

NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTIONS **BAH HUMBUG!**

REPLACING RESOLUTIONS WITH GOAL-SETTING



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I'll just say it up front. I'm not a fan of the typical New Year's resolution. Emotional commitments without an actual plan - what could go wrong? There is a decent chance that by the time you read these words, you will have set and abandoned some or all your New Year's resolutions. If you haven't yet, there's a good chance that you will before the end of 2026. Shocker! And you might beat yourself up about it to boot.

There is a reason the second Friday in January is designated "Quitter's Day." Tons of studies analyze this phenomenon, all reporting similar patterns. A 2002 article published in the *Journal of Clinical Psychology* stated that out of 159 "resolvers," (those who made resolutions), 54% could not report what the researchers called "continuous success" at the six-month mark. Twenty-one years later, a *Forbes Health/One Poll* survey found that the average resolution lasts just 3.74 months. 8% of respondents stuck with it for one month. Another 22% were done after two months, 22% quit after three months, and finally 13% were toast after four months, leaving only 35% still working on their resolutions.

So is it a waste of time to set goals at the beginning of the year? Can neuroscience help us to be more successful?

The Case For Goal-Setting

The late legendary speaker and author Zig Ziglar was an enthusiastic proponent of goal-setting. He told the tale of Howard Hill, a master archer of the early 20th century. Zig claimed he was such an excellent teacher that he could help you hit a target more regularly and accurately than Mr. Hill, provided Mr. Hill was blindfolded and spun around a few times before shooting his arrow. Zig acknowledged the ridiculousness of the scenario. After all, how can you hit a target you can't see? He then nailed his point by irrefutably concluding, "If you can't hit a target you can't see, how could you possibly hit a target you don't even have?" The 2002 study noted above contrasted results from not only those 159 "resolvers," but also 123 "non-resolvers" who wanted to make changes but did not commit to a New Year's resolution. The results? While 46% of "resolvers" reported "continuous success" midyear, only 4% of "non-

resolvers" enjoyed similar results. Four percent! The verdict? Goals matter.

Why New Year's?

We can feel in sync and motivated when setting goals as we approach the start of a new year. Author Daniel Pink explains the science behind this in his book *When: The Scientific Secrets of Perfect Timing*. He observes that beginnings are powerful because they can create "temporal landmarks," which allow us to separate ourselves from our "old self" and motivate us to make "fresh start" changes with increased optimism and self-regulation. It seems our capacity for hope and aspirations for something better are part of our wiring. But starting can be easy. How can we successfully finish? And how can we use our "wiring" to get there?

Reverse Engineering

"Zone Coach" Jim Fannin teaches that we are taught to go from A to B, and that this is the source of many non-optimal results. Even when we have a plan, we can lose our way. Rather, he highlights the power of visualization, getting crystal clear on the reality we'd

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like to see, and allowing the desirability of that end state to pull us. The clarity puts us in a position to make the compelling vision a reality. We can then work backwards from the end state (from B to A, as Fannin says), determining the sequence and timing of the steps needed to reach the details we visualize in the desired goal.

Getting There

James Clear's *Atomic Habits* provides a treasure trove of helpful nuggets. On my first reading of the book, I found myself a little put off in the first few chapters. He seemed to be arguing against goal-setting. But what he was really doing was trying to adjust the goal-oriented mindset to focus more on the process of achieving goals. Taking reverse engineering to the next level, he teaches how to identify behaviors that incrementally get us where we wish to go. After all, how many New Year's resolutions are about either breaking old habits or creating new ones? Clear brilliantly observes that most of us were trained to make and break habits that work against how our brains function. But it's completely unnecessary – you can work with your brain instead of against it. While determination is essential, just being tougher on ourselves is not necessarily the best strategy. As Clear puts it, "When you fall in love with the process rather than the product, you don't have to wait to give yourself permission to be happy. You can be satisfied any time your system is running." Perhaps Aristotle was right when he said, "We are what we repeatedly do, therefore, excellence is not an act, but a habit."

Don't Give Up

We are really talking about a personal strategic plan. Like any strategic plan, regular reviews and adjustments are vital. Daniel Pink explains that those psychological temporal landmarks are not relegated to years. Using the beginnings of quarters, months, weeks, and even days to revisit our progress can help us focus our attention and energy to move toward our desired state. What a great time to visualize that end state and let the energy and clarity propel us forward!

In addition to *When* and *Atomic Habits*, here are two other books that might be helpful as you chart and work through your strategy for 2026: *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance* by Angela Duckworth, and *The Power of Habit – Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business* by Charles Duhigg.

There are no "hacks" in setting goals, establishing habits, making progress, and reaching a desired end state. Even if you employ James Clear's strategies to work with your brain instead of against it, it's still work. Like so many other things in life, it's the journey, not the destination. And yet, the journey gets us to the destination.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Thomas L. Willis, PCAM, has nearly 40 years of community association experience starting his journey as a business partner and evolving into roles as on-site manager, portfolio manager, management company executive, and consultant. He has been a frequent author, speaker and instructor for CAI National and local chapters, and served on CAI's national faculty. He currently serves on the Keystone Chapter Communications & Content Committee and on the Virginia Leadership Retreat Committee.



Tom founded Association Bridge LLC with a simple mission: to share all he's learned in the trenches with as many as he can before he "croaks." Tom partners with his clients to create practical and actionable plans that pave the way for sustainable and successful communities and companies through education, mentoring, support, visioning, analysis, and application of time-tested tools and strategies. Visit Tom's blog at www.tomasaurusrexblog.com

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