

Ask the Coach

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Resolutions: Boon or Bane?

Certainly nothing captures the human spirit more than a resolution. Who hasn't vowed to exercise more, eat more healthfully, improve prospecting activities, or work on improving personal relationships? Making a resolution says we have the imagination to envision a new and better outcome. Resolutions are based on hope and the sense that we can change for the better. What other species on earth has this capacity? In fact, my entire coaching practice is based on the premise that change is possible. Because most of us are hardwired to be optimistic and believe that change is possible, we continuously make resolutions to improve in one way or another.

If only our intentions were matched by our changed behavior. The alternate title of this article could have been possibility and reality, for many of us are unable to keep our resolutions. In fact the old expression, "The road to hell is paved with good intentions," attests to the difficulty of changing. The question is: Why is it so hard to change? And can we do about it?

For clues about our behavior it is interesting to know a few facts:

Humans are born with about 16 billion brain cells,¹ and by the time we reach our teenage years, our brain cell count has shrunk to about 8 billion. Why does this happen and what does it suggest? First imagine our brains at birth as a virgin forest with 16 billion trees – and no pathways of any kind. As we inhabit that forest, we wear paths and build open spaces; in the process the forest gets thinned out. The pathways become permanent where trees no longer grow. The forest is still abundant and productive – it just accommodates different functions than at its inception. We can also imagine that each person has their own unique forest (brain) whose shape and composition also become well defined by the time the teen years arrive.

¹ First, Break All the Rules, Buckingham and Coffman, Simon and Schuster 1999

As the pathways and open spaces become well defined, the ability to change the forest's composition and functioning becomes much more difficult. And in reality, most forests, like most brains, function well after the shaping has occurred. We could say that our habits, behaviors, disposition, talents, and interests are pretty much hardwired by our teen years. Efforts from that time forward to change behavior, or for others to influence our basic personality, are often met with failure.

I am not saying we can't change, nor am I saying that efforts to change are futile. But my experience indicates that making changes will require some special skills that are neither automatic nor easy. They are, however, fairly simple (simple, alas, is not easy).

The process requires first that you slow way down and consider precisely what you want. Clarity of purpose is the first crucial component. Here are a few examples:

CLEAR	UNCLEAR
I want to lose 10 pounds within the next 3 months.	I want to lose weight.
I want to acquire 10 new "A" clients in the next 12 months.	I want to improve my practice.
I want to earn 15% more income in the next 12 months.	I want to make more money.
I will hire an administrative assistant within the next 3 months.	I need more administrative help.
I will join a gym and workout 3 times a week starting:	I need to get in better shape.

This first step could be called "What by When?" What will you do and when will you do it? It is critical that you be able to chart your progress.

Slowing down and considering what you want also includes another crucial step: Becoming aware of the cost for making the change. This is the hidden trap in making resolutions, because, as stated above, our behavior is pretty much hardwired by adulthood. Our default positions are well defined and often unconscious. Thus, our default positions are those whose purpose is to maintain the status quo. They are often much

more powerful than our conscious decisions to change specific behavior. When we look at the goals mentioned above, we can see how our default positions sabotage our efforts to change.

UNCLEAR	CLEAR	DEFAULT POSITION (OFTEN UNCONSCIOUS)
I want to lose weight.	I want to lose 10 pounds within the next 3 months.	Food provides comfort and a sense of tranquility. I don't want to give that up.
I want to improve my practice.	I want to acquire 10 new clients.	I don't know what an "A" client is. I'm afraid I don't deserve it; it's too hard – I can't do it.

These two examples provide some insight into how our default positions can thwart our best intentions. Clearly, these hidden or unconscious positions are so powerful that in many cases you can't easily overcome them. But fortunately, if you follow the right procedures, you do have a good chance of changing your behavior:

1. Be very clear about what you want and be able to ask "What by When?"
2. Bring to consciousness the *costs* of change as well as the *rewards*. Many of my clients have replied, when asked about the cost of change, "There is no cost, only reward." That clearly is not true. Even if the cost is only being more aware of your internal reservations, there is still a cost involved. Just consider this: no good military commander goes into battle without considering the casualties, and will withdraw if the cost is too great. So, too, should you consider both the rewards and the costs. It is generally our failure to consider the costs that sidetracks our best intentions. Being unaware of the costs means that you have no effective response to your own internal objections.

What are the next steps? Napoleon Hill, in his book, *Think and Grow Rich*,² suggests that daily repetition of our goals is a critical ingredient. The reason is that our default position is always at work. The daily repetition of what you want keeps you focused on making the necessary changes

² *Think and Grow Rich*, Napoleon Hill, *Aventine Press* 2004

and allows you to move your default positions out of the driver's seat, so that you can begin to function in a new way.

There are two final steps:

1. Write down your goal – and keep it within sight.
2. Tell someone what you intend to accomplish.

In summary, here are five steps you must follow in order to make changes effectively:

1. Be clear about your goals (what by when).
2. Consider the costs – and bring your default positions to conscious awareness.
3. Write your new goals down.
4. Share your new goals with at least one other person.
5. Repeat your goals on a daily basis – always have your goals top of mind.

Resolutions – boon or bane – it's up to you.

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