

Striving for Something Greater:
How Prisoners Must Find the Motivation to Succeed
By Christopher Zoukis

Is the purpose of modern corrections public safety or rehabilitation? Are these two concepts mutually exclusive, or should they co-exist in the correctional context?

If these questions are presented to the typical prison administration official, it quickly becomes apparent that public safety, in the form of security perimeters and maximum control over prisoners, trumps everything, including rehabilitation.

Rehabilitation efforts require the resources and blessing of administration officials, but they also require motivation by prisoners. The first step in the path to change available through rehabilitation efforts must come from within the prisoner himself or herself.

Sitting in the day room of my housing unit I look around and I see a lack of motivation. I see men of all ages, races, religions and abilities generally wasting away. I see my cellmate, who watches perhaps eight hours of television a day. I see the sports group yelling about Golden State's prospects of winning the NBA championship. And I see a few in the corner working out. In the whole day room, there is only one man studying. Only one. He attends Louisiana State University via correspondence.

For the most part, at least in my experience, prisoners actively look for ways to pass the time. This is unsurprising and typical. It's even expected. After all, this is what many in life do, even those outside of prison. Prisoners, similar to their free world counterparts, are very interested in improving their lot in life. But very few bother actually doing so. In prison, a person may watch television or plays cards day in and day out. In the other world, a person may work a dull job with no real prospects of advancement, just a weekly or biweekly check. Even though the surroundings are drastically different, these situations are very similar.

Talking to a good friend recently -- a fellow prisoner who is anything but unintelligent -- I posed the question, "What do you want to do when you get out?" He had several interesting thoughts: physicist and accountant were the leading ideas. Then I hit him with the real question: "So, how are you going to get there?" He shrugged. This man is smart, brilliant at mathematics, but I saw that he lacked the will to do anything to better himself. He obviously cares deeply about a better future, as we all do, but seems either unable or unwilling to do anything about it. I offered my college accounting textbook. He politely declined. Not stupid, but not motivated either.

It just doesn't make sense. While I'll agree that the prison administration could do a lot more to reduce the barriers to success -- for example, by offering meaningful, free or low cost activities that may lead to good job prospects post-release -- but to me this is only one step. There are many excuses available, especially for the prisoner. "I would study, but I'm going to be old when I'm released." "I would attend class, but it's just such a nice day today." "I would do something, but I just don't feel like it." Most of these are mental butts, which come into existence because it's simply easier to do nothing than something. My cellie is a sad example of the scourge of laziness. He has the mental capacity to really make something of himself, but he would rather watch episodes of *Charmed* and other mindless drivel than do anything productive. After serving close to three decades in prison, all he will have to look forward to is some type of nursing home. The saddest part of this is that it is his choice. My friend, like many others, could choose something more, but elects not to.

Prisoners must always remember that we are the agents of our own change. The prison administration can't feed us success on the same plastic trays that they feed us tuna salad. Prison education departments can't force us to succeed, we have to put in the hard work. It's a choice that we must make for ourselves. Like the drug addicted, offerings of support, love and compassion are not enough. It is up to the addict to wake up, ask for help and put in the work. The same is true with prisoners. We need to wake up (see that without effort now, life will not get better post-release), ask for help (pick up a book, enroll in a class, or otherwise start planning for release), and put in the work (engage in existing opportunities or, if none are available, create our own).

Prisoners face difficulty in improving themselves. But the opportunities are there. Standing at the precipice of a cliff, we can choose to do nothing, and slide down the steep slope of life-long failure, or we can look up, see the summit, and start climbing.

About the Author:

Christopher Zoukis is the author of the "Prison Education Guide" (Prison Legal News Publishing, 2016), "College for Convicts: The Case for Higher Education in American Prisons" (McFarland & Co., 2014) and "Federal Prison Handbook" (forthcoming, Middle Street Publishing, 2016), along with a contributing writer to "The Huffington Post," "Prison Legal News," and the "New York Daily News." He can be found online at www.prisoneducation.com, www.christopherzoukis.com, and www.prisonlawblog.com.