



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

Straight-A Guide Introductory Course



www.prisonprofessors.com

**Module 7:
Awareness**

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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.*