

CONVERTING NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTIONS INTO REALITY

by Jeff Davidson, MBA, CMC

Special E-Book Supplement for Participants of Goals 2003

The end of one year, the start of the next--what will be different about it? It seems since the start of recorded history that people have had a strong need to make prognostications about the future, and one of the most opportune times to make them is at the start of a new year.

Let's Raise a Glass

It's not clear when New Year's resolutions became a social custom. One theory holds that holiday toasts in December propagated a climate wherein people raised their glasses with one another and, with the spirit of the season, made mirthful proclamations about how they would approach the coming year.

In *Toasts*, author Paul Dixon tells us that toasts have been a part of social gathering since people first raised a glass. Since those glasses were often filled with alcohol, it's not unlikely that the toasts fostered a spirit of brotherhood or fellowship and prompted people to say positive things about one another, as well as one another's prospects for the future.

Here's to the Harvest

Of the four great ages of humankind, including the age of hunting and gathering, the age of agriculture, the age of industry, and the emerging age of information, the age of agriculture particularly leant itself to optimistic forecasts. Farmers hoped for rain, no frost, or a long growing season. They hoped and prayed to God that next year's harvest would be bountiful. They hoped to be better at their craft. They hoped to be better human beings. They made resolutions to be more effective at what they did, achieve more completions, be more charitable, be more forgiving, or be more of whatever it was they felt they were lacking.

To this day, resolutions made around the start of the year haven't varied much. Hardly anyone resolves to gain weight, spend more money, have less fun, be meaner, or live in less healthful ways. Almost part of being human is the eternal quest to improve oneself. If not in major ways, then in little ways. If not all the time, at least now and then. If not absolutely, then tentatively.

You Say You Want a Resolution

Have you ever stopped to notice that people make resolutions in the company of others? Few people make resolutions on their own, with no one else around, reported to no one else. From that standpoint, resolutions are more of a social convention than an act of goal-setting.

Suppose somebody comes up to you and asks what your New Year resolutions are. If you don't have any, do you want to stand there and allow yourself to be caught flatfooted? No sir. So, what do you do? You let loose of a few well-chosen platitudes that satiate the ears of your inquirer.

Perhaps you're one of the few who actually establish resolutions before being asked. How long can you go before you let somebody else know about them? A day,

two days? Sooner or later, you have to give in to the reality that most people devise resolutions so they can tell others about them.

At the start of 1842, Alfred, Lord Tennyson "dip[t] into the future" and "saw the heavens fill with commerce." Tennyson was making a forecast as opposed to a personal resolution, but the gesture had the same characteristics as a personal resolution.

Speak into the Mic Please

In the United States, the media keep the practice of making New Year's resolutions alive. On any local TV station starting around December 28th or 29th, but certainly building up by the 30th and the 31st, and blatantly in force on January 1st, some roving reporter trots into town with a microphone and besieges innocent passers-by on the street with the question:

"Pardon me sir, have you made any New Year's resolutions?"

or... "Pardon me ma'am, do you have any New Year's resolutions and would you share them with us?"

Woe be the person on the street who is asked by a reporter if he has any resolutions and happens to answer "No" or "I never make them" or "I think they're silly." He might make the newscast as the last person featured, but he certainly would not be favored by the reporter. Why? The reporter is filling air time and the quaint, though useless, gesture of making New Year's resolutions is what the station producer choreographed for that day's show.

Why People Make Resolutions

People make resolutions to shore up a shortcoming in their lives, personalities, or day-to-day activities. Resolutions are not nearly as powerful as goals since goals ideally represent movement towards some positive, desirable outcome.

Denis Waitley in *The Psychology of Winning* says that you gain much more power and accelerate your progress when striving for something positive rather than avoiding what you don't want.

If you want to lose that 10 pounds and you dwell on how much you currently weigh and how you can barely fit in your clothes, you will not generate as much power as when you dwell on your desired outcome and how you'll look and feel when you're 10 pounds lighter. Hence, you don't want to tape a picture to the fridge of you at your heaviest; if anything, post yourself at your lightest.

Whether people proceed with positive direction toward a desired outcome or use the less powerful, less effective approach of attempting to avoid what they don't want, it's clear that people make resolutions because they want to improve their lives, careers, or businesses.

Executives Caught in the Act

Because of the media's propensity to ask people to step up to the mike, or say a few words to the reporter who's doing the story on resolutions, even top executives in multinational corporations who otherwise adhere to highly effective goal-setting techniques are wont to make New Year's resolutions.

Many top business magazines routinely poll corporate presidents and CEOs as part of their January issue. For example, Forbes magazine annually polls several top executives who report they have, indeed, made resolutions for the coming years. (I suspect that they simply capitulate to the reporters to state their goals in the form of New Year's resolutions.)

Here's a sampling of what some of the most successful people in America have to offer on the topic of business resolutions, followed in most cases by personal resolutions:

* Chairman and Chief Executive of Liz Claiborne Inc. -- "To assure consistently and sparkling products is my resolution." "My personal resolution is that I'm going to take a cooking course in Italy with a couple friends..."

* Chairman and Chief Executive of the Dial Corporation -- Last year was "filled with change and uncertainty. I would like to promise our employees that..." this year will "be a comparatively dull year. Now we simply get to do our jobs." "My personal resolution is to catch more fish..."

* Chairman of International Data Group -- "My New Year's resolution is to start a publication in Antarctica. I'm going there this month..." "I'll be doing a report on how they use computers to find ways to improve the quality of the earth's environment."

* Chief Executive of Frontier Corporation -- "My resolution is to develop at least three new services that will benefit our customers in ways that they have never imagined. What these services are -- I have to be very frank -- I don't know yet..." "Personally I want to find more hours each month to give to charities, I also want to do something different every month..., to find time to learn a new language..., and to lose 30 pounds and be more direct and assertive."

* Founder, Jacob's Engineering Group -- "I want to continue to promote the value of honesty -- not only with our clients, but with our colleagues..." "I am constantly angered by the media image that dishonesty pays in business..."

* Chief Executive of Clear Channel Communications -- "My resolution is to make sure that my two sons take on more and more responsibility... Because they are young and bright, my sons give us an advantage for succession and continuation." "Then, I can spend more time driving around my longhorn ranch in my Jeep."

* Chairman and Chief Executive of Tasco Corporation -- "My New Year's wish is to keep our company entrepreneurial even though it is growing fast. That may sound easy, but avoiding bureaucracy is hard work..."

Tapping the Optimistic

The Optimist, a quarterly magazine for thousands of members also polls its members in its annual December issue. In an article entitled "New Year's Resolutions - Have You Made Your Yet?" the magazine quizzed members about their resolutions, with particular regard to their role as members of Optimists International. Here's what some of the members said:

- * A club president from Georgia "resolves to keep attendance high all year..."
- * A member in Minneapolis says she "resolves to do anything for growth that will get her out of the house!..."
- * A member in Denver "resolves to bring a guest to lunch each week."
- * A member in Los Angeles resolves to put all his efforts into the new club building being constructed.
- * A member in Ontario, Canada ,says he resolves to earn various membership awards.
- * A member in Detroit resolves that his club will achieve "distinguished status."

Pollsters Get into the Act

As you might have guessed, some of the top polling organizations also keep the process of making New Year's resolutions alive by asking corporate leaders what they've chosen for the coming year. The Gallup Poll surveyed more than 400 chief executives of organizations and found that pressing issues for the coming year included organizational profitability, long-term strategic planning, customer loyalty, employee morale and attitudes, and information in computer technology, among several other issues cited.

Gallup found that while these issues were deemed pressing by respondents it's unclear what the actual level of commitment is for resolving them. Gallup estimates that not even half of the people who make New Year's resolutions manage to keep them. I say such an estimate is lame. If you consider how many people probably achieve the goals they set out to achieve, it would probably far less than half. Resolutions, which for reasons already described are far less potent, likely aren't even achieved 10 percent of the time.

Who Says You Can't Have Fun?

In contrast to wishes, dreams, and fantasies, resolutions are not totally useless gestures. If you make resolutions for fun, go ahead and keep doing it. Who says you're not supposed to have fun in this life?

Here's How Americans Rank their Dreams

<u>Dream Element</u>	<u>Percent Ranking It Important</u>
Having a happy home life	97.8
Giving children a good education	95.7
Competent, affordable health care	91.6

Having a job you like	90.4
Having enough savings	88.7
Owning a home	82.3
Sending children to a good college	78.7
Living well in retirement	72.4
Being free of debt	71.3
Having enough free time	69.7
Having a job that pays well	69.3
Having children	68.0
Getting ahead on your job	64.4
Being able to work as many years as you want	64.0
Having your home appreciate in value	62.3
Being married	62.3
Living in a nice community	60.3
Being able to travel when you want to	43.3
Having money for occasional luxuries	43.3
Being able to leave inheritance for children	30.0
Retiring early	26.7
Owning your own business	23.0
Owning a late-model car	10.7
Owning a vacation home	7.0

Out of the Mouths of Everyday People

Curiosity killed the cat, but satisfaction brought him back. Intrigued by the magazine interviews and articles I had encountered, I was curious to know what kind of New Year's resolutions everyday people make. Here are several groups in case you're curious, too.

People Off Newscasts

The local channels in my corner of the world - Raleigh, Durham, Chapel Hill (commonly known as "The Triangle" or the "Research Triangle") probably operate similar to your local stations. Here's what people said off local broadcasts:

- * To spend more time with my children.
- * To be a better Wolfpack fan, whether or not the team is successful (Wolfpack refers to North Carolina State University).
- * To stick to my jogging schedule.
- * To watch less television.
- * To have my husband watch less television.
- * Just to try to be a better person all around.
- * To live up to the resolutions I made last year.
- * To be more charitable to others.
- * To stay more focused more often.

While New Year's resolutions may lead nowhere, there are compelling reasons why identifying what you want to achieve at the start of a year, or other notable intervals, makes sense. There are opportune times in the course of a year, decade, or your entire life when it's appropriate to carve a path for attaining desired outcomes.

Resolutions off the Web

The following are from the archives of some news groups and some chat rooms on the Internet :

- * To upgrade my whole system.
- * To spend less time on-line.
- * To get an unlisted phone number.
- * To get off of mailing lists!
- * To not flame anybody.
- * To read some great novels this year.
- * To complete all of my needed dental work.
- * To see all the episodes of the X Files that I've missed.

Jeff Takes a Poll

To round out my search, I asked people whom I already knew if they made resolutions. Here, in unadulterated language, is what I was told:

- * College student (age 21) -- To graduate on time.
- * Daughter (7) -- To be a ballerina and a teacher, and to go to Ben and Jerry's every week, and to go to Amaze'n Castles.
- * Female university instructor (44) -- To have a life.
- * Multimillionaire best friend (46) -- To break ground on what will be the largest ski resort in Utah.
- * Trainer (51) -- Just to enjoy life.
- * Bookkeeper and accountant (39) -- To leave the office at a reasonable hour.
- * College student (20) -- To transfer to some school up North.
- * Entrepreneur (51) -- To be on the road less and be with my family more.
- * Doctoral candidate (25) -- To stay sane.
- * Insurance agent (54) -- To find my soul mate.
- * Psychotherapist (37) - To expand my business horizon and get into something that's more extroverted.
- * Auditor (29) - To pass the CPA exam and to get a real job.
- * Stockbroker (36) -- I haven't given it much thought.
- * Trainer (60) -- I don't have any, I think they're a complete waste of time.

Getting Down to Business

How can you specifically, make challenging, yet reachable and quantifiable resolutions within a specific time frame? Suppose you resolve to be more charitable

to others. How could you employ the fundamental elements of effective goal-setting so that you actually begin to see the results of your resolution?

1. Challenging but reachable - To be charitable to others, especially if you're not, is challenging in and of itself. To be more challenging assumes that you already exhibit some level of charity; hence, it's likely that this resolution is reachable.

2. Quantifiable - How might you quantify this resolution?

* You could target an amount of money you would give to charitable organizations or homeless people on the street, if that's what you choose, within a given year, quarter, or month. Hence, you could measure your charity by the amount of donations you made.

* You could chart the number of times you said something nice to other people, went out of your way to help them, or otherwise displayed some act of kindness. Perhaps your goal is to do this once a day. If you're ambitious, perhaps it's three times a day. The act of logging how many times you're charitable to others is as good a measure as any if you intend to live up to your resolution.

* You could log the number of hours you spend serving in charitable organizations or actually dispensing soup at soup kitchens. Perhaps you can set for yourself a quota of one hour per week working in charitable organizations, making five phone calls per week day evening on behalf of some worthwhile group, or devoting one weekend a month to some group's planned activity.

3. Time frame - Even a resolution as nebulous as being more charitable to others can have a time frame attached to it, such as six times per week for the next twelve month.

It's important to get out and actually taking action in a couple of key areas that are important to you rather than uselessly sitting in your comfortable chair with your channel changer and intellectually resonating all the problems. Not only are you not going to help anyone, the longer you sit there, the bigger and flatter your bottom gets. Is that one of your resolutions? Taking action is invigorating!

The chart below lists a variety of groups most of which have branches or chapters in your area. Many of these group are perpetually looking for volunteers.

A Partial List of Groups that Need Volunteers

- | | |
|------------------------------|--------------------------|
| * Active Corps of Executives | * Jaycees |
| * Kiwanis Association | * League of Women Voters |
| * American Cancer Society | * Lions |
| * American Heart Association | * March of Dimes |
| * American Legion | * Masons |
| * Boys Club | * Optimist Club |

- * PTA
- * Catholic Youth Organization
- * Easter Seal Campaign
- * Salvation Army
- * Goodwill Industries
- * Historical Society
- * Urban League
- * Public Television
- * Civitans
- * Explorers
- * Scouts of America
- * Heart Fund
- * United Way
- * YMCA, YWCA

All About Failure

If you want to gauge whether or not making New Year's resolutions proves to be an effective gesture for you, try this: The next time New Years rolls around, make some resolutions, write them down on a piece of paper, and file it. Don't look at it for several months, or better yet, a whole year.

When the end of the year rolls around, take out your file, look at your piece of paper with your resolutions, and see for yourself. You've probably made little progress on any of them. If you have made progress, you're among the rare few. Even if the items you listed represent burning issues for you, it's still unlikely that you made any significant progress. Why? Today, in this society, everyone is bombarded on all sides by more things competing for our time and attention than they can keep up with.

It Could Happen to You

Anyone can be so easily and quickly diverted these days, that it's possible to come into work, and by ten in the morning, have no active connection with what you've identified as being important in your life.

Even if you are among the lucky few who make some significant progress on some of your resolutions, you probably could have achieved them in multiples had you turned them into formal goals. Without using specific goal-setting procedures any success that you achieve satisfies your resolution conditions.

Suppose you say that you'd like to lose more weight. If you lose half a pound, that satisfies the condition. Would this amount of weight loss be significant over a year?

Suppose you resolve to spend more time with your children. On 44 out of 52 weekends last year, you had no time for your children. This year, miraculously, you were tied up or away on only 43 weekends. You're back for one weekend more than the year before. That satisfies the condition, but are your children happy about it?

Qualifying but Unsatisfying

Consider another resolution. You want to be more charitable to others. Suppose during the last year you were one mean son-of-a-gun, fly-off-the-handle, cussing, rogue of a person. In the coming year, you manage to smile at people a couple of times every couple of months. You also buy five dollars worth of Girl Scout cookies.

Does that qualify as being more charitable than you were the year before? In the strict sense, it does. Yet, would anyone deign for a moment to say that you're a charitable person?

Since You Insist

Okay, you're among those who annually makes New Year's resolutions, or you'd like to try it based on what you've read. Here are some guidelines for making your next set of New Year's resolutions more rewarding than those you've made thus far.

Only make a handful. If you have too many resolutions, as if you have too many goals, you may end up dissipating your energy and slowing your progress. When you can identify the few key things you'd like to accomplish or experience, your progress in that direction, with all other things being equal, is usually more significant.

Perhaps choosing a theme for the year would work for you. One year focus on getting better at using computers, and another year focus on learning more about nutrition. You could even directed your efforts toward watching many of the movie classics on video. In this regard, you're using the year, itself, as your time line.

You're bound to succeed if you:

- * Approach each resolution with a balanced perspective.
- * Maintain relative simplicity as often as possible.
- * Recognize that progressing a step at a time can result in spectacular achievement.