

LESSON 26: PERSONAL EXCELLENCE

Vocabulary Word:

Excellence — The quality of being outstanding.

Lesson Content:

I began serving my federal prison sentence in the late 1980s. I didn't know what challenges I would face once I got out. A mentor sent me a copy of *In Search of Excellence*, a book by Thomas Peters, suggesting I might learn some lessons from the book.

My mentor helped me a great deal. By learning from him, I understood that we could always work to pursue excellence personally. Our pursuit of excellence didn't have anything to do with the decisions that others made. It had everything to do with our commitment to excellence.

First, we need to define excellence.

Those who've read *Earning Freedom: Conquering a 45-Year Prison Term* may recall how the same author, Tom Peters, wrote a separate book that included a profile about a federal prison warden, Dennis Luther. Warden Luther pursued excellence. I interviewed him for the master's thesis I wrote about preparing for success after prison. Although Warden couldn't change sentencing laws, he could build incentive-based programs that allowed people to work toward achieving their highest potential.

Striving for personal excellence helps us improve and work toward becoming the best version of ourselves. It involves setting and consistently meeting personal standards, being accountable for our actions, and always trying to exceed our previous best.

The path to personal excellence might seem challenging in prison, but a person can always work toward excellence with patience, persistence, and a positive mindset.

We develop confidence when we focus on:

- » personal growth,



- » learning new skills, and
- » making the best use of the time available to prepare for a successful life after release.

In defining personal excellence, leaders teach us that it's essential to consider the following:

Self-awareness:

Understand our strengths, weaknesses, passions, and values. This knowledge forms the basis for setting personal goals and standards.

Goal-setting:

Define clear, achievable goals for ourselves. These goals should challenge us and be realistic, contributing to our personal growth and development.

Persistence:

We should consistently strive to meet our goals and standards, no matter the obstacles. Persistence is vital to achieving personal excellence.

Continuous learning:

Seek to learn something new every day. Learning is a lifelong process, especially crucial in a challenging environment like prison.

Positive Mindset:

Maintain a positive attitude. See every difficulty as an opportunity for growth and every failure as a chance to learn and improve.



QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES: IN ONE HOUR, ANSWER AS YOU DEEM APPROPRIATE.

In your own words, how would you define personal excellence?

What does personal excellence look like for you?

What personal goals can you set to strive for excellence while in prison?

How can achieving these goals prepare you for success after release?

Can you identify a recent situation in which you demonstrated persistence despite facing a challenge?

How did this experience contribute to your journey toward personal excellence?

Activity:

Reflect on your definition of personal excellence and write it down. Then, set at least three personal goals that align with this definition. These goals should be specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART).

Remember, personal excellence is a journey, not a destination. It's about self-improvement and becoming the best version of yourself. It's not about comparing yourself with others but surpassing your past performance. Personal excellence will prepare you for success upon your release from prison. So, strive for excellence, not perfection!

