LESSON 3: ACTION AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Incremental Steps

ANNOTATION: ACTION AND ACCOUNTABILITY

We may know what we want, and we may commit verbally to preparing for success. We also must act. Each decision we make should align with our commitment to success. If we know what we're striving to achieve, our personal accountability tools will help us measure the incremental progress we make.

TAKING ACTION:

We prepare ourselves for a better outcome when we take time to learn from others. The earlier lessons of our course profiled leaders such as Frederick Douglass, Halim Flowers, and Socrates. Those leaders show us the relevance of:

- Defining success,
- Setting goals,
- Moving forward with the right attitude, and
- Aspiring to the outcomes we want for our life.

Yet unless we take incremental action steps, we never open opportunities. Without opening opportunities, we fail to position ourselves for the success we want.

An old proverb teaches us that if we want to know the journey ahead, we should ask people who have walked back. I remember getting that message from reading a story written during medieval times. The trilogy, known as The Divine Comedy, begins in a scary forest, which is a metaphor for darkness—or a predicament beyond what we take as being familiar.

While trying to escape that forest, Dante, the author and protagonist in the story, looks for safety. He fears a lion, a leopard, and a wolf that want

to devour him. Those beasts represent the sins of pride, lust, and greed. If a person doesn't exercise discipline, those sins can lead to a person's demise.

Dante knows his death is imminent, as those animals present an existential threat.

In Dante's pursuit of safety, he encounters the spirit of Virgil, a man who could save him. To get to safety, however, Virgil had to take him from the forest and through the nine concentric circles of hell. Each ring holds people who lived a life of gradually increasing wickedness. By telling Dante the stories that condemned those people to suffer through eternity provided Dante with knowledge, or the wisdom he needed to escape hell and transcend to paradise.

The story, Dante wrote, is not about his life—but about the entire human experience. If we know more about the punishment that follows our wickedness, we can avoid behavior that brings consequences we do not want.

Like Dante, we all must act to prepare for a better life. It's never too early, and it's never too late, to start sowing seeds for something better.

Any person going into a prison term can learn great lessons about action and accountability from others who have gone through the journey before us.

Participants who have access to DVD videos that our team at Prison Professors produces will find examples of people's experiences. The justice-impacted men and women come from different backgrounds, and authorities convicted them of various crimes. All those people have stories to tell. Each of us has a responsibility to listen to the stories of others.

We should strive to decipher lessons that will help us make better decisions; we should act in ways that lead to better outcomes. When we create accountability metrics, we develop resources that can keep us on track.

Watching the videos that accompany this course may prove helpful because we can always learn from people who've gone through challenging times—especially if they've overcome those challenging times.

We also should learn from the people around us. By conversing with people serving time, we can learn a great deal—especially if those people describe previous experiences of going through the system, and challenges they faced upon release. If people try to perpetuate the myth that the best way to serve time is to forget about the world outside and focus on time inside, we should work through the following exercises, which we can start right now:

TAKE TEN MINUTES (3-1):

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

3-1: Describe a justice-impacted person who did well after release.

3-2: Describe a justice-impacted person who failed after release.

3-3: In what ways would you say those people's actions in prison put them on a pathway for success or failure?

TOMMY WALKER'S STORY:

While preparing our course on Preparing for Success after Prison, I had a conversation with Tommy Walker, III. Authorities arrested Tommy and sentenced him to three life sentences. He served more than two decades inside the walls of the United States Penitentiary in Lewisburg before the First Step Act opened an opportunity for release.

With a reputation for holding some of the most volatile people in federal prison, Lewisburg could darken a person's spirits. Tommy understood the bleakness of his sentence. The US Parole Commission did not have authority to release him. He would spend the rest of his life in prison unless:

- An appeals court vacated his sentence,
- The President commuted his sentence, or
- Congress legislated a new law that the President signed.

Despite those complications, Tommy chose to live productively. Living productively requires a person to have a plan, and to execute the plan with incremental action steps. Even if he had to spend his life inside of a federal prison, he could live with meaning, relevance, and dignity.

How?

He could live for something bigger than his life. Instead of complaining about the sentence imposed, Tommy decided to become useful to others. He became a better:

- reader,
- researcher, and
- writer.

Over time, Tommy developed skills in learning how to use esoteric resources in the prison's law library. He learned about the legal process, including decisions by District Court Judges, Circuit Court Judges, and Supreme Court Justices. He read about statutes, citations, and Court rules for Civil or Criminal procedure. Tommy became a master of the Prison Reform Litigation Act, administrative remedy process, and habeas corpus.

With those skills, Tommy served his community and he also served himself. Every day he could hold himself accountable, devoting hours to learning. Those actions kept him focused on becoming more useful to people in his community.

Through his work, Tommy helped many people file pro se motions that advanced prospects for their liberty. Although he didn't know whether opportunities would open for him to walk out of prison, he created meaning by becoming more useful by helping others.

By studying law, Tommy understood the importance of keeping a pristine disciplinary record—free of any infractions. Since he had a purpose to work toward, he avoided behavior that could lead to problems with other people in prison, either staff or others serving time.

In 2018, after 25 years inside, Tommy Walker, III had built an "extraordinary and compelling" record.

When sentencing Tommy to serve three life sentences, the judge considered the prosecutors' arguments. They focused on his past behavior.

Tommy couldn't do anything to change his past decisions, and the judge sentenced him for those crimes. Yet Tommy's actions in prison, and his commitment to hold himself accountable, differentiated him from others.

When President Trump signed the First Step Act, a mechanism opened for Tommy to argue for liberty. Since he served a triple-life sentence for crimes that included violence, he did not complain that Earned Time Credits did not apply to him. Instead, he seized upon other opportunities that the law opened, such as compassionate release.

The First Step Act empowers every person in prison to make an argument for compassionate release. Before President Trump signed that law, people in federal prison had fewer opportunities to self-advocate for liberty. To become a better candidate for relief, however, the person should show an "extraordinary and compelling" adjustment record. People will advance their prospects for success with compassionate release if they can show that they've used their time to prepare for success after prison.

Tommy Walker III provides us with an example of excellence. He understood that he could not change the past. Yet through his behavior, he could build a compelling record that would persuade others to view him through a different lens.

Skilled defense attorneys told Tommy that immutable laws would block him from ever getting relief.

Despite those admonishments, Tommy believed in himself. He acted in ways that would reframe the narrative of his life. When a federal judge reviewed Tommy's petition for compassionate relief, he didn't only consider the history of violence or criminal behavior that led Tommy to prison. The judge also considered Tommy's extraordinary and compelling prison adjustment. She granted his petition, allowing him to walk out of prison as a free man.

Besides developing skills while in prison, Tommy also earned credentials to become a certified paralegal. To live productively in society, he launched his own business: Second Chance 4 R.E.A.L, a paralegal service to help people in prison get relief from their sentences. Through his work, many people have gotten relief through administrative remedy, habeas corpus, and filings related to the First Step Act.

PERSONAL STORY:

Like Tommy and Halim, I would have to live with a lengthy sentence. People like them, who had overcome severe hardship and injustice, taught me the importance of being deliberate and intentional. Although I didn't know Tommy or Halim when I began serving my sentence, I could learn from other leaders by reading. For example, I learned a great by reading about Nelson Mandela.

Authorities in South Africa released Nelson Mandela around the same time that I transferred from the detention center to the penitentiary. Despite serving 27 years for the injustice of apartheid, Nelson Mandela lived without bitterness or anger toward anyone. He only wanted to use his life as a catalyst to help others. Like Halim Flowers wrote decades later, Nelson Mandela showed that love is the antidote to pain and suffering.

Other examples of excellence inspired me. The life stories of inspiring people manifested lessons I learned from reading about Nelson Mandela, Viktor Frankl, and Malcolm X. Their actions in prison led to massive contributions.

To find my path, I began with the end in mind, following the lessons that Stephen Covey taught in his opus, The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People.

I COULD NOT CHANGE THAT:

- I violated laws that prohibit people from selling cocaine,
- A jury convicted me,
- A judge sentenced me to 45 years, or
- Prison administrators sent me to a high-security penitentiary.

To begin with the end in mind, I could think about how I wanted to emerge. Regardless of how much time I served, when I got out, I wanted to live meaningfully. I didn't want to struggle through the trauma of homelessness, poverty, unemployment, or further problems with the criminal justice system. Like Halim and Tommy, I would have to take actions to prepare.

I BEGAN BY THINKING ABOUT THE PEOPLE I ANTICIPATED MEETING:

- Future case managers,
- Future wardens,
- Future probation officers,
- Future employers,
- Future business partners or sponsors,
- Future legislators or prison administrators.

TAKE TEN MINUTES (3-2):

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

3-4: In what ways have you thought about the people who currently have influence over your liberty?

3-5: What action plans have you set to influence people who will influence your success in the years to come?

3-6: Describe accountability resources you created to stay on track with your action plans.

As Virgil advised Dante, today's actions influence the life we lead in the weeks, months, and decades ahead. Leaders taught me that instead of dwelling on the predicament I created, I should contemplate the future.

What would people who had influence over my life expect of me?

Those kinds of questions do not have a right or wrong answer. At any time, we can meditate on such questions. While staring at the wall of a solitary cell, I had to think of the decisions that put me there.

No one would care that I hated living in confinement.

If I wanted to lead a meaningful life, regardless of my location, I had to take steps like any other person who overcame struggle. I had to build a record that would convince others to advocate on my behalf.

By introspecting, I realized the importance of using time inside wisely. If I didn't make changes, people would always see me for the crimes that led me to prison. Every decision would come with an opportunity cost. If I chose to ease the pains of confinement by watching daytime soap operas, playing table games, or acting in ways that could lead to disciplinary infractions, I could prolong rather than shorten the time that I would spend in prison.

On the other hand, if I thought about the people I would meet in the future, I could create an effective action plan. To the extent that I created accountability metrics to measure progress, I may succeed in overcoming the stigma of being a convicted felon.

The tripart plan would require me to focus on:

Earning academic credentials,

Contributing to society, and

Building a support network of positive mentors.

In his book, Good to Great, author Jim Collins wrote about the ways that good companies could become great companies. Readers may find similarities in how they could use the same principles from that Good to Great to reach a higher potential.

A memorable metaphor from that book invites readers to consider the difficulty of starting a new plan. He wrote about a spindle or axis mounted to the ground. On top of the axis, sat a heavy disk made of stone. Mr. Collins wrote that, because of the disk's weight, it would take an enormous amount of energy or force to spin the disk. But once the disk started to spin, it would require less force or energy to keep spinning.

The metaphor helped me realize that I would have to get started if I wanted to become better at anything. To get started, I must apply myself with commitment, energy, and discipline. Getting started would be difficult, as I had been a terrible student before my imprisonment. I didn't read well or write well, and as evidenced by the decisions I made that led me to prison, I wasn't too good at critical thinking.

Yet just as Jim Collins wrote in his book about building great businesses, we could take small actions that would be part of a methodical plan to

build a better life. Although difficult to get into the habit of daily study at first, the more I read, the better I became at reading. The better I became at reading, the better I became at thinking and writing.

Those self-directed efforts changed my life. They helped me to prepare for success through prison and beyond.

While going through that phase of getting started, I remember reading The Autobiography of Malcolm X. That story showed how hard Malcolm work to develop his vocabulary. From inside a solitary cell, Malcolm made a commitment to improve his vocabulary. By learning to put words into sentences, and sentences into paragraphs, he became a powerful orator and a leader for his people. He embodied the maxim that the pen was mightier than the sword.

Another influential message from Good to Great influenced my actions and accountability in prison. He wrote about the importance of setting a BHAG—an acronym for a big, hairy, audacious goal. Leaders of great companies, he wrote, always had something gigantic that they wanted to solve. As human beings, we all could follow the model of setting a BHAG.

PRISON AND SENTENCE REFORM:

Another mentor who inspired me, Mahatma Gandhi, advised people to work toward being the change they wanted to see. I wanted to live in a world that measured justice differently. People in our society measured justice by waiting for calendar pages to turn. Yet leaders like Jim Collins convinced me that we could work toward big, hairy, audacious goals—such as changing the way that society measured justice.

Instead of waiting for calendar pages to turn, we could start with the end in mind. If society wanted people to emerge from prison successfully, we should reconfigure the goals of confinement. If we want people to emerge as good neighbors rather than recidivists, we should open opportunities that would incentivize them to work toward earning freedom, through incremental steps.

To work toward that end, I would have to consider all my strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. Business leaders used an acronym to refer to this exercise. They called it a “SWOT” analysis.

STRENGTHS:

My greatest strength was that I had defined success. I knew that I wanted to emerge from prison with my dignity intact, and with opportunities to live a life of meaning and relevance and dignity. Since I hated being in prison, I made a commitment to engineering a plan. I would have to take intentional steps that would allow me to make an impact on society. Like Socrates taught, success wasn't only about what was happening to me, but also the role I could play in making society better for all.

WEAKNESSES:

Despite wanting to get out of prison, and wanting to see systemic change, I had many weaknesses. During my first 23 years on the planet, I hadn't accomplished much of anything. As an adolescent, I lived recklessly. I sold cocaine, and a jury convicted me of crimes that led to a 45-year sentence. I graduated high school with mediocre grades, and I didn't learn much. I didn't read well, write well, and I hadn't produced much of anything that would cause people to see me as being anything other than a criminal.

OPPORTUNITIES:

I considered our nation's pathway that led to mass incarceration as being the greatest social injustice of our time. It led to intergenerational cycles of failure. People learned how to live in prison. By focusing on their time inside rather than preparing for success after prison, many people emerged from prison to experience homelessness, unemployment, under employment, or further problems with the law. An opportunity existed to change the system and introduce the concept of earning freedom through merit.

THREATS:

The culture of confinement did not foster an environment for learning. In a high-security penitentiary, I felt the pervasive threat of violence and disruption. Although I could control my behavior, I could not control

other people's behavior. Legislators and administrators that I would never meet created laws and policies that governed my life. They supported an ecosystem that did not value the voice or the mindset of a person with my background. Although I wanted to change laws and open opportunities for people to work toward earning freedom, they wanted to protect the security of the institution.

In my view, that system perpetuated cycles of failure. Trying to change that system could lead to problems with other people serving time, and with people that supported the system as it existed.

To work toward prison reform, I would have to consider the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. I didn't like being in prison, and I wanted to get to the other side, becoming the change that I wanted to see. I felt as if I would have to walk across a high wire, with incremental steps. The wrong step could lead to my demise, but if I held myself accountable, and made the commitment, I hoped to contribute to the changes I wanted to see. They may not lead to my liberty, but those changes could lead to a better society. And working toward that end could bring meaning to my life while I served the sentence.

Since I was only in my early 20s, I didn't know how to contemplate the implications of a 45-year sentence. I hadn't been alive that long. With credit for good behavior, I understood that I could complete the term within 26 years—but I didn't have a frame of reference to put that time into context.

Instead, I focused on the first 10 years. To reach the goals I wanted to achieve, I would have to hold myself accountable. During those first 10 years, I pledged to work toward making myself a more potent voice for prison reform. First, I would need to overcome the weaknesses that I perceived in my backstory. I would need to develop credentials that would lead influential people to consider ideas I would propose. I had to overcome weaknesses that included:

- A lack of academic credentials,
- Poor writing skills,
- Low confidence in verbal communications,
- A felony conviction for drug trafficking at the start of the war on drugs,
- A lack of influence with leaders in society.

Within ten years, I intended to change those weaknesses. Since I knew what I wanted to accomplish within ten years, I could craft a pathway to work through the first five years. And since I knew what I wanted to achieve in five years, I could chart a course that would lead to incremental stages of success within three years. Knowing what I wanted to achieve during my first three years of imprisonment helped me to make better decisions during my first year, my first months, and my first days of confinement. I could develop accountability metrics to keep me on track.

TAKE TEN MINUTES (3-3):

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

3-7: What weaknesses could you overcome from prison?

3-8: If you worked toward overcoming those weaknesses, what opportunities would open for you?

3-9: In what ways could you create accountability metrics to ensure that you're making incremental progress?