

## **LESSON 2: ATTITUDE AND ASPIRATION**

### **100% Commitment**

### **ANNOTATION: ATTITUDE AND ASPIRATION**

Once we define success and set clear goals, we need to pursue success with the right attitude. For our course, we define the “right” attitude as a 100% commitment to success—as the individual defines it. That strategy works for people who anticipate a sentencing hearing, and for people after sentencing. Aspire to the best possible outcome.

### **HALIM FLOWERS:**

Halim Flowers is now one of our nation’s most celebrated artists, writers, and activists. But that isn’t how he started his life.

Like many people who go through the criminal justice system, Halim began his life in struggle. Street gangs influenced his adolescent years. Before he turned 10, he walked across puddles of blood that oozed from a dead person. Neither gunshots nor seeing death fazed him. His father became addicted to crack cocaine.

Conditioned by his environment, Halim started selling crack at 12, adapting to life on the streets and housing projects of Washington, DC. Most children his age have positive role models and learn in school, preparing them to live as productive adults. Their lives reflect what they see around them. Unlike other teenagers, Halim didn’t grow up with the opportunities and privileges that so many people take for granted. His behavior mirrored what he saw, and by the time he turned 16, he had to start preparing for sentencing and prison.

Authorities charged him with gang-related crimes. After judicial proceedings concluded, Halim had to cope with the plight of two life sentences.

What does it even mean to serve double life?



Since a judge sentenced him to serve a term with letters rather than numbers, authorities sent Halim into high-security penitentiaries. He stepped inside the walls before being old enough to vote.

While incarcerated, Halim made a commitment. Despite starting his sentence at 16, he had the wisdom to know that he didn't like his environment. People convicted of crimes surrounded him. Those people tried to influence his adjustment, giving him a message that permeates every jail and prison in America:

“The best way to serve time is to forget about the world outside, and to focus on time inside.”

It's tough to start serving a sentence under those conditions. Prison can obliterate hope. Few people know what it's like to live with the following challenges:

- » Being born into an environment that doesn't abound with positive role models,
- » Being influenced by gangs and crime before knowing how to decipher the consequences of decisions,
- » Being separated from a mother at 16,
- » Learning that a federal judge imposed two life sentences,
- » Hearing that the system doesn't offer any way out.

## **TAKE TEN MINUTES (2-1):**

Write responses to the following questions in approximately ten minutes. If participating in a class setting, discuss verbally.

2-1: How would you expect a person with Halim's background to adjust inside the penitentiary?

2-2: In what ways would you expect his life to be different after 20 years in prison?

2-3: What would you say would be the best possible outcome for a person with Halim's background?



Despite the challenges of Halim’s backstory, he had an attitude of self-empowerment. He didn’t like the backstory of illiteracy, poverty, drug abuse, and a pipeline that would carry children from school playgrounds to the penitentiary. Rather than complain, he found a way to write a new chapter in his life story. He wanted to make a difference that would lead to a better community.

Halim coined a phrase:

“Love is the antidote.”

As he moved through his sentence, he developed his mind and understanding of the world by reading. Through reading, he trained himself to become a better communicator. He learned to put words into sentences, and sentences into paragraphs. Over time, he authored several books, including:

1. A Reason to Breathe
2. Mind Over Matter
3. What our Fathers Never Told Us
4. Makings of a Menace
5. Buried Alive
6. Time: How to Do it and Not Let it Do You
7. For Young Offenders
8. Be Great Wherever You Are
9. Niggernomics: What Blacks Must Know about Money
10. A Reason to Breathe

Knowing the importance of using many mediums to communicate, he also taught himself how to paint.

With words and pictures, Halim worked to help others see the pain that comes when society shackles a boy’s soul in chains. Despite living in cages, as years turned into decades, knowing that he did not have a release date, he learned to master the use of words and pictures. By communicating, he could take steps that would lead to liberty. He wrote books and converted



ideas into images, transcending prison boundaries, influencing others to believe in him.

Mechanisms didn't exist to change his life sentence. Yet Halim's attitude gave him the fuel to keep working toward his aspirations. In time, he wanted to make a difference. Through his work, he could contribute to ending intergenerational cycles of poverty.

Like Mahatma Gandhi, Halim Flowers aspired to live as the change that he wanted to see. He gives us an example of what it means to live with the audacity of hope, believing that with the right attitude, he could be more than the label of "super predator" that society had bestowed upon him when he was only a boy.

He made a 100% commitment to that end.

Leaders inspired him.

But inspiration without actions is fantasy. Halim gives us an example of excellence. If a person has the right attitude, and if a person aspires toward the best outcome, perseverance and commitment can bend the arc toward justice.

By the time that Halim served 22 years, the law changed. Those changes allowed a federal judge to take another look at injustice. The judge agreed that, based on Halim's extraordinary and compelling adjustment, a double-life sentence no longer served the interests of justice.

In 2019, after 22 years in prison, Halim returned to court. During the second hearing, he walked out of the courtroom to begin his life as a successful artist, writer, and activist.

## **TAKE TEN MINUTES (2-2):**

Write responses to the following questions in approximately ten minutes. If participating in a class setting, discuss verbally.

2-4: What role would you say that Halim's attitude at the start of his sentence had on his eventual release?



2-5: In what ways would you say that Halim's aspiration fueled his adjustment?

2-6: In what ways could a story like Halim's influence your preparation for sentencing?

## **ATTITUDES, ASPIRATIONS, AND SENTENCINGS:**

Halim is a special kind of human being. Intuitively, soon after authorities locked him in prison as a teenager, he had an idea of what success should look like for him. Then, he set clear goals that would lead him to become a better communicator. Over time, he trained himself to write books, to launch a publishing company, and to paint pictures that would help others see what they did not see previously.

By the time an opportunity opened for him to go through a new sentencing hearing, Halim had a new story. The judge responded by releasing him from the injustice of a double-life sentence.

Few people go into a sentencing hearing with the preparations that Halim made during the 22 years that he served. Taking the long view requires patience, commitment, and the right attitude. Even people who face relatively short sentences (and anything is short compared to a life sentence) tend to think about themselves in the immediate moment rather than what they can become over time.

That's understandable. They're about to lose their liberty.

The concept of being separated from all that a person loves can feel surreal. Yet even people facing short sentences can learn a great deal from Halim's story. They can think about the different people that they're going to encounter and figure out a strategy to influence perceptions.

We tend to view our lives from the limited perspective of how we see ourselves. Yet others may see us differently from the way that we see ourselves.

When I went through the criminal justice process, I had the wrong attitude because I didn't know how to think differently. Instead of thinking about the realities that follow for people facing sentencing, I should have been thinking about the people I would face in the future. Many people



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would have enormous discretion over my future. Rather than coming up with a deliberate, intentional plan to influence those decision makers, I thought about how the sentence would influence my life.

Later, by reading influential books, I began to see a different perspective. For example, I remember a book that changed my perspective. I don't recall the book's name, but I remember it taught me the concept of "The Johari Window."

With the "Johari Window," people learn to understand their relationship with themselves and others. Psychologists use the concept of the Johari Window in self-help groups. Anyone preparing for sentencing may want to consider lessons from the Johari Window teachings.

Start by thinking of a quadrant with two columns and two rows, as follows:

	Known to Self	Unknown to Self
Known to Others	<p><b>(open area)</b></p> <p>The open quadrant is that part of our conscious self that we're aware of, and that is known to others. Anyone can assess our attitude, behavior, motivations, values, and way of life. In preparing for sentencing, we can be certain that prosecutors and the judge are assessing us.</p>	<p><b>(blind)</b></p> <p>This quadrant represents what others perceive in us but that we do not think about when thinking of ourselves. Although we may see ourselves as being good people, when authorities charge us with crimes, we should consider the likelihood that they're looking at us as being bad people.</p>
Not Known to Others	<p><b>(façade)</b></p> <p>In this quadrant, despite what we know about ourselves, others do not see it. For example, we may think of ourselves as being remorseful. Yet prosecutors or the judge may not see it.</p>	<p><b>(unknown)</b></p> <p>This quadrant includes all that neither others know about us, nor that we know about ourselves. Who knows what we will be in the days, months, years, or decades ahead? For example, who could have predicted what Halim would become when he went into prison at 16?</p>

Using this framework before sentencing can influence a person's attitude and aspirations. Instead of living with delusions, we can prepare for reality.



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Those who love us may know the “real” us, but we would be naïve to believe that our adversaries will see us in the same way.

If we want to prepare for the best possible outcome at sentencing, we need to go into the proceeding with the right attitude, and with the right aspiration. We need to think about the obstacles we face today, and the strategies we can create to prepare for a better tomorrow.

If a person does not take appropriate steps before sentencing, the only record that will exist will be the documents that describe our crime. To influence a better outcome, we can use Johari’s Window to consider questions that will help us prepare.

## **TAKE TEN MINUTES (2-3):**

Write responses to any of the following questions in approximately 20 minutes. If participating in a class setting, discuss verbally.

### **Open questions:**

In what ways do you see yourself?

How or why would the prosecutor or judge know this about you?

What steps can you take to help the prosecutor or judge know this about you?

### **Blind questions:**

What motivated the prosecutor or judge to pursue his position?

How does the prosecutor or judge define success?

In what ways does the prosecutor or judge view you?



## **Façade questions:**

When the prosecutor or judge meets with others in his profession, how do they think about people like you?

What common traits do you have with other people the prosecutor or judge must assess?

In what ways does the prosecutor or judge believe you are unaware or unrealistic about how you see yourself?

## **Unknown questions:**

What influences in your future are neither you nor your prosecutor or judge considering?

In what ways does your behavior show that you're contemplating such unknowns?

What motivates your prosecutor or judge to want to deny your request for special consideration?

These kinds of questions should help us build the right attitude and aspiration as we face a sentencing hearing. We don't only want to think about consequences we must face for the decisions we made.

We also want to think about how others will perceive us. Then we need to create a strategy that will put us in a better position to succeed.

Regardless of what stage we're in on the journey through the criminal justice system, we will encounter people who do not know us. Yet they will judge us based on what government officials or media reports have written to describe us.

To the extent we can think about our challenges, we can put ourselves on pathways toward better outcomes. The sooner a person starts to contemplate these realities, the more effective the person becomes in preparing for success.



## PERSONAL STORY:

While locked inside a solitary cell, I awaited my sentencing date. After a year of trial proceedings, a jury found me guilty on every count. Anticipating a lengthy sentence, I needed to make sense of all the ways my life had gone wrong.

When DEA agents arrested me in 1987, I didn't know how to think from the perspective of others. I'd never heard of Johari's Window. All I knew was that I hated being in confinement and I wanted out. I had a natural inclination to think about myself and all I was losing. Everyone in law enforcement, on the other hand, thought about the crimes I committed and the victims of my crime.

In that early frame of mind, I had the wrong attitude. I argued that my crime didn't have any victims. A group of consenting adults paid to purchase cocaine from a group of people that I influenced. I hoped for the lowest possible sentence, but I didn't do the work to prepare for the lowest possible sentence.

While I languished in the solitary cell, a correctional officer began bringing books that he said would change my thoughts.

I knew him as "Officer Wilson," one of the kindest officers in the detention center. He could see something in me that I could not see in myself. Besides passing me books on Frederick Douglass, he gave me an anthology on philosophy. I didn't know the meaning of philosophy at the time. But he assured me that I could learn from reading the lessons in the books he brought.

To create meaning in my life from prison, I needed to learn how to think differently. Instead of perseverating on how I could get out early, I needed to change my attitude and aspiration. That books Officer Wilson provided opened my eyes to a different way of thinking.

I read about Socrates, a man who lived more than 2,500 years ago. Ordinarily, such a story wouldn't have interested me. In reading the first paragraph of the story on Socrates, I learned that he was in a jail cell awaiting the day when authorities would carry out a death sentence for a crime he committed.



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I wouldn't have read the book, or the story about Socrates previously because I neither identified with the concept of philosophy nor did I have any interest in history. Sometimes, we get the message we need at the right time. The story spoke to me because I faced life in prison. Facing life in prison felt as if I faced a death sentence—because I could potentially die in prison. I needed a better attitude, and I needed to aspire to something bigger than my life. That story about Socrates helped me to learn that I had been living by a bad philosophy.

Fortunately, it's never too early, and it's never too late to begin making better decisions.

After reading that story, I began to contemplate the different ways that I could make sense of my journey. I realized that I could not change the past:

- » I broke the law,
- » A jury convicted me,
- » A judge would sentence me,
- » I would go to prison.

Like Halim Flowers, I would have to confront the challenges ahead. My attitude would influence whether I wasted time in prison, or whether I used that time to reconcile with society and make amends. In preparing before sentencing, I needed to convey a message. I wanted stakeholders to know that, going forward, I would make disparate decisions than I had made before my arrest. I intended to work toward something bigger than my own life.

The prosecutor responded to my proclamations of remorse, by telling the judge:

“If Michael Santos spends every day of his life in an all-consuming effort to repay society, and if he lives to be 300 years old, our society will still be at a significant net loss.”

The federal judge presiding over my case sentenced me to 45 years. Fortunately, reading the story about Socrates helped me to process the sentence imposed.

I'll paraphrase an ancient fable that can help us come to terms with the challenges we face.



A scorpion asks a frog to carry him over the river. The frog initially refuses, claiming its fear of being stung. The scorpion argues that if it stung the frog, they both would die because the frog would sink, drowning the scorpion.

The frog then agrees.

Midway across the river, the scorpion stings the frog, dooming them both.

As they started to drown, the frog asked the scorpion why he stung him. The scorpion replied that it's in its nature to sting.

The prosecutor's nature is to ask for a lengthy sentence. The judge's nature is to impose a term that will protect the interests of society—not to make things easier on the person who broke the law.

Like Halim, I could choose how to respond to the sentence. My attitude going forward would determine my aspirations.

