

3 Great New Year's Resolutions For Managers, Directors, and Executives

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We're about to close the books on 2005, and now is the perfect time to set our professional goals for the New Year. Here are three 'sure fire' ways to improve your business and make the next year better for you, your staff and the bottom-line. These straightforward resolutions will help you increase productivity, lower stress and improve the performance of your whole organization. Above all, these strategies will make your team happier and more effective.

For the most part these suggestions are just common sense. True, they are not rocket science, and many people will say, "I already know we need to do that!" Unfortunately, as with other New Year's resolutions, while we know what needs doing, there is a disconnect between knowledge and action. It is my hope that these resolutions will give you a reference point from which to start. I hope they motivate you and provide momentum to begin improving your department and company.



Resolution 1: Look For Patterns In Runaway To-Do Lists – Then Solve The Big Ones.

Everybody can make a to-do list, which is a great way to schedule your day and do as much as possible. Unfortunately, these lists often spin out of control as you pile on more and more fires to fight each day. As the list swells with tasks to handle, you begin to see more nagging issues hanging on, unfinished. Every day there seems to be less time to address those critical issues which you handled easily before. Deadlines start getting pushed back further. Soon your daily lists become so complex that you dread making any lists at all.

While a good to-do list helps you complete tasks, it does not help you reduce tasks. Here is a New Year's resolution you may want to consider: Start looking in your to-do lists for re-occurring themes or problems. Review your to-do lists from past weeks or months and group your tasks by root cause. Once you have established a pattern tackle the large overriding problem and eliminate or limit its demands on your time.

Common sources of problems can include:

- Poor Documentation
- Communication Problems
- Unclear Roles
- Process Flaws
- Timing Issues
- Misallocated Resources

Once you identify the sources of your increasing workload, you can enlist help and overcome it. These issues are rarely yours alone; there are most likely others interested in a resolution, so you should have lots of help finding the solution. Tackling the sources of repetitive problems will make everyone's to-do-lists smaller, less complex, and easier to handle.

Resolution 2: Unplug The Auto-Pilot Long Enough To Check Its Programming.

Managers are great at spotting the inefficiencies in others. We see workers slip into familiar routines, that are less than perfect, and we are quick to point out how these people should change. The one person's work habits we rarely pay attention to, and even less frequently criticize, are our own.

No one is immune to the appeal of the familiar. Who would blame anyone for wanting to do something quickly and easily? We enjoy the feeling of knowing exactly what to do – of being an expert. But have you ever stopped to think that those tasks you consider yourself to be great at, and those jobs you can do without thinking, might be inefficient? More importantly, how many of these routines might waste others' time or cause unnecessary work?

It is not the jobs we are excited or nervous about that are usually performed inefficiently. Learning new things keeps us alert and engaged with what we are doing and cognisant of the quality of our work. More often it is the times when we switch to "Auto-Pilot" that we have to be wary. Inefficiency lives and breeds in these familiar tasks, and it can happen at any level, from frontline staff up to the CEO.

Every manager has to be conscious of how well they manage limited resources. Don't forget, you are a limited resource too, and you need to manage yourself first. Be objective about how you complete familiar tasks.

Here are some common tasks that can be sources of inefficiency, and points to consider:

What to look out for...	Questions to ask?:
Superfluous Meetings:	Does the topic require a meeting? Does everyone that is invited need to be there?
Redundant Standing Meetings:	Is the issue still around? Has the problem changed? Are those involved still the right people?
Overuse of Email:	Do you control it, or it you? Do you Email, back and forth repeatedly? Do you Email, when you should use the phone? Are you reading Emails that don't concern you? Are you forwarding to concerned persons only?
Disruptive Cell Phone Use:	Do you interrupt a meeting with others to answer?
Valueless Performance Reviews:	Are you doing anything with the information? Are you prepared and providing quality feedback?
Rushed Expense Reports:	Do you have to search for receipts? Do you properly code the expense or leave it for accounting to struggle with?
Untrained Software:	Do you know how to use this program? Does your work have to be checked or fixed by someone else?

Resolution 3: Give Your Reports A Chance To Shine (And Make Yourself Look Good In The Process).

Your success is undeniably tied to the success of every one of your reports. But while we would never want to limit our own potential, we may do just that by limiting those upon whom we depend. Though this defies logic, it is one of the most common problems plaguing managed teams today.

Successful, sustainable improvements are all about leverage. Sure you can drive your company or department forward yourself, but this takes a lot of energy and time. If you have the right people under you, the motivation and drive to improve is implicit. Giving the individuals in your team creative control over portions of your improvement strategy will make them more accountable and interested. They will try harder, and have more fun doing it. They will invest themselves in your success.

As well, once a culture of improvement is established, you will have unrivalled clarity regarding the strength of your team and its members. If you have honestly given your reports the support, authority and opportunity to make improvement happen, and they refuse to be accountable for developing your department, then you know that they are not going to further your goals and should be replaced; plain and simple. We all say we want self-starters on our team, but as we get busy, we settle for people we have to constantly motivate or guide. This is counter productive

Here are some common reasons managers avoid letting staff find and manage their own improvement projects:



Perception	Reality
"I'll loose control over my department." "My goals won't be met."	Talk to your each of your direct reports face to face. Agree on the scope of their influence and the department's directional goals. As long as they work within their mandate, and support your direction, let them run.
"This will cost too much." "This will blow my budget."	If you approve improvement projects by looking at the ROI and not initial cost, these projects can help you meet or beat your annual department budgets.
"My image will suffer if my people look too good." "My position will become redundant."	Your image might change, but it won't suffer. The people you report to, be they managers, directors, board members or shareholders, will see that you are not just a hero with lots of helpers, but are instead a leader that builds heroes. When they look good, you look good.
"I need more staff to make improvement happen." "This will take too much time."	You may need temporary help, but you have to <i>keep the faith</i> that improvements "win back" time. It will take a temporary investment of manpower to achieve an improvement that saves man-hours on a perpetual basis. If you invest 1000 hours to gain 10 hours a week, you'll have justified that time spent in under two years. If you use that 10 hours a week to work on other improvements, the returns begin to mushroom at an exponential rate. <i>In the end, improvement projects are always free.</i>

I hope that these three suggestions are of use to you, and that one or more of them can help you meet the coming year's challenges. If you are successful in keeping a New Year's resolution to improve your department I would love to hear about it. Until then, good luck and

HAPPY NEW YEAR!

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