

## THIS YEAR, DON'T MAKE RESOLUTIONS. COMMIT TO ACTION.

Another New Year is upon us. For many this means the annual ritual of the New Year's resolution. Yet so many give up so soon on their resolutions, that rather than serve as a source of growth and renewal, the resolution has become the butt of many a comedian's cynical joke.

But this year is different, you say. This year you've found the will power...the motivation. Perhaps. Or perhaps this year will be more of last year's failed formula. If so, heed this practical principle of personal success: "if it's not working, try something else".

Change requires much of us. Below are seven suggestions, based on research and theory on human change. We know too little of the mystery of being human for these suggestions to be definitive. But adding them to your change effort should prove helpful.

1. Know where you're going. In western society, the information age floods you with limitless pushes and pulls on your time, attention, and effort. It is as if you were afloat in an angry ocean in which you must find and hold a course. As the accidental psychologist Yogi Berra said, "If you don't know where you're going, you'll probably end up someplace else". Paint a detailed picture of where you want to be, then get clear on which aspect(s) of that destination you really care about (value). Such valued results reflect what you want your life to be about: your purpose. For example, in losing weight, it may be helpful to set a goal weight, but you are unlikely to say, "I want my life to be about weighing 130 lbs.". Instead you might say, "I want my life to be about taking care of my health, so that I can live a longer and fuller life". Placing your goal weight in the context of your values or life purpose may help motivate your pursuit of it.
2. Use a clear detailed roadmap for getting there. Change, by definition, involves uncharted waters for you. A successful explorer navigates such waters with the best map available, good research, and a plan for what to do if he or she gets lost. Goals are your map. They are most effective if they are observable (can be picked up with one of the five senses) and measurable (your progress can be represented by a number). For example, "I want to feel better about myself" is probably not an observable or measurable goal as stated. "I want to criticize myself less often" is both observable (you and others can hear your progress) and measurable (you can count the number of times you criticize yourself).
3. Take charge of your time. Perhaps this would be a better Step 1. In contemplating a change effort, the first obstacle is often: "I don't have time". In fact, you have 24 hours every day, which is plenty of time to work on your goals. The challenge is not lack of time but lack of prioritization. If you ranked your daily activities by importance and then by the amount of time spent on them, would the two lists be the same? Are you willing to sacrifice television or internet time to progress toward your goal? Would you risk taking time off (or overtime back) from work to progress toward your goal? Will you make and keep an appointment with yourself each day to work on your goal, just as you would with a co-worker on an important project?
4. Commit to action; don't make resolutions. Webster defines "resolution" as a statement of decision or intention. "Commitment" is a pledge or promise to do something. Unfortunately, saying it doesn't make it so, and both the road to hell and the road to

failed change are paved with good intentions, resolutions, and commitments. First, let's not mistake the "commitment", the words on the page, for "committing", the action word. There is a colloquial meaning of "commit" that defines committing as beginning to act on decision or intention. For example, committing to turn east or west means that one has turned the wheel far enough in one of those directions that turning it back would be difficult. How you think, talk, and write about your decision, intention, or promise can help to turn the wheel in the direction of your commitment. Such thinking might begin by defining (or in more action-oriented terms "approaching") commitment as creative persistence toward a valued end. The "creative" aspect of a commitment implies that you try a wide variety of means to keep your commitment, including things you may have never considered before. The "persistence" aspect means you keep trying. Successful commitments require finding a good balance between creativity and persistence. If you are too creative you may flit from one potential solution to the next before giving any solution a fair chance to work. If you are too persistent, you may doggedly stick to a doomed solution. The litmus test is ultimately progress toward attaining your valued result.

5. Monitor your motivations. Psychologists have identified basically three types of human motivation. The first of these is short-term gratification: you see the ice cream shop you buy ice cream, you enjoy it. Short-term gratification plays an important role in keeping you interacting with your world. Thus, in pursuit of long term goals it is important to "stop and smell the roses". The second type of motivation is avoidance. We usually avoid that which brings us pain, fear, anger, or sadness. Running on avoidance may have worked well in cave person days, when the world was simpler and the difference between danger and opportunity was clearer. Avoidance still helps us steer clear of true dangers such as crossing the freeway with our eyes closed, but, if we are not careful, much of our life can become avoiding imagined dangers. An example is the fear that if you speak up in a meeting you will be humiliated in front of the whole group. Also, if you avoid thoughts or situations that bring up intense emotion, you will find yourself blocked in accomplishing most anything important, including learning from your emotional responses. The final type of motivation is called transcendence. This is based on our human ability to imagine things that don't exist then bring them into existence. For example, an architect imagines a building that has never been built and then works to create it. This type of motivation is called transcendence because it involves transcending short-term gratification and avoidance to accomplish a long-term goal. The architect at times resists more pleasurable activities and endures uncertainty and anxiety in the process of creating a building. If the architect allowed these to interfere with "keeping his or her eyes on the prize" (in the words of the old civil rights anthem) then completion of the building might be delayed or prevented. Focusing on the commitments and valued results above are examples of transcendence. By imagining these, and then working toward what you imagine, you can help motivate yourself to create something you care about. At any moment you can examine which of these motivations is pulling on you. With this awareness, you can better choose your direction in each moment.
6. "Roll start" your motivation. As owners of cars with standard transmissions may have experienced on our recent cold mornings, when a car has a dead battery or broken starter,

you can sometimes start it by pushing it down a hill in neutral, slipping it in gear with the clutch in, then letting out the clutch when the car is rolling. (Don't try this without experienced help.) You can roll start yourself to act on your commitment in a similar manner. Find a small realistic goal (your downhill stretch of road—maybe just getting information) and make a specific plan (perhaps involving other people) to start acting on it at a specific time and place (your push). You may be surprised to find how this gets your engine going! Contrary to this tactic, much of the general public believes that motivation precedes action. And so they wait...and wait...and wait in a state of inertia for motivation (AAA?) to arrive. In fact, motivation often follows action, which is one reason for the action-oriented definition of commitment above. There is no motivational substitute for the experience of having what you do make a difference, and you can't have that experience if you do nothing about what is important to you in life. This is what builds momentum for your commitment.

7. Go public. Don't go it alone. Don't keep your commitments secret. Engage in conversations with your family, friends, and community about your commitment. This will help you keep it. Enlist the aid of those who love you and/or have common cause with you.

I hope that distilling the process of making and keeping commitments down to these seven suggestions has not created the illusion that it is easy. It is not. If these steps don't get you moving in the right direction, consider seeking the help of a professional therapist or counselor. Instead of wishing you a Happy New Year, let me encourage you to make your own wishes come true this year!

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