

## **Developing Goals, Making Plans, and Finding Mentors**

By Michael G. Santos  
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*This article describes strategies those in prison may employ to prepare for success upon release.*

Business magazines frequently report that the lack of effective business plans is a recipe for many business failures. Without a plan, businesses lack direction. Prisoners might learn from this account. Indeed, putting a plan together can make the difference between succeeding and failing in all endeavors.

People who expect to leave prison—even those who expect to remain inside for many years to come—ought to establish goals. Once prisoners identify the goals they want to achieve, they ought to develop plans that will help them reach those goals. Those who use their personal plan as a tool will find it much easier to realize their ambitions. Going through one's term without a plan is like floating across the ocean without a compass.

An easy and brief experiment will help anyone realize the value of developing personal plans. Simply think back to the time you were beginning high school. If you knew then what you know now, would you make the same life choices? I know that I would have done many things differently. And if I did, I would not be writing this course description from inside a federal prison while serving a forty-five year prison sentence.

Personal plans should help the individual see into the future. They should help the individual identify what he expects to accomplish over the next decade. Whatever the goals, those capable of envisioning them now can begin building the plans necessary to succeed. These plans need not be perfect today. Building personal plans is an ongoing process. The successful individual will review his plans regularly, every day, and refine them as necessary.

Regardless of how much time individuals have remaining to serve, personal plans will enhance their chances to succeed. Can there be any doubt of this? Personal plans help individuals stay on course and realize the reasons for their efforts. Plans keep individuals moving forward. An individual with two years to serve may have different goals from a prisoner like me, one whose release date lingers more than twelve years from the time I'm writing this article. If nothing changes, in ten years, I will remain in prison; the short-term prisoner, on the other hand, will have forgotten the time he has spent behind fences after ten years pass. Nevertheless, the personal plan is essential to both long- and short-term prisoners.

### **The Short-Term Prisoner:**

Although the gates soon may open for the short-term prisoner, most will remain within the web of the criminal-justice system. Sentencing laws bring terms of supervised release that require individuals to report to probation officers after their prison time expires. Perhaps one goal the short-term prisoner has is persuading the sentencing judge or the probation officer that he is a good candidate for early termination of his supervised release. If this is a goal, what steps can he take today that will enhance his chances of succeeding tomorrow? Personal plans will help the individual arrive at this answer.

Personal plans can help short-term prisoners in other ways too. Anyone who leaves prison has to know that his prison record will present obstacles. Those obstacles cripple some prisoners. Others move right through them as they follow their plans.

### **The Long-Term Prisoner:**

People who have longer terms ahead of them need plans especially. I know. I began serving my sentence in 1987, when I was twenty-three. When I started, administrators and prisoners alike told me how little one could accomplish from behind prison walls. Refusing to listen to those with limited ambitions, I envisioned the goals I wanted to accomplish and built a plan to help me succeed. The plan has opened significant opportunities.

The one certainty for me is knowing that my lack of a life plan contributed to my imprisonment; the building of a life plan, on the other hand, contributed to every accomplishment I've made from behind these walls. Criminal justice experts differ in their assessments of how many prisoners return to prison after release. The statistics vary from fifty to eighty percent. Everything hinges on how one defines recidivism. If one defines recidivists as those who return to confinement for any reason within the first three years of release from their sentences, people generally can agree that the number exceeds fifty percent. That means at least one out of every two people returns to the strip searches and count times after the sentence expires.

Long-term prisoners ought to ask themselves whether those who succeed make different choices from those who fail. For the purposes of this exercise, readers ought to limit definitions of success simply to those not returning to confinement. My experience suggests that those who have plans—those with a very clear understanding of the goals they are striving to achieve—have a much higher chance of succeeding than those who do not.

### **Ten-Year Plans:**

Think ahead ten years from today. Where will you be? What will you have accomplished? Project yourself into the future, then describe the integral parts of your life. Your career. Your activities. Your social circle. Your wardrobe. Your finances.

Your dreams should be the start of your long-term goals. This should be the destination you struggle to achieve. Once you have a clear understanding of where you're going, you can begin developing the plan to help you get there.

### **Five-Year Plan:**

The ten-year plan leads to the five-year plan. If you know where you want to be in ten years, then you should have a good idea of where you need to be in five years. Just work backwards. What steps must you take today in order to ensure you reach the goals you've set for

tomorrow? This same approach helps successful individuals manage their lives. From the ten-year plan, these achievers develop strategies that turn into five-year plans, three-year plans, and one-year plans, and quarterly plans. These plans help the individual understand that proverbial first step necessary to embark on a thousand-mile journey.

### **Personal Marketing Plans:**

Regardless of whether one is a short or long-term prisoner, there can be no doubt that the greater one's network of support, the greater his chances will be of achieving his goals. Everyone has heard the cliché that it's not what you know but who you know. I'm a firm believer that the more contacts one has in the community, the better one's opportunities for success.

Individuals who expect to request a parole officer or sentencing judge to reduce his term of special parole will stand a better chance of succeeding on this request if they have a substantial network of support behind them. Same story for individuals who expect to request an immigration judge's permission to remain in this country; if the individual can present hundreds of taxpaying citizens who have taken the time to write letters of support, that individual has the capacity to strengthen his request. Support networks are crucial, and personal marketing plans lead to strong networks of support.

Support networks help individuals who are willing to help themselves. Obviously, individual relationships help people secure favorable jobs, find investment capital, and open new business opportunities. Strong networks even help people open meaningful new relationships. And the harder one works in developing his network of support, the luckier he becomes.

Through networking classes I teach in prison, I strive to share the tools I use to build my own network of support. Most people would expect that after having served multiple decades in prison, the only people I should know are other felons. After all, I was arrested when I was twenty-three. Virtually all of my adult life has been spent on the wrong side of prison walls.

Because of the efforts I've made to focus on building my network of support, I have personal relationships with hundreds of influential people, many of whom are leaders in their chosen professions. President Bush recently appointed one person from my network of support to a high public position that was covered extensively by the national press; others are well known authors; still others are leaders of business, law, and academia. I did not know any of these people prior to my incarceration, but they have since opened numerous opportunities that have enriched my life.

One tool I use extensively is [www.MichaelSantos.net](http://www.MichaelSantos.net). This personal Web site has enabled me to reach out beyond these prison walls and helped me build my network of support. There is no greater tool for those behind these walls than using the Internet to reach those who can help you prepare for a successful release from prison. My Web site at [MichaelSantos.net](http://MichaelSantos.net) has enabled citizens to see me as a human being rather than just a number. The site has enabled me to reach people I never dreamed possible, and brought me new hope. I do not provide this information to toot my own horn. Rather, I want all prisoners to know that despite the sanctions that bind us, we can still begin our preparations to succeed.

As a long-term prisoner, I am committed to helping all prisoners see and understand the value of building a strong network of support using the Internet. It is not something one can build over night. Rather, building this network is something an individual must begin from scratch. Then the individual must look for opportunities to expand the network every day. By taking advantage of all tools available, an individual can reach beyond the boundaries and connect with others.

I opened my network of support by writing. When I read or heard of individuals who could help my efforts to prepare for release, I wrote to them. If I read a book that moved me, for example, I wrote the author by sending a letter in the author's name to the publishing house. I connected with many authors that way, and several became mentors of mine. Two of those

mentors helped me open publishing deals for my work. Many of my mentors were distinguished professors, some who had ties to the highest levels of government.

Too many people in prison ignore the challenges they will face upon release. Those who choose to succeed, on the other hand, understand that they can enhance their chances for success by building stronger networks of support.