lead people to better decisions than I made during that reckless transition between adolescence and adulthood.

People in prison need hope, and I’ve aspired to provide them with hope. People who work through these courses have months, years, or decades to serve. We can build safer communities if more people in prison find pathways to success. To convert that vision into a reality, we need to plant, nurture, and work to help the seeds we sow mature into strong trees that bear fruit.

A person’s daily decisions influences life and opportunities that open. Sometimes the monotony of prison makes it difficult to make that



connection. For that reason, I produce content daily, and I publish it on our various websites. I hope to spread that information into as many prisons as possible. I want people to see this connection between today's choices and tomorrow's success. They should connect their responsibility to prepare for success, regardless of what's happening in the institution—every decision matters.

To stay motivated, celebrate every small success along the way. Each success builds upon previous success, bringing higher levels of achievement. Like a snowball gathers size when it rolls downhill, success grows in geometric proportions. Start with small achievements. Keep feeding those achievements, and they will grow into more significant achievements.

Let me elaborate with an example of how small and early achievements brought me a reason to celebrate when I wrote the original version of this module in February of 2017.

In the previous lesson, I described the many layers of my sentence. Besides a lengthy prison term, my judge imposed 29 years of supervision. First, the judge ordered that I would have to complete seven years of Supervised Release. Then 19 years of Parole. Then three years of Special Parole.

US District Court Susan Judge Illston, from San Francisco, agreed that Supervised Release no longer served a purpose in my case.

One year after I finished with the Bureau of Prisons, the judge signed an order to free me, saving me six years. I transitioned to my term on Parole.

A year later, the US Parole Commission terminated my Parole, saving me 18 more years. And on February 22, 2017, at 10:33 a.m., an intern at US Federal Probation called to tell me he had good news. The US Parole Commission granted early termination of my Special Parole term.

If I didn't start sowing seeds in 1987, when I began my prison term, I might have had a different outcome. The seeds I planted at the start of my journey influenced the US Parole Commission to liberate me. On February 22, 2017—instead of 2033, I began living without supervision.

The early seeds led me to influence people I've never met. In fewer than four years from the day I finished with the BOP, people on the Parole Commission let me off.



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As I frequently do, I reflect on the pivotal moments that made this possible. I would have been under supervision for decades. I'm free because an officer gave me a book that told me the story about Socrates. That story inspired me. Reading that book in 1987 helped me to develop the mindset of success in a solitary cell in the Pierce County Jail.

Socrates changed the way I thought. When I changed the way I thought, I changed my life.

Then, by reading the story of Frederick Douglass, I got further inspiration. He taught me that if a person could learn how to read better, and how to write better, a person could change the world. When I read his biography, I learned that after he escaped the bondage of slavery, he published biographies and became an influential speaker. Instead of going on to enjoy his liberty, Frederick Douglass used his personal story of living in slavery to persuade others to abolish laws that allowed slavery.

We all can use stories to change the world.

## TAKE 20 MINUTES

14-1: In what ways can a story change your life?

14-2: When meeting a person who could influence your prospects for success, what story would you tell about your adjustment in prison?

14-3: What pivotal moment caused you to commit to living as a law-abiding, contributing citizen?

14-4: How would you describe the incremental steps you took to prepare for success after prison?

### **Celebrate Small Achievements:**

I remember reading the story of Socrates for the first time. I set the heavy book on my chest to think. As a young man in a jail cell, I didn't know what I would face ahead. But I knew my early decisions led to the friends I chose. Along with my friends, I made choices that led to my predicament



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instead of making choices that would bring a better life. I broke the law, authorities arrested me, and I pled not guilty—despite knowing of my guilt. Then I went to trial, lying on the stand, saying I wasn't guilty. Then a judge sentenced me.

Making the connection between my earlier decisions and my life in a jail cell got me started on the path to changing my thinking. I also accepted that I could make better decisions from a jail cell. I could map a plan for a new life by changing how I thought. It's never too early and never too late to begin building a pathway to success.

Reading Socrates' story helped me think about the people I would meet in the future, my avatars. Some of those people could change my life.

- » How could I use my time in prison to prepare?
- » How could I persuade avatars to help me?
- » What steps could I begin taking then, from inside a jail cell?

Setting clear values and goals led to the principled course of action of the Preparing for Success after Prison course. That strategy made all the difference for me throughout my decades in prison.

In the beginning, I could not see the end of the journey. Since I didn't know how to contemplate 26 years, I focused on the first ten. Before ten years passed, I wanted a college degree, publishing credentials, and a support network that would include at least ten influential people. Each of those achievements would be a milestone. To reach them, I would need to make many small achievements.

- » I would need to write letters to find a school,
- » I would need to get into school even though I didn't have money,
- » I would need to avoid problems in prison so that others would join my support network,
- » I would need to use all that I learned from school and people in my support network,
- » I would need to read books to learn from masterminds.

If I kept taking small steps, I would reach those small achievements. Together, they would put me in a different position after ten years. If I stayed the course, I believed that staff would transfer me from a high-security



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penitentiary to medium-security prison. Later I might get to a low-security prison. I trusted that if I stuck to the plan, I would persuade staff members to reclassify me and allow me to serve the last part of my sentence in a minimum-security prison.

With my sentence length, I had to start in the Special Housing Unit of a high-security prison. To serve my sentence in lower-security prisons, I needed to avoid problems with staff members and other prisoners. I needed to make small achievements. Every decision would influence my journey through the decades I served. And my journey through decades of imprisonment would affect my prospects for success after release.

I had to celebrate small achievements to sustain a high level of energy and discipline. Reading a book or a story may be a small achievement. But if the story caused me to change the way I thought, it would change my life. If I acted in ways to reflect that I thought differently, I would make measurable achievements. Others would notice. Later, I could look back. I could see how each decision in jail influenced each opportunity.

Decisions from the day I read Socrates precipitated a step-by-step path. Each decision and each step aligned with my values and goals. By celebrating the small achievements, I stayed focused. I didn't need to think about serving 26 years. Instead, I thought about the small goals I needed to achieve. I knew I could open more significant opportunities by achieving those small goals.

Freedom from the government is one reward. There are more. In the previous lesson, I wrote about investors. By making a record of every success in prison, I had a solid case study. I could show people the tiny steps that I took. When I could show people how I worked through prison, they were willing to write checks to support projects I wanted to create. That support allowed me to build a new career. I'll describe that career in more detail in the next module.

As a participant of the Preparing for Success after Prison series, consider how you can develop a release plan that will lead to a series of incremental achievements.

- » Track those achievements with accountability tools.
- » Then, use those achievements to open new opportunities.



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Build a string of small achievements. Those achievements will open new options, creating your path to success. If a release date is too far away, celebrate the small accomplishments, just like the people we profiled in the videos that accompany this course. This strategy will motivate you, building hope along the way as you develop the power within to influence a better future.

Those who want to continue working independently through the Preparing for Success after Prison series may invite their family members to visit our website [PrisonProfessors.com](http://PrisonProfessors.com) to see the supporting self-directed books and workbooks. If they're not available in the prison's library, we recommend the following books or self-directed courses:

## **Earning Freedom: Conquering a 45-Year Prison Term**

This lengthy book reveals the journey from the day that I came into prison, facing life without parole. It takes readers through the day that I transitioned into a halfway house. Each year I update the book to apprise readers of how a solid release plan helped to prepare for the journey.

## **Prison! My 8,344th Day Workbook**

This self-directed workbook shows readers the importance of making intentional decisions each day. The exercises help participants see how they use their time inside to prepare for success upon release.

## **Success after Prison Workbook**

This self-directed workbook shows the results after I returned to society. Readers will see how decisions inside opened opportunities to build a career in real estate investments, and how revenues from those decisions provided resources I could use to advance my work in advocacy for prison and sentence reform.



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## Perseverance Workbook

This self-directed workbook offers insight participants can use to overcome the challenges that accompany confinement. By learning to think differently, and to adjust intentionally, people position themselves for resilience.

## Release Plan Workbook

This self-directed workbook offers insight into how participants can build an intentional release plan. It should put them on a pathway to argue for higher levels of liberty, at the soonest possible time.

Each workbook in our Preparing for Success after Prison series provides participants with a clear picture showing the importance of celebrating small achievements. If those achievements happened in one prison, we could dismiss them as luck. Yet the books and workbooks offer story after story, showing how small achievements accumulate from one prison to the next.

Regardless of what decisions administrators make, or what laws pass, people can always work to:

- » Develop a more robust vocabulary,
- » Develop better writing skills,
- » Develop better verbal communication skills,
- » Develop better critical thinking,
- » Develop a self-directed work ethic,
- » Develop a comprehensive release plan, and
- » Develop accountability logs that highlight incremental achievements.

Through all the coursework, readers get to learn about people from every background. They all show one coherent message: The decisions a person makes today influences the opportunities that open in the weeks, months, years, and decades ahead.

If this strategy only worked for me, some may say I was lucky. I agree that I've been fortunate, and I am grateful. Yet I urge students to pay



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close attention to the people I profile in the accompanying books and the supplemental videos that we make available in our Preparing for Success after Prison series. Participants will find interviews with many people who once served life sentences, yet now they're free. Each person validates the concept that I'm striving to convey. They describe how each decision in prison put them on a path to new opportunities and, eventually, freedom.

Every person who transforms while in prison inspires me.

## **Deliberateness:**

You may have seen the award-winning movie Training Day with Denzel Washington. Denzel plays the role of Alonzo, a corrupt police officer that trains a rookie. Alonzo tells the rookie, "This is chess, not checkers."

The memorable line from Training Day describes a complicated challenge with many moving parts. Everything can change in an instant. To succeed, we've got to see the big picture. Winners anticipate what will happen many moves in advance. They are deliberate with every choice. They know how to celebrate small wins. Those small wins lead to significant gains. Never forget that without a steady flow of small achievements, big wins are not possible.

In an earlier lesson, I wrote how Suzy Welch, an author, inspired me. She wrote a book about making good decisions, calling her strategy ten-ten-ten. Think of how every decision will influence your life.

### **TAKE 15 MINUTES**

14-5: How will your decision influence your life in the next ten minutes?

14-6: How will your decision influence your life in the next ten months?

14-7: How will your decision influence your life in the next ten years?

Make decisions in ways that can lead you to a series of small achievements. Together, those achievements build hope. You will see how yesterday's



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choices led you to overcome struggles and launched you to higher levels of success.

Leaders know how to get out of a bad situation and climb to a better position. Since the end is sometimes too far away, they focus on small steps they can take today. Those small steps make it more likely to achieve outcomes.

Make a 100% commitment to putting yourself in the best possible position to succeed. Celebrate small, incremental achievements along the way. If those achievements align with your values and goals, each success will bring more success. You will be able to say:

“I am the person I am today because of the decisions I made yesterday.”

## Written Word:

When I began my self-directed personal development journey, I didn't know how to use my time effectively. What could I do while locked in a solitary cell to prepare for a better future? I took an inventory of resources that I could get.

- » I could get books.
- » I could get paper.
- » I could get pencils.

What else could I do?

- » I could read, write, sleep, run in place, do pushups, leg lifts, and squats in my cell.

I had to use the resources in my cell to prepare for success. By reading about Socrates, I knew what I wanted. I set goals that would lead to success. I would need to stay fit, and I would need to improve my skills. I could improve my fitness. I could build better reading and writing skills and improve my critical thinking to understand every decision's opportunity costs.

I believed the staff would transfer me into better conditions if I did well. In better conditions, I thought I could do more. Such a mindset inspired me to work toward doing well.



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When I began serving my sentence, I did not know how to write a grammatically correct sentence. I would empower myself if I could learn how to write persuasively and confidently. To improve, I put a plan in place of writing 1,000-word essays each day.

- » What would I write?

It didn't matter. I wrote with one purpose in mind, wanting to become more confident in turning words into sentences. From a jail cell, I read books to learn how others wrote. I trained myself to think and write in sentences and paragraphs, believing the skill would help me prepare for success after release. I learned to structure writing:

- » I'd write openings to introduce the idea of an essay.
- » I'd write supporting paragraphs in the essay's body to help make a persuasive case.
- » I'd write a compelling close to present a message with force.

I trained myself to think like a writer. I prepared to earn more support from the types of people who could advance my prospect for success—my avatars.

Each letter, sentence, and paragraph I wrote felt like a small achievement I could celebrate. Like a runner who counts his laps, I calculated the words I wrote, pushing myself to exceed the explicit daily goal to write 10,000 words weekly.

- » What stops you from pursuing a similar goal of writing 1,000 words a day?
- » How would writing 1,000 words each day influence your critical-thinking skills?
- » How would writing 1,000 words each day affect your ability to create a life of meaning and relevance upon release?

## Book Reports:

Reading represented an essential strategy for my commitment. We all had 24 hours on any given day. Even while we're incarcerated, to some extent, we could choose how we spent those 24 hours.



Looking for opportunities to advance my plan, I read books that aligned with my values and goals. The strategy, I hoped, would make favorable impressions on the people I anticipated meeting later. To memorialize the books I read, I wrote book reports that would serve as a kind of accountability log, tracking the systematic preparations for success after prison. Each book report followed a templated pattern:

Author's name:

- » Here, I'd write the author's name.

Book title:

- » Here, I'd write the book's title.

Date read:

- » I'd write the date I finished reading the book.

Why I read (title):

- » Here, I'd write why I chose to read this book.

What I learned from reading (title):

- » Here I'd write the impressions or takeaways I received from the book.

How reading (title) will contribute to my success upon release:

- » Here, I'd write my thoughts on how this book would influence my prospects for success.

Each book report gave me a cause to celebrate, making me feel like I'd created another tool, tactic, or resource to help. Those achievements felt like purposeful steps, leading me out of confinement.

## **Achievements:**

Success is an ongoing journey of incremental achievements. Our mindset shows our commitment to success every day. When we make choices, those choices lead to our next opportunity.

Never forget how the decisions you make today will influence your future. Regardless of where you are in your journey, you can start sowing seeds



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that will lead to a better outcome. There is an old saying that I frequently quote. You may read the quote in some of my other work.

- » The question: When is the best time to plant an oak tree?
- » The answer: 20 years ago.

The second-best time is today!

None of us can change the past. But all of us can sow seeds that will lead to a better future. Develop the mindset to success and start planting seeds that will allow you to build a better life.

## TAKE 15 MINUTES

14-8: Describe a book that influenced your life.

14-9: What prompted you to read that book?

14-10: What lessons did you learn from reading that book?

14-11: In what ways will reading that book influence your prospects for success upon release?

