

## Successful New Year Resolutions in 7 Easy Steps

*How to turn New Year resolutions into powerful, successful and long-lasting goals*

### Resolutions – the gloomy facts

A huge number of us make New Year's resolutions at the start of each year. In the UK it is suggested<sup>1</sup> that the number is around 7 million people and in the US it might be as much as 45%<sup>2</sup> of the adult population. The sad news is that most resolutions are broken within days of being made and very few last throughout the year. One US study<sup>3</sup> showed that 22% of men and only 14% of women often keep their resolutions and in a similar study of 3,000 people, Professor Richard Wiseman<sup>4</sup> found the number was down to 12%.

It has been suggested that trying to turn over a new leaf in the New Year could do more harm than good. The mental health charity Mind<sup>5</sup> has said that New Year's resolutions can be bad for your mental health as they tend to have a negative focus which leads people to concentrate on perceived imperfections, such as being overweight. This creates a negative self image which in turn can lead to feelings of hopelessness, low self-esteem and mild depression. Furthermore, feelings of failure and inadequacy can be triggered by the inability to stick to New Year's resolutions.

### Resolutions – the research

Professor Wiseman's study revealed four main tips to help in finding success with New Year resolutions. An extra 22% of men achieved their resolution when asked to engage in either goal setting, for example, instead of trying to lose weight in general, aiming to lose a pound each week, or focusing on the rewards associated with achieving their goal, for example, being more attractive to the opposite sex. Women were more successful when they told their friends and family about their resolution, and almost 10% were more likely to be successful when encouraged to be especially resilient and not to give up because they had reverted to the old habits. For example, by treating a chocolate binge as a temporary setback whilst dieting rather than as failure. This advice is useful as well as interesting but still leaves us with a greater chance of failing than succeeding. So how do you make resolutions into

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<sup>1</sup> Institute of Financial Advisors (2006)(2) Wiseman, R. (2007) University of Hertfordshire.

<sup>2</sup> <http://abcnews.go.com/Health/MindMoodNews/years-resolutions-survive-test-time/story?id=9404149>.

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.businesswire.com/portal/site/home/permalink/?ndmViewId=news\\_view&newsId=20081229005180&newsLang=en](http://www.businesswire.com/portal/site/home/permalink/?ndmViewId=news_view&newsId=20081229005180&newsLang=en).

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.quirkology.com/UK/Experiment\\_resolution.shtml](http://www.quirkology.com/UK/Experiment_resolution.shtml).

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.mind.org.uk/news/243\\_new\\_years\\_resolutions\\_could\\_be\\_bad\\_for\\_your\\_mental\\_health](http://www.mind.org.uk/news/243_new_years_resolutions_could_be_bad_for_your_mental_health), Friday 2 January 2009.

powerful catalysts for lasting change? Before we look at the answer let's look at the psychology behind New Year resolutions which makes them so hard to follow.

### The Psychology of New Year Resolutions

One of the biggest challenges<sup>6</sup> with resolutions comes from the context within which they are set. We typically spend December overindulging in food and drink, as well as spending a lot whilst exercising little. We then promise ourselves that once the holiday season is over, we will definitely take control. An extensive worldwide survey<sup>7</sup> of over 300,000 people revealed the following top ten resolutions:

- ❖ Lose weight and get in better physical shape
- ❖ Stick to a budget
- ❖ Debt reduction
- ❖ Enjoy more quality time with family and friends
- ❖ Find a soul mate
- ❖ Quit smoking
- ❖ Find a better job
- ❖ Learn something new
- ❖ Volunteer and help others
- ❖ Get organised

Our resolve is at its peak when we feel full, drunk, or broke. We get to January, feeling sick of rich food and drinks, and feeling sluggish from a lack of physical activity. It seems as if it will not be difficult to abstain from overindulgence when we are craving more structure and discipline in our lives. Unfortunately, only a few weeks into the New Year and our appetites have returned, and we start to feel the pain of our new routines and the deprivation that we are inflicting upon ourselves. Results are often slower to materialise than we imagined and we get disillusioned. It is at this point that we are most at risk of reverting back to our old behaviours and putting off our resolutions until it gets warmer in the spring, or of forgetting them completely. So we need a way of connecting with our resolutions that makes them so powerful that our commitment to them doesn't falter quickly. Fortunately there are some useful lessons to be learned from an approach to coaching based on modern neuro-scientific research – a so-called 'brain-based' approach.

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<sup>6</sup> <http://mentalhealth.about.com/od/selfhelp/a/newyears.htm>, Leonard Holmes, About.com Guide, December 28, 2005.

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.goalsguy.com/Events/n\\_top-ten-resolutions.html](http://www.goalsguy.com/Events/n_top-ten-resolutions.html).

## A 'Brain-based' Approach

In his book *Quiet Leadership*<sup>8</sup>, David Rock sets out the foundations of this brain-based approach to leadership and coaching. He identifies a number of recent findings about the way the brain works which help us to create powerful, achievable goals highlighting the importance of changing our thinking rather than using our old thinking. Four of the findings have particular relevance to resolutions and goal setting:

- ❖ **The brain hardwires everything it can.** Our brains are designed to push things down into our long-term memory to keep our working memory from overloading. Our working memory has only a limited capacity. Once we have learned something, it becomes hard-wired and we don't have to think about it actively anymore and it becomes easy. An obvious example here would be in learning a sport, say tennis, where the basic movements and decisions become almost instinctive (hard-wired) allowing the brain to concentrate on other tasks, such as the tactics required to beat your opponent rather than on how to swing the racquet for each shot. This is the brain's way of being efficient. The lesson here is that it will take an investment of time and effort to change the hard-wiring that exists at the moment around the subject of your resolution.
- ❖ **Our hardwiring drives our perception.** The information stored in long-term memory becomes the basis for how we view the world and create new learning. We perceive the world around us based on our own unique experiences and the bits of information we have stored in our brains from these past experiences. Thus our reality is our interpretation of the world based on the way our brains are wired. Every brain sees the world differently, based on its hardwiring. We believe that the world is a certain way, driven by our wiring, and we will make the world fit in with this picture. The brain literally draws on itself to make sense of things. This is why resolutions can be so hard to achieve. You have hard-wired perceptions of yourself, or the world around you, based on your previous experiences and it is these that are probably stopping you from moving forwards. You have hard-wired your mind in its thinking about such things as fitness, eating, smoking, careers or relationships.
- ❖ **It's practically impossible to deconstruct our wiring.** It's an attention economy in the brain. Anything we give focus to can become hard wired. Therefore the more we focus on a given connection, the more we deepen that connection. In fact what happens when we try to get rid of some wiring is that we actually think about it even more thereby making it even stronger. It is almost impossible to get rid of old wiring just by thinking about it. For example, if you are told not to think about smoking,

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<sup>8</sup> Rock, David. *Quiet Leadership*, Collins, 2007.

you immediately think about smoking. The more you try not to think about smoking the more our brains will tend to focus on smoking. This increased focus tends to deepen the wiring even further rather than erase it. Getting some basic awareness of an issue is helpful, as we need to know what our wiring is. Once we know there is an issue that we want to change, then changing the issue requires a different approach to trying to 'deconstruct' it. There is no point working out why it is there, how it got there, or where it comes from, we must simply work to create new wiring.

- ❖ **It's easy to create new wiring.** Luckily however it is almost effortless to create new wiring – it is what our brains are designed to do. We reconcile dilemmas by creating new maps. This occurs in a moment of insight. New maps can become hardwiring with enough attention and positive feedback. These can come from others or ourselves. When we are given the opportunity and encouragement to reflect, we deepen our wiring. Building in new wiring doesn't get rid of the wiring. It is still there – it is just not being used so much. The phrase 'use it or lose it' is very relevant here; for example, if you want to stop smoking – thinking about why you smoke just increases the hard wiring for smoking; thinking a what else you could do at the moment of wanting to smoke creates new wiring. Therefore when it comes to resolutions, we must create new wiring around our resolutions and focus on that new wiring time and time again, to imprint it clearly on our brains. In that way our thinking changes and we stand a much better chance of achieving our goals.

## Turning Resolutions into Powerful Goals

Knowing that the brain hardwires everything it can, that our hardwiring drives our perceptions, that it is practically impossible to deconstruct our wiring, and that it is easy to create new wiring, gives us a fresh perspective on how to adapt traditional goal setting processes so that we new and powerful way to turn resolutions into powerful goals. The following 7 step process is based on David Rock's goal setting process and uses these insights about the brain.

- ❖ **Step 1 - List your resolutions.** Write everything down that is in your mind that you want to change. Put down any resolutions that you have made and anything else that is in your mind to change – whether large or small, and however achievable it is. Do not allow yourself to judge what you write down – just get it down on paper.
- ❖ **Step 2 - Get clear on where to set your primary goal.** Once you have captured everything look through the list and put a tick next to the five areas that seem to be most important to you right now. Only judge items on their *importance* to you – not on how achievable they are. Once you have five, look at your shortlist closely and ask yourself this question: which area would make the *least* difference to you if you

had a big shift in this? Put a line through that area. Keep doing this until you are left with just one area. This is the area that will have the *most impact* on your life once your goal is achieved. It is quite common to get down to 2 or 3 issues and have difficulty in choosing between them. In that case, look to see if an improvement in one area would cause a change in another. For example, if you have to choose between finance and career, ask yourself – if I had a new job, would my finances be taken care of? If the answer is yes, then the less important of the two would be finances. Alternatively, if having more money saved meant that you would be able to start your dream business, then career would be less important at this time.

❖ **Step 3 - Focus on the core issue.** Look at the area you have chosen and brainstorm all of the different issues going on for you at this time in that area. Get a clean sheet of paper (paper is better than computer for this kind of exercise) and start writing down all the issues that come to mind. Keep on writing until you have nothing left to add. This is an opportunity for you to write down everything you are thinking or feeling about something - in this case, a specific goal area. Try not to re-read the list until you have absolutely nothing left to write. It can be a private document that you don't want to share with anyone else, so include every thought - even the ones that make you feel fear or embarrassment. The aim is to have it all down in front of you on paper. If your goal area is 'health and fitness' then your brainstormed list might look something like this:

- *Aging*
- *Don't know if I have the money to put towards equipment*
- *Don't own any jogging shoes*
- *Feel embarrassed by how I look*
- *Heaviest now I have ever been*
- *Have tried heaps of stuff before with no result*
- *Don't trust myself to follow through*
- *It's too hard*
- *I don't want to focus on my eating*
- *I don't like exercise*
- *I know I need to look after myself*
- *I want to do this for my children*

Now use a process of elimination, as before, considering which issue would have the least impact within that area at this time, until you have found the core issue. Many choices at this stage rely on intuition and it is important that you start listening to yours – give yourself a quiet space and take your time to uncover the core issue. This process of consideration and elimination might reveal some interesting, and sometimes uncomfortable, insights. As an example, if the list above was yours, you might think that over time the real issue was that you had been finding too many excuses to put off getting fit (no shoes, no money, don't like exercise, too hard, feeling embarrassed, don't trust myself) as well as some very good reasons for being fit (aging, need to look after yourself, your children, heaviest you have ever been). After grouping all of these things together you then see that your reasons for doing it outweigh the excuses, even though there are more excuses. You might then decide to focus the goal and come up with 'to play a whole game of football with the kids'. As you can see from this example, you may need to open up your thoughts and think laterally to uncover what the core issue is for you.

In uncovering the core issue and focussing on that you might need to reframe it as a positive – something that you want to drive forcefully towards rather than something you want to escape or avoid. A 'towards' motivation is more powerful and enduring and will help you to achieve more. Focus on how much better life will be for you, and those around you, when you achieve your resolution.

- ❖ **Step 4 - Define the goal as a 90-day project.** Defining your goal as a 90 day project is a really powerful way of bringing about lasting change. 3 months is enough time to really make an impact on your life, but short enough to maintain motivation and excitement. Treating the goal as a project also allows you to break it down into a series of strategies and then into smaller, achievable actions. It starts to become easier if you have a series of attainable objectives as this will give you a strong sense of success and progress. It might also be worth going back and checking whether your goal is challenging enough for a 90 day project. Go for a goal that you don't know for sure you can do, something that makes you a little excited and nervous at the same time. In fact, the best goal is one you don't know how you're going to achieve; you just sense that you'll be able to work it out if you really apply yourself. However, your goal must not be unrealistic otherwise you are setting yourself up to fail which is not what we are trying to accomplish. To give yourself the best chance of success, you will also need to check that your goal is defined as a project with a clear conclusion, for example, a goal of being financially independent is almost certainly a long term goal. What could you realistically achieve in 3 months to take you towards that long term objective? Maybe you could save £1,000, or make your first

investment in the stock market or clear your credit card debt? This step of defining your goal as a project is vitally important and perhaps the hardest so take your time and seek help in clarifying your thinking if you need to. Make sure that you come out of this stage knowing that you will be stretching yourself, learning new skills or developing new habits, and that this is challenging, exciting, a little daunting but achievable.

- ❖ **Step 5 - Make it snappy.** The goal that you choose is going to be your motivation for change and you're going to be saying it to yourself over and over again during the next 90 days. So keep it short and snappy. You don't need to say everything in the goal itself. The best goals are around five words, not long statements. You need to make the goal memorable so that it stays at the front of your mind. Make sure that you tailor the goal to what will excite you. Some of us respond well to visual images. If the image has an emotional subtext, even better. To get a goal that's really worth going for, try to capture some kind of visual element in the goal, for example 'fit my best jeans' is stronger than 'be a size 8'. Or 'crack the champagne open at the launch' is better than 'start a new business'. Consider other senses as well. Maybe you want to 'live where I can smell the ocean' or 'hear my song played on the radio'.
- ❖ **Step 6 - The treasure of a measure.** The measure of the goal is the element of the goal that is going to let you know when you have achieved the goal or how close you are. I cannot stress enough how important it is to have an accurate, objective measure. A measure can be related to another time in your life (to be as fit as I was in senior school), a percentage (to be 50 per cent fitter), a numeric scale (to be an 8 out of 10 in my fitness) or a physical outcome (to wear a size 10 or to fit my favourite jeans). It is important that the measure is written into the goal so that you hear it every time you read the goal. To help you out, imagine someone else reading your goal – how would they be able to tell that you had achieved it? Sometimes getting the measure can be the hard bit – if you can't get it straight away come back to it after a few days with a fresh mind.
- ❖ **Step 7 - A final test - 'does the goal truly inspire you?'** Once you've completed the 6 steps above, there is only thing left to do. You need to write out your goal and the steps that you are going to take to achieve it including the measure of your success. It is really important to focus on this goal relentlessly. If you have written your goal down and broken it into small steps then come back to review progress every day. The more you think about it and how you are succeeding, and changing, the more your new ways of behaving become hard-wired. If you do this day in, day out, week in, week out, for 90 days, not only will you achieve success, but you will have hard-wired this success and be ready to set yourself an even more inspiring goal. It is

important always to have inspiring goals to keep you moving forward. When looking at your goal and reading it to yourself you should feel some kind of physical response, it may be nausea, nerves, or it may make you want to punch the air with excitement. So what is your goal? Here are some great goals to think about:

- Credit cards at zero
- As in love with my partner as when we first met
- Have the physique of Brad Pitt
- My name on the door of the business
- To have the most fun three months of my life
- Land my dream job
- To show my work on the big screen
- Have my first short story published

Turning your New Year resolution into a goal worth going for is a process that takes time - don't expect to get it right straight away. It really is worth taking the time to get it right as this is what you will be focusing on for the next 90 days of your life. This focus will be on achieving something really important and creating the lasting change that could transform your life in the year ahead.

May I wish you the best of luck with your resolutions and do let me know how you get on.

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