

LESSON 7: DEFINING SUCCESS

Your beliefs become your thoughts, Your thoughts become your words, Your words become your actions, Your actions become your habits, Your habits become your values, Your values become your destiny.

—Mahatma Gandhi

If you would like to influence how other people perceive you, this lesson on values will help. Participants will learn the value of questions. By asking good questions, we can start laying the groundwork that will take us from where we are to where we want to go.

The children’s book *Alice in Wonderland* dispensed this wisdom from a character known as the Cheshire Cat. The Cheshire Cat said:

“If we don’t know where we’re going, any road will take us there.”

Sadly, many begin a prison term without considering how earlier decisions influenced current struggles. Similarly, they don’t connect how today’s decisions will influence their future. If we want a better future, we’ve got to ask better questions. We should think about the implications of how we answer those questions.

Any of us can choose to learn how to build a stronger mindset. While incarcerated, I learned two tactics from masterminds that would influence my prospects for success while in prison and beyond.

- » Developing strong critical-thinking skills, and
- » Developing more potent communication skills.

As we advance, I’ll reveal more about tactics and strategies. For example, notice the words and phrases in bold italics—such as *tactics* and *strategies*.

Some participants may have more advanced vocabularies than I had when I entered the prison system. I didn’t know how to define either of those words when I started. From a mastermind, I learned that we could empower ourselves if we built more robust vocabularies.

Regardless of what level of restrictions a prison imposes, anyone can work toward building a more robust vocabulary and more vital critical-thinking skills.



Before entering the prison system, I would not have taken the time to learn new words or develop critical-thinking skills. I was lazy. If I read words I didn't understand, I would simply skip over the words and move on. Later, I'll reveal more about a mastermind that helped me to appreciate the power that comes from developing more extensive communication skills and better critical-thinking skills.

Each participant in this course may want to grow stronger and more capable of success upon release.

Building a vocabulary represents one self-directed tactic that any person could pursue. To help, I use bold and italics to highlight each word that would have been new to me at the start of my sentence. If a participant doesn't know how to define the bold and italicized words or doesn't understand the phrase, then a good personal-development tactic toward the strategy of self-improvement would be to:

- » Write down the word,
- » Look up the word,
- » Write the definition of the word,
- » Learn how the word is categorized—a verb, a noun, or adjective,
- » And use the word in a sentence.

TAKE 10 MINUTES

7-1: How would this exercise of vocabulary building and personal development influence a person's prospects for future success?

7-2: How do officials define you?

7-3: How do you define yourself?

Reflecting on open-ended questions helped me immensely. By asking good questions, we develop our critical-thinking skills. Notice that there are no "wrong" or "right" answers to the open-ended questions. We can't answer "yes" or "no." We must think. The more time we spend contemplating challenging questions, the more skills we develop.



We succeed by training our minds on how to think differently. We can choose to develop better critical-thinking skills. When we make such a choice, we learn how to think in ways that improve the outcomes of our lives.

Questions help us define our values or what we consider central to who we are as individuals. When we identify values, we can begin to make more deliberate choices that lead to success—as we define success.

GETTING STARTED:

In previous lessons, I wrote about my bad decisions as a young man and how those decisions led to my 45-year sentence. Since those lessons didn't come easily to me, I'll offer the backstory, hoping that participants can follow along. Future modules and supplementary video lessons will show how early preparations influenced the career I began to build upon release. The sooner we begin preparing for success upon release, the stronger we become.

Any person searching for a pathway to personal development from prison may find examples of strategies and tactics helpful.

While I sat in my jail cell, I knew I wanted to change. My crimes exposed me to a possible life sentence. When authorities arrested me in 1987, I understood that a conviction would mean I wouldn't be eligible for parole. The jury's verdict meant I would serve at least a decade and probably much longer.

Since I hadn't been to prison previously, I didn't know what to expect.

Regardless of my sentence length, as I sat in various holding cells, I knew I wanted to leave prison differently. I tried to influence the way others thought about me. A jury convicted me, and a judge sentenced me. I wouldn't be able to reverse that reality. Still, I believed I could create meaning or a positive life if I could influence my future.

When Officer Wilson from the detention center passed me *A Treasury of Philosophy*, I didn't know what I'd learn. After I began reading, I felt as if I had come across a treasure map. If I could follow the teachings in the



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book, I would build a brighter future. Each chapter brought a new lesson, teaching me how to build strength out of weakness.

The story of Socrates gave me a character with whom I could identify. When I read that Socrates awaited his death while in a jail cell, I felt we had something in common. For that reason, I wanted to learn about his life. As I read more about his inspiring life, I saw that Socrates thought differently from me. In his story, I could ascertain that he placed high importance on living responsibly as a good citizen. While in my early 20s, such concepts didn't occur to me.

Socrates' thought process influenced my perceptions. Before reading his story, I didn't consider the relationship between my actions and the broader community. Neither did I think about how choices I made would influence others. Instead, I thought about myself.

Before reading that story of Socrates—during my first year of imprisonment—I only wanted to get out. My attorney led me to believe a big difference existed between an indictment and a conviction, and I wanted to believe him. I lacked the maturity to contemplate my crimes or what I would do if authorities released me. I simply wanted out of my jail cell.

Socrates changed my thinking. While lying on that concrete rack in the detention center, I stared at the ceiling of my cell. I needed to prepare, to make sure each day felt productive. In search of answers, or a roadmap that would help me navigate the pathway to success, I read deeper into that philosophy book.

While reading, I needed a dictionary. Before prison, I felt drawn to a fast lifestyle, not books, learning, or studying. School never held my attention. Reading through that philosophy book made me realize how poorly I had prepared for life's challenges. As a prisoner, I knew I would confront many challenges.

By reading philosophy, I learned the importance of introspecting as the first step toward change.



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INTROSPECTION:

When I looked up “introspection” in the dictionary, I developed a better understanding. Philosophers said that wise men considered the motives that drove them. They took deliberate action in pursuit of success—as they defined success. Not every person would define success in the same way. Each person had to define success for himself.

That advice made sense. If people could define what success meant to them, they would have a better chance of advancing along the journey of success.

The more I thought or introspected, the more I realized I had to change. Before prison, my thoughts were shallow. I never gave any consideration to what it would mean to define success. Instead, I thought about what I wanted in the immediate moment—material objects, like cars, places to live, or clothes. I didn’t comprehend how daily decisions would influence the rest of my life. Like the friends I chose, I lived for the moment.

Introspection brought more clarity. I reflected on my years in school. From my earliest memories, I looked for the easy way, ignoring the teachers that invested so much time trying to teach me. I didn’t discipline myself. Whenever I saw opportunities, I acted quickly, without thinking about what would follow. I didn’t hesitate to lie or cheat if I felt lying or cheating would serve my interest.

The more I introspected, the more disgusted I became with my earlier decisions. Those thoughts and decisions led to the young man I had become—a person locked inside a cell on his way to prison. As I began to develop my thought process, I concluded that I wasn’t in jail because I sold cocaine. Instead, the system confined me because I lacked discipline since I was a young boy. I chose the easy route instead of preparing for success. Rather than surrounding myself with good role models, I befriended people with character flaws like mine. As I reflected, I could see how all those earlier decisions put me on a pathway that influenced the person I became.

While alone in that solitary cell, I thought about people I admired. Instead of being driven by greed or the pursuit of immediate gratification, those people aspired to become people of good character. They didn’t act in ways that would harm their reputation.



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The more I thought about my life in the past, the more I realized how my earlier decisions would influence the future I would build. Although I didn't know what sentence my judge would impose, I understood that I would have to serve many years.

When I finished serving my sentence and returned to society, I surmised that people would always judge me. They would denounce me as a convicted felon or a man who spent decades in prison. Their perceptions of me would influence opportunities or present barriers to opportunities.

As I thought about success, I wondered what steps I could take to influence the perception of people I would meet in the future. I wanted to be positive.

TAKE TEN MINUTES

7-4: In what ways does introspection influence your release plan?

ADVICE FROM CONFINEMENT

By introspecting, I began to question whether I could do anything to change the course of my future. I considered past decisions and projected into the future. From staff members in the detention centers, I heard two messages:

- » You've got nothing comin'.
- » Don't do the crime if you can't do the time.

From the other people serving time, I heard a variety of messages:

- » The best way to serve time is to forget about the outside world.
- » Focus on your reputation inside.
- » Survival in prison requires hate.

That advice didn't inspire much hope. I needed to believe I could accomplish something during my imprisonment. Accomplishments could redeem the bad decisions from my early 20s. I wanted to reconcile with society and open opportunities for a better life.



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From reading Socrates, I learned that if I wanted to change the course of my future, I had to start by looking at my past. I had to contemplate the choices I made in the past. I learned to question all my choices.

- » How did earlier decisions influence my predicament?
- » What effect would those decisions have on my future?
- » Could I take steps during my imprisonment to influence people I would meet in the future?
- » Was it possible to influence how others would perceive me?
- » Could I reconcile in ways that would induce leaders to join my support group?

Those were yes or no questions. While locked in the cell, I questioned whether I could do anything to influence the people I would meet in the months, years, and decades ahead.

Either I had the power within to transform my life, or I didn't. The more I introspected on questions, the more hope I developed. Decisions I made while serving time could influence the life that I would lead upon release. Still, I wanted more clarity. The path ahead wasn't so apparent during those early stages of my journey.

- » I didn't know what sentence my judge would impose.
- » I didn't know where prison administrators would send me.
- » I didn't know the people with whom I would have to serve time.
- » I didn't know anything about prison.
- » I didn't know how I would support myself.
- » And I didn't know what else I didn't know.

There were a lot of unknowns. But I knew what I wanted: return to society unscathed from prison.

- » How could someone serving decades in prison prepare for a triumphant return to society?

The sooner a person starts asking such questions, the more it becomes possible to engineer a strategy that will lead to success.

Asking good questions led me to further thoughts. The more I stared at the concrete block walls, the more questions I had. The questions brought



clarity. For me, the exercise in personal development began with “Socratic questioning.”

We can define Socratic questioning as an exercise in asking questions that may help us come up with better answers. I learned how introspection could empower me.

We all have the power to ask better questions. Masterminds defined insanity as doing the same thing repeatedly but expecting a different result.

As I lay in my cell, I knew I wanted a different life. It dawned on me that if I continued to associate with people who broke the law, I would always have problems with the law. I began to think of what I could do to build a better life—a life where I wouldn’t be running from the law or running from anyone else.

RESTORING STRENGTH:

Thinking about my past helped. First, I thought about all the decisions that led to my troubles with the law. Then I thought about what I could do to build a life of meaning and relevance.

- » What could I do to influence people I would meet in the future?

I didn’t know who those people would be, but I knew that others would influence my ability to lead a full life after prison.

- » A probation officer would supervise me after release.
- » Could I take steps to influence that future probation officer?

I didn’t have much in the way of work experience before prison. Yet I would have to persuade an employer to hire me.

- » Could I influence the ways that future employers would judge me?

I didn’t have any financial resources and would need people or companies to extend credit.

- » Could I take steps while in prison to make it easier to obtain credit when I got out?
- » How could I use the time inside to solve problems I would face after release?



TAKE TEN MINUTES

7-5: What steps are you taking to convert adversaries into advocates?

AVATARS:

My questions turned to the people I would meet in the future. I referred to those people as my “Avatars.” I considered an avatar as the ideal type of person I would want to support me.

Could my adjustment in prison influence my avatars? That was another yes or no question.

That led to a new question:

What would law-abiding citizens expect from me?

Participants should recognize that each question leads to more questions. I had to think about my responses. And I had to assess whether my responses, decisions, and actions would bring me closer to success upon release.

If people were going to open opportunities in the future, they would expect me to show that I’m different. They would want me to do more than serve time. Calendar pages turn without any influence on my part.

You may have heard of the judge who sentenced a man to serve 20 years. The defendant felt weak.

“But judge, I can’t do all that time.”

“Well, do what you can,” the judge responded.

I knew my judge would sentence me to a lengthy term. My conviction carried a mandatory minimum sentence of 10 years. But the law allowed my judge to sentence me to life without parole. My judge would have total discretion on sentence length. But I could make choices to affect prospects for success. My adjustment in prison could put me on the pathway of opportunities. Or my adjustment could threaten progress.



CRAFTING A PLAN:

The judge would impose a sentence, but there would be more to the process. I could wait for my sentence to end. Yet waiting for calendar pages to turn wouldn't prepare me to overcome challenges, and I anticipated that I would face many difficulties in prison and upon release.

As mentioned above, I thought about:

- » My future probation officer and how I could persuade him to grant me a higher degree of liberty,
- » My prospective employer and how I could persuade him to look beyond my criminal record and allow me to work toward a career,
- » Future lenders and what they would expect me to achieve for them to do business with me.

Those questions made me think more about the people I'd meet. They led me to flesh out my avatars.

- » Who were they?
- » What kinds of friends did they have?
- » What perceptions would they have about someone who served a lengthy term in prison?
- » How could I persuade those people to see me differently from what my criminal convictions suggested?
- » Thinking about the future brought clarity.

Successful people think about problems and how to find or create solutions. Then they could develop plans that would lead to a successful outcome. By learning from them, anyone could plan. People in prison could create adjustment strategies.

That new "philosophy" helped me believe I could do more than serve time. I could take measurable steps to improve the outcome of my prison experience. Anyone could choose the same strategy.

If I wanted a second chance at life, I would need to do my part. People would always judge me if I didn't work hard to build an extraordinary and compelling record of accomplishments. I wanted to show how I matured into something more than the 20-year-old kid who sold cocaine. I couldn't



keep blaming others for problems I created. To build a better future, I had to solve problems.

First, I had to anticipate what problems I would face in the future. If I didn't make changes:

- » I knew that I'd leave prison without any clothes.
- » I knew that I'd leave prison without any money.
- » I knew that I'd leave prison without a vehicle.
- » I knew that I'd leave prison without any credit.
- » I knew that I'd leave prison without any work history.
- » I knew I'd leave prison without much in the way of resources other people took for granted.

How could a person in prison overcome those hurdles?

If I didn't take steps to solve those problems, my return to society would present many, many challenges. Those challenges, I realized, could complicate my future.

This questioning, introspection, or self-examination led to the values that would define my life. In time, I came away with an answer.

If I were going to emerge from prison with my dignity intact, unscathed by the prison experience, I needed to live a values-based, principled life. My values would reflect my commitment to success. As Gandhi said, habits become values, and values become destiny.

Even though I would serve a lengthy term, I could define value categories. I could pledge to live by those value categories. Those value categories could influence every decision I made going forward.

Before learning about values, I didn't have any direction. Although I hated being in prison, and wanted out, I didn't know how to create a path that would lead to a better life. I felt like a marionette. The prosecutor, my judge, and the prison system pulled the strings of my life. If I served multiple decades, I anticipated new challenges would await me once I got out.

From masterminds, I learned that I could seize control. I could define values. Then I could make decisions and take steps to show others that I was worthy of a second chance. I wanted to influence the way that



others perceived me. I didn't try to fit in with the prison culture or with the expectations of others. Instead, I set my values in accordance with the people I expected to influence later. I didn't know those people by name, but I had an idea of what they would expect. Those ideas influenced the value categories by which I would live.

Those people became my avatars, and I'll write more about how they inspired me in future lessons. The salient point of this lesson, I think, is that at any time, we can start making decisions to influence what we become in the future. Regardless of what bad decisions we've made in the past, it's never too early, and it's never too late to start becoming good.

Once I committed to living a values-based life, I took the first step toward a deliberate course of action. I knew that I was locked in prison. And I knew that I wanted to return to society strong. To accomplish that goal, I charted the course that would put me in the best possible position upon release.

I committed to living by the same value categories that governed the lives of law-abiding citizens—my avatars.

What would law-abiding citizens—my avatars—expect from me?

Masterminds convinced me that people would be more receptive to working with me if they believed I lived a values-based life. Instead of “giving” me a second chance, those people may consider my accomplishments and conclude I earned a second chance.

Those thoughts led me to identify three value categories that would be consistent with the values of my avatars. They included commitments:

- » To pursue an education
- » To contribute to society
- » To build a support network

A person may endure the struggle of confinement, yet anyone could take time to introspect. By introspecting, a person could look at past decisions. Looking at past decisions, a person could think about the relationship between the choices made and the life created.



TAKE 30 MINUTES

Consider the following questions to prompt your critical thinking.

7-6: What past experiences influenced your thoughts?

7-7: How did those thoughts influence the way you communicated?

7-8: In what ways did your communications lead to your actions?

7-9: How did your decisions and actions become your habits?

7-10: Would others define you by your habits?

7-11: Did those habits become your values and put you where you are now?

Regardless of where authorities confine us, we can make decisions to influence a better future. We may start by defining our values, and to the extent that we align those values with the future we want to create, we live like a mastermind.



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