

LAW PRACTICE

Future Perfect

Reforming bad habits in 12 months involves picking a theme, responsibilities and opportunities, making plans and getting guidance. **By Dennis McCue**

A new year is upon us, and it is traditional to resolve to reform bad habits. Yet, if you are like many attorneys, you will make and break most resolutions of New Year's Day in days or weeks. Face it — resolutions just do not work!

Let's try a different approach. First, examine whether you are on track to accomplish your goals. Are you in any ruts? What problems are occurring? What are you learning? Do your relationships work? What corrections are necessary?

Attorneys don't often discuss fear, weakness or problems, but denial and avoidance are in themselves problems. Tell yourself the truth. It is critical, if not easy. If you overlook fears, weaknesses and problems, you probably will attempt more than is realistic, even under the best of circumstances.

More power to you

Personal power is highest when situations are assessed correctly and appropriate actions are taken. By telling yourself the truth, you build the foundation to begin anew.

Evaluate what you'd like to accomplish. Choose a theme. Plan the next 12 months around it. Break this down into your areas of responsibility: partner, attorney, spouse, parent, rainmaker and community member.

Include yourself. Don't ignore your own needs, or you will suffer. Think of yourself as a valuable commodity that needs attention and nurturing. Attorneys often give their automobile more attention than their mind, body and spirit. If you neglect your own needs — physical, spiritual, emotional or mental — you are not likely to produce well in critical legal situations.

Old habits die hard

After listing your responsibilities, examine each to determine whether it is viable. Sometimes,

people outgrow a particular role yet continue in it, because they don't recognize that they simply are hanging on. Sometimes, it is time to move out and go in a new direction.

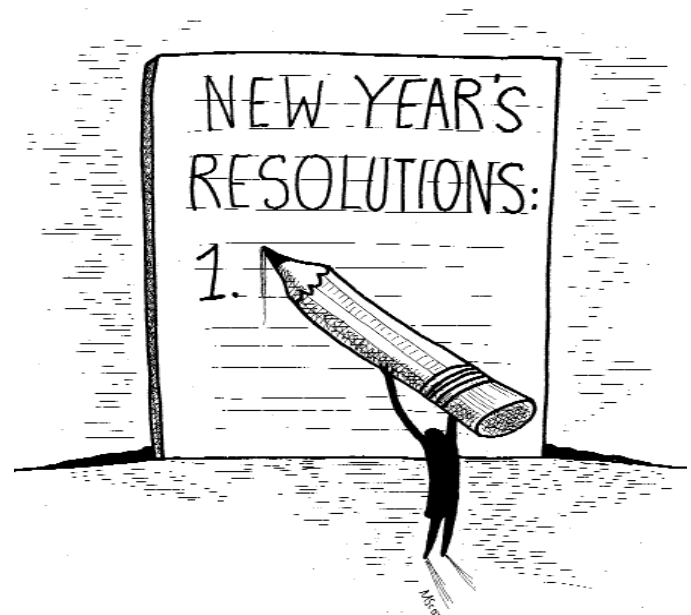
Design new responsibilities or opportunities for the year rather than making specific resolutions. The conscious choice of a new path helps to make you aware of your lack of experience. In this venture, you will experience real growth and the discomfort that comes with learning. Often, fear of this discomfort keeps people from making changes and keeps them in old patterns. Allow for uncertainty, mistakes and failure. Newness brings with it an air of experimentation, enthusiasm and freshness of life.

Now, set goals for each responsibility and opportunity for the next 12 months. After setting your goals, realistically appraise them. You may be an eternal optimist, expecting things to turn out well with little effort. It will not be simple and easy. It will take much time and attention. Old patterns die hard, and shifting them requires focus, determination and discipline.

Plan first, be realistic, write it down

Attention given to good planning will make a great difference in the outcome. If you don't make time to plan, you are unlikely to make significant progress. Real change is usually slow and deliberate. Proper set-up requires determination and allowance for learning, problems and shortcomings.

Plan only what you are realistically able to do. You'll accomplish more and have more satisfaction, too. Try cutting your initial goals in half to allow breathing room for yourself. If you accomplish them easily, you will be better equipped to set more aggressive goals while basking in the thrill of victory. Failure to meet personal goals usually results in negative self-image and self-defeating behavior, so be



conservative in initial planning. There is always more to do than you estimate at first.

Break down your yearly objectives into manageable pieces: monthly, weekly and daily. Maintain calendars that aid in planning and keep records to track progress.

Love and support: both important, not equal

As strange as it may seem, the people who love you and assist you in your practice often are unwittingly holding you back. Spouse, children, employees, partners and friends all have expectations of you. These expectations may or may not be in alignment with what you are trying to accomplish.

These differences in intentions, whether expressed or not, hold you back from accomplishment. Communication with these people is critical, and gaining their alignment is necessary if your venture is to succeed at your desired levels.

Get professional guidance

Hire an independent mentor,

consultant, adviser, coach or teacher. Those who are intent on success do. By doing so, you develop a relationship with someone of your own choosing whose only interest is to have you succeed at what you most care about.

If you doubt this, look at people who absolutely must perform: professional actors, sports figures, corporate presidents and government leaders. All have one or more advisers who help to shape and guide their decisions and actions. They know that the outside input yields better performance.

You know it, too. You provide this type of service to others. Be sure that you are availing yourself of the opportunity that having such guidance can give to you in your professional growth and the health and vitality of your firm.

Dennis McCue is a certified management consultant and is the principal of Dynamic Firm Management, www.dynamicfirm.com, focused on providing management effectiveness and growth to lawyers and professional service firms.