Making Change Stick

New Year’s Resolutions

It is a common dilemma. You know where you need to improve. You believe that it is a worthy effort. You want to improve. But life gets in the way. You often do not live up to your own ambitions.

In the United States, roughly half of all adults make New Year’s resolutions—a commitment at the start of the calendar year to make some sort of self-improvement. Typical goals focus on losing weight, quitting smoking, managing money better, or being more organized. They represent our ambitions to become the individuals we want to be. Some represent doing existing things better, such as reducing debt faster, while some represent more fundamental changes in how we live, such as starting one’s own business.

But how many people are actually successful? While research estimates vary, success rates might be just shy of 50% after six months, but drop to closer to 20% two years later. That might sound depressing, given that most resolutions fail to sustain improvement. But from another angle, change is hard. A fifty-fifty chance at some sort of meaningful improvement after six months of some significant self-improvement, and a one in five shot after two years, sounds like something worth understanding a little better. In fact, resolutions made at New Year’s are up to ten times more effective than comparable commitments made at other times of the year.¹

Creating the Vital Organization

While there are differences, certainly, between personal New Year’s resolutions and organizational efforts to improve performance, there are three important lessons of successful resolutions that help guide organizational change, and the effort to live up to the goals one has already set.

First, resolutions need to be social. Part of the success of resolutions made at New Year’s versus other times of the year is that there is a collective understanding—and corresponding support—for self-improvement. Additionally, including a buddy in one’s resolutions can dramatically improve success. Studies show that something as simple as texting a buddy when you take an action toward your goal triples the rate of success.²

Second, rhythms matter. Annually revisiting aspirations, recalibrating, and setting goals for improvement is a rhythm that fits how we think and act in our lives. Seasons, birthdays, holidays, and other anniversaries all add punctuation to how we plan for and evaluate personal progress. Comparable rhythms hold within organizations with revenue reporting, seasonal booms and busts, product-release schedules, and strategic planning.

Third, the most successful resolutions are opportunities to “connect with your ideal self,” according to Stanford professor Kelly McGonigal in The Willpower Instinct. Like an organization’s efforts to execute on its strategy, New Year’s resolutions for self-improvement offer an opportunity to reflect on who you really want to be, and to invest in that goal.

Resolutions for Organizational Change

How does the struggle of New Year’s resolutions translate into organizational change? Deciding what to change and enlisting the buy-in of employees is difficult enough. This is the setting and clarifying of resolutions, as discussed in the previous chapter. Real change requires executives, managers, and employees to change behavior, not just for a while, but permanently. Much of the failure to change is not based on poor decisions about direction or lack of initial enthusiasm, but failure to follow through. An organization’s resolutions to improve need special attention and support, helping employees manage through the uncertainties of new approaches until they become “normal.”

Importantly, not all kinds of change efforts are equal. In the language of Vitality, the two types of organizational change are about improving the