

Strategy for Successful Prison Adjustment

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Description of how I used a quadrant theory to thrive through a 45-year prison term. This Theory is applicable to white collar crime offenders as well as to anyone convicted of felony criminal indictments.

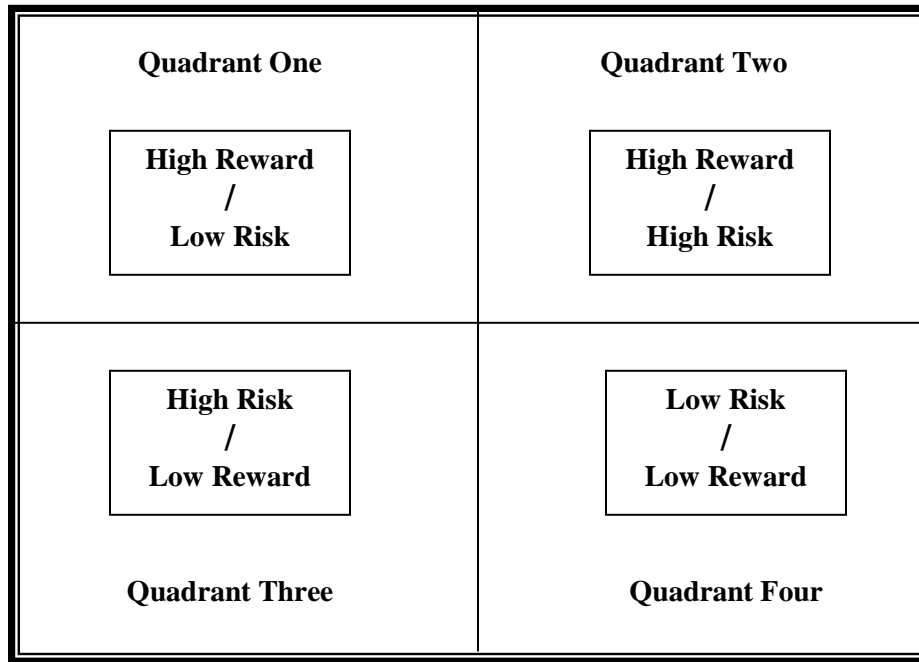
I'd like to offer my fellow prisoners a strategy for serving time successfully. My term in confinement began in 1987, and since then I've relied upon this approach to real advantage. It has been my compass. By using it to direct my every step, I've thrived while serving time in prisons of every security level.

I refer to the strategy as my Quadrant Theory. Theorists for other disciplines, particularly business and investments, have used quadrants to measure or classify decisions and actions. As far as I know, no one else has applied the theory to prison adjustments.

The concept was quite simple. First it required that I define a meaningful purpose to work toward, along with individual goals I could clearly achieve. Then I used a four-block grid to classify my decisions, behaviors, and thoughts. The four blocks, or quadrants, measured whether my actions would lead me closer to the goals and purpose of value to me; they also helped me track whether my decisions threatened possibilities for my success.

On my grid, I labeled the lower two quadrants as three and four, from left to right. The top of my grid comprised quadrants one and two, from left to right.

I reserved quadrant three for behaviors with a potential for high risk, yet offered only low rewards. In quadrant four I included low-risk and low-reward behaviors. Quadrant one was where I categorized high reward and low risk behaviors. Finally, in quadrant two I categorized high-reward and high-risk behaviors. Graphically, the quadrant looked like the diagram below:



Just as a ship's captain used a compass to navigate stormy seas, I used my quadrants to direct my adjustment. I wanted to ensure that the Michael Santos who emerged from prison would be stronger in every way than the Michael Santos who walked into prison.

With a lengthy sentence that promised to lock me inside prison boundaries for more than 25 years, I chose to set long-term goals. I did not concern myself with the chaotic world in which I was immersed. Like an acrobat who made a living crossing high-wires, I took each step with cautious and deliberate precision.

Conventional wisdom in prison suggested that men should forget about the world outside. Since they had such little influence on what happened in the outer world, many prisoners believed that the best adjustment was one that focused on time inside. I could never bring myself to embrace that strategy or the prison culture. From the beginning, my all-consuming purpose was to prepare for success upon release in every way possible. I used the quadrant theory to guide my decisions.

Prisons, I noticed quickly, were environments that extinguished hope. In that way, the infrastructure differed significantly from what I knew and loved about our country. The system was designed in a way to perpetuate failure, or so it seemed to me. Despite the pervasive discouragement, I envisioned the kind of man I wanted to be when I walked out of prison and into the world.

I was 23-years-old when I started serving my sentence. I had been an adult for only five years when bad decisions I made resulted in the loss of my liberty. My educational level, and the values that drove my actions until then were inferior. I felt compelled and determined to change, to mature during the multiple decades of my imprisonment.

All of my material belongings were lost as a consequence of my struggles with the criminal justice system. If I did not create opportunities, I understood that I would conclude my sentence when I was approaching 50, and I wouldn't own a home, a car, a retirement account, or even any clothes. I would be alone. I would not have a work history, or even a résumé that might open employment opportunities. If I did not take control of my life, I would leave a system of concrete and steel, but feel imprisoned by the limitations and challenges that would come with poverty and despair upon release.

My goal was to ensure that the bad decisions I made during my early 20s would not define my entire life. Instead, I made a commitment. I would triumph through the turmoil of confinement by educating myself. Once I earned educational credentials, I would use my knowledge to create opportunities. Those opportunities would allow me to build a network of support. They would help me earn financial resources to ease my transition into society upon release. They would help me find the love and companionship of a woman. And I intended to use what I would learn to motivate others to transform their lives despite adversity.

With the purpose defined, I could set specific goals that were consistent and in harmony with the vision I had of the man I wanted to become. It wasn't enough to paint with broad

strokes. I needed specifics. Not to educate myself, but to earn a Bachelor's and Master's degree. Staying in shape meant maintaining my weight within a ten-pound range between 170 and 180, along with running more than 40 miles each week. I set the clearly-defined goal of building a bank account that I would fund with earnings from profits I created while serving my sentence; I wanted at least \$100,000 in that account before my release. I wanted to build relationships with at least three mentors who would vouch for me and help me overcome obstacles upon release. I wanted to publish a book that would help me connect with thousands of others. I wanted to find a woman to love, marry, and to whom I would devote my life.

All of those goals were exceedingly specific. Either I would succeed in reaching them, or I would fail. With my quadrant theory, I had an instrument I could rely upon to keep me on track. I used the quadrant grid to ensure that every step advanced me closer to my goals, to my life's purpose.

I used my grid to measure everything. That included my personal relationships, cell mates, exercise programs, recreational activities. I even consulted the grid to determine whether I would abide by prison rules, where I would work, eat, and what schedule I would keep. My time in prison was a constant adaptation, a constant focus on how I could prepare to emerge successfully. By reading the goals I had stated, I felt empowered.

Prison prohibited me from having much influence over the conditions in which I lived. The quadrant grid enabled me to understand options and make the most of available opportunities. When the time was right, I could create new opportunities.

I stated my purpose as preparing for success upon release in every way possible. Each of my specific goals worked harmoniously with that purpose. That commitment meant that I had to avoid or limit behaviors, relationships, even thoughts that belonged to the "low-reward" quadrants three and four. I purposely strove to restrict everything I said, did, and thought to

quadrants one and two. I always sought the potential for high rewards, even if I had to accept a level of risk to succeed.

Quadrant Three Adjustments: High Risk / Low Reward

In striving to achieve the goals I had set, I deliberately avoided activities that other prisoners embraced as a means of passing time. Those included card and table games, organized sporting events, television addictions, tattooing, hustling contraband, drinking wine or using drugs, interacting with gang members or prison cliques.

Those were popular adjustment activities for many in the penitentiary, medium-, and low-security prisons. They effectively distanced thoughts about what each prisoner was missing and enabled him to build an identity within the boundaries that limited his life. The activities eased the time in prison for them, though to my way of thinking, they didn't help preparations for release. Each of those activities belonged to grid three, as they brought a high degree of risk, but nothing in the way of meaningful rewards.

Shaky Jake was a neighbor of mine in the penitentiary. He loved to pass his time playing seasonal sports on teams from one housing unit that competed in games against teams from other housing units. In the evenings, Shaky Jake drank hooch with his friends and played table games or watched late-night television.

To Shaky Jake, prison was like a recreation center. He was 35, but lived for the thrill of the moment as if he were a 13-year-old boy on summer break. Shaky Jake was quick to join in battle if he felt insulted or disrespected. The reputation he built in prison was of value to him. Concerns about how he would respond to the challenges that followed release, on the other hand, did not disturb him in the least. Shaky Jake said there wasn't anything he could do about the outside world while serving time, so he would worry about release when the time came.

Shaky Jake's release did come. He returned to a world that was hostile to those with prison records. He had no money to begin his life. With a down payment for an apartment rental, transportation, clothing, and living expenses, Shaky Jake would need several thousand dollars. Yet the only employment opportunities available to him offered hourly wages in the ten-dollar range. Not being able to accumulate the resources necessary to begin a self-sustaining life, Shaky Jake floundered. Within eight months of Shaky Jake's release from the penitentiary, he had violated the terms of his supervised release, and his probation officer ordered his return to confinement.

With 70 percent recidivism rates, I saw many, many examples of failure upon release. Unfortunately, Shaky Jake's adjustment pattern prepared him to live in prison well, though it simultaneously conditioned him for failure when the free room and board came to an end.

Quadrant Four Adjustments: Low Reward / Low Risk

Some men tried to hibernate through their sentences. Sleep and other mindless activities helped ease the pains of loneliness and despair that came with confinement. By malingering through the motions, inmates could persuade the health services department to issue medications that would put them to sleep for more than 12 hours every day. When awake, they stayed out of the mix by reading simple fiction or flipping through the pages of glossy magazines featuring women in underwear or revealing the latest Hollywood gossip.

Others participated in hobby craft projects like crocheting or needlepoint, model building or pottery. Some became super inmate workers, identifying with that Stockholm syndrome that conditioned them to relate better to staff members than with other prisoners.

Those activities don't bring much in the way of risk, as inmates who stay to themselves lessen the possibilities for altercation or conflict with others. Yet although risk levels for this adjustment pattern are low, according to the grid that guides my decisions, the rewards that come

are meaningless with regard to preparations for success upon release. An individual may succeed in sleeping half of his time away, or become fluent with what is happening in every pop star's love life, yet years of such adjustment will not open much in the way of opportunity. I found it best to minimize any behavior that belonged to quadrant four, with low risk and low rewards.

It was understandable to me why some inmates chose quadrant-four adjustment patterns. They felt alienated from the world. Sleeping helped them connect. I've known many inmates who were abandoned by their families and they couldn't stand the loneliness. They immersed themselves in pen-pal relationships with women they never expected to meet. Prison walls could feel as if they were closing in. Prisoners who sunk into quadrant-four adjustments escaped the pain by numbing their minds.

Quadrant One Adjustments: High Reward / Low Risk

Men who embraced adjustment patterns in quadrant one sought to maximize their potential for meaningful rewards while minimizing exposure to risks. Their focus was on avoiding problems or complications in prison while striving to develop skills, credentials, resources, and relationships that added value to their lives. They had no interest in games, meaningless prison certificates, or prison reputations. Their interest was not on how the prison culture would judge them, but on the challenges they would have to overcome in prison and upon release.

Quadrant-one adjustment patterns did not threaten or challenge the prison infrastructure or the decision of others. On the contrary, those who moved through their sentences with clearly-defined goals gave themselves reasons to avoid anything that could disrupt their progress. Some of the activities I included in quadrant one included independent study; vocabulary building; reading; writing; exercise; building and nurturing mentoring relationships; learning marketable skills; cultivating a network of support; studying the principles of business, politics, and civics;

developing and improving upon communication skills; participating in spiritual growth programs; all activities that advanced an individual's prospects for success upon release.

Prisoners who came from different backgrounds selected activities within quadrant one that were appropriate to their lives. As I moved lower in security levels, I met more men who were significantly better prepared to function upon release than were those in the general populations of higher security prisons. In prison camps, many men had university degrees and significant resources in society.

Justin, for example, had degrees from a prestigious California university. His focus while serving an 18-month sentence was not on educating himself or preparing for employment upon release, as Justin had extensive career options that awaited him. Yet all of his adjustments fit into quadrant one. Consequently, he thrived through prison.

Within two days of his arrival at Taft Camp, Justin set a plan. He understood that if he earned the maximum amount of good time, and if he received a moderate amount of halfway house time, he would serve approximately 12 months in Taft Prison Camp. He decided to structure his time to make the most of his predicament, while simultaneously avoiding or minimizing interactions that could result in the loss of good-time or halfway house privileges. That is classic adjustment within the quadrant one section of my grid.

Justin committed himself to reading a minimum of two books each month. He wanted to stay current with events in the world, so he made a point of reading newspapers and news magazines as well. Justin began keeping a journal, and he wrote out detailed entries every day of his confinement. They described the progress he made toward the goals he had set. From the beginning, Justin committed to transforming his physique into that of a peak-performance athlete.

He woke each day before 5:30. After watching the early news on television, Justin was on the track exercising. His first run made him gasp for air after three slow miles. Four months

later Justin was running ten-mile distances in 70-minute times. By exercising for between three and four hours every day, and keeping a strict diet, Justin dropped thirty pounds. Other than the time Justin spent exercising, he was alone. He was cordial and courteous to all, but he limited interactions with others in order to lessen the possibilities for altercation or conflict.

Justin understood what he wanted. By focusing on his purpose, and setting individual goals that would lead to success, he had a vested interest in limiting himself to quadrant-one thoughts, actions, and words.

Quadrant Two Adjustments: High Reward / High Risk

As a long-term prisoner, I always did a lot of reading. One of the books I read in 2008 was called *What Got You Here Won't Get You There*. It was written by a successful life coach who advised executives how to achieve peak performance. The author suggested that the decisions that propelled executives to become sales leaders early in their careers would differ from the decision necessary to transition into corporate leadership. I found that the same was true through my lengthy prison adjustment.

When I began serving my term I focused on my first decade. I didn't waste much thought on possibilities for advancing my release date. Instead, I put all of my energy into developing skills, credentials, and resources that would help ensure that I could succeed upon release. Since my release date was more than 25 years ahead, I focused on the first decade.

During that first decade, all of my decisions belonged to quadrant one. I believed that if I worked toward earning academic credentials, more people would take me seriously. I focused on the specific goals of earning a bachelor's degree, a master's degree. I focused on expanding my vocabulary by 1,000 words. I established a public speaking club and delivered at least one speech each week to develop and refine communication skills. I wrote at least 5,000 words every

week. I became physically fit, hitting specific goals with regard to strength and endurance training. I avoided interactions and activities that could expose me to disciplinary problems.

After advancing through that first decade, however, I realized that maintaining a clear disciplinary record in prison was not nearly as important as preparing myself to overcome the obstacles I expected to encounter upon release. By the time I walked out of prison gates, I expected to have a quarter-century of imprisonment behind me. I would not have a career history, a credit history, or financial resources to establish my life. Not wanting to struggle through the problems of Shaky Jake, or countless others who returned to prison after release, I set plans in motion to ensure I would emerge strong.

Prison rules and administrative practices discouraged inmates from preparing themselves in meaningful ways for success upon release. For example, if an inmate did not know a community leader prior to his imprisonment, administrators would not allow the community leader to mentor the inmate through visits. In my case, administrators not only blocked university professors from coming to visit me, they also cited policy to prevent me from studying in correspondence the University of Connecticut arranged specially for me to work toward a doctoral degree.

Those experiences convinced me that I was on my own. The prison system had an interest in preserving and perpetuating itself, and so implemented a culture that was secure, but one that simultaneously fostered failure and high recidivism rates. It was up to each individual to power through the resistance and prepare for success despite the institutional obstacles made in the name of corrections. My adjustment pattern gradually moved from quadrant one to quadrant two.

In quadrant two, I was after high rewards, though my tolerance increased for acceptable levels of risk. Whereas I was assiduous in my adherence to both the spirit and the letter of prison rules during my first decade, as I advanced deeper into my sentence, I questioned whether those

rules would interfere with my preparations for release. If I determined that they would block my progress, I used what I had learned through my studies and experience to overcome the limitations imposed by the rules. Although administrators relied on the refrain “preserving the security of the institution” to justify their decisions, I felt a more compelling obligation to my family and community. I had to prepare for success upon release.

The prison rule that I tested most frequently was known in the disciplinary code as Prohibited Act 408, Conducting a Business. That was classified as a low-moderate category offense. Before challenging the rule, I made inquiries with various custody officials within the prison system. They told me the purpose of the rule was to discourage inmates from running businesses inside the prison. Some prison-based businesses included offering services like laundry, ironing, cleaning cubes, and other hustles. I had no interest in such ventures.

There were two activities that I could pursue, I believed, that would make a difference in my life upon release. Both had the possibility of generating a meaningful income, and neither would interfere with the security of the institution in any way. I had trained myself through more than a decade of schooling and independent study, and each of those activities offered an opportunity to apply what I had learned. Most importantly, they offered an opportunity to build a savings account, to pay income tax, and to build both skills and resources that would help me meet the challenges I will face upon release.

One of the activities I chose to pursue was writing for publication. That work, I hoped, would lead to revenues from royalties. After paying the necessary state and federal taxes on that revenue, I could begin saving. As those savings grew, I could pursue the second activity, which was speculating and investing in the stock markets.

Before engaging in either activity, I sought both legal counsel and guidance from prison administrators. I memorialized what I had learned from my research, and I ensured that a copy of

all correspondence was placed in my central file. That way, when disciplinary problems arose, I could show that I made every effort to understand and comply with prison rules.

In essence, the rules stated that as a prisoner, I could not engage in business activities. Yet I had a first amendment right, guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution, to write. So I wrote. Those in my support group received royalties from what I wrote. They paid taxes on those royalties. They invested the remaining funds in the stock market, or speculated as I directed. Since I moved into the quadrant-two adjustment, my work has resulted in hundreds of thousands of dollars in revenues, and generated significant tax payments to state and federal governments.

I was charged numerous times with violating the Prohibited Act 408. Sometimes I was transferred from one prison to another because of those charges. Yet I was never convicted of violating the code, because I was successful in showing that I did not own or control anything. Those in my support group were in charge of all financial and business matters with regard to the work I created.

Although I believed that I was in compliance with the letter of the prison rules, I understood that some within the prison system resented the earnings my work was generating. There was thus a level of risk associated with my quadrant-two adjustment decisions. I understood those risks. To me, the rewards justified the harassments that I knew would come. The earnings my work created enabled me to marry the lovely Carole when I was 16 years into my sentence. I was able to support her completely and finance her through nursing school. Together, we built a family and generated the resources necessary to assure my successful transition to society. Because of my adjustment decisions, first in quadrant one, and then in quadrant two, I was more prepared to succeed upon release than anyone would have expected from a long-term prisoner.

Conclusion

Those who want to thrive through prison should consider using the quadrant theory of adjustment. It requires the individual to visualize his purpose, to understand the progress he wants to make, and with that purpose defined, the individual may set gradual, but clearly defined goals to achieve. The goals must work in harmony with the overall purpose.

As the individual develops a clearer understanding of how he wants to emerge, he should establish his grid of quadrants. Although adjustment patterns may change with time, as mine did, those changes should come with purpose and understanding. No success comes by accident, and thriving through prison is no different. My experience of living in prison for longer than 21 years suggested that individuals should measure their progress by spending as much time as possible in quadrants one and two, minimizing time in quadrant four, and not spending any time in quadrant three.