

■ Ringing in the New Year with Old Year Reflections

by Tom Terez

January 1 is fast approaching, and you know what that means. People will be vowing to lose weight, stop smoking, stick to a budget, save money, find a better job, become more organized, exercise more, be more patient, eat better, drink less, and _____ (fill in your own resolution).

New Year resolutions have been with us for 4,000 years, ever since the Babylonians began celebrating the start of each new planting cycle.

The Babylonians really knew how to ring in the new year. They'd party for 11 days, with each day devoted to a theme, before packing up their party hats and pulling out their plows.

Even the king got involved.

The festive folk would symbolically strip the king of his robes and send him away for several days—just to make sure no authorities were around to dampen the party atmosphere. (Think your boss would be open to such a tradition?)

The Babylonians were the first to have New Year resolutions. The most common promises were to return borrowed farm equipment and pay off old debts. Starting on the 12th day, of course.

I'm all for New Year resolutions. In fact, I like them so much that I make them all the time, even without waiting for January 1. I make so many resolutions that my one New Year resolution this year might be to make fewer resolutions.

But do I *keep* these resolutions? And what

about you? Do you keep *your* resolutions?

A study at the University of Washington found some interesting answers. Among people in their study group, 67% made at least three resolutions for the coming new year, and 63% of them stuck with their No. 1 resolution for at least two months. Conclusion: about two out of every five people make and keep a resolution, at least for a while.

What about you? Do you make resolutions for the New Year? Do you keep them as the year unfolds?

Another study, this one conducted by the American Medical Association, found that only 40% of their study participants had any intention of making New Year resolutions. Half of these people went on to keep their promises. Conclusion: one in five people makes New Year commitments and turns them into action.

If the Roman god Janus were around today, he'd have a thing or two to say about this. Enshrined in ancient mythology, he was the god of change, transitions, and beginnings. The Romans named the first month of the year after him.

Janus was often pictured with a set of keys, in keeping with his role as warden of gates. Shrines to him typically took the form of arch-

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ways, gateways, and arcades. In later years, the Romans even exchanged coins embossed with Janus' image, as a way of offering people good fortune in the New Year.

As for his physical appearance, Janus had a face only a mother could love. That's because he had *two* faces—one looking forward, the other backward. This showed his ability to watch entrances *and* exits. Symbolically, it signaled the need to balance our hopes for tomorrow with a keen awareness of what happened yesterday.

I'm sure you don't have much need for Roman mythology. But it strikes me that Janus might know why so many resolutions are forgotten by February. Could it be that we're only looking forward—when we should be looking back in equal measure? We have New Year resolutions. What about Old Year reflections?

Surveys show that rashly made resolutions are the first to fall by the wayside. The University of Washington study found that 65% of their study subjects made their promises between December 28 and New Year's Day. These were the folks most likely to fall off the resolution wagon within a few weeks.

In contrast, resolutions that stick are almost always backed by a strong personal commitment to change. And commitment depends on deep reflection, including an honest look at what unfolded during the recent past. As Janus would tell you, it's not enough to look at the entrance; the exit calls for attention as well.

Much of this reflection is done individually and around dinner tables. But why not open a dialogue in the workplace, too? The arrival of a new year gives us the perfect nudge.

How to proceed? Simple. Make a point of getting together with your colleagues to carve a collective resolution in stone. But don't agree on anything—don't even talk in terms of action—until you've reflected on the past year. Here are several questions you can use in your work group to seed the dialogue:

- If a headline and news article were written to capture our work group's accomplishments for the year, what would they say?
- Forget metrics and scorecards and all the measurable stuff for a moment. What are we plain old proud of from this past year?
- What values were most important to us as the year began? What values seem to be paramount right now? Why the change?
- What would we do differently at work if given the chance to circle back and relive one week of our choosing?

Why not *open a dialogue* in the workplace? The arrival of a new year gives us the perfect nudge.

- What did we learn at work this past year, and how did we learn it?
- Did we stay in touch with our deep interests as individuals, and were we able to apply these passions in the workplace?

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- How well did we nurture a sense of community and teamwork while valuing and leveraging people's unique knowledge, talents, skills, and interests?

Questions like these will spark other questions and open the way to a meaningful conversation. It won't be the easiest or quickest exchange in recent memory, and at first, it might make your metric-minded colleagues a bit queasy. But it could be the most honest and revealing conversation you have all year.

Thoughtful answers to questions like those above will point you and others to just the right

resolutions for the coming year. There's no need to light candles to Janus. Some serious reflection on the past will shine a much brighter light on how you and your co-workers can shape the future.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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