



Life at Work

Amy Joyce, Columnist

Some Promises You Should Keep

No. 1 for 2006: Keep Learning

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At the beginning of a new year, I always like looking at a calendar that I keep on my desk (yes, I'm old school), knowing it's wide open. It's as if that calendar is sitting there saying, "I'm all yours."

It's a fresh feeling. An acknowledgment that no matter what happened last year, I can try again. And no matter what I didn't accomplish in 2005, here's another chance. Lucky me.

The 2006 calendar here on my messy desk is taunting the beat-up 2005 calendar, all folded pages, ripped edges and bent paper clips marking off particular big-event days. The 2005 calendar had its own day when resolutions were still just a thought. It's done. It's over. It's so, well, yesterday. It's time to toss that 2005 calendar and make 2006 resolutions. (First for me: cleaning off a space on this desk for the calendar.)

So what about those 2006 resolutions? Did you make any? Have you given up on making New Year's resolutions? Do you simply change the things you want to change as they come up?

According to Michael Crom, executive vice president for Dale Carnegie Training, 45 percent of workers are making career-oriented resolutions this year. There were probably many work-related resolutions shouted out at the stroke of midnight over a glass of bubbly last night. Do you remember yours through the haze? Here are the resolutions I wish we would all make:

Learn something new. Are you bored at work? Does your job feel like a grind? If it does, then you're bringing everyone down. Including yourself. And it doesn't have to be that way. Learn something new and take it back to the office. If it doesn't apply to your job but you think you could find a job where these new skills will be excitedly put to use, then make a search for that new opportunity part of your resolution.

There are so many classes, groups and organizations out there that can help us expand our brains and inspire us again. It's time to figure out what we want to learn and go for it.

Take Chuck Murphy, who just started a new job in December: "My resolution is to take advantage of a generous tuition reimbursement program and become an invaluable asset to my employer," he said. His organization offers a \$3,500 reimbursement every year, even for non-work-related courses, he said. It awards bonuses for degree milestones and even offers interesting free courses that can be taken at work.

Murphy wants to take accounting, computer application and some programming classes.

It's so easy to know your employer offers this, but not to actually use it. It's free money, and a free education. We should always be learning new things, even if we already have our degree.

Communicate. Do you, as a manager, have a problem with an employee? Tell her. She needs to know. And the more she knows, the more she can fix her problem. Then the better off you, as a manager, are.

Employees: Think something in your workplace needs to change? Figure out what that is and why it needs to change. Then talk to someone about it. There is no use sitting around whining if you are only going to . . . whine.

"In general, you have to be very specific," said Heather Bradley, co-founder of the Flourishing Company, a workplace consulting firm. "If a goal is 'I want to manage my career,' that's great, but what are the action steps you're going to take?"

"Acknowledge first that you are miserable, then decide what you are going to do about it," she said. "Recreational complaining: It has become a lifestyle. You can find lots of other people who take part in that activity. Or you can sit aside from that group and do something different this year."

Great advice. Which leads perfectly into this:

Stop dreaming. Just do it. These resolutions you make will sound exciting and maybe even inspiring. But without finally stepping up and following through on the resolve part of the resolution, it will all mean nothing. Again.

And really, some resolutions don't seem all that mountainous.

One senior administrative assistant who works in a governmental relations office in the District told me she will resolve to get to work on time. Her reason for doing so is primarily to get a good reference because she's also looking for a new job. But it's hard to get a new job if you've left a bad impression with your current boss. So, baby steps, baby: Get to work on time.

"I'm usually famously late," she told me. She's typically 15 to 20 minutes late, she says, because of traffic and a long commute from Laurel. Blah, blah, blah. Time to stop making excuses. If you're 15 minutes late every day, start leaving 15 minutes earlier. How hard is that?

"I'm planning to leave at least a half hour to an hour earlier," she said. I'm hoping to hear back from her that it will happen more than just tomorrow.

Jan. 1 provides the perfect "opportunity to refocus and create a new habit," Crom said. "If you keep that [resolution] going for the month of January . . . that will be a new habit" that you can hold throughout the year.

For me, that starts with clearing the desk off every day. At least the part that holds my calendar.

Happy new year, everyone.

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