

## LESSON 15: APPRECIATION AND AUTHENTICITY

As we express our gratitude, we must never forget that the highest appreciation is not to utter words but to live by them. Self-acknowledgement and appreciation are what give you the insights and awareness to move forward toward higher goals and accomplishments.

—John F. Kennedy

In earlier lessons, I wrote about how I would've liked to have received this message of self-directed learning as an adolescent. I would've made better decisions, choosing friends and role models that would have inspired me to make better decisions. I would've made decisions that led to success rather than decades in prison.

I offer that personal insight because I am determined to be authentic. I will never ask anyone to do or say anything I did not do or say while serving my sentence. To move from struggling to better times, we must live authentically.

I would not be authentic if I didn't disclose my many failures as an adolescent and student. Ironically, I didn't develop the mindset of success until a jury returned a guilty verdict and a federal judge sentenced me to serve a 45-year prison term.

As this course reveals, it's never too early and never too late to develop a success mindset. If you're living in challenging times, contemplate steps you can take to be authentic. And think about how those steps reflect an appreciation for the blessings that have come your way.

### Learn From Masterminds:

World leaders like Mahatma Gandhi inspired me, and I'm confident his message can encourage anyone. Regardless of where we are, Gandhi tells us that we can create our happiness. To create happiness, we must keep our thoughts, words, and actions in harmony. As I learned from Gandhi,



we should make decisions showing that we're the change we want to see in the world.

I strive to be the change I want to see in the world. To earn trust, I live authentically. That isn't to imply that I don't make bad decisions. I am a human being, conditioned by having served 26 years in prison. I've made good decisions, and I've made bad decisions. Those decisions have led to great experiences and challenging experiences.

In 2018, for example, I made an investment that led me into a civil lawsuit. Settling that suit wiped out \$3 million in equity I had built since getting out of prison. Rather than being angry at what I perceived as a great injustice, sangfroid helped me accept that I must live in the world as it exists and not as I want it to be. With a commitment to transparency, I published records from that lawsuit on my personal website, at MichaelSantos.com.

We will always face more challenges and we must always be ready to overcome those challenges. I felt grateful to have the confidence to rebuild. Lessons from masterminds helped me to develop that self-assurance.

Lessons in this course will help participants develop self-actualization. We self-actualize when we know that we're making progress. Our success becomes self-evident, as everyone knows we've conquered a challenge. When we're successful, we show appreciation for the lessons we learned. We share those lessons with others so they can become successful, too.

## Why Pursue this Path?

I want people to avoid prison, and I want people in prison to leave that environment as success stories. A success story means someone isn't running from the law or anyone else. A success story implies an individual can keep his head high with dignity intact.

Those who pursue success realize the influence of every decision, seeing the opportunities and threats, the strengths and weaknesses in every choice they make. Strategic thinking—or the mindset of success—may help a person from the time they enter jail. It may guide adjustment strategies as days turn into weeks, weeks turn into months, months turn into years, and years turn into decades. A person's plan may lead to a more fulfilling outcome, regardless of where or when an individual begins.



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Steve Jobs paraphrased the famous artist Picasso, who said:

- » Good artists copy ideas. Great artists steal ideas.

To write the Straight-A Guide, I stole ideas from masterminds. Participants that want to develop the mindset of success may use the same strategies of stealing ideas from masterminds.

Masterminds always:

- » Identify values.
- » Set clear goals.
- » Pursue success with the right attitude.
- » Have aspirations for the success they want to become.
- » Take action steps.
- » Hold themselves accountable.
- » Stay aware of options, and make others aware of their commitment to success.
- » Live authentically, developing tools, tactics, and resources.
- » Celebrate every achievement along the way.
- » Show appreciation for the blessings that have come their way.

**TAKE 20 MINUTES**

15-1: How would you describe the steps that led to your current predicament?

15-2: What differentiates your preparation for success from others?

15-3: In what ways does your adjustment strategy resemble the way of masterminds?



## Live authentically

Participants that adhere to the Straight-A Guide path become authentic. They don't talk about wanting to be successful. Instead, they pursue a path they designed with their values and goals. They understand how a documented strategy would advance their prospects for success in all areas.

Since writing the earlier version of this course, I've built many businesses requiring me to work closely with companies' leaders. I'm grateful for each lesson that I learn from leaders. Like the ten principles identified above, the CEOs with whom I work teach that building a great company requires leaders to:

- » Identify a problem to solve,
- » Define the best possible outcome,
- » Document a strategy that will resolve the problem,
- » Create tools, tactics, and resources to succeed,
- » Execute the strategy every day, and
- » Measure progress and adjust as necessary.

We all can follow such principles to become the CEO of our life!

Anyone can self-actualize, making success self-evident. We don't need anyone else to say we're thriving. Living by our values and goals, we experience success every day.

Each of us has made bad decisions and good decisions in the past. At any given time, we can choose to learn from those decisions. We can choose how we define success. Then we can begin to make deliberate decisions. Our choices and actions reflect our values and goals. They take us from where we are to where we want to go. We know we're successful when we're living a values-based, goal-oriented life that keeps everything we say in harmony with everything we think and do.

Define your life with thoughts, words, and actions. Let those thoughts, words, and actions reflect your commitment to success.



## Being Authentic:

The supplemental books and videos to the Preparing for Success after Prison series share stories about other people that conquered struggles. They may have made bad at different stages of their life. But they all chose to become better. They all decided to draw a line in the sand and work toward conquering the struggle. They began by defining success.

People that succeed define success with their values. They set clear goals to show their commitment to success:

- » They had the right attitude.
- » Their aspirations helped them to visualize success.
- » They took incremental action steps and held themselves accountable.
- » They became aware of opportunities to seize, and others became aware of them.
- » They celebrated small achievements.
- » And they were authentic.

## Shon Hopwood:

You can see an example of someone who adhered to the Straight-A guide's principles by reading the story of my former partner in Prison Professors, Shon Hopwood. Shon authored *Law Man: My Story of Robbing Banks, Winning Supreme Court Cases, and Finding Redemption*. His story shows that regardless of bad decisions a person has made in the past, it's never too late to build a better future.

Shon's book reveals how he made terrible decisions as a student, choosing friends that led him into trouble. While in his late teens, Shon experimented with drugs and robbed banks, and he served ten years in federal prison after he pleaded guilty.

While in prison, however, Shon made a choice. He chose to learn and to become more than his past. Because of Shon defining success differently, he learned the law. Then he started to help other people in prison. He made a 100% commitment to learning how to read the law and research the law. Shon acted, learning how to write persuasive legal arguments.



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He held himself accountable by devoting time daily to improving his skill. Anyone could choose to follow Shon's path.

Shon kept his head in the game. He stayed aware of opportunities in the law that he could use to help others. Shon celebrated achievements when others won victories in court. Through his work, he contributed to winning cases in district courts, appellate courts, and the United States Supreme Court—all while he served his prison term.

Because of Shon's commitment to success, while serving ten years, opportunities opened for him. When he got out, Shon finished college. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation awarded him a full scholarship to attend law school, and the University of Washington awarded him a law degree. He accepted his first job as a clerk for the DC Circuit Court of Appeals, then Georgetown Law School made him a full-time associate law professor.

Shon's story shows how a person could choose to build a better life. He is authentic, and his success is self-evident. He shows his appreciation for the blessings that have come into his life. Others become aware of his commitment to volunteer hundreds of hours of community service. President Trump invited Shon to work with the White House on prison reform, and he became instrumental in passing the First Step Act, which applied to all people in federal prison.

Like Shon, everyone on our team at Prison Professors strives to bring systemic improvements to social justice issues, including sentence reform and reforms to our prison system that will lead to better outcomes. With the courses we offer, we ask each person in prison to join this effort to build safer communities and more effective systems.

First, however, we ask participants to invest in themselves. Learn to document a strategy for personal development and show appreciation by helping others along the way. Develop a personal release plan that will lead from struggle to success and create accountability logs that define the daily progress you're making.

To improve the outcomes of our nation's criminal justice system, we must persuade leaders that all justice-impacted people can use their time inside to prepare for success. Our team at Prison Professors will strive to push for the following reforms:



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- » More incentives that will encourage all people to work toward higher levels of liberty,
- » Access to social furloughs to maintain community ties,
- » Access to work-release programs that will prepare people to live as contributing, tax-paying citizens,
- » Broader access to compassionate release or commutations of sentence, and
- » Reinstatement of the U.S. Parole Commission.

To accomplish those goals, we need to influence leaders and legislators. If we can show how people in prison are building effective release plans that help them prepare for success upon release, we advance advocacy efforts.

Some may feel cynically about the possibility of succeeding with these efforts. We faced that same cynicism when I wrote *Earning Freedom*, which encouraged reforms that would lead to “Earned Time” credits, as we see in the First Step Act.

Incremental steps lead to successful outcomes.

## TAKE 20 MINUTES

15-4: What reforms would you like to see in the system?

15-5: What challenges do you see in bringing these reforms

15-6: In what ways can you contribute to advancing these reforms?

### Walk The Way:

Anyone that adheres to the Straight-A Guide can go from struggle to success. But, it’s one thing to know the way. It’s quite another thing to walk the way.



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While in prison, neither Shon Hopwood nor the people I profiled in earlier lessons knew what challenges they would face after release. They needed to prepare, to get ready to overcome challenges. They needed to define success with values and set clear goals.

Time in prison taught many lessons to people like Halim Flowers, Tommy Walker, Shon Hopwood, and others. All of us can learn from those lessons. By sharing lessons, we hope to inspire others. To overcome the challenges of our life, we must walk the way of masterminds.

## **Not for Everyone:**

As I write these lessons, I remember reading about an interview with James Patterson. Mr. Patterson has authored dozens of novels and sold millions of books. During an interview, a journalist asked Patterson to respond to critics. Some of those critics accused Patterson of not being a very good literary stylist. The journalist asked Patterson how he would respond:

- » “I’m not a very good literary stylist. There are millions of people that don’t like how I write. Fortunately, a few million do.”

As one of the best-selling authors of all time, Patterson didn’t need other people to define his success. Sales made his success self-evident. But there would always be people who disagreed with his approach. Those disagreements didn’t matter because he defined success and pursued it with a 100% commitment.

Similarly, not everyone will agree with the Straight-A Guide’s message of hope and self-reliance. Likewise, not everyone agrees with the efforts we make to advance more pathways for people in prison to earn freedom through merit. That’s okay. We all must carve our own path.

We want our participants to define their path to success, and we’re confident that anyone can reach a higher potential by following a principled approach.



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## Getting Out of Prison:

I will never forget the day my wife drove me from the prison in Atwater to the halfway house in San Francisco. With 25 years of prison behind me, I had to serve six more months in a halfway house, followed by six months of home confinement. After 9,500 days, I would conclude my obligation to the Bureau of Prisons. Then I would start my term of Supervised Release. My wife and I talked about the career I wanted to build. I told her a message that I've lived by since I first read about Frederick Douglass:

I want to make an impact on the world by helping people who live in struggle. Leaders taught me how to create meaning and relevance, and I want to share those lessons. It doesn't matter if they're in school, in prison, or struggling in other areas of their lives. We can reform systems to create better outcomes for people.

To earn trust from people, I needed proof. People had to believe the strategies would lead to their success. I told my wife I committed to building assets worth at least \$1 million within five years of release. By achieving that goal, I believed people would be more inclined to accept my message's potency. They would accept that they could become more successful if they pursued this path. I've been on this path—with a mindset of success—since I began my prison term. I'm still on it today.

I connect with participants through words, photographs, and videos. Through those efforts, I strive to show my authenticity. But neither the digital assets nor the live presentations show how many hours I must devote to this daily effort. No one can see the incremental progress—or investment I must make to create courses. I could not complete any of this work if I did not begin in prison and follow the Straight-A Guide path daily.

Think it through.

On the day that I left prison, I was behind with technology. When I went to jail, the internet didn't exist. I never sent or received an email. I did not know how to create a video or publish it online. I didn't know how to use technology that would allow me to develop products. I had to purchase computer equipment and software. Once I had the equipment, I needed to invest thousands of hours learning how to use it. Each day I had to invest time to learn; a deliberate adjustment in prison prepared me to accelerate progress.



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I create products. Then I must find a market for those products. Judges, US Attorneys, and Prison leaders are not so willing to purchase products from a man that served multiple decades in prison. After all, until February 23, 2017, I was still on Special Parole.

Participants who have access to the books I wrote will see that I did not begin this path on a whim. I've been committed to sharing this message for decades. If you do not have access to the books, your family members can easily find them at [PrisonProfessors.com](http://PrisonProfessors.com). Those books will show my decisions through prison. They also will show strategies I used to overcome challenges since my release.

I hope you will see that by adhering to the Straight-A Guide principles, I'm authentic.

## **Authenticity and Appreciation:**

When we're authentic, it's easy to appreciate the blessings that have come our way. Living in gratitude brings more blessings, empowering others along the way.

Every day opens an opportunity for further growth and fulfillment. Masterminds plant seeds and they nurture gardens. Consider the metaphor. By enriching the soil, caring for plants, removing weeds, and caring for details, we allow gardens to thrive.

Masterminds invest energy in building great gardens. They see the value of creating strong networks. To build more robust networks, they invest in others that prove worthy. Those investments bear fruit, bringing more value. People can show appreciation for blessings that come their way. They give time, energy, or resources, making their commitment to success full circle. They create more success for more people and live more fulfilling lives.

## **Map of Success:**

Masterminds give us their map. Observe and learn from the principled approach to life that leaders show us. We see how to chart our course to success as we define success—with our values and goals.



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Arriving at our success begins with our preparation. Commit by following the map. Think of this concept as preparing for a transatlantic journey. Years may pass before we reach our destination. Yet, we know the value of the choices we make every day. Choices will either bring us closer or lead us farther away.

If we're beginning our journey on the other side of the world and want to come home, we need to consult this map. The map helps us stay the course. We know that we'll face storms of adversity along the way, but by staying the course, we also know that we will reach our destination.

Each lesson has value, including this final lesson on "appreciation."

## **Concept of Appreciation:**

Struggles anywhere can lead to a culture of negativity. Negativity can pull a person under the current. At any given moment, storms threaten to sink spirits. Accept the principled path of masterminds to triumph over the pull that drags down so many. Use the strategy as a compass. To reach your destination, anticipate darkness. You'll face rough seas, even hurricanes. Use the strategy as your map and your compass. The concepts will lead you to calmer seas and advance you along your course.

- » Stay true to the values by which you profess to live.
- » Always set short- and long-term goals.
- » Proceed with your 100% commitment to success.
- » Never lose sight of your aspiration.
- » Pursue aspiration as the days turn into weeks, the weeks into months, and the months into years.
- » Seize every opportunity for productive actions that align with your definition of success.
- » Your action steps will open further opportunities for growth.
- » Hold yourself accountable.
- » Live transparently, inviting others to hold you accountable.
- » Keep your head in the game.



- » Become aware of new and exciting ways to accelerate your progress.
- » Others will become aware of your pursuit of excellence. They will invest in you.
- » Celebrate every achievement.
- » Be authentic.
- » Express gratitude and appreciation for the blessings that come your way.
- » Invest in community renewal, helping those around you to reach their highest potential.

This strategy will influence:

- » The friends you choose,
- » The activities you pursue,
- » The mentors you bring into your life,
- » The way that people in authority treat you,
- » The gradual improvements in your living conditions,
- » The employment opportunities you open,
- » The language you use to communicate,
- » The time you devote to your fitness,
- » The books that you read,
- » The skills that you develop,
- » The relationship you build with your family and loved ones,
- » The resources you can draw upon,
- » The way that you use those resources,
- » The support network that believes in you,
- » Your access to credit and investors,
- » Your access to business opportunities,
- » Your reputation.



## **Gambler or Investor:**

Living in struggle may influence your perspective. I encourage you to introspect. Consider whether you want to live as a gambler or as an investor. Either way, you make a choice.

A gambler may play the odds and live by chance, while an investor thinks more strategically. An investor assesses the landscape and surroundings, then determines the best way to deploy resources. Both gamblers and investors have opportunities to win, but those who think strategically succeed at a far higher level.

The greatest gamblers operate more like investors and minimize chance by training to read signs and clues. They place their bets using a skill set that they develop over time.

What factors influence their decisions?

They look at every data point that comes their way. With sports betting, they want to know big-picture issues like weather patterns and soil conditions. They also want to know minute issues, like rosters and injury lists, and statistics of personal athletes. The more they know, the better they can place their bets.

Investors take the same approach, considering as many data points as possible when making decisions. They evaluate price-earnings multiples, and they look at year-over-year sales growth. Investors want insight into equity returns and assess the organization's overall competency. Data points make investors more confident to put money on the line.

Whether you live as a gambler or an investor, make good decisions. Always acknowledge the stakes. With your life, liberty, and future at stake, take a big-picture view and assess what you can do now. Then set priorities that are consistent with your values and goals. Remember that the right decision at the wrong time is the wrong decision.

## **Big Picture Perspective:**

The big-picture perspective for people in prison is ugly. Statistics show that seven out of every ten people in prison face challenges when they



get out. They struggle to find employment and face challenges in finding permanent housing. Some have trouble with substance abuse.

Strategies in this course helped me overcome my problems, and I'm convinced the techniques can help others.

But each must decide.

We wish you success!

## TAKE 10 MINUTES

15-7: In what ways would living in gratitude influence your prospects for success upon release?



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