PRACTICAL ADVICE FOR PRISONERS ON DEVELOPING AN ENTREPRENEURIAL CAREER

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DEAN A. SHEPHERD
David H. Jacobs Chair in Strategic Entrepreneurship
Kelley School of Business
Indiana University
Kelley School of Business
1309 E. Tenth St.
Bloomington, IN 47405
shepherd@indiana.edu

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One day, you will be released from prison. Release from prison represents a great opportunity for a new life. You can create a new (and happy) post-prison life by using your time in prison to build an entrepreneurial mindset as a foundation for an entrepreneurial career. You can construct an entrepreneurial career to suit your knowledge, to do something you enjoy, and to overcome many of the constraints that exist with employment. I recognize that constructing an entrepreneurial mindset is not easy. Indeed, some of the steps I offer below are going to be incredibly tough. On the flip side, however, the benefits to you could be immense.

Flowing from my research (listed below), I offer the following advice for those in prison about creating an entrepreneurial career:

1. **What you do matters**
   Although being convicted of a crime and being incarcerated in prison can make you feel that you have little control over your life, giving into these feelings of helplessness can have a detrimental effect. If what you do does not matter, then you are merely a victim of circumstance and are solely at the mercy of other individuals. In contrast, if you believe what you do matters, then you have some control over what happens to you—you can change things for the better and not be solely dependent on other people. To do this, you need to develop an entrepreneurial mindset, which involves the following:
   - **Take responsibility for the past.**
     Undoubtedly, there are other things and people that contributed to your imprisonment (perhaps even bad luck), but to develop an entrepreneurial mindset, it is important not to dwell on the “external” causes of your situation but to focus on your own decisions and actions. By taking responsibility for your bad situation, you can start to gain strength—you are no longer just a victim of others or of destiny. You have control over what happens to you (which will be important as you think about the future). In addition, by taking responsibility, you gain a better understanding of why the event leading to your imprisonment happened so you can learn from it. We all make mistakes; the important thing is to learn from them. You can’t do that if you solely blame others.
   - **Believe that you have control over the future.** There are challenges to pursuing any career after prison. These certainly represent constraints. However, you can overcome constraints—indeed that is what entrepreneurs do all the time. Telling yourself (and letting yourself believe) that you can control what happens in your life and that you will be successful in the future after prison is not a lie. In fact, the more you believe it is true, the truer it becomes. If you believe you will be successful, you will act in ways that make it true, and you will overcome obstacles to it happening. This is not psycho-babble; there are thousands of studies that show personal belief enhances performance. You can
develop this belief by following the previous point—taking responsibility—and the next point.

- **Expect the future to be good.** It might be tough to expect that the future will produce good things for you when many bad things have happened in the past. I also realize that expecting good things could lead to even greater disappointment if bad things happen. However, by taking responsibility for the past, you have a better understanding of why things happened and how they can be avoided in the future. By believing you have control over what happens to you in the future, you can work to achieve your desired career and life. Expecting the future to be good frees your mind of the baggage associated with stress and worry, so you can be more creative; you can be more entrepreneurial in the way you think about your career and life.

2. **Discover an opportunity that excites you**

Discovering business ideas is exciting, but opportunities rarely appear fully formed simply waiting for someone to pick them up. So, how do we find these opportunities?

- **Think about the past.** Based on earlier points, you should already be thinking about how your actions could have led to different outcomes. Thinking about the past helps reveal what is unique about you—your unique experiences and skills. It also provides insight into what motivates you—what gives you satisfaction. Reflections about your unique knowledge and motivation can lead to the generation of many business ideas, ideas that not only motivate you but that you are also potentially capable of pursuing.

- **Redefine problems as opportunities.** On the flip side of a problem or a threat is an opportunity. Think about the problems and threats you have faced. Given that you recognize that you have control over the things that happen to you, what opportunities can you construct from your experiences? If you experienced these problems or threats, then others might also and would benefit from a solution to them.

- **Open your mind.** As you begin to take responsibility for the past and think more positively about the future, you need to take the opportunity to release your mind from negative feelings and thoughts. By relieving yourself of negativity, your mind opens up to creating and exploring opportunities for the future. Here is a chance to see things that were previously closed to you.

3. **Pursue an opportunity**

Now that you have identified an opportunity, put your energy toward exploring, developing, and modifying it further. This is an exciting thing to do. What is interesting is that you were only able to come up with this opportunity because you changed your mindset by taking responsibility for past mistakes, believing you have control
over the future, and expecting the future to be positive. However, pursuing the opportunity (even if only in your mind at the current time) provides a number of benefits. It means that your thoughts and actions now (even though still somewhat constrained) are providing the basis for a positive future. There is something to do now and something to look forward to when out of prison. Certainly working on your opportunity now can help you cope with prison life and even make productive use of what would otherwise be wasted time. Obviously, you can’t pursue the opportunity in prison as well as you could if you were outside, but you do have the time to think it through. Indeed, the more you can talk about your idea with others, the more refined the idea will become. Don’t be too worried about someone stealing your idea. Discussing the idea is far more likely to help you improve it and may even start building support with potential customers, suppliers, and/or partners. You might be surprised by how others enjoy talking about an opportunity—something positive—especially if they can help.

Developing an entrepreneurial mindset can be the basis for creating a successful post-prison career. To develop an entrepreneurial mindset it is important to recognize that your actions matter. You can start to develop this entrepreneurial mindset by taking personal responsibility for what has happened in the past, establishing a belief that you have control over your future, and believing that the future will be good. You still need to find or create an opportunity, which can be done by thinking about the past, seeing problems and threats as opportunities, and opening your mind to positive thoughts and feelings. Once you find or create an opportunity, pursue it—while still in prison think about its possibilities, talk it through with others, and take steps towards exploiting it. Good luck!

Bibliography

The motivation for this note was to share some of the practical implications of my research, specifically the following:

Patzelt, H., Williams, T. and Shepherd, D.A. Overcoming the walls that constrain us: Reactions to an entrepreneurship education program in prison. *Academy of Management Learning and Education* (in press).