

Keeping Promises

Welcome to the last Sunday of 2014. Newspapers, television, the internet are all busy compiling lists and preparing shows about the highs and lows of this year. Stories about the misfortunes of Malaysian Airlines losing two flights during the year, the outbreak of Ebola in East Africa and celebrities who passed during the year, including Pete Seeger, Sid Caesar, Philip Seymour Hoffman, James Garner, Richard Attenborough, Joan Rivers and Robin Williams. And each of us have personal highs and lows that occurred during this year. Hopefully there were more highs than lows for you.

It is my intention today to discuss the resolutions we made for this year and the outcomes most of us experienced with some ideas to improve outcomes should we want to try again in 2015

Considering the Japanese attempt at summarizing the year in a single character, for most of us the year was a bit more complicated. One of those complications might have been self-imposed. Statistics reported by the University of Scranton indicate that over 60% of us probably made resolutions last New Year's. And further that 8% of us were likely to succeed at keeping those same resolutions. Whoa! 8%? What the heck? Why bother? The question is why did we fail so spectacularly?

Why do we make a promise to do something better and then break it, often within a few weeks. Are we that fickle; weak willed; easily distracted? Well maybe some, but certainly not us! UUs are focused and dedicated. We make promises to help others and follow through do the extent that some folks refer to UUs as that religion that DOES things.

Maybe we just said some things in the spirit of the moment and didn't really mean them. Or maybe we just don't how to do it right.

What? A right way to make resolutions? If you truly are making a resolution this is a goal setting exercise. And like any goal it must be put into a measurable and doable context. So over the next few minutes let's explore ways to help set, measure and achieve personal goals. You've probably heard all these suggestions before but let's look at them again from the perspective of the New Year. Most have to do with self improvement because making resolutions for other people, even if well intended, have a very low chance of success and can lead to many unpleasant consequences.

First what are the most common New Year's resolutions? (This also from the University of Scranton.)

1	Lose Weight
2	Getting Organized

3	Spend Less, Save More
4	Enjoy Life to the Fullest
5	Staying Fit and Healthy
6	Learn Something Exciting
7	Quit Smoking
8	Help Others in Their Dreams
9	Fall in Love
10	Spend More Time with Family

An interesting mix, if we chatted amongst ourselves we could have come up with a similar list I'm sure. Three of these are really different sides of the same goal in my view. Losing weight, quit smoking and staying fit and healthy are really about better taking care of ourselves. From my own experience that is the area that I think about when I make resolutions at this time of year. So obviously we think, at least briefly, that these goals are important. What can we do to make these resolutions succeed?

I have combed the combined knowledge and resources of the world (otherwise known as the Internet) for ideas and guidance. And several common threads appear very quickly.

The first thing that you notice is to focus. Don't try to lose weight, give up smoking, get organized and exercise regular all at the same time.

David Prescott, a hospital psychologist, says

Change one behavior at a time. Unhealthy behaviors develop over the course of time, so replacing them with healthy ones also requires time. Many people run into problems when they try to change too much too fast. To improve your success, focus on one goal or change at a time. As each new, healthy behavior becomes a habit, try to add another goal that works toward the overall change you're striving for.

The goal itself is important. Sarah Metzger, a writer on Livestrong.com tells us to be specific.

It's easy to create broad, sweeping goals for ourselves. It's just as easy to watch those broad goals fall by the wayside. Specificity is important when it comes to crafting your resolution this year. Committing to something specific and tangible will root your resolution in reality and build benchmarks you can actually hit. So, for example, instead of resolving to eat healthier with your family this year, try committing to healthy dinner night three nights a week. With specificity your resolutions will be action-oriented.

Scope is also important. Metzger continues with this.

When it comes to pursuing your goals, hopes and dreams you've likely always heard to "think big." Think again. It's much more effective to start your new year with small, attainable goals. Think of your resolution as a marathon that can only be achieved by completing small sprints. You'll empower yourself with attainable benchmarks and avoid the discouragement that can accompany big picture planning.

Interestingly sometimes small steps can help.

A [Stanford University](#) study found that when people wrote down their goal, it increased the probability of them achieving it by over 70%. But don't just write down the specific goal, write down how you will feel when you've accomplished it. When you have finished penning your desires, jot down on sticky pads the words that inspire you most about your goal and put them around your home/office to remind you of why you are committed to doing what it takes to bring your goal into reality.

Yet another psychologist, Lynn Bufka says *"Remember, it is not the extent of the change that matters, but rather the act of recognizing that lifestyle change is important and working toward it, one step at a time."*

As with anything in life, your mileage may differ. There is an alternate view written by Louise Lee for the Stanford Graduate School of Business, suggesting that vague goals can help you keep your resolutions. Professor Baba Shiv at Stanford writes "For one to be successful, one needs to be motivated". In a recent paper, done with two professors from the University of Utah, they suggest that

Presenting information in a vague way - for instance using numerical ranges or qualitative descriptions - "allows you to sample from the information that's in your favor," says Shiv, whose research includes studying people's responses to incentives. "You're sampling and can pick the part you want," the part that seems achievable or encourages you to keep your expectations upbeat to stay on track, says Shiv.

A typical resolution they suggest would read "I'd like to lose between 5 and 15 pounds this year" , instead of "I'd like to lose 12 pounds by July 4th. This really doesn't contradict the first suggestion to be specific. It is suggesting that you don't have to establish an exact timetable.

Many of the experts tell us to focus on the process. Margie Warrell writing for Forbes suggests:

It's easy to get caught up in an initial wave of enthusiasm, only to come crashing down when your initial efforts don't produce

immediate and amazing results. So focus on the process itself, and develop greater competence of the actual activity, habit or skill you want to acquire. For instance, if you want to become more fit, focus on being able to jog a little bit further every time you go for a walk, rather than being able to run 5 miles within a week.

PERSISTENCE ALWAYS PAYS OFF.

Others suggest making short interim goals and rewarding yourself when you obtain them. Metzger suggests:

Assign your small, attainable goals specific rewards. You'll build greater incentives into your long-term plan and reinforce continuous progress. For example, if you have a big weight loss goal and losing five pounds is your first objective, commit to buying a new top once you've succeeded. If you're training for a marathon and hit your first goal distance, take the next morning off (provided this fits into your training plan). Your rewards don't have to be monetary _ they could include "me" time, an outing with friends and family or something entirely personal.

Be careful not to reward yourself with something that sets you back.

Achieving a weight loss interim goal shouldn't be rewarded with an all you can eat stop at Dunkin' Donuts, but you already knew that.

Kendra Cherry, a psychology expert reminds us:

Those unhealthy habits that you are trying to change probably took years to develop, so how can you expect to change them in just a matter of days, weeks, or months? It may take longer than you would like to achieve your goals, but remember that this is not a race to the finish. Once you have made the commitment to [changing a behavior](#), it is something that you will continue to work on for the rest of your life.

Another big help, according to the experts, is don't do it alone. Get support from family, friends, an organization, special support groups. Starting to exercise, find someone who is starting also, they can help keep you motivated and you can help them. Find a meet-up that shares your goal. Get a professional coach if that is affordable. Even better is to make yourself accountable to someone else. A close family member or friend who understands what you are trying to do, can be honest and help keep you on the right track.

Keeping motivated is a huge obstacle for many of us. We want to lose a large amount of weight, but in the first month we lose 2 pounds. 2 pounds, this will take forever. I can't keep this up! This will never work! Whoa, slow down, don't beat yourself up, you lost 2 pounds, you are succeeding, you are winning. Relish every success, take each day as

it comes. Ask yourself, what can I do today, to further my goal? It took you many months to establish one habit, it will take as long to change it. Don't despair it can be done.

Like the punch line to the old joke, How many psychologists does it take to change a light bulb? Only one but the light bulb must really want to change. You can change yourself, but you must really want to change.

Writer Rob Ebrahimi says:

"focus on the carrot, not the stick". If you're having trouble staying motivated, focus on what you'll get from your end goal—whether that's feeling better at a lower weight, being able to impress your friends with your new guitar skills, or just being able to breathe now that you've quit smoking. Staying positive seems like common sense, but it can be hard when you're in the middle of a big plateau.

This visualization of the final result can help keep you on track when things seem stalled or not going well.

Know there will be setbacks, anticipate them, plan for obstacles.

Suppose you are trying to get up and run every morning, but you know that tomorrow morning it will be cold. Set out a pair of warm gloves and an extra-warm jacket. Then you know you are prepared and you

will get out and run. If you don't prepare then it is just a easy to stay in bed where it's warm.

Beverly Hills psychotherapist Barbara Neitlich says "Believe in yourself".

sometimes all you need to keep going is a pat on the back—from yourself. "Congratulate yourself for your progress. The problem is that many individuals have a very black and white attitude. They see it as either you have achieved your goal or you have failed, but there is a grey area," she says.

If your goal was to send out ten resumes a week for a new job and you only sent out five, don't beat yourself up for it. "Rather, congratulate and reward yourself for making the effort toward your goal. That will give you the energy and stamina you need to continue achieving your initial goal," Neitlich says. And kill yourself with kindness, says Silber. "With friends, we often offer kindness, praise, warmth, and positive feelings, but most people don't speak to themselves that way. Commit to offering that same kindness and compassion to yourself."

To summarize, if you really want to set a resolution that focuses on self improvement then experts suggest:

1. Be specific, focus on one habit or behavior at a time.

2. Think small, set interim goals to see success quickly.
3. Plan and record your goals and record you progress.
4. Get a buddy to help. Be accountable to someone else.
5. Ask for support, don't do this alone.
6. Relish small wins, use them to motivate you.
7. Remember that change is a process and it takes time.

Some internet references for this talk.

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