

Why New Years Resolutions Often Fail



*James Holden: Executive Leadership Master Coach, Speaker and Trainer
(adapted from Equilibrio Ezine)*

'Any man can make mistakes, but only an idiot persists in his error.'
Marcus Tullius Cicero

There are many reasons why people fail to achieve their New Year's Resolutions. Rather than attempt to list all of the reasons here, I have come up with the top seven obstacles people stumble over. See which ones apply to you or other people you know.

1. Not being specific enough:

Typically, when I ask people what they want in life, by far and away the number one response is 'I just want to feel happy'. Who can argue with that? More happiness in the world has to be a good thing; the Kingdom of Bhutan even measures its wealth by how happy its citizens are.

My response to these people is 'you can achieve this by simply recalling a time when you felt really happy.' Now if just feeling happy is all these people really wanted, hey presto, instant happiness on tap, any time they want it.

Quite often though, the driver behind the statement of 'I just want to feel happy' is so much more: More friends, more money, more fun, more loving partner, a better job, a personality change, you know the usual sort of things people wish for.

I am not suggesting that we do not know how to be specific, quite the opposite in fact. You only have to ask someone 'what do you not want in your life' and then listen carefully. Usually they can tell you in an instant and with great clarity all the things they do not want.

We can all be specific; it is a case of using this capability to focus on what you want.

'Define what you want, focus with sniper precision'

2. Aiming too high or too low

This stumbling block has to do with people's own perception of them self and their ego.

Typically people fall in to one of two camps:

Aiming too high - People that aim too high are optimistically ambitious about their abilities to succeed. Often they charge at their objective with full speed, only to fall flat on their face... and usually early on in their quest for success. An absurd example of this would be someone attempting to climb Mount Everest before first climbing a series of smaller mountains to hone their skills.

Clearly this relates to an issue of self-perception where the person has too high an image of their self and their capabilities, one that is likely to set them up for heartache and failure. Having done this myself, it may comfort you to know it only hurts until you stop doing it.

'A series of smaller wins, accumulates to great results'

Aiming too low - In the previous example the glass was half full; this time the glass is half empty and the taste is equally as disappointing. People falling into this camp literally cheat themselves out of living their dreams by believing they cannot achieve what they want and then set about talking themselves out of it. Worse yet, some people refuse to believe that they truly deserve their dream and simply give up.

It is a truism in life that if you really do not believe you are going to achieve something or that you do not deserve it, you will be sure to get the satisfaction of proving yourself correct. Worse yet, this reinforces a negative self-perception of low image or ability. Again this only hurts until you stop doing it.

So choose carefully what you believe you can or cannot do. From personal experience, I can assure you that by the time you have put in the personal effort in to achieve your New Year's Resolution, you will really feel like you do deserve it. More than that, I am sure you will be pretty darn proud of yourself too, so give it a go.

A big point to note: Your beliefs serve as hugely powerful motivators that stoke your engine room, providing the energy to make things happen.

'Set goals you believe in, it fuels motivation and builds confidence'

In setting your goals listen to your internal self-talk and ask 'is this is a useful companion to take on my journey?'

'Having a good dose of self-awareness goes a long way'

3. Not making an absolute commitment:

Accomplishing just about anything in life requires some degree of focus, discipline & dedication.

In my work as a corporate leadership coach, I come across lots of people who say they want to become a better leader. We talk about why they want to do this and how it will improve their quality of work life and for the people they work with. When they tell me this, it is clear they have a strong interest in doing this and with very compelling reasons.

However, when it comes to the crunch time of taking action and putting in the hard yards to get what they want, it is clear that not everyone is prepared to do what it takes to become a leader.

Here is the distinction - they are interested in becoming a great leader, they want the destination, but they are not committed to the journey it will take to get there.

Commitment involves a highly motivated state of mind that binds itself with appropriate action to get the task done. The combination of these two factors is essential to anyone wanting to achieve anything in life.

It is no coincidence that the rewards of success and commitment always march along, hand in hand. The opposite is also true:
Fail to be committed: Fail to be successful.

'Commitment distinguishes people who live their dreams from others who live in regret'

4. Inconsistent in action taken:

It is pretty obvious that even if you are committed to achieving something, it will take a good deal longer to achieve your outcome without some form of constant and consistently applied action.

Anyone who has been to Italy and seen the massive blocks of marble that Michelangelo used for his carvings will understand just how much physically intense chipping away would have occurred to produce the magnificent statue of 'David'. This naked biblical hero stands at an impressive 17 feet (5.17m) in height. Imagine how big the original block of marble would have been.

When it comes to constant practice with consistently high standards it is hard to find a better example than Michelangelo. His creations are prodigious, among them the beautiful paintings in the Sistine chapel in Rome. What amazes me is that Michelangelo had carved 'David' before he was even thirty years old. For most of us, this would have been a lifetime's achievement in itself.

'Age is no barrier to achieving great things!'

Michelangelo is an inspiration to us all just to keep chipping away mindfully at things we care about.

'Give yourself the odd day off but by and large stick to your plan and you will get there'

5. There are competing interests:

Competing interests occur when a person's life style choices do not support their desired outcome. Take for example someone who wants to be slim and toned, but rather than eating nutritious meals and exercising regularly, they spend every spare hour relaxing on the couch watching television and eating snacks instead. It is a no-brainer they are not going to get what they intend, their other interests simply out compete their New Year's Resolution.

For these people, there will always be a list of reasons, justifications or excuses as to why they do not do what they say they will do. If you are one of these people; brace yourself. This is what psychologists refer to as operating from a 'victimhood mentality'. What this means is that no responsibility is being taken for the situation the person finds them self in. Not everyone is aware of this, so I say this out of kindness and as a helpful wake up call, so that if you choose to, you can take charge of the dreams that are important to you and avoid living your life in regret.

'Ninety-nine percent of failures come from people who have the habit of making excuses'

Overcoming competing interests requires aligning your attention (what you are doing) to your intended outcome (what you want). In this instance, the intention to be slim and toned needs to be matched with focused attention on exercising and eating nutritious food.

Without alignment, it is like damming up the river – nothing flows. In the field of Neuro Linguistic Programming there is a useful presupposition that states:

*'Energy Flows
Where Attention Goes
As Determined and Governed by Intention'*

So, if you find that you are lacking the oomph to stick with your resolution simply check your attention and bring it into alignment with your intention.

6. It is not within their power or control to achieve:

Whilst I firmly hold the belief that no one gets ahead in life doing it all by themselves, this is different when it comes to achieving your New Year's Resolution. Here's why, even though your dream may involve other people, success will be far less likely, if not impossible to achieve if the dream is outside of your control.

You need to be the captain of your ship or you will very quickly find your dream veering off course. Take for example someone who wants a better relationship with his or her partner. If this involves their partner changing, the dream could easily be frustrated, despite valiant efforts at personal development on their behalf. This is because they have no power to control how invested their partner is in actualizing your dream. According to the old proverb 'you can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink'.

'Re-define your New Year's Resolution so that it is within your power to control the outcome'

In this case it would be far better for a person to re-define what they want by focusing on their own personal development. By taking responsibility for their actions and responses within the relationship they can be proud of them self and know they have created fertile ground for the relationship to grow.

'Be the change you want to see in the world'

7. Overwhelm, frustration and impatience get in the way:

We now live in an age of great expectations. It is our expectations that trip us up when it comes to achieving things we want. We are so used to things happening fast, that we have come to place often-ridiculous expectations on our selves and others. If you think about the tasks you set out to do, whether at work or in your social life, how often do they take longer than you had expected? As the clock ticks by frustration builds and builds. This 'x' factor, that none of us seem to like, somehow always manages to find its way into the scene.

Added to this some dreams have so many stages involved that it is likely to take quite some time to complete the project. For many people, having put in the effort to create the necessary inertia, they struggle with the ongoing effort to keep the momentum going. Before they know it, the enjoyment factor has gone and it has suddenly become all too hard. Is it little wonder by the end of January so many people have thrown in the towel and given up?

Reality check: getting overwhelmed, impatient or frustrated by the gap between what is currently happening in your life and the way you would like your life to be is completely natural. We all suffer from this – it is how we deal with it that counts.

Can you imagine Michelangelo chipping away at his massive block of marble, his hands blistered and bleeding from his effort, he is close to the area where he wants to start sculpting and thinks to himself 'will it never end'?

It will. My mum is often found saying, 'everything ends' and 'this too shall pass' and she is right, so just keep chipping away and you will get there.

'Breaking the dream into small, simple steps provides a series of motivating wins along the way'

On Reflection:

I have highlighted seven common reasons why people fail. I have done this for two purposes, firstly to see if some of these reasons strike a chord with you or with others you know. Secondly, to operate as a lighthouse, illuminating those perilous rocks that sink dreams. Now that you know them you can avoid them.