

Making Business Resolutions

By Rebecca A. Morgan
Inc.com • 2006

For most of us, how we think about improving our businesses is consistent with how we approach improvement and accomplishments as individuals.

January 1st provides a handy reminder each year to take stock of our lives, identify improvements we want to make in ourselves, and resolve to successfully make those midcourse corrections. Unfortunately, for many the resolve doesn't last long. Known more for being broken than for being kept, New Year's resolutions reflect an important awareness of the need to improve, but can diminish self respect and credibility when broken or ignored year after year. Good intentions are not wrong; they are merely insufficient for effective execution.

What New Year's Day represents to individuals is often served by budgeting periods in businesses. The month, the quarter and the year are somewhat arbitrary breakdowns, but often provide the incentive for businesses to reassess their plans and execution. Because for most of us how we think about improving our businesses is consistent with how we approach improvement and accomplishment as individuals. Perhaps we can learn from the 1997 University of Washington study of New Year's Resolutions. It described three keys to successful resolutions:

- a strong initial commitment to change
- a strategy for how to handle the inevitable moments of weakness or backsliding
- know how you're doing by regular monitoring and feedback

Commitment is not a soft word. As the saying goes: "The difference between involvement and commitment is like ham and eggs. The chicken is involved; the pig is committed." Countless resolutions fall to the wayside simply because they are more wish than commitment.

Growth consultant and friend Andy Birol says that his biggest competitor is inertia. While wanting to grow the company, many owners are unwilling to take significant action. That can parallel those who want to lose weight, but consider the commitment to eat less and exercise more to be too tough a path to take.

The second key acknowledges that it will be a bumpy ride at times. The importance of being prepared to acknowledge and work through backsliding cannot be overstated. I call it "the rubber band effect." A rubber band held taut by your hands initially will try to snap back if you let it. At some point it becomes sufficiently stretched that it will no longer snap back. The same is true of employees as you ask them to internalize new expectations. Without constant reinforcement, many will snap back to the old way of operating. As they try to do so, you must be prepared to hold them taut. At some point, whether three days, three months, or three decades from now, without fanfare the new order of things will be accepted.

If you don't have mechanisms in place to recognize, and then address, the backsliding, you will be exhausted, the organization will not have changed the way you intended, and your credibility with employees will be diminished. An employee who doesn't strictly adhere to the changes is no more a dissident than someone who eats "forbidden" foods or skips exercising once in a while. Don't be surprised by the backsliding. Help them respond with self-image intact and renewed dedication.

The third and final key is an ongoing "how are we doing?" assessment. When you resolved that the organization would change in a specific way, you did it for an observable reason. Whether you seek lower employee turnover, increased sales, improved productivity or some other desirable condition, your resolution rests on the cause and effect relationship that you accept as true. Others may not see the connection the way you do, may

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not agree with the targeted outcome, or may not understand the big picture driving the change. As a result, their day-to-day implementation may differ from what you envisioned. The second key addressed making the resolution stick through difficult stretches. This key is about recognizing how the resolution is actually being implemented and how well it is deriving the intended results.

There isn't a single guaranteed successful methodology for addressing the three keys to successful resolutions. Some people subscribe to "by whatever means necessary" thinking. For them, getting there is more important than how they get there. Their resolutions define objectives (lose 20 pounds), not strategies (eat less, exercise more) nor tactics (eat 5 small meals a day and take up running). They keep their eyes on the prize, and if one approach isn't getting them there quickly enough they move to another.

A second group advances the belief that focus should be on behavior, as it is the best predictor of results. Their resolutions are more along the lines of exercise and eat healthy. They believe that if they're doing all the right things, there is no reason to be unduly influenced by short-term aberrations. At some point aberration becomes trend, and they will consider changing, but they stick with the game plan for as long as they can.

Whether you choose to drive behavior thru an unwavering focus on results or drive results thru an unwavering focus on behavior, your resolutions can be kept. If you can't decide between the two approaches, resolve to choose one of them this New Year's.



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