



**Ten Steps to Prepare for Success  
from Jail or Prison:**

## **Straight-A Guide Introductory Course**



[www.prisonprofessors.com](http://www.prisonprofessors.com)



## TESTIMONIALS

I regard Michael Santos as an eminent policy analyst in the field of sentencing and corrections. At Stanford Law School, we welcome his great wisdom about the most needed and feasible improvements in reentry practice and programs.

**Joan Petersilia, Professor of Law,  
Stanford Law School**

As Deputy Warden of Programs and Services at the Maine State Prison I wanted to find a Reentry program designed specifically to build intrinsic motivation for people in prison. I personally facilitate the Mastermind course to our prison's most problematic prisoners. This strategy keeps the highly resistant participant engaged and challenged.

**Michael Tausek, Deputy Warden  
Maine State Prison**

Prisons should give serious consideration to the curriculum prepared by Michael Santos, specifically designed to prepare inmates for release. I read his book, *Earning Freedom: Conquering a 45-Year Prison Term*. He has the life experience, knowledge, skills, and intellect to contribute to the rehabilitation process.

**Honorable Robert Tafoya,  
Superior Court Judge,  
Bakersfield, California**

Michael Santos is a great resource for students at UC Berkeley! I invite him to speak regularly to my large class in Wheeler Hall, with more than 500 students in attendance each time. His dynamic presentations always inspire and educate the Berkeley community. Michael shows the power of human potential and we welcome him to present at Berkeley anytime.

**Professor Alan Ross,  
UC Berkeley Haas Business School**

I've done business with Michael Santos and I will continue to do business with Michael Santos. He inspires me every day and I'm glad to have his friendship. I've never had any doubt of the success he would build.

**Lee Nobmann,  
Founder, Golden State Lumber**

Michael Santos wants to give back. I find him to be very genuine. He feels very strongly that whatever he can do to help offenders change their lives and become successful, he would like to do. It's a very compelling story.

**Michael Colwell,  
Assistant Director  
Washington State Correctional Industries**

Immediately after his release in 2013, Santos began lecturing at a respected state university. Today, he has a website, course materials for persons facing lengthy prison sentences, scores of supporters and mentors, and the charisma and character to hold a law symposium audience spellbound for every minute of his thirty-minute presentation.

**Rory Little,  
Professor of Law, University of California Hastings College of the Law**

Michael Santos is one of the most inspiring people that I have ever met. I had the good fortune of meeting him last year when he spoke at Gideon's Promise. He has inspired many lawyers. He works with lawyers to improve the outcome for our clients, preparing them so they have meaningful lives in prison and beyond.

**Colette Tvedt, Director,  
National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers**

Michael Santos has channeled his fine mind and abundant energy into academic work of excellent quality. His personal and academic achievements while incarcerated convince me that he has become a serious and intellectually sophisticated man who has great potential for doing good as well as doing well. His life and skills give promise to anyone enduring challenge.

**Alfred Cohn,  
Professor of Psychology,  
Hofstra University**

Michael Santos' articles have appeared in scholarly journals and textbooks. His knowledge of the federal prison system and succeeding inside and outside of prison is without equal.

**George F. Cole,  
Professor Emeritus,  
University of Connecticut**

I have noticed over the years that we listen to some people because of what they have to say, and that we listen to others because of where they have been. I listen to Michael Santos for both reasons.

**J. Colin Harris,  
Professor of Religion of and Philosophy  
Mercer University**

“Santos relates how he has structured his prison time to avoid confrontations with other inmates and trouble with guards and has pursued every educational opportunity open to him. This culminated in a master’s degree from Hofstra University.”

**Edward Humes,  
Los Angeles Times Sunday Book Review**

As *Success After Prison* shows, nothing can stop an individual who chooses to succeed. Despite being incarcerated for longer than 26 years, Michael Santos has come back to society strong. He quickly began applying all that he learned to launch a number of successful business ventures while simultaneously making contributions to society.

**Tim Ufkes,  
Managing Director  
Berkadia**

In *Success After Prison*, Michael Santos shows the results of making good decisions. Even though he started life with a 45-year prison term, he came out and quickly launched a career that brought him into the top percentile of all earners. He embodies the characteristics of a hardcore closer. If you follow the guidance in *Success After Prison*, you will too!

**Ryan Stewman,  
Hardcore Closer**

I was happy to assist Michael with the purchase of three investment properties. I found him to be honest and fully capable of articulating an investment strategy—just as he described in *Success After Prison*. I’m looking forward to assisting Michael with all of his real estate financing needs. His work ethic, as characterized in this book, inspires me to work toward achieving more.

**Derek Clemons, Mortgage Banker,  
Evergreen Mortgage**

**Other Books by  
Michael G. Santos**

**Inside: Life Behind Bars in America**  
St. Martin's Press

**About Prison**  
Cengage Publishing

**Profiles From Prison**  
Greenwood Praeger

**Prison! My 8,344th Day**  
PrisonProfessors.com

**Earning Freedom:  
Conquering a 45-Year Prison Term**  
PrisonProfessors.com

**Triumph! The Straight-A Guide  
Preparing Prisoners for Reentry**  
PrisonProfessors.com

**Success After Prison**  
**How I Built Assets Worth \$1,000,000  
After Being Released from Prison**  
PrisonProfessors.com

**Success! The Straight-A Guide  
for At-Risk Youth and Young Offenders**  
PrisonProfessors.com

**Contact:**  
[PrisonProfessors.com](http://PrisonProfessors.com)  
[Team@PrisonProfessors.com](mailto:Team@PrisonProfessors.com)  
949-205-6056

# Table of Contents

## Module 1: Values—9

Learn to identify success, and to pursue it deliberately

## Module 2: Goals—23

Master techniques to develop a clear pathway to success

## Module 3: Attitude—35

Pursue success with a 100% commitment to success

## Module 4: Aspiration—49

Visualize the success you're determined to achieve

## Module 5: Action—61

Take the action steps necessary to prosper

## Module 6: Accountability—73

Pursue your steps in a deliberate and disciplined manner

## Module 7: Awareness—85

Keep your head in the game, and help others know about your progress

## Module 8: Authenticity—97

Don't fill the room with happy talk

## Module 9: Achievement—119

Celebrate every achievement, no matter how small

## Module 10: Appreciation—131

Live with gratitude for the blessings you've received

Contact:

[PrisonProfessors.com](http://PrisonProfessors.com)

[Team@PrisonProfessors.com](mailto:Team@PrisonProfessors.com)

949-205-6056





## Module 1: Values



**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**

**H**ow do law-enforcement officials define you? How do you define yourself? If you would like to influence the way that other people perceive you, then this lesson on values will help.

Through this course, you will learn the value of asking questions. That strategy helped me immensely. By asking good questions, we strengthen ourselves. We learn how to think in ways that improve the outcomes of our lives. Questions help us define our values, or what we consider to be central to our lives. When we identify values, we can begin to make more deliberate choices that lead to success—as we define success.

In the opening lesson, I wrote about starting my term in prison. To teach this course, I need to share what I learned. And I need to show how I learned.

### **My name is Michael Santos:**

As I sat in my jail cell in 1987, I knew that I wanted to change. My crimes exposed me to a possible life term, and I would not be eligible for parole. I knew that I would serve at least a decade, and probably longer.

Since this was my first time in jail, I didn't know what to expect. Other people in jail offered me advice on how to get through the time. Yet they'd been to jail many times before, so I didn't consider them as reliable sources for what I wanted to achieve.

Regardless of my sentence length, I wanted to leave prison differently from when I came in. I wanted to influence the way others thought about me—in a positive way. A jury convicted me, and a judge would sentence me. I wouldn't be able to reverse that reality.



Still, if I could influence my future, I believed that I could bring meaning and relevance to my life.

When I found a *Treasury of Philosophy* in the jail's book cart, it was a pivotal moment in my life. The stories I read taught me how to think differently. Lessons in that book taught me how to build strength out of weakness. When I found the story of Socrates, I identified with him. His imprisonment made me feel connected. But Socrates thought differently from me. He wrote about having responsibility as a citizen, and I never thought about such concepts.

Socrates' thought process influenced my perceptions. Prior to reading his story, I didn't think about my responsibilities as a citizen.

I came across that philosophy book when I was about a year into my sentence. I was still a pre-trial detainee. Authorities arrested me on August 11, 1987. As I wrote previously, I only cared about getting out. My attorney described a big difference between an indictment and a conviction. I wanted to believe the lawyer. But I didn't know what I would do if authorities released me. I didn't care. I simply wanted out of my jail cell.

Reading about Socrates changed my thinking. While lying on that concrete rack in the Pierce County Jail, I stared at the ceiling of my cell. Outside, I could hear the television blaring. Other prisoners slammed cards or dominoes on the tables in the jail's day room. Passing time with card games and television didn't interest me. I needed to prepare, to make sure each day was productive.

In my search for answers, some kind of roadmap to success, I read deeper into that philosophy book.

I needed a dictionary while I read. Before prison, I didn't study. I pursued a fast lifestyle, not books. School never held my attention. Reading through that philosophy book made me realize how poorly prepared I was for any type of challenge. As a prisoner, I knew that I couldn't completely avoid confrontations. Yet, I questioned whether I could make choices to minimize my exposure to problems.

The wisdom of philosophy suggested that I should introspect. But I didn't even know the meaning of "introspect."

## Introspection:

When I looked up the definition of "introspection" in the dictionary, I developed a better understanding of the word and its meaning. Philosophers said that wise men con-

sidered the motives that drove them. They took deliberate action in pursuit of success—as they defined success.

That advice made sense to me. If a person knew how to define success, it would seem that he would have a better chance of succeeding.



The more I reflected and the further back I examined my life, the more I realized I had to change. Before prison, I didn't think about how my decisions would influence the rest of my life. The friends I chose were like me, living for the moment. I never thought about success.

Introspection from my jail cell brought clarity. By looking back, I could see how decisions early in my life influenced the choices I made. Ever since I could remember, I looked for the easy way. I reflected on my years in school—I didn't pay attention in classes. I wasn't a disciplined athlete. Whenever I saw opportunities, I acted impulsively, without thinking about what consequences would follow. I didn't hesitate to lie or cheat if I felt that lying or cheating would advance my interests.

The more I reflected on my past decisions, the more disgusted I became. Those thoughts and decisions led me to become a shallow, undisciplined young man who was in trouble.

In contrast, I thought about people I admired. They behaved differently from me. Instead of being driven by greed or a fast life, other people aspired to develop good character. They didn't act in ways that would harm their reputation.

My reputation was shot. The more I thought about my life in the past, the more I realized the impact it would have on my future. I would have to serve many, many years in prison. Then, when I returned to society, people would always judge me. They would see me as a convicted felon, or a man who served a lengthy term in prison.

I wanted to influence how others perceived me. I wanted to be positive.

## 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 I projected to what I wanted to become. In the jail environment, I heard two messages from staff members:



» *You've got nothing comin'.*

» *Don't do the crime if you can't do the time.*

From the other people in jail, I heard a variety of messages:

» *The best way to serve time is to forget about the outside world.*

» *Focus on your reputation inside.*

» *The only thing it takes to survive in prison is a ball of hate in your stomach and a knife.*

That advice didn't bring much hope. I needed hope. I needed to believe I could accomplish something during my imprisonment. Accomplishments could redeem the bad decisions from my early 20s.

Reading Socrates taught me that I should ask questions. While locked in the jail cell, I didn't have anyone to ask. That didn't stop me from thinking about seeds I could sow to influence others—people I didn't yet know, and people that didn't know me.

Could I take steps to influence people to see me as something different from my criminal behavior?

That was a yes or no question.

Either I held the power to transform my life or I didn't. The more I thought about the question, the more hope I developed. My answer was yes, and I understood that decisions I made while serving time could influence the life that I would lead upon release. Still, I wanted more clarity. During those early stages of my journey, I didn't have any way of knowing the direction my path would take me.

» *I didn't know what sentence my judge would impose.*

» *I didn't know where I would serve my time.*

» *I didn't know the people I would meet in jail or prison.*

» *I didn't know anything about the culture of confinement.*

» *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 that I wanted to come back to society unscathed from prison.



» *How could someone in jail, or someone serving decades in prison, prepare for a successful return to society?*

That question led me to further thoughts. I stared at the concrete block wall. The questions I wrestled with over and over in my mind brought clarity. From that internal quest for answers, I learned how introspection could empower me.

We all have that power.

Masterminds define insanity as doing the same thing over and over but expecting a different result. As I lay in my cell, I knew that I wanted a different life. If I continued to associate with people that broke the law, I would always have problems with the law. I began to think of what I could do to change the course of my life to one that reflected my new purpose.

## 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 create more meaning. I learned to think about the future that I wanted to create.

I thought about people I would meet. I didn't know whom I would meet. But I knew that other people would influence my ability to lead a full life after prison.

A probation officer would supervise me after release.

» *Could I take steps now 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 money and I 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?*

## Avatars:

My questions turned to the people I would meet in the future. Eventually, I gave a name to those people. I called them my “avatars.” I considered an avatar as the ideal type of person I would want to support me. I’ll describe more about avatars in future lessons.

- » *Could my adjustment in prison influence my avatars?*

That was another yes or no question. It led to a new question:

- » *What would law-abiding citizens expect from me?*

As you can see, each question I asked opened 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 for me in the future, they would expect me to show that I’m different. They would want me to do more than serve time. Serving time didn’t present any particular challenge. Calendar pages would turn without any influence on my part.

You may have heard an old saying. A judge 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 prison term. My conviction carried a mandatory-minimum sentence of 10 years. But the law allowed for my judge to sentence me to life without parole.



I didn't know anything I could do to influence my sentence length. But I could make choices to influence my prospects for success. My adjustment in prison could put me in 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. I would face many challenges in prison. I would face more challenges after 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 future 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 led me to think more about the people I'd meet in the future. 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 more clarity.

Successful people taught that thinking about problems led to solutions. Then they created plans that would lead to a successful outcome. By learning from successful people, anyone could create a plan. People in prison could create adjustment strategies. That new



“philosophy” helped me believe that I could do more than serve time. I could take measurable steps to improve the outcome of my prison experience.

Anyone could do the same.

If I wanted a second chance at life, I would need to do my part. If I didn’t work hard to build a credible record, people would always judge me. I wanted to show how I matured into more than the 20-year old kid who sold cocaine. I couldn’t keep blaming others for the problems I created. To build a better future, I had to solve problems.

» *What problems would I face in the future?*

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 that I’d leave prison without much in the way of resources that other people took for granted.

» *How could a person in jail or prison prepare in ways to 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. They may have been more challenging than serving the lengthy term I was certain to receive.

This type of questioning, introspection, and 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 was in prison, 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.



Prior to learning about values, I didn't have any direction. I hated being in prison and I wanted out. But I didn't know how to create a path that would lead me out. I felt like a puppet. The prosecutor, my judge, and the prison system pulled the strings of my life.



From masterminds, I learned that I could seize control of my thoughts and behaviors. 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 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—my avatars—that I expected to influence in the future.

I didn't know my avatars by name. But I had some ideas of what they would expect from me. Those ideas influenced the value categories by which I would live.

Once I made a commitment to live 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 out the course that would put me in the best possible position upon release.

I committed to live in accordance with the same value categories that governed the lives of law-abiding citizens, my avatars.

What would law-abiding citizens expect from me?

Masterminds taught me to introspect. Doing the work of introspection convinced me that I could influence a better future. By living a values-based life, people would be more inclined to work with me. Instead of “giving” me a second chance, they would see that I earned a second chance.

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

- » *Pursue an education,*
- » *Contribute to society,*
- » *Build a support network.*

The Straight-A Guide course should generate and reinforce hope for participants. A person living in struggle can introspect and examine past decisions. Looking at past de-



cisions can lead the individual to ask Socratic questions in the search for a better life.

- » *What past influences led to your thoughts about all that you value in life?*
- » *How did those thoughts influence the way you communicated?*
- » *In what ways did your communications lead to your actions?*
- » *How did your decisions and actions become your habits?*
- » *Would others define you by your habits?*
- » *In what ways did those habits influence your values, or where you are now?*

Regardless of where you are now, you can make decisions to influence a better future. If you want a better future, start now by defining your values. To the extent that you align those values with the future you want to create, you live like a mastermind.

## Basic Questions:

1. *What are Socratic questions?*
2. *What does it mean to introspect?*
  - » *To rest.*
  - » *To think about past decisions.*
  - » *To plan for a better future.*
3. *What steps can you take to influence positively the ways that others perceive you?*
  - » *People will always think the worst and there's nothing I can do about it.*



- » *I can wait until I get out of prison because nothing matters in here.*
- » *I can build a record of accomplishments.*
- 4. *When is the best time to prepare for challenges you will face upon release?*
  - » *I can start preparing for release right now.*
  - » *I will enroll in pre-release classes when the prison lets me.*
  - » *I'm just going to focus on doing time now and I'll focus on release when I get out.*
- 5. *What steps can you take to influence others so they see you positively, even though you may be in a challenge right now?*
  - » *I can't do anything about the way others see me.*
  - » *I can build a record that will influence the way that others perceive me.*
- 6. *Which of the following decisions be more likely to influence a prospective employer to hire you in your future?*
  - » *I could make sure he knew I was a shot caller.*
  - » *I could show that I was great at playing cards.*
  - » *I could describe steps I took to prepare for success upon release.*

## Personal Development Exercises:

- » *Pursue these personal-development exercises independently, or in a group breakoout session. Respond to the questions and discuss with your group.*



1. *How do you think law-enforcement officials define people who have been in custody?*
2. *How do you define yourself?*
3. *What steps could someone in custody take to influence people in the future so that they would not only consider the criminal charge?*
4. *How could someone serving decades in prison prepare for a successful return to society?*
5. *What steps could someone in custody take to influence a future probation officer?*
6. *What steps could someone in custody influence perceptions of future employers?*
7. *What steps could someone in custody take to open credit lines upon release?*
8. *What steps could a person in custody take to prepare for challenges after release?*
9. *How could behavior while in custody influence a person's avatars?*
10. *Who are your avatars?*
11. *What kinds of friends do your avatars have?*
12. *What perceptions would your avatars have about someone who served a lengthy term in prison?*
13. *How could you persuade your avatars to see you differently from what your criminal convictions suggest?*
14. *What problems do you anticipate facing in the future?*
15. *How could a person in custody overcome those hurdles?*
16. *What influences led to your current station in life?*

17. *How did those thoughts influence the way you communicated?*
18. *In what ways did your communications lead to your actions?*
19. *How did your decisions and actions become your habits?*
20. *Would others define you by your habits?*
21. *In what ways did those habits influence your values, or where you are now?*

## Module Activities

- » *Vocabulary Exercise: In each chapter, write down 10 words you did not know. Use a dictionary to look up each word and write the definition next to the word. Practice saying each word out loud, correctly.*

## Critical Thinking Exercise

Return to the module and read the sentences and paragraph sections where you looked up words. Think about what you learned by looking up the words.

- » *Does understanding what the words mean bring you a new understanding of the meaning in what you're reading?*
- » *As your understand of vocabulary increases, are you relating to the course content differently?*
- » *Next to each word, write down what you learned from reading deliberately.*



## Module Two: Goals



**What you get  
By achieving your goals  
is not as important as what you  
become by pursuing your goals.  
Henry David Thoreau**

What did you do yesterday? How did your decisions move you closer to the person you intend to become?

I ask myself those questions every day. My answers align with my values, and that strengthens me. Others who ask that question can make better decisions, too. Leaders teach that we should pursue a deliberate path. We should take action steps. The steps should take us closer to the success we want to achieve. Regardless of where we are today, we can grow. We can take incremental steps. Those steps lead us closer to success, even if we're living with struggles.

Anyone can work to build a meaningful life. My adjustment through 26 years in prison led to a life of fulfillment. In August of 2013, I finished my term. I continued living deliberately, using mastermind strategies. Instead of experiencing unemployment or struggle when I got out, I had income opportunities after release. As I've stated before and I'll say again, I never ask anyone to do anything that I didn't do, and that I'm not still doing. Since mastermind strategies led to a positive outcome for me, I'm convinced they can work for others as well.

The Straight-A Guide course begins with a commitment to values and goals. First, we need to define our values. Then we advance to the lesson on goals. This course will show how making values-based and goal-oriented choices will help you.

## REVIEW:

The previous lesson discussed values. I described the thought process that led to my three value categories. To recap, I made a commitment to spend every day working to:

- » *educate myself,*
- » *contribute to society, and*



» *build a support network.*

Those value categories felt consistent with how I defined success. My avatars would recognize and respect those value categories. I wanted to walk into any group of law-abiding citizens and fit in. Whether I stood in a bank, a prospective employer's office, or a business, I wanted people to accept me. If I didn't tell anyone, no one would know that I served a day in prison. If I succeeded, I would find support and opportunity.

The strategy of working to educate myself, to contribute to society, and to building a support network helped me frame decisions. Avatars would believe in my future if I lived by those values. Defining values would help me build a better life.

The strategy would help me while I was in prison.

It would also help when I got out.

For example, a prison official could help me. A case manager may recommend me for lower security. A lieutenant may refrain from citing me with an infraction. A Warden may consider a special request. Those leaders could make life harder or easier. My values-based adjustment could influence those people in a positive way.

Likewise, values-based decisions would influence my future. A probation officer may consider my adjustment. An employer would want to know why I'm a worthy candidate for a job. People that approved loan requests would want an explanation of my criminal background. I considered all of those people my avatars. My values would influence their perceptions and my prospects for success.

I wanted to influence my avatars. If I could make a favorable impression on others, I could open better opportunities. To succeed, I used values to guide my adjustment. I didn't concern myself with anything else. Many people in prison expressed different values. They focused on their time inside.

» *How are values influencing your life today?*

» *How will people you meet in the future relate to your values?*

As mentioned earlier, people in prison like to offer advice. They have clear ideas on how to serve time. Some people in prison mistakenly believe that they can't influence life "outside." As a result, their decisions inside suggest that they want to ease the adjustment of life in jail or prison. They believe that focusing on what's going on in the world makes



time inside more difficult. The general mentality inside jails and prisons is to forget about the world outside. Those determined to succeed develop the strength to resist the urge of falling in with the jail or prison mentality.



When I was in school, before I went to prison, I didn't think like a leader. I didn't give much thought to my future. Since I wasn't thinking about my future, the decisions I made didn't matter. That disconnected thinking led me into problems. I didn't think about how my decisions and actions influenced the lives of others. Instead of thinking about my role as a citizen, I focused on myself. That thinking pattern led to bad actions. Those actions led to my prison term. This was a very "un-mastermind" way of making decisions.

## Making a Change:

I wanted a different life. During the many months of my pretrial detention, I saw and heard a lot. Hundreds of prisoners told me their stories. Many described serving time previously. They faced problems after release.

Ironically, men spoke as if serving multiple terms gave them credibility. They were prison leaders, dispensing advice. Certainly, they had solid images as stand-up convicts. People in the jail "respected" them. Those cellblock leaders decided which television shows to watch. They had their own seats in common areas. They lived as stand-up convicts, leaders in the system. The path to being a stand-up convict differs from the path to prepare for success upon release.

- » *How would my avatars respond to someone that built a reputation as a stand-up convict?*

Continually asking myself that question guided my behavior.

My judge was about to sentence me to a lengthy term. The mandatory-minimum was 10 years. But my judge had discretion to impose a life sentence.

Regardless of what sentence he imposed, my adjustment inside would influence my future. He could sentence me to life. I could still work to influence a better outcome. I wanted to leave with my dignity intact, at the earliest time.



My definition for success always remained in the forefront of my mind. When I walked out, I wanted to be ready. My three value categories defined me, and every decision I made was aligned with that pursuit.

» *What defines you?*

## SETTING GOALS:

By setting clear goals, I could show my commitment to the three value categories. Achieving goals would influence perceptions of my avatars. Both the values and goals worked together. A values-based, goal-oriented adjustment would prepare me for success.

Pursuing a reputation as a stand-up convict was another option. Such a value would require different goals. Those goals may not have a positive influence on my success once I got out.

## Defining a Stand-up Convict:

During the awkward months in pre-trial detention, I listened to others. People spoke about the importance of a prison reputation. Decisions could either put me on a track to succeed or lead to cycles of failure. Shot callers in jail described a lot of failure outside. They described transient lives after release from earlier terms. In other words:

- » *They didn't have credit.*
- » *They didn't own a home.*
- » *Their most prized possession was a vehicle.*
- » *They didn't have financial resources.*
- » *They didn't have stable careers.*
- » *They couldn't buy commissary.*
- » *They didn't have stable relationships.*

- » *They didn't have close or supportive families.*
- » *They described problems with substance abuse or other addictions.*
- » *They described ongoing problems while on supervised release.*
- » *Their family members had problems with the criminal justice system.*



If I heard that story from one prisoner, I may have dismissed it. Yet, after I'd been in custody for several months I heard the same story from prison leaders. I saw a pattern. An adjustment in prison influenced life after release. Men who valued a prison reputation had low prospects for success after release.

A jury convicted me. Prisons would confine me for a long time. I couldn't change that fact. But I could change how I got out. The value categories would guide my adjustment. I would:

- » *Focus on Education*
- » *Focus on Contributing to Society*
- » *And Focus on Building a Support Network*

What clear goals would show a commitment to those values? Would clear goals put me in a better position to succeed?

I wanted to succeed in prison and beyond.

If you're living in struggle, how can you use these lessons to change your life today?

What relationship do you see between your circle of friends, and your prospects for success as you defined success with your values?

## Transparency:

Establishing value categories influenced my choices. I wanted to go on record with my choices. Others should know of my commitment to transform. I wanted to mark the date



when I would grow from criminal to a law-abiding citizen. With that end in mind, I wrote a letter to a journalist at the local newspaper.

In the letter, I wrote how I regretted selling cocaine. I couldn't change the past. But I pledged to educate myself. I would find ways to contribute to society. And I would build a strong, positive support network. That would be my strategy to prepare for success.

I invited the journalist to visit me in jail.

That letter was a first step in my quest to make things right. By writing the letter, I made it clear that I wanted to atone. I planted a seed for a new and bright future. The record would show the exact time that I made a conscious, deliberate choice to change.

The journalist interviewed me in a small jail conference room. The week before sentencing, the newspaper published the article. It was a front-page story, profiling how I said I would change. I was on the record, pledging to spend every day working:

- » *To educate myself,*
- » *To contribute to society,*
- » *And to build a support network.*

I wanted to live by those value categories. By going on the record, I started moving closer to liberty.

## **The Sentencing Hearing:**

I expected the prosecutor to oppose my request for mercy. Instead, he would argue that I was only sorry because I got caught. His job was to request a tough sentence. He would say that I wasn't remorseful for the crimes that I had committed.

Exposure to Socrates and philosophy changed the way that I looked at the world. Earlier, I lived by a bad philosophy. I wanted to make things right. The newspaper article demonstrated my remorse and my changed thinking.

On the day of my sentencing, jailers came to my cell before dawn. I heard the sound of keys approaching. I changed from my jail jumpsuit into my court clothes. Regardless of

what term I received, I had my value categories. They would serve as a guide. They would help me build a path home.

Decades have passed since the day of my sentencing. But I remember the prosecutor's words. He told the judge:

**If Michael Santos spends every day of his life working to reconcile with society, and if he lives to be 300 years old, our community will still be at significant net loss because of his crimes.**



The judge assessed the arguments. He sentenced me to 45 years.

Strangely, I felt okay with the sentence. Under the 1987 law, I could earn “good time credits.” By avoiding disciplinary problems, I could finish my sentence in 26 years. Still, 26 years felt like a long time. It was longer than I’d been alive.

We can put that term in perspective. Imagine a young man going into prison today. Project 26 years into the future. How could a young man who began serving that sentence sustain a high level of energy and discipline while climbing through the peaks and valleys of the journey? Could I learn from masterminds how to answer to that question?

Yes!

We should aspire to learn and teach lessons that lead to lives of fulfillment and avoid further altercations with the criminal justice system.

A values-based, goal-oriented adjustment strategy brings energy and discipline.

Clear goals reflect our commitment to the values we set. Experts who wrote about goals suggest that they should adhere to the acronym: “SMART.”

- » **S:**    *A goal should be specific.*
- » **M:**    *A goal should be measurable.*
- » **A:**    *A goal should be action-oriented.*
- » **R:**    *A goal should be realistic.*
- » **T:**    *A goal should be time-based.*



By setting SMART goals, I could work toward success. I defined success with my values. Those goals would help me break up the time. With the decades I expected to serve, I needed goals. Instead of dwelling on time, I focused on moving through goals. One goal would lead to the next. Achieving goals felt like building a ladder. I could climb a ladder to liberty, to success.

Can you see how using SMART goals can help you?

To set SMART goals within each value category, I thought about my avatars. They included:

My future probation officer.

My future employer.

My future creditors.

My future business partners.

What steps could I begin taking in jail and prison to influence those avatars in a positive way? Thinking about that question led me to set the following clearly defined goals:

To measure whether I lived in accordance with my commitment to educate myself, I needed:

» *To earn a university degree within my first 10 years.*

To measure whether I lived in accordance with my commitment to contribute to society, I needed:

» *To publish something within 10 years.*

To measure whether I lived in accordance with my commitment to build a support network, I needed:

» *To bring 10 people into my support network within 10 years.*

During my first 10 years in prison, I would achieve the three goals. I didn't yet know how. Nevertheless, the goals became my guide. By achieving the goals within 10 years, I advanced prospects for success. Then I could set new goals. Setting my initial series of goals brought strength. I started on a path of recreating myself. My transformation from a reckless youth into the man I aspired to become had begun.

## Basic Questions:



1. *What role do values play in an adjustment strategy?*
  - » *A. They impress our teachers and case managers.*
  - » *B. They show how we define ourselves and profess to live.*
  - » *C. They get us into better living conditions.*
  - » *D. They make us more money.*
2. *When preparing for success, does it make more sense to focus on today's reputation or focus on preparing for challenges of the future?*
  - » *A. We can't control the future so it's best to focus on today.*
  - » *B. No one cares what we do today or tomorrow, so focus on today's reputation.*
  - » *C. It makes total sense to sow small seeds that empower us to overcome challenges of the future.*
  - » *D. Success is driven by luck and who a person knows, and no one change that fact.*
3. *Which response to a question about a criminal background is more likely to make a favorable impression on a prospective employer?*
  - » *A. I was a shot caller in prison.*
  - » *B. I ran the card table.*
  - » *C. From reading 25 books on leadership, I developed insight that will bring more value to your company.*
  - » *D. I didn't do it because someone set me up, so my criminal background shouldn't matter.*





4. *What would you accomplish by affirming your commitment to change?*
- » *A. More people would see me as being responsible.*
  - » *B. People would judge me because of the steps I've been taking to grow.*
  - » *C. People would be more inclined to open opportunities for me.*
  - » *D. All of the above.*
5. *Is the statement "I'm going to be successful." a SMART Goal?*
- » *A. Yes, because it's good to be successful..*
  - » *B. No, for the following reasons: the goal doesn't define success, the goal doesn't measure success, and the goal doesn't have a time component.*

## Personal Development Exercises:

- » *Pursue these personal-development exercises independently, or in a group breakoout session. Respond to the questions and discuss with your group.*
1. *What did you do yesterday?*
  2. *How did your decisions move you closer to the person you intend to become?*
  3. *How are values influencing your life today?*
  4. *How will people you meet in the future relate to your values?*
  5. *Who is your avatar?*



6. *What is your market?*
7. *How would your avatars respond to someone that built a reputation as a stand-up convict?*
8. *What defines you?*
9. *What clear goals would show a commitment to those values? Would clear goals put you in a better position to succeed?*
10. *If you're living in struggle, how can you use these lessons to change your life today?*
11. *What relationship do you see between your circle of friends, and your prospects for success as you defined success with your values?*
12. *Can you see how using SMART goals can help you?*



## Module Activities

- » *Vocabulary Exercise: In each chapter, write down 10 words you did not know. Use a dictionary to look up each word and write the definition next to the word. Practice saying each word out loud, correctly.*

## Critical Thinking Exercise

Return to the module and read the sentences and paragraph sections where you looked up words. Think about what you learned by looking up the words.

- » *Does understanding what the words mean bring you a new understanding of the meaning in what you're reading?*
- » *As your understand of vocabulary increases, are you relating to the course content differently?*
- » *Next to each word, write down what you learned from reading deliberately.*



## Module 3: Attitude



**Nothing can stop the man  
with the right mental attitude  
from achieving his goal;  
nothing on earth can help the  
man with the wrong mental attitude.**

**Thomas Jefferson**

What does it mean to have the right mental attitude?

That's a question masterminds teach us to ask. We should think about how we define "the right mental attitude." Once we define the right mental attitude, we can begin to assess our individual mental attitude.

- » *Do you have an attitude that is set for success?*
- » *Are you doing everything within your power to prepare for success?*
- » *What more can you do to prepare for success?*

The initial lesson on values should help you define success. The second lesson on goals should put you on track to set and achieve SMART goals. Your goals will prove your commitment to success.

Remember that success comes in tiny steps, not all at once. Sometimes we're in difficult situations. Sometimes others attempt to pressure or influence us. They try to tell us what we can or cannot become. We determine whether we want to listen. Our values and goals should always keep us on the path to success.

## Prepare to Grow Through Fertilizer:

First we must know how to define success—with our values. Then we must plant the seeds to success—with our goals. We nurture those seeds. We nourish the seeds with fertilizer. In time, as seasons pass, those seeds grow through the fertilizer. If we sow the right seeds, and if we nurture the seeds appropriately, they will produce crops in abundance. We can feed off of those crops for a lifetime.

I see three key points in the paragraph above.



We must plant the right seeds.

We must nourish and nurture the seeds over time.

The seeds must grow through the fertilizer to become healthy plants.

What does that mean? Well, remember that one of the most effective types of fertilizer is manure—a polite way of saying a word that I pledged not to use in this course. We’ve got to grow through the fertilizer (“sh\*t”) in order to grow and build the future we want!

## **Straight-A Guide:**

In this third lesson, we move beyond the prerequisites of values and goals to move into the “Straight-A Guide.” Before elaborating on the “Straight-A Guide,” I’ll tell you how and why I formed this tool. I had about 20, or 22 years of prison behind me. I didn’t know when I was going to get out. There were some complications because sentencing laws had changed since the time of my conviction. Release could come for me at 23 years, 24 years, 25 years, or 26 years. I wasn’t sure when I would get out.

Regardless of when I got out, I wanted to teach others the strategies that strengthened me, and I hoped to build a career around that vision. Strategies that masterminds taught powered me from the time I started in jail, and through the decades I served in prison. Those strategies could help others. The strategies could help students just as well as they could help people in jail or prison. They could help returning veterans that faced challenges in reacclimating to society, or people that were released from jail or prison.

The strategies help all people who choose to live a values-based, goal-oriented life. They help people who want to succeed. We simply must apply the strategies to every area of our life. We can apply the strategies to our fitness, our relationships, our finances, our careers, and to our community involvement.

I knew that I wanted to earn a living by creating products that would empower others. But that would require me to sow a lot of seeds. It would require me to grow through a lot of “fertilizer.” I didn’t quite know how I would start. I received that answer when a mentor came to visit me.

My mentor asked how I was going to teach. I told him that I would use the story of my journey, and the stories of other people. By sharing those stories, I could show how all

people that overcome struggle make small steps. Those small steps, if directed and deliberate, lead from struggle to success.



My mentor gave me some good advice. Besides stories, he said, I needed a simple tool that people could remember. After listening to his advice, I came up with the Straight-A Guide. The course's name would be easy to remember. As described earlier, to start on the Straight-A Guide, we must identify our values and goals. Those are the prerequisites. Then, each of the next lessons starts with the letter "A."

All masterminds start with the right attitude. Their attitudes align with how they define success. From mastermind thinking, I learned how to conquer struggle. It begins by defining our values. Then we set clear goals to make sure that we're not just talking about values—but living those values.

Once we identify our values and we set our goals, we move on to Attitude. Attitude is the first "A" in our Straight-A Guide.

Masterminds like Nelson Mandela, Viktor Frankl, Martin Luther King embody the power of having the right attitude. Nelson Mandela had the right attitude to make it through 27 years of prison in an unjust society. Viktor Frankl had the right attitude to make it through the challenges of a Nazi concentration camp. Martin Luther King had the right attitude to work toward restoring civil rights for all people. They defined the right attitude with a 100% commitment to success! With their attitude, they overcome monumental struggle.

### Begin with the Right Attitude!

It isn't only world leaders that move through struggle with the right attitude. Business leaders like Steve Jobs, Bill Gates, and Jack Welch prove that with the right attitude, we can create value from ideas. Steve Jobs built Apple, one of the most innovative companies in history. Bill Gates had the right attitude when he led his partners to start Microsoft and change the world with computer software. Jack Welch built General Electric with an attitude of building great companies that would lead innovation.

By sticking with the same lessons that drive masterminds, we all can succeed. Start with the right attitude.

Masterminds teach that success depends upon what we profess to hold important. When it comes to the individuals I named above, how would you define their values? If you don't know those historical figures, let me provide a brief description:



## Nelson Mandela:

Authorities locked Nelson Mandela in prison for 27 years. He opposed the racist laws of South Africa. Those laws existed during the Apartheid era. Despite imprisonment for multiple decades, Mandela did not harbor any bitterness. He did not hate his oppressors after his release. Instead, Mandela worked to bring justice and peace. He became a leading world figure, personifying the best of human dignity.

## Viktor Frankl

Nazis locked Dr. Frankl in a death camp. He watched as Nazis killed his family members. On any given day, Dr. Frankl knew the Nazis might murder him. He refused to show anger. He kept peace by devoting his life to helping others.

## Martin Luther King

Authorities locked Dr. King in many jails. They opposed his efforts to expand civil rights for all people. He led the way to bringing awareness to injustice. Dr. King fought against inequality between races. He crusaded and united people of all races. People from around the world consider Martin Luther King a global leader. We celebrate his life as a historic American figure and role model.

## Steve Jobs

You may not know Steve Jobs, but I'm sure you know his company. He and his partner started Apple Computer. Later, business decisions forced him out of Apple. Rather than being bitter at losing the company he started, Steve went on to start new companies. Then he returned to lead Apple. With the right attitude, he grew Apple into the most valuable company in the world.

## Bill Gates

Bill Gates and his partner started Microsoft. Their company started with an idea. Bill wanted to make computers more practical. He believed that every business should have a computer, and every home should have a computer. With Microsoft, Bill turned those ideas into a reality. In the process, he became the wealthiest man alive. And he pledged to use his wealth to improve the world for all people.

## Jack Welch

Jack Welch studied chemical engineering in college. When he earned his final degree, he began building a career with General Electric. He rose quickly, eventually reaching the top position. Under Jack's leadership, the value of GE grew by more than 4,000 percent. Many people wrote books about his leadership philosophy, and about his commitment to success.



## Learn from Leaders:

Leaders like those I mention above inspired me during my 26 years in prison. They clearly defined what they wanted to achieve. Mandela, Frankl, and King valued equality for all mankind. Jobs, Gates, and Welch placed a high value on creating value. When I write about learning from “masterminds,” I’m writing about people like them. They define success. Then they engineer the path that moves them closer to success. The path never ends!

We should learn from masterminds. Their strategies can work for us. Notice how they identify values. They make their values public. They invite others to judge them by their authenticity, their integrity, and their commitment to those values.

## Values and Goals in All Areas of Life:

The initial lessons on values and goals teach us how to excel in areas of our life that are important to us. But we can fail miserably when we don’t use that approach in other areas of our life. For example, we frequently see the stories of celebrities who value their talent. They set goals of becoming the best in the world at what they do. Take Whitney Houston, for example. Clearly, she valued her talent as a singer. She didn’t place as high of value in another area of her life—being clean and sober. Her life ended tragically from a drug overdose.

More recently, we can look at the case of Aaron Hernandez. He was a star athlete. He set goals to become the best at his craft. Yet when it came to other areas of his life, he failed. If being successful outside of football meant something to Aaron, he should have followed the same path. Clear values and goals would have helped. Aaron lost his way. He lost his career in professional sports when he committed a violent crime. He lost a criminal trial and a judge sentenced him to life in prison. Then he committed suicide while inside his jail cell.

Values and goals advance our prospects for success. To achieve a balanced sense of fulfillment, we should apply them to every area of life. Some areas where we can use values and goals as a guide to success include:





- » *Fitness*
- » *Health*
- » *Relationships*
- » *Education*
  
- » *Spirituality*
- » *Career Development*
- » *Family*
- » *Hobbies*
- » *Living clean and sober*
- » *Release preparation*

To the extent that we use values and goals, we grow closer to success. We can learn from masterminds like Mandela, Frankl, and King. We should make decisions like masterminds.

Values and Goals Guided Me Through Jail, through Prison, and Upon Release:

As I wrote previously, Socrates inspired me to change. After a jury convicted me, I thought about my past. I thought about how I got into the predicament I was in. I reflected on where I started to go wrong. I was locked in a jail cell, waiting for the judge to sentence me.

What could I do from inside of a jail cell to make things right? I may not get out of prison early. But what could I do to make things better when I got out? That question led to my three-part plan. I would work:

- » *To educate myself,*
- » *To contribute to society, and*



» *To build a support network.*

I would not have come up with that three-part plan on my own. By reading about people who succeeded, I learned that I needed to define success. In my case, success meant I could return to society ready to stand on my own. I wanted to live and interact with people that didn't have problems with crime or prison. Those people were my avatars. They would want me to educate myself, to contribute, and to have a strong support network. As I wrote earlier, I didn't know those people. Someday I would meet them. I would want them to accept me as a good person. If I didn't make efforts while I was in prison, they would always wonder why I was in prison for so long. I had to take steps while in prison so that I could influence their perceptions of me in the future.



» *Who is your Avatar?*

An “avatar,” for me, was specific. When I got out, I knew that certain people would advance my prospects for success. And certain people would threaten my prospects for success. I needed to recognize the difference and connect with people that would help me succeed. Those people were my avatars. I used all of my time in prison to prepare in ways that would make it more likely for my avatars to support my efforts to succeed.

» *I thought of my future probation officer.*

» *I thought of my future employer or business partners.*

» *I thought of my future creditors or investors.*

When I got out, a probation officer would oversee the level of liberty that I would have.

» *What would my probation officer expect of me?*

Future employers would know about my criminal background and lengthy prison term.

» *What would employers expect me to accomplish while I served my time?*

I needed to make changes that would counter the negative background from my early 20s.



Prospective creditors or investors would also know about my criminal background. What could I do to make things right with them? I would need to find creditors and investors when I got out. I wouldn't have a car, I wouldn't have a house, and I wouldn't have clothes when I got out. I knew that I would need help to get started.

Avatars could help me. While in custody, I built a record that would make it easier for avatars to believe in me.

» *Who is in Your Future?*

By thinking about avatars, I found my value categories. Then my judge slammed me with a 45-year sentence. I had to think further out. "Good time" credits would result in my being released after 26 years if I didn't have disciplinary problems. The release date was far away. I hadn't even been alive that long. I couldn't focus on the time I had to serve. Instead, I had to focus on the future I wanted to build.

» *Who is in your future?*

» *What can you do while you're in prison to prepare for your future?*

To sustain my level of energy and discipline, I had to take my mind off the time. I took the next step. I set clear goals that I could measure.

» *How to Become Successful?*

A great management guru, Peter Drucker, is famous for advising companies on how to become more successful. He spoke about the importance of measuring incremental success. By measuring each tiny step on the way to improvement, we could make further improvements.

I took that message to heart. By reading from leaders like Peter Drucker, I learned. I set clear metrics to define what it meant to make a commitment:

» *To educate myself,*

» *To contribute to society, and*

» *To build a support network.*

- » *I needed to measure progress.*
- » *How could I measure a commitment “to educate myself?”*
- » *How could I measure a commitment “to contribute to society?”*
- » *How could I measure whether I worked “to build a support network?”*



## Finding Your “Why” with Questions:

To answer those questions, I thought about my avatars. What would they expect? Then, I set a time limit. Since prison would be a big part of my life, I set a time horizon far into the future. I focused on the first 10 years. I could measure 10 years. What could I accomplish during the first 10 years? What would make a favorable impression on my avatars?

- » *In 10 years I made a commitment to earn an undergraduate degree. My avatars would see me as an educated man if I had a degree.*
- » *In 10 years I made a commitment to publish something My avatars would consider a “published author” as someone who made a contribution to society.*
- » *In 10 years I would persuade 10 people to have a vested interest in my success. Those 10 people would become my support network. If I built a support network, avatars would find it easier to believe in me.*

## Guides through the Maze of Confinement:

Values and goals became my guide through prison. By adhering to them, I overcame struggle and achieved high levels of success.

If you set values and live by those values, you’re on the path. If you set goals that you can measure—with timelines—you advance prospects for success.

Use the Straight-A Guide to achieve new levels of performance.

An individual must have the right attitude to overcome. The right attitude leads to higher levels of success. Individuals may differ in how they define the right attitude. It’s



easy when we say that the right attitude means a 100% commitment to success, as defined by our values and goals.

Is success the same for everybody? No.

Success isn't the same for everyone because people set values differently. Some people value wealth. Some people value family. Some people value contribution to society. When we set our values, we take a step toward defining success. Our goals show our commitment to success.

Once we define success, and we show our commitment with goals, we can show that we have the right attitude. We can keep everything we say, everything we do, and everything we think in harmony with our values and goals. That's when we have the right attitude. That's when we follow the path of masterminds.

**When you determine what you want, you have made the most important decision of your life. You have to know what you want in order to attain it.**

**—Douglas Lurton**

Determine what you want! Use values and goals. Then, advance your prospects for success with the right attitude. Make a 100% commitment to make decisions that are consistent with your values and goals. I learned the value of this strategy from true masterminds like those listed earlier:

- » *Nelson Mandela*
- » *Viktor Frankl*
- » *Martin Luther King*
- » *Steve Jobs*
- » *Bill Gates*
- » *Jack Welch*

» *Can You Make a 100% Commitment to Success?*



To prepare for success when I left prison, I had the right attitude. While inside, I made a 100% commitment to success—by my definition. Does that mean I was a model inmate? Not necessarily. It means that I made decisions that were consistent with my values and goals.

I made decisions that would influence my avatars. That 100% commitment defined my pursuit of excellence. My attitude guided my decisions seven days each week. When people ask what I mean by seven days a week, I explain.

I mean seven days a week!

When people ask whether I obsessed over those goals on weekends or holidays, I explain with more clarity. I tell them I had the right attitude seven days a week. As long as weekends and holidays fell within a seven-day week, I adhered to the strategy.

I am not in prison anymore. But I still follow the strategy of having the right attitude. I make a 100% commitment to success because I know what I want to achieve. That strategy powered me through prison. I am convinced that it opens opportunities for me in society.

This principled, values-based, goal-oriented adjustment through prison helped. It allowed me to seize control of my adjustment. My attitude may not have influenced an earlier release date. But my attitude influenced how I passed through each day. By making a 100% commitment to my values and goals, I put myself on a path to receive support from “avatars.” The strategy made all the difference during my journey through prison. More importantly, the strategy empowered me to return to society precisely as I anticipated—with my dignity intact, and with opportunities for a life of fulfillment.

Live a life of fulfillment. Live in accordance with the principles of this Straight-A Guide course. It begins with Attitude.

## Questions:

1. *Does having the right attitude mean that you're adhering to some type of “model” behavior pattern?*

» *A. No. People can set their own values and goals. Their commitment to those values and goals determines whether they have the right attitude.*



- » *B. Yes. People with the right attitude always abide by rules.*
- 2. *How do we define whether we have the right attitude?*
  - » *A. The system defines our attitude?*
  - » *B. Family members define our attitude?*
  - » *C. Our level of commitment to values and goals defines our attitude.*
  - » *D. Our friends define our attitude.*
- 3. *When it comes to the right attitude, what do Steve Jobs and Martin Luther King have in common?*
  - » *A. They don't have anything in common.*
  - » *B. They both made a 100 percent commitment to success as defined by their values and goals.*
- 4. *Why does Doug Lurton say that knowing what you want is the most important decision in your life?*
  - » *A. You need to know what you want in order to attain it.*
  - » *B. If you don't know what you want, you can't make a 100 percent commitment to attaining it.*
  - » *C. By defining success in your life, you can engineer a path that will take you there.*
  - » *D. All of the above.*
- 5. *To determine whether you have the right attitude, you must first identify your values and goals.*
  - » *A. True*



» *B. False*

## Personal Development Exercises:

» *Pursue these personal-development exercises independently, or in a group breakout session. Respond to the questions and discuss with your group.*



- I. Do you have an attitude that is set for success?*
- 2. Are you doing everything within your power to prepare for success?*
- 3. What more can you do to prepare for success?*
- 4. When it comes to the individuals I named above, how would you define their values? Jobs, Gates, Welch*
- 5. What could I do from inside of a jail cell to make things right? I may not get out of prison early. But what could I do to make things better when I got out?*
- 6. What would my probation officer expect of me?*
- 7. What would employers expect me to accomplish while I served my time?*
- 8. What could I do to make things right with them?*
- 9. Who is in your future?*
- 10. What can you do while you're in prison to prepare for your future?*
- II. How could I measure a commitment "to educate myself?"*
- 12. How could I measure a commitment "to contribute to society?"*
- 13. How could I measure whether I worked "to build a support network?"*
- 14. What could I accomplish during the first 10 years? What would make a favorable impression on my avatars?*



## Module Activities

- » *Vocabulary Exercise: In each chapter, write down 10 words you did not know. Use a dictionary to look up each word and write the definition next to the word. Practice saying each word out loud, correctly.*

## Critical Thinking Exercise

Return to the module and read the sentences and paragraph sections where you looked up words. Think about what you learned by looking up the words.

- » *Does understanding what the words mean bring you a new understanding of the meaning in what you're reading?*
- » *As your understand of vocabulary increases, are you relating to the course content differently?*
- » *Next to each word, write down what you learned from reading deliberately.*



## Module Four: Aspiration



**A noble man compares and estimates himself by an idea which is higher than himself. Such pursuits produce aspirations.**

**Marcus Aurelius**

It's my hope that you're making progress with this introductory Straight-A Guide course. Staying focused while in school or while locked in custody isn't easy. We feel pressure. Still, if we remember how all decisions influence our prospects for success, we empower ourselves. Never forget that reality.

If I would have learned that concept when I before I went to jail, I may have made better decisions. Bad decisions led me to court proceedings, jail, and prison. The more I reflected on my life, however, the more I realized how early decisions set me on a bad path.

I chose to ignore my teachers. I chose to ignore my guidance counselors. I chose to ignore my parents. I chose friends who were bad influences on me. All of those choices led me into a life of crime by the time I turned 20. And by the time I turned 23, I started serving a 45-year prison term.

I should have made better choices as an adolescent and as a younger man. Fortunately, I started to make better decisions after a jury convicted me, while I was still in the county jail. From masterminds I learned how to make better choices. Because of the lessons that masterminds taught me, I had a better outcome when I finished serving 26 years.

### How to Aspire:

From masterminds, I learned how to overcome adversity. Mastermind thinking taught me a strategy. We strengthen ourselves when we look beyond our current struggles. We have to see into the future, into what we're striving to become. We need to see and feel success. Success may be far away, but we pursue it with every choice we make.

Let me summarize what we learned from earlier lessons. Namely, masterminds teach us that we each define our own success.

We define success by stating our values.

We commit to values by setting clear goals.



We succeed by living with the right attitude. We define the right attitude with our 100% commitment to the values and goals we set.

If we can envision success, we can aspire and set aspirations.

An aspiration relieves pressure. An aspiration gives us a reason to complete lessons because we know those lessons lead to success. Our aspirations strengthen us and help us make it through challenges. They weaken the force of anything that is holding us back. We see the future that we aspire to create. Then we engineer a path from where we are to where we aspire to go.

» *Can you envision your future?*

» *How are your actions moving you closer to the success you aspire to achieve?*

Success is a journey. It's not a destination. The day we stop pursuing success, we wither. Values and goals evolve. In later lessons, I'll explain how values and goals evolved during my adjustment. The values and goals evolve, but they should always harmonize with our aspiration.

» *How will your values and goals evolve?*

» *As you advance through stages, what will change with your values and goals?*

## The Labyrinth

When I was locked up, my aspiration served as a light. I had a long way to go but I could always see the light at the end. The light guided my decisions. I didn't have that light when I was a student in school, and I didn't have that light before my prison term started.

I made bad decisions when I was a teenager. At 20 I started selling cocaine. Bad decisions from my youth led me into a dark pit, or a labyrinth. Aspirations could have led me out.

I learned about labyrinths (pronounced lab-ir-inth) when I began reading the work of masterminds. While confined in the Pierce County Jail, waiting to get sentenced, I waited for the marshals to transport me to prison. I read a lot while I waited. One book I read included a story about a labyrinth.

Some readers may not grasp the definition of a labyrinth. I didn't. But the concept of finding my way out of the labyrinth inspired me. This concept can empower anyone who lives in struggle.

Socrates influenced me to change the way I thought. By continuing to read stories from authors that wrote about ancient Greece, I found a lot of stories to inspire me.



## Greek Mythology

In Greek mythology, I read about Theseus. He was a mythological king, and his story gave me hope. The story introduced me to the concept of a “labyrinth.”

Theseus had to save his community. A beast kept killing the youth. To solve the problem, Theseus needed to kill the beast. The beast lived at the bottom of a labyrinth. The labyrinth was an intricate maze buried deep underground.

Theseus knew that no one escaped the labyrinth. Either the beast devoured those that entered, or the individual got lost in the labyrinth and died.

Theseus valued his community.

To show his commitment to the community, he set a goal of killing the beast.

He aspired to make his community safe. He didn't want others to live with the threat of the beast.

To succeed, Theseus made a plan. Before entering the labyrinth, he armed himself with a sword. He would kill the beast with the sword. But killing the beast wouldn't be enough. He still needed to find his way out of the labyrinth. His plan would help.

Theseus tied a string to a post at the entrance of the maze. He tied the other end of the string to his ankle. After killing the beast, Theseus used the string to find his way back out.

Identifying with the Labyrinth

» *Can you relate to that story?*



When I was in my youth, school felt like a dark pit. I hated to get up in the morning. I didn't like learning. I didn't aspire to building a better life. Since I didn't have any aspirations, I didn't have a reason for learning, school didn't inspire me. I made decisions that led me into prison. It was another dark pit.

Imprisonment is like a dark pit. Statistics show that most people struggle when they get out. The more time in prison, the less chance for a fulfilling life.

I wanted a fulfilling life, in prison and beyond. If I wanted a fulfilling life, I had to make the right choices. Every person has choices to make.

- » *What do you want?*
- » *When will you start pursuing what you want?*

Fitting in with the culture of school was one choice that I didn't make. In prison, I had to make choices about the new culture I was in. Prisoners offered advice on the best way to serve time. "Forget about the outside world and focus on life inside."

I had to think about what would follow that choice.

- » *What do you think would follow for those that make a choice of adjusting to the prison culture?*

I can give you an example. Think of a shot caller in prison. The choice to live as a shot caller brings consequences. The shot caller may control the television set. He may control where people sit in common areas.

Think about what follows for someone who pursues that adjustment pattern. They can expect the following:

- » *They face problems with staff.*
- » *They spend time in SHU.*
- » *SHU time can also mean a longer stay in prison.*
- » *SHU time means less access to opportunities to prepare for success.*

- » *Lower preparations for success can mean fewer opportunities for employment after release.*
- » *Fewer opportunities for jobs means a harder time generating resources.*
- » *Without resources, it's harder to gain traction in society.*
- » *Without traction, it's harder to resume stability.*
- » *Without stability, more problems with the law follow.*
- » *Problems can lead to more time in prison.*
- » *The cycle of failure would continue.*



Without a doubt, I wanted a different outcome. I set values and goals to define success. My attitude showed a 100 percent commitment to staying out of prison. My aspiration kept me on course.

## Aspirations:

Masterminds teach that we always aspire to success. When we see success, we begin to advance. Pursue the deliberate path, even if you're locked in a cell. Leaders like Mandela, Gandhi, Frankl, and Martin Luther King aspired to end social injustice. They took clear steps to succeed. Even while living in struggle, they knew what steps to take. Leaders like Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, and Jack Welch aspired to build businesses that would ease life for millions of people. They knew what they wanted. They set a path to succeed. They inspired others to follow their path.

Students can choose to prepare for the careers that they want to lead. Or they can make choices like I made. Either way, they make a choice. And choices have consequences.

Similarly, prisoners can choose to focus on their life prison, or they can choose to prepare for success. Consider likely outcomes. Those projected outcomes may lead to better decisions.



### Aspirations Means Looking Ahead

At the start of my sentence, I thought about the best possible outcome. I had to look far ahead, decades ahead. Unless I made changes, my return to society would bring many struggles:

- » *I would not have a work history.*
- » *I would not have financial resources.*
- » *I would not know anyone other than people who were in prison with me.*
- » *I would not have any credit.*
- » *I would not have any clothes.*
- » *I would not have a place to live.*
- » *I would not have resources saved for retirement.*
- » *I would not have a car.*

Those thoughts could weigh me down. Fortunately, I found courage and hope in stories like Theseus in the labyrinth. All I needed was a string. A string could guide me from the depths of my labyrinth to the brightness of a better world. I would have liked to have found that string when I was in school.

Values, goals, and my attitude would become my string. My aspiration would be the new life I would lead. First, I had to kill the beast that devours so many people that serve time in prison.

### 10-Year Aspirations:

Another Greek myth inspired me. I read Homer's *Odyssey*. The story describes Odysseus, a man separated from his family and home after fighting a war. Despite his separation, he never lost sight of home. He aspired to return home. Odysseus spent 10 years fighting battle after battle. His aspiration sustained him, and he made a 100% commitment to succeed. Odysseus knew what he wanted. He had the right attitude! That attitude brought



him closer to his aspiration. After 10 years, he succeeded, returning home.

Homer's Odyssey inspired me to set a 10-year plan. I didn't expect to return home in 10 years. But if I stayed true to my values and goals, I would be farther ahead. I knew that every decision I made during the first 10 years of my time in prison would have an influence on my life.



- » *Where will you be in 10 years?*
- » *Will you be closer to your aspiration?*

When I learned about aspirations, I was at the start of my journey inside. I couldn't think of 26 years in prison. I hadn't even lived that long. To put the term in perspective, project into the future by 26 years. It's a challenge to sustain a high level of discipline and energy through all of that time. As a strategy, I followed the path of Theseus and Odysseus. I set an aspiration I could grasp. I set my initial aspiration for 10 years. During that first decade, I knew what I would need to achieve. I could see success.

And what was it?

- » *Within 10 years I would have at least one university degree.*
- » *Within 10 years I would find someplace to publish an article, chapter, or book.*
- » *Within 10 years I would start my support network by bringing 10 new people into my life.*

Those aspirations strengthened me. I could see success. I could measure progress on the journey of success. I didn't obsess over matters beyond my control, like my sentence length. Instead, I focused on aspirations. By advancing, I restored strength and confidence that I could succeed.

## Restoring Strength and Dignity:

Don't live like a prisoner. Don't let calendar pages anchor you in a pool of hopeless thoughts. Don't dwell on the past, or on parts of life that you can't control. Focus on what you have the power to change. Live in the world as it exists, not as we want it to be. Each



day brings an opportunity to work toward something better. Make decisions that show you want to climb out from the labyrinth of confinement.

Through each of my 9,500 days in prison, I considered my values and goals. Adhering to them positioned me for the best possible outcome. If I ignored those values and goals, I became vulnerable. Decisions could easily derail my progress. After all, I lived in prison. I would remain in prison for years, for decades. People around me could be volatile. Fights would erupt over trivial issues. Television programming, noise, personal space, or perceived respect could bring problems. I couldn't ignore those realities. Instead, I needed a strategy to succeed in spite of those threats that could block progress.

Good decisions in prison could lead me closer to my aspiration. Bad decisions could threaten progress. This insight helped me assess bad ideas that I heard from others. Bad ideas can derail people in prison. For example, consider how some people in prison interpret the meaning of "respect."

## Respect or Fear?

As a young person in prison, I heard many experienced prisoners talking about respect. Stump, for example, spoke about "respect" in prison. He said that anyone could get respect as long as he was willing to pay the price. The price, Stump said, was to respond immediately with lethal violence at any sign of "disrespect." Others would "respect" a man, he said, if they knew that he would retaliate to any type of disrespect with a knife.

Stump's perspective was consistent with the prison culture. Yet that perspective differed from my avatar's concept of respect. I didn't aspire to become "the man" in prison. Instead, I aspired to success when I returned to society.

With success in mind, I had a reason to avoid problems. I wanted to sidestep the cycles of failure that others faced when they finished their time in prison. My avatars defined respect differently from Stump and others in prison.

I wanted respect from my avatars, and I made decisions that were consistent with my aspiration.



## Who Will Facilitate Your Success?

My avatars would not respect me if I pursued a path that included violence. They would “fear” people that responded to problems with violence. They would want that person to stay in prison.

My 100% commitment to living a values-based, goal-oriented life influenced my decisions and my adjustment. My aspiration influenced every step I took. It influenced every decision I made. I made decisions that would minimize exposure to problems.



## What does it mean to avoid problems and pursue success?

- » *I avoided hustles.*
- » *I avoided television rooms.*
- » *I didn't participate in team sports or table games.*
- » *I selected jobs that would allow me to work toward goals that I set.*
- » *I was deliberate with regard to my conversations, the words that I used, and the activities that I pursued.*

Every step felt like I was crossing a high wire. Each step forward would lead to my aspiration. One false step could lead to my fall. Holding a clear aspiration gave me reasons to continue the journey to success, as I defined success.

Your library may include a copy of my book, *Success After Prison*. I wrote that book to share what I have been up to since I finished my term. As I wrote in an earlier lesson, my wife picked me up at USP Atwater in August of 2012. She had to transfer me to a halfway house in San Francisco. I was supposed to serve my final year in the halfway house. While driving to San Francisco, I told my wife that I was going to follow the same strategy that got me through prison. I had values and goals in place. But they evolved from the values and goals that I set when I started my term. The decisions I made in prison put me in a different place. I had an education, as evidenced by the bachelor's and master's degree that I earned. I contributed to society, as evidenced by the many books that I published. I had thousands of people in my support network.



When my wife drove me from the prison in Atwater to San Francisco, I told her of my new aspiration. Within five years of my release, I told her that I would control more than \$1 million in assets. If I achieved that goal, I told her that I could inspire more people to follow the Straight-A Guide. Success follows for anyone that adheres to that goal.

In *Success After Prison* I describe how I built a portfolio of assets worth far more than \$1 million. I can tell you for certain that my decisions in prison influenced the possibility for that success.

» *Decisions you're making today influence your future.*

## Basic Questions:

1. *1. Your behavior today will influence your prospects for success.*

» *A. True*

» *B. False*

2. *Can you make decisions today that will advance your income prospects?*

» *A. Yes*

» *B. No*

3. *Do the friends you choose influence your chances for success?*

» *A. Yes*

» *B. No*

4. *Would the people you love and the people who love you prefer that you focus on preparing for success, or on being a badass?*

- » *A. They want me to succeed.*
- » *B. They want me to be a badass.*



5. *Can you seize opportunities in your life right now that would show your commitment to preparing for success?*

- » *A. Yes*
- » *B. No*

## Personal Development Exercises:

- » *Pursue these personal-development exercises independently, or in a group breakout session. Respond to the questions and discuss with your group.*

1. *Can you envision your future?*
2. *How are your actions moving you closer to the success you aspire to achieve?*
3. *How will your values and goals evolve?*
4. *As you advance through stages, what will change with your values and goals?*
5. *What kind of maze are you in?*
6. *What steps are you taking to find your way out?*
7. *What do you want? When will you start pursuing what you want?*
8. *What follows for people who choose to forget about the future, and focus on the present moment?*



9. *Where will you be in 10 years? Will you be closer to your aspiration?*

## Module Activities

» *Vocabulary Exercise: In each chapter, write down 10 words you did not know. Use a dictionary to look up each word and write the definition next to the word. Practice saying each word out loud, correctly.*

## Critical Thinking Exercise

Return to the module and read the sentences and paragraph sections where you looked up words. Think about what you learned by looking up the words.

- » *Does understanding what the words mean bring you a new understanding of the meaning in what you're reading?*
- » *As your understand of vocabulary increases, are you relating to the course content differently?*
- » *Next to each word, write down what you learned from reading deliberately.*

## Module 5: Action



**Successful people maintain a positive focus in life no matter what is going on around them. They stay focused on their past successes rather than their past failures.**

**They also look to next action steps they need to take to get them closer to the fulfillment of their goals.**

**They refuse to be distracted by obstacles that life presents.**

**Jack Canfield**

We must pass through hard tasks on the success journey. I didn't understand that during my school years. I could have made better decisions as a young man, taking action steps that would lead me on to the fulfillment of my goals and success. Unfortunately, I didn't learn that lesson until I was in prison.

People in prison face many obstacles and hard tasks. An example of a hard task may include spending weeks or months in SHU. The time alone limits us. While locked in a cell, we may not be able to attend programs. We cannot connect with family as easily. We are isolated from human connection. I spent months in the SHU when I was in prison. To keep productive, I took small action steps. With small action steps, I could move closer to success.

Regardless of where you are, keep moving toward success, as you define it with your values. Expect to pass through tough times today and in your future. Remember that they are part of the success journey. There is always more struggle to come. You've got to grow through the fertilizer for your seed to blossom into a solid tree.

To build strength while in struggle, I use the Straight-A Guide. It's like a compass. I use the compass to stay on course.

## Mindset of Success:

I start with introspection, thinking about my past. Those thoughts remind me of the values that define who I am. My goals show a commitment to success. With the right mindset, I strengthen my attitude. I can see what I'm trying to achieve, my aspiration. This strategy helps me take the next action step. That is the mindset of success.



I had to use this mindset-of-success strategy when I launched a healthcare business with my wife. I started on this path years ago. The healthcare industry appealed to me because of the growing need. Every person needs healthcare. The aging baby boomer group means that the industry will grow. I wanted to build a business that served and eased life for elderly people.

I faced challenges as a convicted felon. To overcome my felony background, I needed to persuade licensing authorities to give me an exemption. Sometimes I faced resistance. To get through, I revisited all the action steps I had to take when I was in prison. When I thought about each action-step I took along the way, I connected the dots.

Success comes when we take small action steps. I climb hills to get where I want to go. I jump over gaps. I wake early in the morning and I work late into the night. The small action steps bring me closer to success. When I think back, I can see the power and influence of early decisions. I read the story of Socrates when I was locked in a cell. That story changed the way I thought and put. I began thinking of avatars. The avatars helped me think about values and goals. That process gave me the right attitude and it gave me an aspiration. Action steps led me into the right programs. By finishing programs, I built my skillset. Each action step helped me get through prison. When I got out, I was in a better position to succeed.

The action steps you take today will make a difference in your life, regardless of where you are. Begin taking action steps today that will ease success as you pursue your aspirations.

That is the mindset of success!

Masterminds teach the power of values-based, goal-oriented choices. We become more than past bad choices and more than tough times of the moment. As mentioned previously, some of the Masterminds who taught me include:

- » *Socrates*
- » *Nelson Mandela*
- » *Viktor Frankl*
- » *Mahatma Gandhi*

- » *Martin Luther King*
- » *Malcolm X*
- » *Steve Jobs*
- » *Bill Gates*
- » *Jack Welch*
- » *Michael Jordan*
- » *Who are the Masterminds that you're learning from today?*



Leaders reflect on the past. Thoughts of the past remind them of how to move through tough times. Their thoughts of the past give them strength to take the next step. They see how small steps lead them out of struggle. They never stop taking actions.

We learn from leaders. Their clues teach us how to make progress. Learn from the clues they leave us:

- » *Leaders know how to state their values.*
- » *Leaders set goals.*
- » *Leaders live with the right attitude.*
- » *Leaders have high aspirations.*
- » *Leaders change the world. They may live in struggle today. They choose to prepare, and they achieve new heights. They make life better with every decision, with every thought, and with every action step they take.*

## Make Good Choices:

We start by defining success with our values. The values lead us to set clear goals. We keep the right attitude because we want our aspiration to be more than a dream. We take action steps to connect dots, to move toward success.





Without action steps, it's all just "happy talk." We hear a lot of happy talk from people that fail to take action. It's the "I'll-be" syndrome, evidenced by statements such as:

I'll drive a new Benz some day.

I'll live in a penthouse after this.

I'll make big money in the future.

Aspirations can include expensive cars, homes, and high incomes. But we have to do more than talk. We must take action. If we don't take action, we're only dreamers that live in a fantasy. In prison, I interacted with many people that waited for calendar pages to turn, but they didn't take action. They didn't pursue the small steps that are necessary to succeed. We need to take action to advance. We can always take a new action step. They lead us from tough times to success.

## Incremental Action Steps

I learned from Marshall Goldsmith, a teacher. He is one of the top business coaches in America. I read his influential business book, *What Got You Here Won't Get You There*. Besides writing books and articles for business, Dr. Goldsmith has a career of being a coach to CEOs. People on the path to becoming CEOs want to learn from him. They want to know about the best action steps they can take.

Since leaders hired Dr. Goldsmith to learn about action steps, I knew that I could learn from him. In his book *What Got You Here Won't Get You There*, I read about steps I could take in prison. He didn't write the book for prisoners, but the message was the same for anyone that wants to change.

Take Deliberate Action Steps!

Action steps bring you close to the people you want to influence.

If you want to influence people that can hire you, take action steps. Start by thinking about what they expect.

That process led me to think about avatars. Who were my avatars? They were people who could help me build a life after 26 years in prison. My avatars included:

My future probation officer,



My future employer or business partners,

My future creditors who could provide resources I would need to start a new life.

Think about the people you want to impress. Who should believe in you? Make them your “avatars.” Take action steps to prove worthy of their trust. That strategy worked well for me. If you take action steps, you can walk through tough times.



The action steps will change as time passes. Master a lesson at one level. You then climb to the next level. Growth comes with small action steps. If you don't take an action step today, you miss out on a new action step that you could take tomorrow.

What action step you can take today? Can you read? Can you learn? Can you write? Can you do pushups? Can you do leg lifts? Can you do crunches? Can you pray? Can you ask for help?

Align action steps with values and goals. What steps will lead you through current challenges? What steps will open opportunities for you on the other side of this challenge?

I made the choice to change after a jury found me guilty. As I rested on the concrete slab of my cell, I stared at the ceiling and the walls. I heard all the noise around me.

## What could I do to change?

Asking that question was an action step.

The question led me to look for an answer.

I found a book and read about Socrates.

Reading was an action step.

By reading about a leader, I could start to think in different ways.

I thought about avatars, another action step.

By thinking about avatars, I could see the next action steps to take:

Avatars would want me to educate myself.



Avatars would want me to contribute to society.

Avatars would want me to build a support network.

Thinking about avatars led to my values: Education, contribution, and support. I set clear goals. I said I would achieve those goals during my first 10 years.

- » *I would earn a university degree.*
- » *I would find a way to publish*
- » *I would persuade 10 people to help me succeed.*

To achieve the goals, I would need to take small action steps. First, I had to find a school that would allow me to earn a degree. I didn't have any money. My record from high school was not good. But I had to start. I took the following action steps:

I found a dictionary

The book included names of universities and I wrote the names.

The book also gave the cities and zip codes for the schools.

I wrote a letter to each school as follows:

**Please allow me to study toward degree. I made bad decisions and I'm serving a long prison term. I want to learn so I can give back to others. Please let me earn a degree. By learning and earning a credential, I'll grow as a human being. I don't have any money. But I make a 100% commitment to learn and grow. Please let me know if you can help.**

## **Persistence:**

To master struggle, regardless of what type of struggle, we need patience. We also need persistence. Since my struggles were in prison, I had to figure out ways to transcend the walls that separated me from the community. I wrote more than 100 letters. And I had to be patient and wait. I could wait months for a response. Sending a letter is one step. Sending 100 letters is 100 steps. If I sent one letter, I may not have found the right person. By sending more than 100 letters, I had a better chance. I had to keep taking action steps.

Be persistent with your action steps.

This strategy gave me strength. I did not wait for months to pass. I took small action steps each day. They would lead to my goal. I could not control whether a school would respond. But I could control how many letters I wrote. By hand, I wrote letter after letter. I bought stamps and I wrote to as many schools as I could find. By copying, I could write about four letters per hour. In eight hours I could write about 30 letters. In two days I could send 60 letters. Then I could wait, or I could write more.



Those small action steps brought me closer to my goal. Ohio University accepted me. Once I started school, I felt a change. I wasn't only a prisoner. I was a student on my way to earning a university degree.

I wanted more than a credential. A degree was a piece of paper. More than the degree, I wanted to learn. By learning, I could persuade avatars to invest in me. They would see me as something more than the bad choices I made when I was 20. I took action steps from prison to influence avatars I would meet in the future.

## **Influenced by The Autobiography of Malcolm X:**

I was a terrible student in high school. Before prison, I didn't know anything about Malcolm X. While scanning books in a prison library, I found The Autobiography of Malcolm X. I read the book for a reason. The biography included chapters about a man who transformed his life from inside a prison cell. I wanted to do the same.

From Malcom X, I learned more about small action steps. He wanted to learn. He thought about his past. He could connect the dots and see how he made bad decisions. He wanted to change and to give back to his community. He wanted to teach people how to get out of struggle. In order to teach, he had to learn. He started to read. He learned new words. His action steps showed his 100% commitment to reach his goals. The book showed each small action step Malcolm took to think differently. From inside of a jail cell, he took small action steps that led him to grow and mature. He became a leader.

Like Malcolm, I wanted to grow. I had to start in a jail cell. But I could take small action steps to learn. I could hold myself accountable. I could learn to read better, to write better, and to speak better. I could take action steps to influence my avatars. Others can learn from this path, too. We need to take action to change.

Action Plans Lead to Success:



Marshal Goldsmith taught the leaders that hired him to keep growing. We have to keep growing, too. If we take action steps today, we will grow. Our growth will put us in a position for new action steps. We cannot reach higher levels of growth tomorrow unless we take our first action steps today.

I am always looking back. When I reflect, I can see the pivotal points on my journey. In January of 2017, I persuaded an investor to partner with me. He provided me with \$1 million that I could use to purchase a new piece of real estate. In June of 2017, other investors provided me with an additional \$500,000 that I could use to expand the business I was building.

I finished my prison term in August of 2013. Only 41 months after finishing 26 years inside, I was growing my business. When did I begin sowing seeds that would lead investors to partner with me? How did I start?

I started with small, incremental action steps. The first step was reading a book in a jail cell. The book led me to think differently. I developed a mindset of success. I started to think about avatars. I took small steps that would show I wanted to earn their trust. I wrote to schools. I studied. I learned. I earned degrees. I wrote articles and chapters and books. By writing, I built a support network. My commitment to succeed gave me a reason to avoid problems in prison.

The small action steps I took in a jail cell put me on a path to success. Each step led me closer. I could pursue higher goals because I took small steps early. Now, when I face tough times, I look back. I see how small action steps got me through tough times before. The tough times are part of the journey. By focusing on success, I know that I can take another action step. Just as in the past, the action steps I take today will lead to new growth ahead.

As I look back now, I can see action steps let me pivot from struggle to prosperity:

- » *I earned a bachelor's degree in my fourth year.*
- » *I earned a master's degree in my seventh year.*
- » *I published my first article in my sixth year.*
- » *I published my first book in my 10th year.*

- » *By publishing, I built a massive support network.*
- » *The support network led to marrying the love of my life in prison.*
- » *Marriage allowed me to publish more, and the writing brought income.*
- » *Income from my writing supported my wife and she went to nursing school.*
- » *With my wife's degrees in nursing, I could learn about health care.*
- » *My track record led to job offers before I got out.*
- » *I became a professor at a university within three weeks of finishing my sentence.*
- » *I persuaded investors to partner with me.*
- » *Those relationships led to my building many different businesses.*



If I did not take small action steps in prison, I would not have had success. When I face tough times today, I reflect. By looking back, I see more clearly. I can see how choices I began making in jail led to a better adjustment in prison. And choices in prison put me on a path to succeed upon release. I kept taking action steps that led me away from trouble. When troubles followed me after my release, I used my Straight-A Guide to begin charting the course to recalibrate and succeed again.

- » *What action steps can you take today?*

## Basic Questions:

### I. I. Why does reflection lead to better decisions?

- » *A. Thinking about the good times helps us through the bad times.*



- » *B. By thinking about past decisions, we see a connection to where we are today and we see how to make decisions for a better future.*
- » *C. It's best to forget about the past because we can't do anything about it.*
- » *D. While in prison, don't think about the outside.*

*2. Which action step would lead you closer to preparing for a job:*

- » *A. Playing on a softball team.*
- » *B. Getting the best seat for television viewing.*
- » *C. Reading nonfiction books that relate to the type of job I want.*
- » *D. Hustling contraband.*

*3. Why do small action steps lead to new opportunities?*

- » *A. They build better skills.*
- » *B. They keep us on track to success.*
- » *C. They help us avoid trouble.*
- » *D. All of the above.*

*4. Who is responsible for steering us to action steps?*

- » *A. The system should provide more programs.*



- » *B. People should give us resources.*
  - » *C. The government should make things easier.*
  - » *D. We should create our own opportunities to grow.*
5. *When is the best time to start taking action steps that would lead to success?*
- » *A. Think about your future when you're close to your future.*
  - » *B. Tell others that you're going to succeed, but don't make any changes until later so no one will think you're soft.*
  - » *C. Start taking action steps when the system starts giving you more incentives.*
  - » *D. The best time to take action steps that lead to success is today.*

## Personal Development Exercises:

- » *Pursue these personal-development exercises independently, or in a group breakoout session. Respond to the questions and discuss with your group.*
1. *Who should believe in you?*
  2. *What action step you can take today?*
  3. *How can reading move you closer to success?*
  4. *What can you learn from where you are in life right now?*
  5. *In what was can improving your writing skills advance your prospects for success?*
  6. *How would doing pushups contribute to your success?*
  7. *How would prayer influence your success?*





8. *Where can you sow seeds that will lead to help?*

## Module Activities

» *Vocabulary Exercise: In each chapter, write down 10 words you did not know. Use a dictionary to look up each word and write the definition next to the word. Practice saying each word out loud, correctly.*

## Critical Thinking Exercise

Return to the module and read the sentences and paragraph sections where you looked up words. Think about what you learned by looking up the words.

- » *Does understanding what the words mean bring you a new understanding of the meaning in what you're reading?*
- » *As your understand of vocabulary increases, are you relating to the course content differently?*
- » *Next to each word, write down what you learned from reading deliberately.*



## Module 6: Accountability



**Great companies operate with high cultures of accountability. Those accountability metrics help us determine whether we are succeeding. Accountability systems let us know when we must correct course and pursue new strategies.**

**Steve Ballmer**

We can learn a great deal from the leaders around us. As a young man, I didn't know how to learn from leaders. Rather, I learned the wrong lessons from the wrong people. It wasn't until I went to prison that I saw how many opportunities I missed.

» *In what ways are you learning from the leaders around you?*

You may be a father or a mother. If you're not a father or a mother, you're a son or a daughter. You know that parents expect children to bring home report cards. What do those report cards tell us? We use them to measure performance. When students do well, we see progress. The report cards show areas where students can improve. They hold students accountable.

You might coach sports teams. You might play sports. Perhaps you watch sports. If so, you know that sports is all about measuring performance. We count wins and losses. We count batting averages. We count passing or rushing yards. We count points. Each metric gives us an idea of future performance.

If you invest in public companies, you measure performance. How well has the stock performed over the past 12 months? Have sales kept pace with growth targets? Does the company lead the market? How much does the company earn from each sale? Those types of questions give investors an idea of the company's health. Investors hold themselves accountable by assessing all types of metrics.

Accountability metrics help us determine whether we're on the right track. They help us examine our choices and our performance.

Aristotle, another teacher from ancient Greece, wrote that we should always examine performance. He wrote:

**“The unexamined life is not worth living.”**



- » *In what ways have you examined your life?*
- » *How have choices you made in the past influenced who you are today?*
- » *What choices can you make today to influence the success you want to achieve tomorrow?*

I examine past choices a lot. When I think about past choices, I also think of costs.

- » *What did I gain or lose from my past choices?*
- » *If I made a different choice, would I be better off today?*
- » *What options can I choose today? Which choice will put me on track for the best future?*

These types of reflections cause us to examine our life. They help us make better choices. From inside of a jail cell, I started to assess the influence of past choices. Then I started to think about tools I could create to measure progress. I needed to create accountability logs. Such tools would keep me on the path to success.

## Starting Over:

Being in prison gave me a chance to start over. While stuck in the cell, I knew that I wanted to change. In some ways, being in jail made it easier. The system would provide me with a place to sleep. I would get food and water. I had clothes. Money would make things easier, but I did not need money. In jail, the system provided for my needs. If I were not in jail, I would need an income to provide for my needs. While in jail, I had to change the way that I thought. But I also needed to measure my progress.

I could count the number of months that passed. Each month would lead me closer to my release date. But I had to think about the kind of life I would lead when I got out. I spoke to other people in prison. They told me about challenges they faced when their earlier terms ended:

- » *Former prisoners could not find jobs.*
- » *Former prisoners could not find housing.*

- » *Former prisoner said they didn't feel welcome in society.*
- » *Former prisoners could not gather resources to make a clean start.*
- » *Former prisoners could not break free from the criminal lifestyle.*
- » *Former prisoners said they would rather serve time in prison than live with all the challenges in society.*



Those former prisoners were capable. There wasn't anything wrong with them. Their adjustment made them ready to live in prison. They believed in prison wisdom: "The best way to serve time is to forget about the world outside." Later, they had bad news. Focusing on prison made them less able to fit in with society. Prison gave them a tone, mannerisms, and an attitude. In society, the prison vibe didn't lead to success.

For a different outcome, I had to change.

I wanted to show other people how they could change, too. If I became successful after my release from prison, other people may choose to follow the same pattern. Other people could build better lives if they learned the same lessons that masterminds taught me:

- » *They could define values.*
- » *They could set clear goals.*
- » *They could check their attitude.*
- » *They could visualize aspirations.*
- » *They could take small action steps.*
- » *They could hold themselves accountable.*

As I studied, I read the work of John Locke. John Locke was alive in the late 1600s. The world was coming out of the Dark Ages, and into an era of hope. People referred to the new era as The Enlightenment. People were learning more. John Locke wrote that all human beings came into the world with "a blank slate."



He said that human beings were not good or bad. We saw things and heard noises. Those things we saw and noises we heard made an impression on our minds. We learned. Some of us learned to do good. Some of us learned to do bad. We became the product of what we learned. It's like the saying, "But for the grace of God, there go I."

John Locke said that even if we made bad decisions in the past, we could learn new concepts. We could start at any time to make good decisions.

John Locke taught me a lot. Early "learning" led me into a criminal lifestyle. By reading John Locke's work, I understood that what we "learned" we could also "unlearn." We could build a better life by following clues from successful people.

Successful people hold themselves accountable. They don't wait for others to tell them whether they're on the right path. They know where they're going. They engineer success. When they use accountability metrics, they know whether they're making the progress to succeed. They adjust when necessary.

From studying and reading about successful people, I learned how to create my own tools and to measure progress. I could hold myself accountable. To build an accountability metric, I had to define success. I had to set a timeline. And I had to measure my progress on the timeline I set.

- » *Like a parent uses a report card to hold his child accountable, I could hold myself accountable.*
- » *Like a coach uses statistics to measure performance of athletes, I could create an accountability metric to grow from one goal to the next.*
- » *Like an investor assesses the pace of a stock's growth, I could measure if I was on track to succeed.*

## Why Use Accountability Metrics?

My avatars spoke the language of accountability. My actions would convince them to believe in me. By holding myself accountable, I could earn their trust.

I thought about how I could make the best use of my time. I planned for success, even with the heavy lift ahead.

I sold cocaine.  
A jury convicted me.  
A judge sentenced me to 45 years.  
I would serve 26 years if I didn't lose good time.



Accountability metrics could help me overcome those challenges. I simply had to begin with a clear understanding. With my values and goals, I needed to be clear about how my life would be different when I came to the end of my sentence.

» *How will your life change when you pass through this current challenge you're enduring?*

To set my strategy, and measure the growth I would make, I thought about my avatars.

» *What could I do in prison to ease my path to success after I got out?*

My avatars would consider me worthy of their trust if I earned a degree from prison.

My avatars would find it easier to employ me or extend me credit if I could show that I gave back to society while I was in prison.

My avatars may be willing to invest in me if they saw that others believed in me.

With accountability logs, I could track whether I made progress every day. And I would work toward goals I set every day. Accountability logs that I created helped me stay on track.

I went to jail when I was 23. I didn't know how to think about 26 years inside. Instead, I thought about the first 10 years. When I hit the 10-year mark, I wanted a record of accomplishments that would speak louder than words:

I wanted a degree.  
I wanted to publish something.  
I wanted a support network of at least 10 people.  
Masterminds taught this path as:



- » *Visualize success.*
- » *Create your plan.*
- » *Prioritize your goals.*
- » *Execute the plan.*

## Visualize! Plan! Prioritize! Execute!

I knew precisely what I wanted to achieve. With an accountability log, I could measure progress.

If I could define success at 10 years, I could reverse engineer. I could figure out how far along I should be in five years. If I knew where my progress should be at five years, then I should be able to reverse engineer. I could measure if I was on track at two and three years. An accountability log would show where I should be when I hit my first year. With that insight, I could figure out where I had to be in six months. I could extend that process back to the next month, to the next week, and to the next day.

## How To Create Accountability Logs (wherever you are):

In prison, I had to accept that I could control some things and I could not control other things. Staff members would say where I served time. They would order where I slept. Rules would dictate how much contact I had with society. Others would say what I could eat, when I would eat, and how much I would eat. Despite all of those external controls, I could control my adjustment. I could set values and goals. I could take incremental actions that would lead me closer to my aspirations. And I could create accountability logs to measure progress. By using them wisely, accountability logs would lead me out from the labyrinth.

In lesson six I described how I wrote letters to persuade schools to admit me. I wanted a degree. I had to convince them to overlook my crimes and allow me to enroll, even though I didn't have money. I did not control whether a school would admit me. But I could control how hard I worked to persuade them. With my accountability logs, I could measure progress.

My accountability log would resemble something like the following:

Value category: Education



Goal: Earn a university degree

Purpose: A university degree would persuade my avatars to respect and invest in me.

Action Plan: Write five letters each day until I wrote 100 letters and sent letters to 100 schools.



Accountability Metric: Write letters to five different schools each day.

Timeline: Connect with 100 universities over the course of 20 days.

Intended Outcome: Persuade at least one university to admit me.

The accountability metric gave me a clear plan. I had to set priorities and execute the plan. The plan gave me a deliberate path. I didn't know whether a school would admit me. But I could measure whether I followed the plan. If I executed the plan, I would increase my chances of getting into school.

The plan worked. Ohio University accepted me. I then began to track my progress through school. I measured the number of lessons I completed and the credits I earned. In 1992, I earned my first degree. In 1995, I earned a second degree.

In lesson six I wrote how The Autobiography of Malcolm X influenced me. Reading that story gave me hope. I could increase my value by learning how to write and speak better. By building my vocabulary, I could become a better writer and speaker.

I needed a plan and an accountability log. I thought about my avatars. I could learn to communicate like them. I could refrain from talking as if I spent decades in prison.

With that end in mind, I chose my words carefully. I would avoid words like "homie" when referring to friends. I would not refer to a woman in my life as my "old lady." I set a clear path to build my vocabulary:

Value Category: Education

Goal: Add 500 words to my vocabulary within 100 days.

Purpose: Communicate in the language of my avatars.

Action plan:

Keep a sheet of paper beside me while I read each book.

Write down each word that I don't know.





Learn to define each word on my sheet.

Write and define each word and part of speech (adjective, noun, or verb).

Create flash cards.

Write word on one side of the flash card; define word and name part of speech on other side of the flash card.

Carry stack of flashcards with me at all times.

While waiting in lines, test knowledge by flipping through flashcards. Make each word a part of my vocabulary.

Accountability metric: Incorporate an average of at least five new words into my vocabulary each day.

Timeline: 100 days.

Intended outcome: Build vocabulary by more than 500 words within 100 days.

## Accountability Metrics Keep Us On Track

With accountability metrics, I could measure progress. I used them as tool to keep me on track. Others advised me to slow down. They said it didn't make sense to obsess over progress with a long sentence. Progress toward goals, they said, would not result in an early release.

Success requires people to know when to accept advice. It also requires a person to know what advice to reject.

Since I did not learn the mindset of success until I was in prison, it became clear that I thought carefully about where I would turn for advice. Statistics are really clear. More than half of the people that go into prison fail after release. We cannot ignore that accountability metric.

We should ask whether our adjustment patterns mirror successful people. If they mirror the patterns of people that fail, then we should change. Choose a deliberate path. Use accountability metrics to make progress toward goals. That is the path I learned from masterminds. That is the strategy people follow when they're on the mindset of success.

By using accountability logs, I beat timelines that I set at the start:

- » *Instead of earning one college degree within 10 years, I earned two university degrees within eight years.*
- » *Instead of publishing something within my first 10 years of imprisonment, I published more than 20 articles or book chapters within my first 10 years.*



I set a goal of finding 10 people to believe in me during my first decade of imprisonment. Yet the published writings allowed me to bring many, many people into my life during those first ten years. Those people were community leaders. They visited me in prison. They opened more and more opportunities.

- » *Are You Waiting for Calendar Pages to Turn?*

or,

- » *Are You Measuring Success?*

In the next lesson, I'll share how accountability logs led to my building a huge support network.

## Basic Questions:

### 1. *Why do accountability logs matter?*

- » *A. They show why we're special.*
- » *B. They get us more from the system.*
- » *C. They allow us to measure progress toward goals we set.*
- » *D. They lead to us getting out of systems.*



2. *Who should set an accountability log?*
- » *A. Our case managers and teachers should tell us what they expect from us.*
  - » *B. The system should tell us what to do.*
  - » *C. We should set our own accountability logs.*
  - » *D. Our friends should decide how much progress we should make.*
3. *Accountability logs are the same for everyone.*
- » *A. True*
  - » *B. False*
4. *When should we use an accountability log?*
- » *A. Never. Too many people already try to hold me accountable.*
  - » *B. I'll start using an accountability log later.*
  - » *C. I will use an accountability log to track progress on each goal that I set.*
  - » *D. I don't need tools to tell me whether I'm making progress.*
5. *People are more likely to succeed if they track their progress toward goals.*
- » *A. True*
  - » *B. False*
-

## Personal Development Exercises:



» *Pursue these personal-development exercises independently, or in a group breakout session. Respond to the questions and discuss with your group.*

1. *In what ways are you learning from the leaders around you?*
2. *In what ways have you seen accountability metrics used in business?*
3. *In what ways have you seen athletic coaches use accountability metrics?*
4. *In what ways do parents use accountability metrics?*
5. *How do you anticipate authority figures will use accountability metrics to assess you?*

## Module Activities

» *Vocabulary Exercise: In each chapter, write down 10 words you did not know. Use a dictionary to look up each word and write the definition next to the word. Practice saying each word out loud, correctly.*

## Critical Thinking Exercise

Return to the module and read the sentences and paragraph sections where you looked up words. Think about what you learned by looking up the words.

- » *Does understanding what the words mean bring you a new understanding of the meaning in what you're reading?*
- » *As your understanding of vocabulary increases, are you relating to the course content differently?*
- » *Next to each word, write down what you learned from reading deliberately.*



## Module 7: Awareness

**The ultimate value of life depends upon awareness and the power of contemplation rather than upon mere survival.**

Aristotle



What does awareness mean to you? When I think of this concept of awareness, I think of coaches. Coaches frequently tell athletes to keep their heads in the game. When they give such guidance, the coaches are telling the players to stay aware and avoid distractions. Players need to stay aware of every opportunity. When we keep our head in the game, we see opportunities and we seize them. The concept of awareness is central to the Straight-A Guide Earning Freedom course because we're always on the lookout for opportunities that can advance us to our goals, to our end game.

As a young man, I lacked awareness. I didn't think about how the decisions I made as a student could influence my future. My parents tried to put me on the right track. I ignored them. Both teachers and guidance counselors would warn me about the problems my decisions would bring. I dismissed them, thinking I could avoid problems. My head wasn't in the game. I ignored the possible consequences of my actions, telling myself I didn't care.

Although I wasn't aware of punishments that would follow breaking the law, that didn't mean law enforcement wasn't aware of me. The DEA kept their head in the game. They worked behind the scenes to arrest me. And then prosecutors worked to convict me.

There are two concepts with awareness. We can choose to become aware, or we can choose ignorance. Either way, we make a choice. Regardless of what choice we make, others will become aware of our choices. The choices we make and the people we meet will influence our future.

Regardless of where you are right now, check yourself.

- » *What level of awareness do you have about opportunities around you?*
- » *In what ways do your actions show that you're keeping your head in the game?*
- » *How will your decisions influence your future?*



- » *Your responses to those questions influence how others perceive you. And their awareness determines whether they want to invest time, energy, or resources to help you develop. In what ways will investing in you advance their values and goals?*

Let me provide an example of how being aware influenced my future in a positive way.

## Sowing Seeds with Awareness:

As mentioned in earlier lessons, after high school I started selling cocaine. A jury convicted me. A federal judge sentenced me to serve 45 years. I kept my head in the game from the start of my sentence. I didn't want to make the same types of bad decisions that I had made when I was a student in school. Rather than focusing on avoiding problems while in prison, I contemplated how I could prepare for a better future. By preparing, I opened opportunities to grow and prepare for success. I was always aware of opportunities I could seize. My term ended with the Bureau of Prisons in August of 2013, after 26 calendar years. But I wasn't finished with the criminal justice system.

Once I finished the prison portion of my sentence, I had to serve time on probation. First, there would be seven years on Supervised Release. Then I would start parole. My sentence required 26 years inside and 19 years on parole—but I couldn't start the parole portion of my sentence until after I finished Supervised Release. When I finished Supervised Release and parole, three years of special parole would follow. Federal probation officers would oversee me through all of the post-release term.

My term required 29 years supervision from federal probation. Day-to-day life would be the same on Supervised Release, Parole, or Special Parole.

I put a plan in place to terminate that supervision early. The same strategy that got me through prison would help. I had to stay aware of how every decision would matter. I had to keep my head in the game. I stayed aware of what I could do to make me a good candidate for relief. I also stayed aware of efforts I could make to earn support from others.

I couldn't control what others would do. Yet by being aware, I could keep my head in the game at all times. I could create ways to make my case stand out in a more favorable light.

Awareness! It's part of the Straight-A Guide strategy that can help you.





## Double Concept:

Each previous lesson only had one concept to grasp. With Awareness, we have two concepts. By using the Straight-A Guide, we know that we can make different choices. Each choice comes with a cost. We assess the cost. We make the best choice. We are aware of how each choice relates to our success.

The choices make others aware of us. They see how true we are to our values and goals. As a result of our work, they begin to believe in us. Then they offer to help us on our path.

- » *Concept 1: We become aware of opportunities.*
- » *Concept 2: Others become aware of our commitment to success.*

## Preparing for Supervised Release:

The values and goals I set clearly guided my behavior and decisions.

I wanted freedom as soon as possible. I wanted to build a career and stability. To succeed, I would need support from the probation officer.

I began preparing to build a record that would result in the best experience on Supervised Release many years before I finished my term. In prison, I stayed out of trouble. A clean disciplinary record would have a positive influence on my probation officer. I also earned two university degrees and many certificates. I published books and built a strong support network. Together, I hoped my record in prison would make a favorable impression on the probation officer assigned to my case.

In 2011, I knew that I was close to my release date. I set a goal. In order to influence the probation officer, I decided to write a monthly letter. Since I didn't know the probation officer's name, I wrote to the federal probation office. I expected that someone would receive the letter and open a file. In time, the right person would receive it.

In the initial letter, I introduced myself. I told the probation officer how hard I worked from the start of my sentence to prepare for a law-abiding, contributing life. I also explained the career that I wanted to build. The next 24 monthly letters I wrote provided an update.



No one wrote me back while I was in prison. But in August of 2013, I concluded my term with the BOP. When I went to meet with my probation officer, she was aware of how hard I worked. Those efforts I made to influence her bore fruit. She gave me a much higher level of liberty. She allowed me to travel and she allowed me to build my business—she authorized me to communicate with other felons.

That is an example of how I used the Straight-A Guide. It got me through prison. It led to success upon release. I became aware of opportunities. Others became aware of my efforts to succeed.

## How Being “Aware” is Part of The Straight-A Guide:

This course gives credit to the masterminds that taught me. I learned from many. By studying their success, I learned how to make better choices. From a prison cell, for example, I could make a choice of what I wanted to learn. Like anyone else, I could learn from people that I would never meet. Leaders offered valuable lessons.

I chose lessons that would put me on a path to success. I wanted to learn from people that had a record of succeeding in their chosen fields. By learning from successful people, I saw patterns. They knew what they wanted. They made deliberate choices. They were aware of opportunities. Investors became aware of those leaders. The more aware they became, the more resources investors gave to leaders.

Learning from leaders led me to incorporate the concept of Awareness into the Straight-A Guide.

For example, I learned from Bill Gates. He started Microsoft with Paul Allen. Bill Gates and Paul Allen were great examples of masterminds. We can learn from them. They built and led one of the most influential companies in the world.

Bill Gates and Paul Allen made good decisions when they were young. They studied on their own to learn and master computers. They knew their values. They set clear goals. They wanted to write software code in a short time. In less than one week, they wrote the computer code that would launch Microsoft. As they succeeded, investors from all over the world invested resources to help Bill and Paul succeed.

Bill and Paul’s early preparations put them on a path to success. When an opportunity of a lifetime opened, they were ready. We all can make choices today that will allow us to take advantage of opportunities later. We need to sow our seeds.

We see many examples to show how people that succeed follow the principles of the Straight-A Guide. As a case study, let's consider more about the story behind the founders of Microsoft.



## **Attitude:**

They commit to success with a 100% effort. Bill Gates studied on his own time. He learned as much as he could. When he saw an opportunity to start his company, he went all in. He quit Harvard and moved to New Mexico so he could work with his first client. Gates did not allow anything to get in the way of his success.

## **Aspiration:**

They had a vision. They wanted every office and every home to use personal computers. They wrote the codes that would drive computers. Then they taught others how to use the code to write programs. It was all part of a grand vision to build Microsoft.

## **Action:**

They took incremental action steps. First they wrote the code. Then they got the client. Then they hired staff that would help them find more clients. Then they repeated the process. Then they found investors that would provide resources to accelerate success.

## **Accountability:**

They set clear goals. Each goal had a timeframe to complete. A timeline let them know how much progress they needed to make each day. By meeting timelines, they earned trust from their partners.

We see these kinds of examples all around us. We should follow the clues. The Straight-A Guide shows us how to follow a pattern of success. Define it. Commit to it. Make decisions that will deliver success. Those who follow this pattern are aware of choices that will lead them to success.

That's the first prong: Being aware!

But there's a second prong. Others become aware of people that put themselves on pathways to success. Everyone wants to be a part of success.

## **Being Aware in School, in Jail, in Prison, and in Life:**

I didn't get this concept of awareness when I was in school. My lack of awareness had a bad outcome. I chose friends poorly and I made bad decisions that locked me in conflict



with authorities. Then I went to prison for multiple decades. From prison, I learned from masterminds. They taught me that regardless of where we are, we could take steps that would put us on a path to success. Or we could stay unaware and follow the path that derails success. We must choose.

To follow patterns of success, we may need to change the way we think. We need a new mindset. To change the way we think, we should start by thinking of our teachers. Learn to think like people who succeed. They leave clues that show how they became successful. Reject patterns of failure that we see so frequently in jails and prisons.

From the example of Bill Gates and Paul Allen, we see that if we prepare early, we can reap big rewards. They studied science and math. When they began, neither Bill Gates nor Paul Allen knew they would start a valuable company. They applied themselves and they learned. As a result, they were ready to seize the day when others could not. They were “aware” of opportunities. Later, others became aware of their success and joined them.

People in prison could follow the same steps. In the Straight-A Guide, we list those steps as follows:

- » *Values: Identify values to define success.*
- » *Goals: Set clear goals showing how you commit to your values.*
- » *Attitude: Show that you have the right attitude with your 100% effort.*
- » *Aspiration: See the success that you're going to become.*
- » *Action: Take small action steps each day.*
- » *Accountability. Use clear timelines to measure your progress.*
- » *Awareness. Stay aware of opportunities to seize, and more people will become aware of you.*

Prisoners who follow the principled steps of the Straight-A Guide are more aware. They know the score. Jails and prisons are filled with negative energy. Prisoners must triumph over that energy. They choose friends carefully. They know that they can control

their own behavior, but they cannot control the behavior of others. So they make choices that will lessen their exposure to problems. They are aware of the power of each choice they make. The choices they make today puts them on a path to success tomorrow. Every choice matters.



It's never too early and it's never too late to start preparing for success. But the earlier we prepare, the more likely we are to put us on a pathway to success.

- » *Leaders know how decisions matter. They know how actions matter. They are aware of how their choices, their decisions, and their actions will influence others.*
- » *Make choices today to prepare for a better life tomorrow. Every decision can have an influence on success.*
- » *If problems erupt from table games, be aware. Avoid table games. Read instead of playing games.*
- » *If sports teams lead to tempers flaring, be aware. Avoid playing on sports teams. Exercise alone or with people who share the mindset of success.*
- » *If people value seating rules in common areas, be aware. Avoid common areas. Spend time introspecting, thinking about the future you will build.*

If you follow those principled steps, you will become aware of opportunities. Because of your awareness, you can seize those opportunities to achieve increasingly higher levels of performance. Simultaneously, others will become aware of your commitment. They too will want to invest in your success. They will help you, assist you, and encourage you.

That principled strategy works everywhere. It works in prison and beyond. It worked for all of the leaders who inspired me. They kept me going through the 9,500 days that I lived as a prisoner. The strategy allowed me to return to society successfully. Because I followed the patterns of successful people, jobs opened. Before I finished serving my time, San Francisco State University hired me to teach as a professor.

I continued using that same strategy to build my career.

Remember, I never ask anyone to follow any strategy that I do not follow. The Straight-A Guide strategy powered me through prison. It leads me to success in society,





too. By living the values-based, goal-oriented strategy of this guide, I open business relationships and income opportunities. I am able to open deals that few would think are possible for someone with my background. By keeping myself aware, I always keep my head in the game. And others are aware of efforts I'm making to succeed. They invest alongside me, allowing me to create new opportunities.

I finished my term in August of 2013, nearly seven years ago from the time that I'm writing this course, in June of 2020. But I continue living by the same principles that powered me through 26 years in prison. I learned the strategy from leaders; I feel a duty to teach the strategy to people in prison. The fact that this course exists should show you that it works. Despite my being a prisoner, directors from state prison systems, federal and state prison wardens, federal judges, federal probation officers, and even United States Attorneys have placed purchase orders for different versions of the Straight-A Guide.

At the beginning of this lesson on awareness, I wrote how I use this strategy to deal with probation. Remember, I began preparing for probation at the start of my prison term. I lived a values-based, goal-oriented life through all the years I served. I said how I would prepare for a law-abiding life. My avatars influenced me to focus on education, on contributing to society, and on building a support network. At the end of my sentence, I could show that I made a 100 percent commitment to preparing for success. I avoided problems in prison. I rejected advice from people that told me to forget about the world outside. Instead, I prepared for my return to society.

When I came to the end of my term, I could report about my progress to probation. By writing the monthly letters from prison, my probation officer became aware of my commitment to succeed. She authorized me to build the career I wanted. She allowed me to travel. I kept her in the loop with all of my efforts.

After one year, my probation officer joined a US Attorney in submitting a motion to a federal judge. They asked the judge to terminate my seven-year term of Supervised Release. The judge granted the order. I then began serving my 19-year term on Parole. After one year, my probation officer urged the US Parole Commission to terminate the remainder of my parole. I then began serving my three-year term on Special Parole. I concluded that term early, as well.

This strategy of working, of adhering to the Straight-A Guide has helped me immensely. It helps the other people I feature on Earning Freedom and Prison Professor podcasts and webinars. I am convinced that it can help anyone in prison.

Be aware of opportunities. Understand and accept that the decisions you make in prison have a direct influence on your prospects for success—through prison and beyond!

- » *Keep your head in the game of success.*



## Basic Questions:

1. *Which strategy will keep us aware of opportunities to grow?*

- » *A. Hanging out*
- » *B. Watching television*
- » *C. Setting clear goals that align with our values*
- » *D. Playing a lot of card games*

2. *Which strategy will influence employers we meet in the future to hire us?*

- » *A. Journaling about specific steps we took to prepare for success.*
- » *B. Writing book reports to show what we learned from books we read.*
- » *C. Showing endorsement letters from people that support us.*
- » *D. All of the above.*

3. *Is the following statement true or false? We improve prospects for success by being aware of opportunities to grow.*

- » *A. True*
- » *B. False*





4. *Is the following statement true or false: To prepare for success, it's best to forget about the future and just live for today.*

A. True

B. False

5. *Which of the following would have the least influence on your prospects for success?*

A. Stay aware of opportunities to grow and succeed.

B. Make others aware of your commitment to success.

C. Make sure other people see you as being super tough.

D. Be aware of how your behavior today influences your prospects for success

What does awareness mean to you?

## Personal Development Exercises:

1. *What level of awareness do you have about opportunities around you?*
2. *In what ways do your actions show that you're keeping your head in the game?*
3. *How will your decisions influence your future?*

## Module Activities

- » *Vocabulary Exercise: In each chapter, write down 10 words you did not know. Use a dictionary to look up each word and write the definition next to the word. Practice saying each word out loud, correctly.*

## Critical Thinking Exercise

Return to the module and read the sentences and paragraph sections where you looked up words. Think about what you learned by looking up the words.



- » *Does understanding what the words mean bring you a new understanding of the meaning in what you're reading?*
- » *As your understand of vocabulary increases, are you relating to the course content differently?*
- » *Next to each word, write down what you learned from reading deliberately.*



## Module 8: Authenticity



Building a reputation of authenticity takes work, it requires, time, and it requires commitment. Regardless of what bad decisions we've made in the past, at any time we can start building a record of accomplishments to show that we're authentic in our efforts to succeed—as we define success.

If we want others to invest in us, to believe in us, we need to develop a system. That system requires:

- » *Strategies*
- » *Tactics*
- » *Metrics*





## Be Systemic:

We want to replicate our success in every area of our life. To achieve that end, we need to do more than talk about developing strategies, tactics, and metrics. We need further development, working to create a systemic path to success.

Authenticity requires us to develop:

- » *Strategies: Develop a documented plan that will lead to our success.*
- » *Tactics: Show the tools we've developed to help us achieve more.*
- » *Metrics: Create mechanisms to measure our progress.*



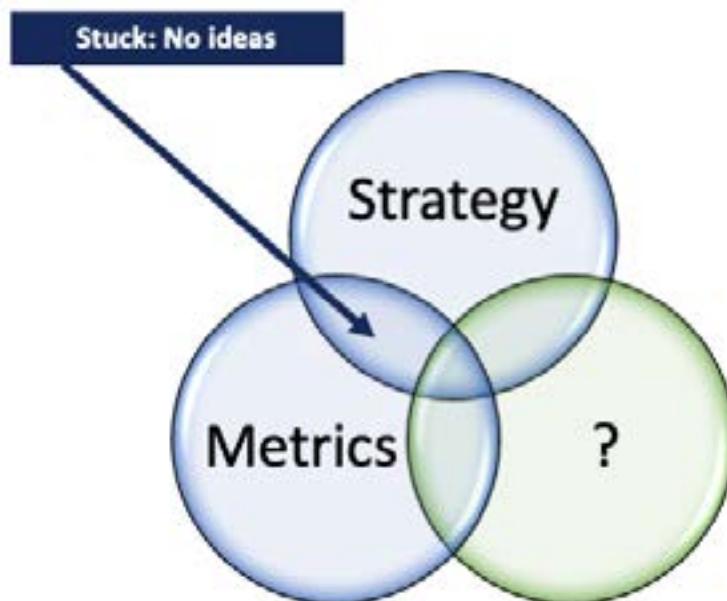
## Get Out of the Rut:



If we have strategies and metrics, but no tactics, we don't know what to do. We cannot build a record of authenticity unless we become self-directed, knowing that it's our responsibility to climb our way from struggle into prosperity.

When we define success, we need to think about each of the tactics that will help us achieve all that we're setting out to achieve.

Don't get stuck in the rut, and don't wait for others to change your life.





## Develop Discipline:

Sometimes, people can define success. They create a strategy and they identify tactics. Yet if they're missing accountability metrics, they tend to flounder. They procrastinate and time passes without any measurable progress. Before they know it, months or years have passed by without any measurable progress.

Authenticity requires that we work toward building a record to show how we're self-directed—that our success depends upon our intrinsic motivation, not on what others do for us.





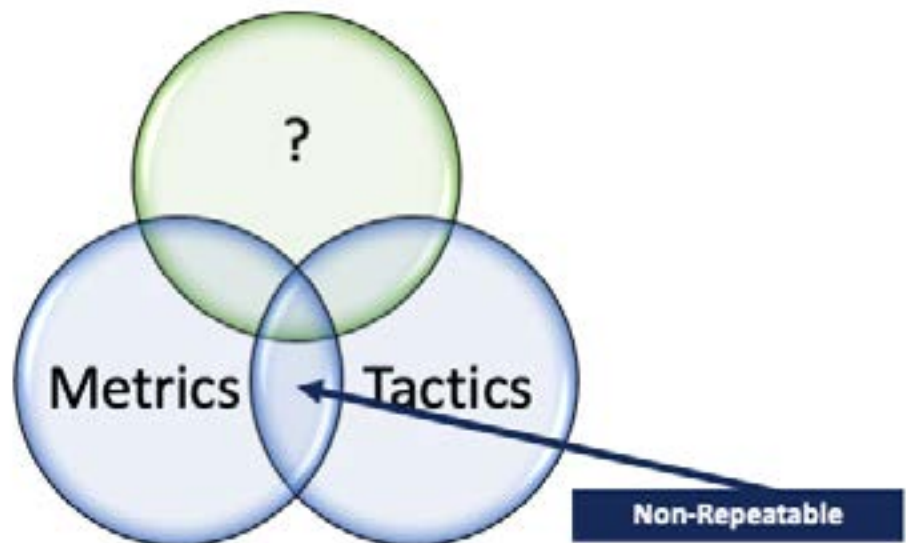
## Lacks Repeatability:



When we have metrics and tactics, but we lack an overall strategy, we fail to build that record of authenticity that inspires others to believe us.

We want to show the world that we're more than the bad decisions of our past, or the current challenges in our life.

To succeed in building a record of authenticity, we need a coherent strategy that incorporates every area of our life. Sometimes people succeed in one area, but they fail in others. From people who build records of authenticity, we see a coherent and documented strategy, with clear tactics and tools, and measurable metrics.





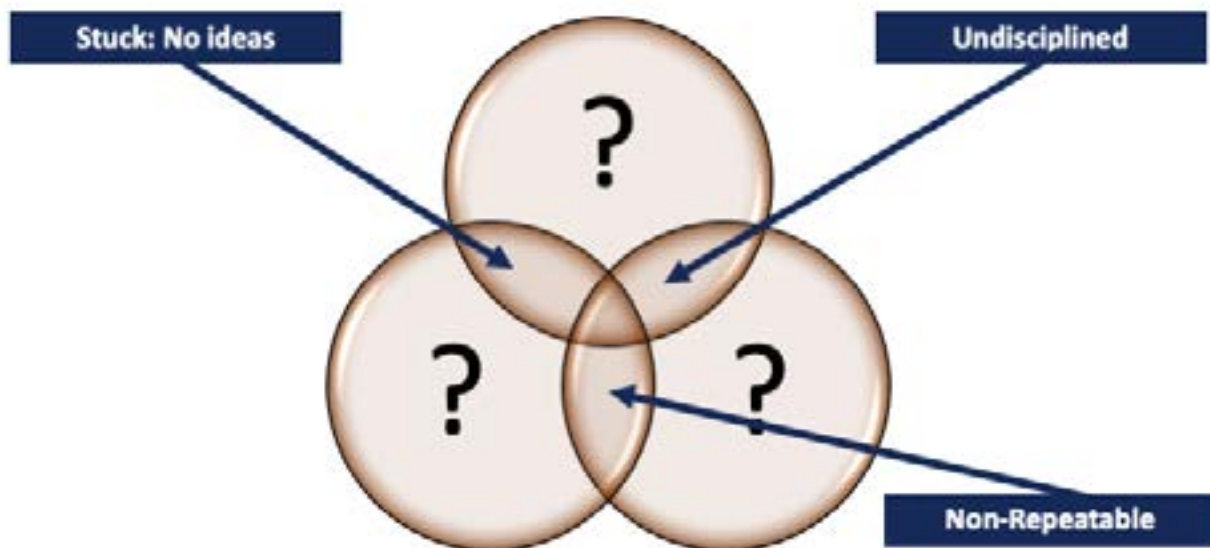
## Lacking Direction:

If we blame external forces on our lack of motivation, we cannot inspire others to believe in us. People want to work with others that can inspire confidence.

To inspire confidence, we need to show that we're self directed. We show that we're self-directed and authentic when we can show our:

- » *Documented strategies,*
- » *The tools we developed for our tactics, and*
- » *Measureable accountability tools that we developed.*

That's when we show we're authentic. With such tools, we make it more likely for others to invest in us.



## Sustainable Personal Growth:



Get everything working together and we build a pathway to personal growth that is:

- » *Predictable*
- » *Repeatable*
- » *Scientific*
- » *Authentic*

These are the pathways to success, in all areas of our life.





## Success:

To keep the wheels of growth spinning, we start by defining success.

Think of how you can define success right now, in a specific area of your life.

Defining success is always a first step.



## Assess:



Once you've defined success, then assess where you are. What is it going to take for you to bridge the gap from where you are to where you want to go.

To the extent that we give an honest assessment, we empower ourselves for the journey ahead.

Introspect, Figure out what decisions you made that led to where you are right now.





## Ideas:

Use your definition of success and your assessment of where you are to “idea-ate.”

Come up with ideas.

- » *What can you do with the resources around you to make progress?*
- » *How can Socratic questioning help you make better decisions?*
- » *What incremental steps will lead to new opportunities?*
- » *How will your incremental steps relate to your definition of success?*



## Plan:



- » *What is your plan of attack?*
- » *How will you define to others the reasons behind the decisions you've made?*
- » *In what ways does your plan influence prospects for your success?*







## Prioritize:

- » *What are the priorities for you to put in place?*
- » *Make a case for what your accomplishments last week.*
- » *Show why the decisions you made last week put you on a path for more success this week.*
- » *How will your decisions this week relate to what you're going to accomplish next month?*



## Execute:



- » *What is your daily execution plan?*
- » *What makes your plan sustainable?*
- » *What does your execution plan say about your commitment to success?*
- » *How will your avatars assess your execution plan?*





## Measure:

- » *What does your accountability log look like?*
- » *With whom do you share your accountability log?*
- » *What does your accountability log say about your commitment to success?*
- » *What does your accountability log say about your authenticity?*



## Reporting:



- » *To whom are you reporting your progress?*
- » *How will your reporting strategies influence your next steps?*
- » *What does your reporting say about your ability to be self-directed?*
- » *In what ways do you anticipate new opportunities opening because of your wheel of progress?*



» *In what ways do your strategies show a predictable pathway to growth?*

- 
- Success:**
- Predictable
  - Repeatable
  - Scientific
  - Authentic

## Be Deliberate:

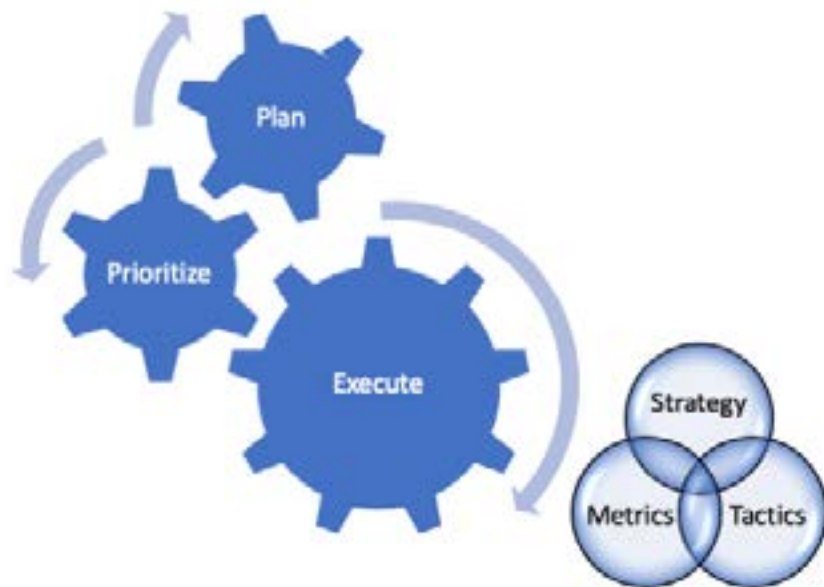
- » *Show that you're not pursuing some random path, filled with excuses and happy talk.*
- » *Differentiate yourself from others who talk about working toward success, but lack a disciplined, deliberate plan.*





## Keep Your Gears Turning:

- » *Build your machine to success.*
- » *Work through your progress.*





## Start Your 90-Day Plan:

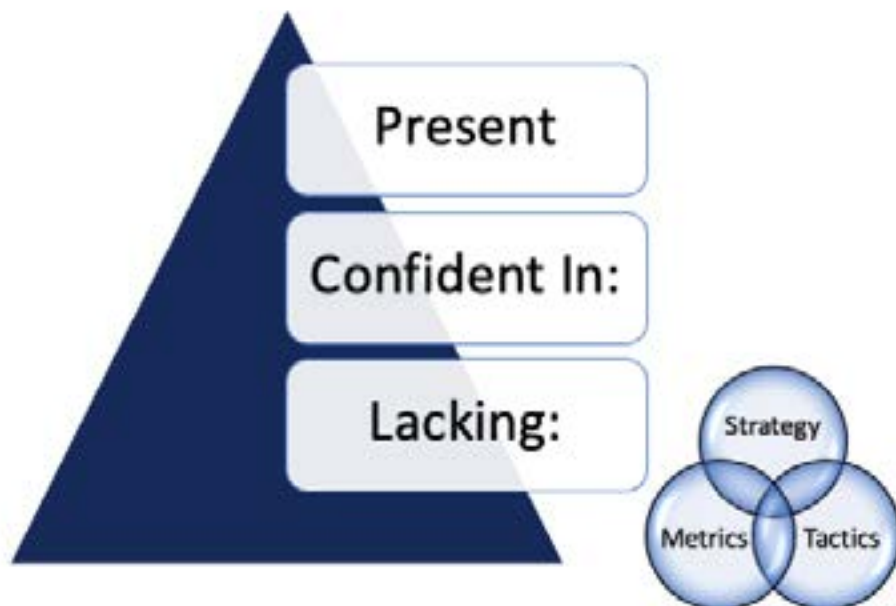
- » *Write down what you're most proud of over the past 90-days.*
- » *Write down any regrets you have over what you've done over the past 90 days.*





## Where are You Now?

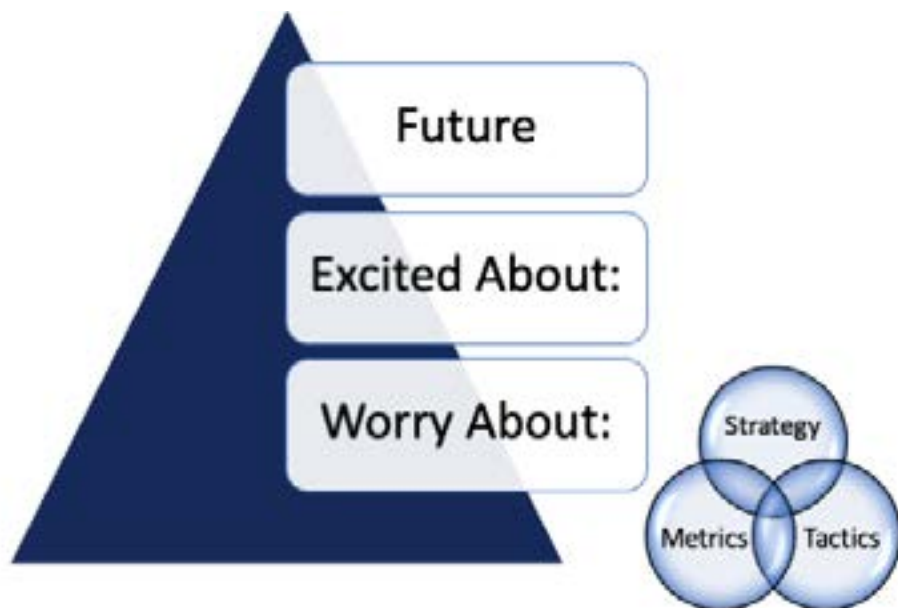
- » *What are you confident about with regard to what is going on in your life right now?*
- » *What is lacking with regard to your mindset or life right now?*



## What do you see in your future?



- » *Write down what you're most enthusiastic or excited about with regard to what you see in your future.*
- » *Write down all that is worrying you about your future right now.*





## Create Your Execution Plan:

- » *Build pride, confidence, and excitement by coming up with five execution cycles that you can begin now.*
- » *In what ways does your execution cycles relate to how you define success?*
- » *How does your execution plans relate to your documented strategies?*
- » *What tools and tactics will you develop to succeed with your execution cycles?*
- » *How will you measure progress with your execution cycles?*

**This is your path to authenticity!**



## Module 9: Achievement

**Great achievement is born of great sacrifice. Happiness comes from the achievement of a difficult task that demanded our best.**

**Napoleon Hill**



### Achievement:

I'm writing this version of the lesson on "Achievement" on May 10, 2020. Despite having had a term of Supervised Release that would have kept me under the supervision of a probation officer for more than 30 years, I became free three years after concluding my prison term.

Neither early liberty, nor success after prison, would have been possible had I not started to make better decisions while I was locked in a county jail. Those experiences convince me that it's never too early, and it's never too late to begin planting seeds for a better future.

Students make daily decisions that influence prospects for success. By developing the mindset of success, students avoid the types of bad decisions that I made. Through this course, I've tried to show how all decisions influence the future we create. The Straight-A Guide has the potential to lead anyone to better decisions than I made when I was a student.

People need hope. They may find hope in what I'm about to reveal.

If you're working through this course, your success means a great deal. Plant seeds. Nurture the seeds. Watch the seeds you plant grow to bear fruit.

Decisions you make today will influence your life tomorrow. Celebrate every small success along the way. They will build upon each other. Like a snowball gathers size as you roll down a hill, success grows in geometric proportions. Start with small achievements. Keep feeding those achievements, leveraging them. They bring new opportunities that grow into larger achievements.

Let me elaborate with an example of how small, early achievements brought me a reason to celebrate along my path.

In the previous lesson I wrote, I described the many layers of my sentence. Besides a lengthy prison term, my judge imposed 29 years of supervision. First there were seven years of Supervised Release. Then 19 years of Parole. Then three years of Special Parole.



U.S. District Court Susan Judge Illston, from San Francisco, agreed that Supervised Release no longer served a purpose in my case. One year after I finished with the Bureau of Prisons, the judge signed an order to free me, saving me six years. I started my term on Parole. A year later, the U.S. Parole Commission terminated my Parole, saving me 18 more years. And in February of 2016, at 10:33 am, I received a phone call. An intern at U.S. Federal Probation told me he had good news. The U.S. Parole Commission granted early termination of my Special Parole term.

If I didn't start sowing seeds back in 1987, when I was still in a county jail, I may have had a different outcome.

Instead of serving 29 years on post-release supervision, I am free.

The early seeds led me to influence people I've never met. Less than four years after the day I finished with the BOP, people on the Parole Commission let me off. Further, despite what people in jail and prison said, I opened many opportunities upon release. Those opportunities allowed me to work with other formerly incarcerated people. They allowed me to create products and services that prison and jail administrators purchased from a company that I built.

As I do frequently, I reflect on the pivotal moments that made this possible. I would have been on supervision until 2040, or some date far in the future. I'm free because a book about a mastermind inspired me. By reading that book while I was locked in a jail cell, back in 1987, I started to develop the mindset of success. I was locked in the SHU at the Pierce County Jail. Reading the story of Socrates changed the way I thought. When I changed the way I thought, I changed my life.

## **Celebrate Small Achievements:**

I remember setting that book on my chest to think. As a young man in a jail cell, I didn't know what I would face ahead. But I knew my early decisions led to the friends I chose. I started making bad decisions when I was a student. The friends I chose influenced the choices I made. Instead of making choices that would bring a better life, I chose to break the law. After my arrest, I pled not guilty. Then I went to trial. I lied on the stand to say I wasn't guilty. Then a judge sentenced me.

Accepting that I made decisions that led me to a jail cell was a start. I also accepted that I could make new kinds of decisions from a jail cell. That was the start of my change. By changing the way I thought, I could map a plan for a new life.

It's never too late and it's never too early  
to begin preparing for a better life.



The story of Socrates helped me to think about the people I would meet in the future, my avatars. Some of them could change my life. How could use my time in prison to prepare? How could I persuade avatars to help me?

» *What steps could I begin taking then, from inside of a jail cell?*

I set clear values. I set clear goals. I invested time and energy to apply myself in the same manner that I teach through this Straight-A Guide Course. That strategy made all of the difference for me through prison.

But at the start, I could not see the end of the journey. Twenty-six years would pass. I couldn't see that far ahead. I focused on the first 10 years. Before 10 years passed, I wanted a college degree. I wanted to publish something. And I wanted to build my support network with the first 10 people. Each of those achievements would be a milestone. To reach them, I would need to make many small achievements.

» *I would need to write letters to find a school.*

» *I would need to get into school even though I didn't have money.*

» *I would need to avoid problems in prison so that others would join my support network.*

» *I would need to use all that I learned from school and from people in my support network.*

» *I would need to read books to learn from masterminds.*

If I kept taking small steps, I would reach those small achievements. Together, they would put me in a different position after 10 years. If I stayed the course, I believed that staff would transfer me from a high-security penitentiary to medium-security prison. Later I might get to a low-security prison. Staff members said I would never get to a camp. Still, I believed that through my actions in prison, I could persuade them to reclassify me. By reaching small goals, I believed that someone might agree to let me serve the last part of my sentence in a minimum-security prison.





With my sentence length, I had to start in the SHU of a high-security penitentiary. To serve my sentence in lower-security prisons. I needed to avoid problems in prison. I needed to make small achievements. Every decision in prison would influence my journey through decades in prison. My journey through decades in prison would influence prospects for success after release.

To sustain a high level of energy and discipline, I had to celebrate the small achievements. Reading a book or a story may be a small achievement. But if the story caused me to change the way I thought, it would change my life. Then, if I acted in ways to reflect that I thought differently, I would make measurable achievements. Others would notice. Later, I could look back. I could see how each decision in jail influenced each opportunity.

Decisions from the day I read Socrates were a step-by-step path. They aligned with my values and goals. They led to earning degrees, to publishing books and articles. They led staff members to transfer me from high security to lower-security level prisons. I went from the SHU in a penitentiary to general population. After eight years, I went to a medium, then to lower-security prisons. In lower-security prisons, I found it easier to avoid problems. I could make more progress. I could build a stronger support network. I could prepare for success upon release.

The incremental achievements we make along the way open up possibilities and new opportunities.

By celebrating the small achievements, I could keep focused. I didn't need to think about serving 26 years. Instead, I thought about the small goals I strove to achieve. By achieving those small goals, I knew that I could open bigger opportunities.

Freedom from the government is one reward. There are more. In the previous lesson I wrote about investors. By making a record of every success in prison, I had a solid case study. I could show people the tiny steps that I took. When I could show people the way that I worked through prison, they were willing to write checks to support projects I wanted to create. Those checks allowed me to build a new career. I'll describe that career with more detail in the next lesson.

Build a string of small achievements. Those achievements will open new options. You will create your own path to success. If release is too far away, celebrate small achievements. This strategy will motivate you. You will build hope. You will know that you have the power within to influence a better future.

Think big.

## Deliberateness:

You may have seen the award-winning movie *Training Day*, with Denzel Washington. Denzel plays the role of Alonzo, a corrupt police officer that trains a rookie. Alonzo tells the rookie, “This is chess not checkers.”



The memorable line from *Training Day* describes a complicated challenge. There are many moving parts. Everything can change in an instant. To succeed, you’ve got to see the big picture. Winners anticipate what will happen many moves in advance. They are deliberate with every choice. They know how to celebrate small wins. Those small wins lead to big gains.

Your small achievements lead to big wins.

Suzy Welch, an author that inspired me, wrote a book about making good decisions. She called her strategy 10-10-10. Think of how every decision will influence your life in the following segments:

- » *How will your decision influence your life in the next 10 minutes?*
- » *How will your decision influence your life in the next 10 months?*
- » *How will your decision influence your life in the next 10 years?*

Making decisions in that way can lead you to many small achievements. Together, those achievements build hope. You will see how yesterday’s decisions led you to overcome struggle and launched to higher levels of success.

Leaders know how to get out of a bad situation. They know how to climb to a better situation. They don’t only focus on the end. Sometimes the end is too far away. They focus on small steps they can take today. Those small steps make it more likely to achieve outcomes.

Make a 100% commitment to putting yourself in the best possible position to succeed. Celebrate small, incremental achievements along the way. If they align with your values and goals, each success will lead to more success. You will be able to say:

**“I am the person that I am today because of the decisions that I made yesterday.”**



## Written Word:

When I started in a jail cell in the SHU, I didn't know how to use my time effectively. What could I do while in there to prepare for a better future? I took an inventory of resources that I could get.

» *I could get books.*

» *I could get paper.*

» *I could get a pencil.*

What could I do? I could read. I could write. I could sleep. I could run in place. I could do pushups and leg lifts and squats in my cell.

I had to use the resources in my cell to prepare for success. By reading about Socrates, I knew what I wanted. I set goals that would lead to success. I would need to stay fit and I would need to improve my skills. I could improve my fitness. I could build better reading and writing and thinking skills.

If I did well, I believed that staff would transfer me into better conditions. In better conditions, I believed I could do more. I set out to do well.

When I began serving the sentence, I did not know how to write a grammatically correct sentence. If I could learn how to write persuasively, with confidence, I would empower myself. I put a plan in place. Each day I would write 1,000 words.

What would I write about? It didn't matter. I wrote with one purpose in mind. I wanted to become more confident as a writer. From a jail cell, I read books to learn how others wrote. I trained to think and write in sentences and paragraphs. I learned to structure writing:

» *I'd write openings to introduce the idea of an essay.*

» *I'd write supporting paragraphs in the body of the essay to help make a persuasive case.*

» *I'd write a compelling close to present a message with force.*

I trained to think like a writer. I prepared in ways to earn more support from the types of people who could advance my prospect for success—my avatars.

Each letter, sentence, and paragraph I wrote was a small achievement that I could celebrate. Like a runner counts his laps, I remember counting the words I wrote. I set goals of writing a minimum of 1,000 words each day, and at least 10,000 words each week.



## Books:

Reading was an essential strategy of my commitment to success. We all had 24 hours in any given day. To some extent, we all chose how we spent those 24 hours. I chose to read books that aligned with my values and goals.

I read books that would help me influence avatars. I needed them to open opportunities later. So I read books that would advance the possibility of making favorable impressions on them later. I wrote book reports that would serve as a kind of accountability log to track the books that I read:

- » *Author's name: Here I'd write the name of the author.*
- » *Book title: Here I'd write the book's title.*
- » *Date read: Here I'd write the date that I finished reading the book.*
- » *Why I read (title): Here I'd write the reason that I chose to read this book.*
- » *What I learned from reading (title): Here I'd write the impressions or take-aways I received from the book.*
- » *How reading (title) will contribute to my success upon release: Here I'd write my thoughts of how this book would influence my prospects for success.*

Reading books would advance my prospects for success. I had cause to celebrate. Those achievements felt like purposeful steps. They led me out from the pit of confinement, like the string that helped guide me out of the labyrinth.



## Achievements:

Masterminds teach that we never achieve success. Rather, success is an ongoing journey of incremental achievements. Our mindset shows our commitment to success. Every day we make choices. Those choices lead to our next opportunity.

Never forget how the decisions you make today will influence your future. Regardless of where you are in your journey, you can start sowing seeds that will lead to a better outcome. There is an old saying. Sometimes I quote it in my work, and I may have said it before. It begins with a question:

» *When is the best time to plant an oak tree?*

The answer is 20 years ago. The second-best time is today!

None of us can change the past. But all of us can sow seeds that will lead to a better future. Develop the mindset to success.

Start sowing new seeds that will allow you to build a better life.

## Basic Questions:

1. *How did I satisfy a 29-year period of post-release supervision in less than four years?*

» *I complained about the unfairness of a long sentence.*

» *I pleaded with my probation officer to let me off early.*

» *I began building a series of small, incremental achievements when I started the term in jail, then used those small achievements to persuade a probation officer, a U.S. Attorney, a federal judge, and the U.S. Parole Commission to release me.*

2. *The Straight-A Guide recommends which of the following to stay motivated?*

» *Watch a lot of television.*

» *Sleep as much as possible.*

- » *Become an expert at playing table games.*
- » *Work toward small, incremental achievements that you can celebrate.*



3. *How do small achievements lead to success when a person is going through struggle?*

- » *Small achievements don't matter at all.*
- » *Small achievements aren't worth celebrating.*
- » *Small achievements can result in certificates.*
- » *Small achievements lead to new opportunities and growth potential.*

4. *Is the following statement true or false: Employers are more inclined to offer opportunities to people that show a history of small achievements over time.*

- » *True*
- » *False*

5. *When is a good time to start building a record of small achievements?*

- » *No one pays attention to small achievements and they don't matter.*
- » *The sooner a person starts building a record of small achievements, the better.*
- » *A person shouldn't care about small achievements because no one else will notice.*
- » *A person living in struggle shouldn't think about small achievements until he gets into a better situation.*





## Personal Development Exercises:

1. *How will your decision influence your life in the next 10 minutes?*
2. *How will your decision influence your life in the next 10 months?*
3. *How will your decision influence your life in the next 10 years?*
4. *In what ways are you putting yourself on a pathway for success?*
5. *What incremental steps do you need to take along the way?*
6. *How will the incremental steps you're taking influence new opportunities and possibilities?*
7. *In what ways would writing book reports open opportunities for you?*

## Module Activities

- » *Vocabulary Exercise: In each chapter, write down 10 words you did not know. Use a dictionary to look up each word and write the definition next to the word. Practice saying each word out loud, correctly.*

## Critical Thinking Exercise

Return to the module and read the sentences and paragraph sections where you looked up words. Think about what you learned by looking up the words.

- » *Does understanding what the words mean bring you a new understanding of the meaning in what you're reading?*
- » *As your understand of vocabulary increases, are you relating to the course content differently?*
- » *Next to each word, write down what you learned from reading deliberately.*



## Module 10: Appreciation

**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**



### Appreciation:

We're in the final lesson of this introductory course to the Straight-A Guide. But the course isn't over. This course does not have an end. In fact, more than a course, the Straight-A Guide is a strategy. It's a strategy for participants that want to develop the mindset of success.

Our team at Prison Professors created this introductory course by revealing how the strategy that powered me through a lengthy prison term. I am hopeful that all participants find value in the message.

In earlier lessons, I wrote about how I would've liked to receive this message as a student. If I learned as a student, I would've made better decisions. I would've chosen better friends and role models. I would've made decisions that led to success rather than prison.

I offer that personal insight because I am authentic. I never ask anything to do or say anything that I did not do or say. Moving from failure to success begins with authenticity.

I would not be authentic if I didn't disclose my many failures from youth. I had many failures as a student. Ironically, I didn't develop the mindset of success until a jury convicted me. Soon after that conviction, a federal judge sentenced me to serve a 45-year prison term.

But it's never too early and it's never too late to develop the mindset of success. If you're a student, think about what steps you can take to be authentic. And think about steps you're taking to reflect on your appreciation for the blessings that have come your way.

If you're in struggle, in jail, in prison, or facing challenges in society, think about your past. Think about the steps that led to your current predicament. What steps can you take today to influence a better future?

## Learn from Masterminds:

I learned from many world leaders. Leaders like Mahatma Gandhi inspired me, and I'm confident his message can inspire anyone. Regardless of where you are, Gandhi tells us that we can create our happiness. To create happiness, we must keep our thoughts, our words, and our actions in harmony. As Gandhi did, we should strive to live as the change we want to see in the world.

I strive to be the change that I want to see in the world. To earn trust, I live authentically. I never ask anyone to do anything that I didn't do and that I don't continue to do. This path leads to "self-actualization." We self-actualize when we know that we're making progress. Our success becomes self-evident, as everyone knows that 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?

I want people to avoid making decisions that can lead them to jail or prison. I want people who are in jail or prison to realize that they can start building a pathway that can lead to success stories. A success story means that a person isn't running from the law, or anyone else. A success story means that an individual can hold his head high, with his dignity intact. Those who pursue success realize the influence of every decision. They see the opportunities and threats, the strengths and weaknesses in every choice they make. Strategic thinking, or the mindset of success, leads to a more fulfilling outcome, regardless of where an individual begins.

Steve Jobs paraphrased the famous artist, Picasso. They 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.*
- » *Celebrate every achievement along the way.*



Participants that adhere to the Straight-A Guide path become authentic. They don't say they want to be successful. Instead, they pursue success in a deliberate, scientific, methodical way.

Anyone can self-actualize, making success self-evident. We don't need anyone else to say we're successful. When we live in accordance with our values and goals, we experience success every day.

Like all people, we've made bad decisions in the past, and we've made 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 decisions 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.

Define your life with thoughts, words, and actions. Let those thoughts, words, and actions reflect your commitment to success. Reject the negativity of happy talk about success, it pollutes the environment.

## Being Authentic:

In this initial, introductory Straight-A Guide course, I teach strategies by sharing my own experiences. Future lessons share the story of other people that conquered struggle. They may have made bad decisions in school. They may have made bad decisions at different stages of their life. But they all chose to become a better. They all chose to draw a line in the sand. They all chose to conquer struggle, and they began by defining success.

They defined success with their values. They set clear goals to show their commitment to success. Then they adhered to principles of the Straight-A Guide. 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. No one could dispute his or her success.



Intermediate and advanced courses will teach concepts of personal leadership, critical thinking, and practical courses. All of them adhere to the same principled strategy of growth and success.

Videos that accompany this course profile other people that began to transform their life while they served time in jail. We'll offer additional videos with business leaders that discuss what they would like to see from people who want to begin building careers—even if they have a criminal record.

## Shon Hopwood:

You can see an example of someone who adhered to the principles of the Straight-A guide by reading the story of Shon Hopwood. Shon authored *Law Man: My story of Robbing Banks, Winning Supreme Court Cases, and Finding Redemption*. His story shows that regardless of what 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 bad decisions as a student. He chose friends that led him into trouble. While in his late teens, Shon experimented with drugs. He participated in armed bank robberies. He served longer than 10 years in federal prison.

While in custody, however, Shon made a choice to change. He chose to learn. He chose to become more than his past. As a consequence of Shon defining success differently, he learned the law. Then he started to help other people in prison. He made a 100% commitment to learn how to read the law and research the law. Shon took action by learning how to write persuasive legal arguments. He held himself accountable by devoting time each day to improve his skill. Anyone can 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. He celebrated achievements when others he helped won victories in court. He won cases in district courts, appellate courts, and the United States Supreme Court.

Because of Shon's commitment to success while serving 10 years in prison, opportunities opened for him. When he got out, he finished college. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation gave him a scholarship. He earned his law degree at the University of Washington Law School. With his 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. Later, President Trump worked closely with Shon on criminal justice reform issues.

Shon's story shows how a person can choose to build a better life, even if a person is in custody. He is authentic and his success is self-evident. Shon shows his appreciation for the blessings that have come into his life. Each year, he volunteers hundreds of hours working to bring systemic improvements to social justice issues, including sentencing laws and the prison system.



## Walk the Way:

Anyone that adheres to principles of the Straight-A Guide can go from struggle to success. But as they say in *The Matrix* it's one thing to know the way. It's quite another thing to walk the way.

While in prison, neither Shon nor I knew what challenges we would face after release. We had ideas, but we didn't know. We needed to prepare. We needed to get ready to overcome challenges. We needed to define success with our values and we needed to set clear goals. Then we needed to follow the principled path of the Straight-A Guide.

We learned a great deal during the decades that we served in prison. By sharing those lessons, we hope to inspire others.

To overcome struggle, we must walk the way of masterminds.

## Not for Everyone:

As I present this final lesson on our introductory course, I'm reminded of an interview I read with the author James Patterson. Mr. Patterson has authored dozens of novels and he has 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 literary stylist.

When the journalist asked the question, Patterson responded, "I'm not a very good literary stylist. He said: "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. His success was self-evident. But there would always be people who disagreed with his approach. Those disagreements didn't matter. He defined his success and he pursued it.



Similarly, not everyone will agree with the Straight-A Guide message of hope and self-reliance. We want our readers to define their path to success. By following a principled path, we're confident that anyone can reach a higher potential.

## Getting Out of Prison:

I remember when my wife drove me from the prison in Atwater to the halfway house in San Francisco. I had 25 years of prison behind me, and one more year in a halfway house before I finished my obligation to the Bureau of Prisons. Then I would start my term on Supervised Release. My wife and I talked about the career I wanted to build. I told her what I'm telling you now.

I want to help people who live in struggle become more successful. It didn't matter if they were in school, in prison, or in struggle with other areas of their lives.

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

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 effort each day. 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 follow the Straight-A Guide path every day.

Think it through.

On the day that I left prison, I was behind with technology. When I went to prison, 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 create products. I had to purchase computer equipment and software. Once I had the equipment, I needed to invest hundreds of hours to learn how to use it. Each day I invest time to learn.

I create products. Then I must find a market for those products. School and prison leaders are not so willing to purchase products from a man that served multiple decades in prison. After all, until the U.S. Parole Commission released me, I had to report my activi-



ties to a federal probation officer. Since I made principled decisions, I could do so with my dignity intact..

If you have access to books I wrote, you 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 online. Those books will show my decisions through prison. They also will show strategies I used to overcome challenges since my release. I started to employ strategies and the mindset of success while I was at the start of my prison journey. I stayed with the strategy through the 9,500 days I lived as a prisoner. I used those strategies since my release from prison. And I continue to use the strategies today.



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

## **Authenticity and Appreciation:**

The Straight-A Guide expresses the importance of being authentic. When we appreciate the blessings that have come our way, we bring more blessings. Masterminds live in a state of gratitude.

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

Masterminds invest energy to build great gardens. They see the value of creating strong networks. To build stronger 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. This brings their commitment to success full circle. As they create more success for more people, they live more fulfilling lives.

## **Map of Success:**

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





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

If we're beginning our journey on the other side of the world, and we 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. By staying the course, we also know that we will reach our destination.

We define our destination with our values and goals. Follow lessons from the Straight-A Guide course. 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 our ship. To triumph over the pull that sinks so many, accept the principled path of masterminds. Use the strategy as a compass. To reach your destination, you must anticipate darkness. You'll face rough seas, even hurricanes. Use the strategies as your map and your compass. They 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.*

Advance in pursuit of that aspiration as the days turn into weeks, the weeks into months, and the months into years.

- » *Seize every opportunity to take action.*
- » *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 have to 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 choose. A gambler may play the odds and live by chance. 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. Those who think strategically succeed at a far higher level.

The greatest gamblers operate more like investors. They minimize chance by training to read signs and clues. They place their bets in accordance with 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, they better they can place their bets.

Investors take the same approach. They consider as many data points as possible when making decisions. Investors evaluate price-earnings multiples. They look at year-over-year sales growth. They want insight on equity returns. They weigh executive competency and many other factors. Data points make investors more confident to put money on the line.



Whether you choose to live as a gambler or an investor, make good decisions. Always acknowledge the stakes. Your life and your future are at stake. Assess your environment. See the big-picture and see the moment. 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. They face challenges in finding permanent housing. They may have troubles with substance abuse. Strategies in this course helped me overcome those problems. I'm convinced the strategies can help you. But you must decide.

At Prison Professors, we encourage you to learn from our other courses. We profile others who have gone through struggle. They've built lives of success. They followed a principled path that we strive to convey with our Straight-A Guide.

We wish you success!

## Basic Questions:

**I. I. What does it mean to be authentic?**

- » **A. To be a pet of the administration.**
- » **B. To be popular with your peers.**
- » **C. To keep everything you say, everything you think, and everything you do in harmony.**



- » *D. To have a job.*
- 2. *Why does being authentic lead others to trust in you and support your efforts?*
  - » *A. They see that you do what you say you're going to do.*
  - » *B. They see that your actions are consisted with your values and goals.*
  - » *C. They see that you don't ask anyone to do anything that you're not doing.*
  - » *D. All of the above.*
- 3. *3. Is the following statement true or false? People are more inclined to find others authentic if they document incremental achievements.*
  - » *A. True*
  - » *B. False*
- 4. *4. Why does it make sense to show appreciation for the blessings you receive?*
  - » *A. You may receive a certificate.*
  - » *B. You may receive an extra bowl of cereal.*
  - » *C. You may have your own seat reserved.*
  - » *D. You keep the cycle of growth going and contribute to a better community.*
- 5. *5. Is the following statement true or false? By helping others in your community, you simultaneously help yourself.*
  - » *A. True*
  - » *B. False*

## Personal Development Exercises:

*Pursue these personal-development exercises independently, or in a group breakout session. Respond to the questions and discuss with your group.*



1. *What steps can you take today to influence a better future?*
2. *What can you do create happiness?*
3. *How are you defining success today?*

## Module Activities

- » *Vocabulary Exercise: In each chapter, write down 10 words you did not know. Use a dictionary to look up each word and write the definition next to the word. Practice saying each word out loud, correctly.*

## Critical Thinking Exercise

Return to the module and read the sentences and paragraph sections where you looked up words. Think about what you learned by looking up the words.

- » *How does an understanding of a word's meaning influence an understanding of what an author tried to convey?*
- » *As your understand of vocabulary increases, are you relating to the course content differently?*

## Final Word:

As a final word, on behalf of our entire team at Prison Professors, I wish you success through your journey. The strategies I offer through this course empowered me through every stage in the journey, and they helped me to build a successful life upon release. I wish you the same level of success.





