

## CHAPTER 4

# UNLOCK YOUR POTENTIAL AND START A SUCCESS REVOLUTION

BY MARK T. ARSENAULT

Imagine you are in a place in your life where things feel hopeless, where past mistakes are thrown in your face daily, persistent reminders of your failure and obstacles to doing something positive with your life. Imagine facing people you dislike and distrust every day. There's no escaping them. Imagine sharing a home with them, with no locks on the doors or windows. How can you sleep knowing someone could literally stab you in the back or cut your throat while you sleep? Imagine facing constant pressure to break the rules, to harm someone else, or to abuse drugs. Imagine everyone you associate with feels hopeless, afraid and angry like you do. Any thoughts you express about making a change or being positive are quickly shot down and ridiculed. Imagine feeling like life holds nothing but more of the same, day after day, month after month, year after year. The drugs you have easy access to start looking like the only option to numb the pain and fear.

Many of us have had some of these feelings at one time or another. We all have our own prison. There are literal prisons, and there are others that we deal with. Perhaps you feel trapped in a bad relationship or stuck in a bad job (or a good job with bad management). If you feel a lack of freedom to do what you want to do and go where you want to go, you're living in a kind of prison.

There are a growing number of people who live the existence I described above every day in a very literal sense. They are the incarcerated; more than two million men and women incarcerated in United States Federal and State prisons, and County jails by the end of 2011 (source: U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics) at a cost of nearly \$300 billion a year.

From 2007 to 2012, I worked in a special assignment position in one of two large correctional facilities for a local law enforcement agency. I was assigned as the Intelligence Analyst in the jail's Investigative Services Unit (commonly referred to as "ISU" by the staff). While I was assigned to ISU, I had two life-changing experiences.

The first began in July, 2009, when I was diagnosed with colorectal cancer, which was linked to my use of tobacco products. That journey is detailed in my book, *Semicolon; Memoir of a Colon Cancer Survivor*. What's worth relating here is that for the year following my diagnosis, I was undergoing treatments, which included chemotherapy and radiation therapy, and two surgeries. To say the least I wasn't at my best. That journey through cancer put my mind in a very different place. It may well have contributed to how I came to my second experience: the creation of an in-custody gang diversion program.

While working in ISU, I was blessed to work with one officer in particular, Deputy Tammy Gillock. Together we had more than two decades of experience in dealing with gang members, both in cooperative and less-than-cooperative circumstances. We'd interviewed suspects and victims, received statements, confessions, and gathered untold amounts of intelligence, all with the focus of making our facility more secure and increasing the safety of the staff and the inmates. We were good at our job and to this day we have an excellent track record of establishing rapport with the inmates we interact with. Part of that came easier because of our understanding of what we called the "jail culture."

Tammy and I started identifying a growing number of inmates who showed signs of wanting to make different choices but not knowing how. We realized that we could use our investigative and interpersonal skills to reach people for change, to encourage them to choose a different path for themselves. To put it succinctly, we wanted to give hope, reduce recidivism and ultimately save lives.

We began working on an in-custody gang diversion program. We reviewed and hand-selected class materials, selected from an established evidence-based program, and we developed a curriculum. We added “free talk” time and a message of positivity to the program, what we termed “success strategies,” as well as other non-traditional elements (such as opening each class with a music video and motivational video), that we felt would bolster the morale and thus, the participation, of the inmates in the program.

It took us a few months to put together, though it took nearly three years to get approval from the administration and some meager funding to get it started. Our program was added to the variety of classes offered through the reentry services program that resulted from recently-enacted prison realignment legislation. In July of 2012, our gang diversion program began and we co-facilitated our first class of 55 volunteer street gang members and associates.

I call them “volunteers” because every one of the participants voluntarily opted-in to the program, a program that had a zero tolerance for gang activity. You see, after each of our recruiting “presentations,” which took about 10 to 15 minutes each, we had roughly two-thirds of the people we spoke to agree to at least try our program. That’s nearly a 70 percent opt-in rate among gang members in custody, addressed in a group setting, to participate in an in-custody gang diversion program where they would not be allowed to “politic” or engage in gang activity. Many of our co-workers and supervisors at the jail were in utter disbelief at how many prisoners we spoke to were not only willing to try the program, but spoke up in front of other prisoners to do so. Now that’s truly an example of ‘beating the curve’!

At the classroom, the participants were greeted by me and my partner. We literally greeted each and every inmate as they came through the door, shook their hand, and thanked them for coming. We began reinforcing from the very first moment of class time that life was about choices. We reinforced that they made a choice to be there by welcoming them and thanking them. Some of them looked confused, while others smiled and soaked up the positive attention.

As they found their seats, we played a music video with the lyrics on the screen. We did this at the start of every class, and each song was

specifically chosen for its positive message. After hearing the song and reading the lyrics, we would talk briefly about it and encourage the class to share what it meant to them.

After the song we usually shared a light-hearted, humorous video. It was solely intended to get people laughing and loosen up. Being in jail can be stressful. We wanted to do what we could to change the atmosphere, to allow them to “forget” the negative while they were in class.

The second video was motivational. We introduced the participants to a variety of speakers, from Eric “ET the Hip Hop Preacher” Thomas and world-renowned leadership expert, John C. Maxwell, to legendary speakers and authors like Brian Tracy, Tony Robbins, Og Mandino, Leo Buscaglia, and Jim Rohn. After the motivational video, we opened the class for discussion.

Following this opening session, which might last anywhere from 15 minutes to an hour, we got into the actual gang-intervention curriculum. This was, not surprisingly, the least popular portion of the class but they “endured it” because it was part of the program. And, frankly, they really enjoyed the rest of it.

It was amazing to observe how these men, many of them in and out of jail for all of their adult life, reacted to the information in these videos. We observed a noticeable shift in their behavior, how they thought and this was reflected in the choices they made on a daily basis.

For most of the participants, our program exposed them to many “firsts.” Our class was the first time most of them were exposed to the concept of personal development. It was the first time most of them had even heard of the speakers. It was the first time most had been thanked by an officer (one man told me it was the first time an officer ever shook his hand). For most it was the first time they had “a good time” in jail. It was a change for everyone. It was a change in thinking, in expectations, and in attitudes.

By the end of the second session we asked them to come up with a class motto. They chose “Unlock your potential.” It seemed appropriate on several levels, so it stuck. I’m fond of another saying, as well. “It’s now o’clock,” because there’s no time like the present to start making positive change in your life.

Soon, they would enter the classroom, remain standing at their seats until everyone was inside when we would ask “What time is it?” In unison, all 55 inmates would shout “It’s now o’clock!” Then we’d ask, “What’s our motto?” They’d shout “Unlock your potential!” If we didn’t feel their authenticity or sincerity we’d ask them again, and they would respond even louder. On several occasions the officers in the control room would ask us what we were doing that was causing the inmates to yell so loud. “Oh, you know,” we’d say, “just doing our thing.”

One of the memorable moments was about a month into the curriculum. Even after half a dozen class sessions, most of the participants still weren’t opening up and actually talking much. To keep this in perspective, among inmates, talking about personal experiences in prison (or jail) with officers is considered “snitching” in jail culture. It isn’t condoned by your fellow inmates. To reveal details about one’s criminal life, about one’s associates or one’s gang to an officer is tantamount to becoming a target for beatings, or worse. But that was outside of this class. One of the rules of our program was that each participant agreed to leave “jail politics” outside the classroom. Until now, the “no talking” rule still held sway over the men in our class.

One afternoon, however, it all changed. I invited the class to share an experience they had related to the topic of discussion. Brad (not his real name), an inmate who’d been to prison and a leader in his gang, raised his hand.

“What have you got, Brad?” I said as I pointed to him. He went on to tell us about a situation he dealt with on the yard in prison. He related, with some detail, about the conflict he felt about a choice he had to make, and about the consequences of that choice. He also told us something that surprised me. He said (paraphrasing):

“I was all about my homies and the gang. But you know what? Every one of them is a dope fiend and they’re going nowhere. It’s all about doing dirt and coming back to jail or going to prison. And for what? So there can be more of us in there. I’ve got to do something different or I’m just going to die or, worse, rot in prison. Now, for the first time in my life I feel like I have a chance to take a breath and make up my own mind about what I want and what I’m going to do about it. So I just want to say thank you to you and Miss G.”

Realizing we need to change is a start but making that public declaration, in the face of criticism from our peers, can be extremely difficult. When we do, however, it gives others around us the courage to do the same. Brad's courage to speak up and share his personal experience and honest feelings gave tacit permission to the rest of the class to speak openly and honestly. It was one of the turning points in our program.

The program continues to this day. As of this writing, the program has been running for more than three years. In that time there has only been one documented fight in the housing unit. Think about that. One fight in three years, in a jail housing unit occupied by rival gang members. Statistically it seems impossible but we made it possible by giving men hope, tools, and the permission to think differently and, thus, to change their lives.

Mohammed Ali said, "Impossible is just a big word thrown around by small men who find it easier to live in a world they've been given than to explore the power they have to change it."

We had an impact on all of them, however slight or great. What follows are some of the basic action steps we taught our classes. If they can help inmates, who came to us feeling helpless, oppressed and angry, make positive changes in their life, they can work for you in your life, too.

Forgive yourself and let go of the past. You have to have the courage to forgive yourself and give yourself permission to move forward in your life. Too many people get stuck in the past, clinging to mistakes that paralyze them into inaction. Your future really has nothing to do with your past, nor on someone else's opinion of your past. Your future is a choice. Your history doesn't equal your destiny. I would often tell my class, "What you did yesterday hasn't a damn thing to do with what you do tomorrow! It's about your choices starting today."

Become an intentional student. We all know that other people are having success in life. What makes them different from us? Knowledge and action. That's it. Personal development is key. The more we learn and the more we put that knowledge into action, the more successful we will become. My mentor once told me, "You should always be growing." We have to be intentional about learning. How did that person become wealthy? How did this person become happy? How can I achieve the

same thing that person did? It's not rocket science. If someone else has done it, you can find out how they did it and do it, too.

Choose the right kind of pain. Life will always bring us pain. It's human nature to try to avoid pain but here's a secret – you can't avoid pain. But you *can* choose what kind of pain you will endure. Jim Rohn said, "We must all suffer from one of two pains: the pain of discipline or the pain of regret. The difference is discipline weighs ounces while regret weighs tons." In the military we were told "Pay me now or pay me later." It's the same philosophy. You must be willing to sacrifice to grow. Sometimes the sacrifice is easy and sometimes it's difficult. My mentor, John Maxwell says, "You must give up to go up." Be willing to be uncomfortable, to sacrifice who and what you are for who and what you could become.

You can free yourself from your own negative circumstances. Your circumstances do not define you. Other people do not define you. *You* define you. You have the freedom to become what you were meant to be. Grab hold of the truth and begin a success revolution in your life.

**It's now o'clock!**



## About Mark

Mark Arsenault is the founder of Success Revolution, a company dedicated to bringing positive mindset and motivational training to individuals and organizations. He is also the founding Director of GAATES, Inc., a 501(c)(3) nonprofit dedicated to reducing recidivism and helping ex-offenders through personal development, career readiness, and success strategies.

Mark is a top selling and award-winning author and award-winning author of a number of books, including *Semicolon; Memoir of a Colon Cancer Survivor*. He is an avid reader and an amateur historian, having studied Asian cultures with a focus on feudal Japan. Mark has studied, researched, written and spoken for more than fifteen years in the fields of history, business, corrections and psychology.

He's been quoted in *SUCCESS Magazine*, *USA Today*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*.

Prior to founding his company, Success Revolution, Mark had a successful career in law enforcement and corrections, where he co-created and co-facilitated a successful in-custody gang diversion and mindset program for state and county inmates. He's also run a successful publishing business and is a decorated U.S. Air Force veteran of Desert Shield and Desert Storm.

Mark is happily married and has two children. He is active in community and donated time as a volunteer speaker with several community programs as a way to “pay forward” what he's gained from his study of personal development.

To learn more about Mark's work, visit the Success Revolution web site at: <http://SR916.com>.

You can follow him on Twitter at @SuccessRevo.