

The Business Brain

The slippery task of sticking to resolutions

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Like most people, my New Year's resolutions fizzled my first week back at work. As vows go, I thought mine were pretty modest – to avoid e-mail until I'd written 400 words a day, and to meet with a financial wizard to whip my retirement savings into shape.

My immediate lapses were due to being hit by the flu, I told myself. Actually, I veered off course because I was cavalier about how long it takes to change ingrained habits, says Piers Steel, a professor at University of Calgary's Haskayne School of Business and author of *The Procrastination Equation*. Summarizing the research on self-restraint, he says it usually takes five attempts before a vow takes hold. And outlandish expectations mean people discount their small-scale, early achievements. "Most people fail at their resolutions because they don't expect to fail," he says. "It's better to ask yourself, 'What do I need to do to get back on the horse?' It's like disaster planning: What are you going to do when things go badly?"

A flu is hardly a disaster, but it did highlight a misconception I had about waylaid plans. I thought it was all about perfectionism (in my case, not writing unless clear-headed). "That's dead wrong," Prof. Steels says. His analysis of nearly 700 studies found that the reasons we drag our feet are less about self-flattery than about self-confidence and self-control.

So what motivates us to scuttle our own fervently held goals? If we were truly rational, as most economists believe we are, we would always choose to do things that bring the biggest payoff, right? Well, not quite.

Another recent book, economist Dan Ariely's lighthearted *The Upside of Irrationality*, reveals why we put off doing now the things we know will bring handsome rewards later. The illogical drivers that come between our intentions and our actions include our fleeting but compelling emotions; how meaningful we perceive the task to be at that exact moment; and the paradox that huge payoffs create performance pressures that demotivate us. "Emotion is designed to override our rational thought ... It eliminates evaluating costs and benefits in favour of the target. That's why people say 'I'll always use a condom,' but when aroused they don't," Prof. Ariely explains, adding that our emotions persuade us to execute a program nature has designed for us, deadlines be damned.

That's because our brains evolved at a time when a bird in the hand was worth two in the bush. Those who ate or mated when the opportunity arose were more likely to pass on their DNA than those who waited for something better to materialize. Eons later, we still get a bigger neurological blast from an immediate, small pleasure (a new smart phone, say) than from an abstract but delayed reward (a fatter annuity in retirement years). "Choices about immediate rewards light up the limbic system," Prof. Steel explains, whereas the more recently evolved prefrontal cortex – the brain's rational decision-maker – keeps the long-term picture in focus.

Sticking to resolutions, then, is all about giving your prefrontal cortex the upper hand. The techniques described in both books work by temporarily blinding the limbic system, keeping temptation out of view. Disabling e-mail and Facebook alerts, for example, can give you an extra month's productivity a year, Prof. Steel notes, while chunking large tasks and "mental contrasting" (identifying a goal and obstacles to it) are like the miracle of parallel parking. They help you close the gap between where you are now, and where you hope to be.

*Susan Pinker is a psychologist and author of *The Sexual Paradox: Extreme Men, Gifted Women and the Real Gender Gap*.*

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