

It's a New Year! Time to make those resolutions—or is it?

Effective Goal Setting

New Year's resolutions...they are a waste of time and I don't make them! Why? "Resolutions" made at a time when social pressure and an arbitrary date in the diary dictate that we "should" decide things, are doomed from the start. A controversial viewpoint, you may think? Well, let's start with the facts:

- Around 43% of people make New Year's resolutions.
- Of those, close to 4 in 10 have broken them by the end of January, while a further third only keep them up for six months.¹

I have a theory as to why. First, New Year's resolutions are made using our conscious mind—the logical *front brain* part—which, like a captain of a ship, sets the direction for the crew. I'll come back to the crew in a moment.

Secondly, most of the time New Year's resolutions are not actually goals. How many of us set New Year's resolutions like, "I'll go to the gym three times a week," or "I'll give up smoking" or "I'll create a better work-life balance"? These are not goals.

Why not? A goal is an outcome, not the thing or action you do to get the outcome. Sometimes the actions themselves may not excite us, but a great goal should! So ask yourself **why** do you want to go to the gym three times a week? **What** will stopping smoking really do for you? Getting the right higher level goal can be a powerful motivator and push you through the actions you'll need to take in order to succeed.

In the example—"I'll create a better work-life balance"—what does a "better work-life balance" mean, specifically? To increase your chances of success, goals need to be S.M.A.R.T. (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Time-bound) and positively stated (i.e. what you want, rather than what you don't). They also need to have action plans that will help you achieve them. To increase your chances of success, you need to have the right number of goals—enough to excite you and few enough that you can channel your energy into each one you've set.

And here's the fundamental, pivotal thing about setting successful goals: They need to be powerful and motivating enough that you are driven to overcome any obstacles that crop up on the way. Bob Proctor, international coach and motivational speaker, said, "Set a goal to achieve something that is so big, so exhilarating that it excites you and scares you at the same time. It must be a goal that is so appealing, so much in line with your spiritual core, that you can't get it

¹ Source: *The Telegraph*, 20th December 2008

out of your mind. If you don't get chills when you set a goal, you're not setting big enough goals."

His point about the spiritual core is critical: Remember the captain and crew analogy? Think of the crew as your spiritual core, your unconscious system. It needs to pull in the same direction as the captain for the boat to arrive at its destination. If the goal isn't congruent with your core, the crew won't work with you to achieve it.

The New Year's resolutions that you set at five to midnight, or in the haze of the morning after the night before, will have been made without a genuine plan to achieve them and probably won't be very compelling. Can you imagine a world class company like Microsoft or Apple setting goals on 31st December that they haven't thought about and made a plan to achieve? That would just be another name for wishful thinking! Successful companies have to align their global resources to achieve their goals, and so do you, using the full resources of your mind and body.

But, it is good to set goals—the right ones. Research shows that people who clearly set goals or make resolutions are ten times more likely to achieve them than those who don't explicitly make them.²

So, how can you check that the goals you're setting are important enough? There are four great questions you can ask yourself, and it's worth taking the time to go through all four, writing down your answers:

The Four Powerful Questions

1. What will happen if you do achieve this goal?
2. What will happen if you don't achieve this goal?
3. What won't happen if you do achieve this goal?
4. What won't happen if you don't achieve this goal?

These questions will help you to map out the consequences of achieving or not achieving your goal, and with that knowledge you will get a sense of motivation and importance. If at the end of the exercise you're not highly motivated to achieve your goal—it may be the wrong goal to set and you probably won't take the required actions. Very quickly you could be beating yourself up for not doing something you were never fully aligned to do!

² Source: *Auld Lang Syne: Success predictors, change processes, and self-reported outcomes of New Year's resolvers and nonresolvers*, by John C. Norcross, Marci S. Mrykalo, Matthew D. Blagys, University of Scranton. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, Volume 58, Issue 4 (2002).

Having said all of that, this time of year is a good time for clearing and making room for new seeds to grow. It's nature's rest time—the leaves are gone, the fields lie empty, many animals hibernate—and in nature's cycle, it's an essential phase before new growth can come. For we humans, it's a great time to do the "maintenance jobs" we have in our lives—the clearing out, the repairs, the "down time" we need to give us the energy for the growth phase. That could be physically clearing out the junk we've accumulated, finishing outstanding jobs, or maybe letting go of emotional baggage that's been weighing us down. By clearing this stuff out, we make room for newness; we clear the soil for planting. We give ourselves a chance to grow even more vigorously towards our goals.

"We must always change, renew, rejuvenate ourselves; otherwise we harden."

*Johann Von Goeth, 1749 – 1832,
German poet and writer.*

Nature works in a cycle of rest, rebirth, blooming, shedding and rest again. What makes us any different? How can you make room for growth in your life? What earth do you need to clear? And what seeds do you want to plant?

I'd encourage you to think beyond the coming year too. Some seeds take longer to grow than others and bring richer fruit and rewards that make the wait worthwhile. If we only focus on what we can harvest this year, we'll be missing out.

What do you want to plant this year that will bring you fruit and reward in the years to come? Which areas of your life do you want to blossom more in the future? Whether it's your career, relationships, personal development, hobbies or health, consider what it is you actually want and how you'll know when you've got it. Take a few minutes to dream about achieving it—what you'll see, hear, feel and say to yourself in that moment. Mental rehearsal is a powerful tool in motivating yourself. And flexing the mental muscles is a great way to get the captain and crew working well together.

Have I just talked myself into setting New Year's resolutions after all? Not quite, but I have paused for a moment to think about how I'm going to prepare the ground for success this year and beyond, and what seeds I'm going to select based on the flowers and fruit I really want to enjoy at the end of the growth season. And I know that choosing the right ones is critical to my commitment to take action and to increasing the possibility of fully achieving them.

So, good luck with choosing your resolutions, and enjoy the fruit of your labours when it comes!

Jo Wright of Phoenix Training & Coaching Ltd. is an experienced management development consultant, trainer and coach, and is a qualified Master Practitioner of Neuro Linguistic Programming. For more information about her services, or for coaching support to help you set and achieve your personal or business goals, fill in the contact form on the website.

Checklist for Setting & Achieving Successful Goals:

- ✿ Choose the right ones and the right number to motivate you
- ✿ Use the 4 powerful questions to help you decide
- ✿ Imagine achieving them and align the captain and the crew towards the goal
- ✿ Create your action plan
- ✿ Identify potential obstacles and make a plan to overcome them
- ✿ Identify the resources that could help you—that might include a coach to help keep you motivated and on track
- ✿ Keep taking action
- ✿ Enjoy and reward yourself for your success!