

Conditioning for Improvement

Taking business improvements from idea to reality hinges on a few key factors.

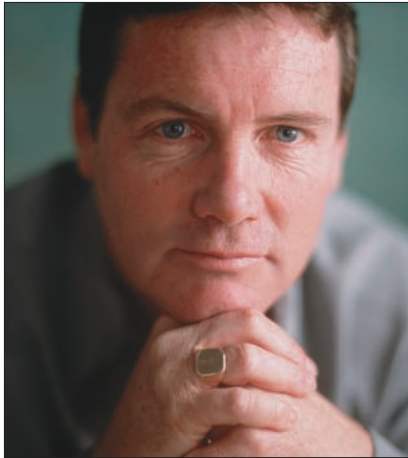
Most people make New Year's resolutions, and most people fail to keep them. When, during my speaking engagements, I've asked the audience about this, I find that usually the failure to follow through is not because the resolution was stupid or unrealistic.

So what happened?

Your business depends on your increasing the odds of success. If you focus on why you have succeeded or failed in the past, you will find it generally boils down to a few things.

MOTIVATION

The things we have the greatest success changing are the ones with really strong "whys."



For example, you may be 50 pounds overweight. Your clothing is tight and uncomfortable, and when you look in the mirror you are not thrilled about what you see. But at dinner you go ahead and have an extra helping of potatoes and don't say "no" to the apple pie. You know that by eating this way you will not lose weight and may even add a pound or two, but you

think "There is always tomorrow."

Now imagine that you go to the doctor and, after reviewing your blood work and performing a stress test, he announces that your cholesterol levels are off the chart and he's worried you may have heart issues. Suddenly, pushing away from the table is not just about your vanity and your wardrobe, it's about your survival.

The doctor's concern provides you with more than enough motivation to alter your diet, and may even spur you to start exercising, go to bed earlier, and make other lifestyle changes.

Before you initiate changes, always create a written plan that begins with the reasons why you need the improvement to happen. By writing it down, you will find the conviction it takes to commit to change.

CONTEXT

Creating an environment conducive to improvement increases the likelihood of success. A simple example might be catching up on reading. Like many people, you might set a goal of reading one book a month, whether for business or pleasure. But, given a busy work schedule, it's hard to find the time to sit down and read regularly. Or you make several false starts so that you end up reading parts of the same book two or three times.

But when you get away on vacation, you are able to read a book almost every day. By changing the context or environment, you have made it more conducive to meeting your goals.

To make business improvements, you must create a supportive environment. That usually begins with changes to how your work week is organized. Look for opportunities to:

- Eliminate some activities or change their time and frequency.
- Communicate via e-mail when it's more efficient.
- Be more proactive and less reactive.

Decide which part of the day is most productive and make an appointment with yourself (yes, just like you would set a lunch date with a client) to specifically work on your improvement. If you're still having trouble, plan a brief retreat.

PACE

It makes a difference how fast you attempt to make an improvement. If you want to lose 25 pounds before a big event, such as a wedding, you may need to go on a crash diet. Although this may not be the best tactic for your health in the long run, it will help you to look great for the wedding photos.

If, on the other hand, your doctor asks you to lose 25 pounds to improve your overall health, you might set a more gradual pace for weight loss, with tweaks in diet and exercise that will benefit your long-term health.

When making improvements, I like a pace that is aggressive but realistic. This forces me to take into account other priorities that factor into the context of making the desired improvements. And finding the right pace for the improvement process will increase the likelihood that I will stick to it. —Mark Richardson is president of Case Design/Remodeling and Case Handyman Remodeling Services, Bethesda, Md. In 2006, Ernst & Young named him a Maryland Entrepreneur of the Year.