



Three Resolutions by Stephen R. Covey

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Well-intentioned resolutions will fall flat in the face of stiff restraining forces without character and social reinforcements.

Every organization and individual struggles to gain and maintain alignment with core values, ethics, and principles. Whatever our professed personal and organizational beliefs, we all face restraining forces, opposition, and challenges - and these sometimes cause us to do things that are contrary to our stated missions, intentions, and resolutions. We may think that we can change deeply imbedded habits and patterns simply by making new resolutions or goals only to find that old habits die hard and that in spite of good intentions and social promises, familiar patterns carry over from year to year.

We often make two mistakes with regard to New Year's resolutions:

First, we don't have a clear knowledge of who we are. Hence, our habits become our identity, and to resolve to change a habit is to threaten our security. We fail to see that we are not our habits. We can make and break our habits. We need not be a victim of conditions or conditioning. We can write our own script, choose our course, and control our own destiny.

Second, we don't have a clear picture of where we want to go; therefore, our resolves are easily uprooted, and we then get discouraged and give up. Replacing a deeply imbedded bad habit with a good one involves much more than being temporarily "psyched up" over some simplistic success formula, such as "think positively" or "try harder." It takes deep understanding of self and of the principles and processes of growth and change. These include assessment, commitment, feedback, follow-through.

We will soon break our resolutions if we don't regularly report our progress to somebody and get objective feedback on our performance. Accountability breeds response-ability. Commitment and involvement produce change. In training executives, we use a step-by-step, natural, progressive, sequential approach to change. In fact, we require executives to set goals and make commitments up front, teach and apply the material each month, and return and report their progress to each other.

If you want to overcome the pull of the past - those powerful restraining forces of habit, custom, and culture - to bring about desired change, count the costs and rally the necessary resources. In the space program, we see that tremendous thrust is needed to clear the powerful pull of the earth's gravity. So it is with breaking old habits.

Breaking deeply imbedded habits such as procrastinating, criticizing, overeating, or oversleeping involves more than a little wishing and willpower. Often our own resolve is not enough. We need reinforcing relationships, people, and programs that hold us accountable and responsible.

Remember: response-ability is the ability to choose our response to any circumstance or condition. When we are response-able, our commitment becomes more powerful than our moods or circumstances, and we keep the promises and resolutions we make. For example, if we put mind over mattress and arise early in the morning, we will earn our first victory of the day (the daily private victory) and gain a certain sense of self-mastery. We can then move on to more public victories. And as we deal well with each new challenge, we unleash within ourselves a fresh capacity to soar to new heights.

Universal Resolutions

In each of our lives, there are powerful restraining forces at work to pull down any new resolution or initiative. Among those forces are 1) appetites and passions, 2) pride and pretension, and 3) aspiration and ambition.

We can overcome these restraining forces by making and keeping the following three resolutions:

First, to overcome the restraining forces of appetites and passions, I resolve to exercise self-discipline and self-denial. Whenever we over-indulge physical appetites and passions, we impair our mental processes and judgments as well as our social relationships. Our bodies are ecosystems, and if our economic or physical side is off-balance, all other systems are affected.

That's why the habit of sharpening the saw regularly is so basic. The principles of temperance, consistency, and self-discipline become foundational to a person's whole life. Trust comes from trustworthiness and that comes from competence and character. Intemperance adversely affects our judgment and wisdom.

I realize that some people are intemperate and still show greatness, even genius. But over time, it catches up with them. Many among the "rich and famous" have lost fortunes and faith, success and effectiveness, because of intemperance. Either we control our appetites and passions, or they control us.

Many corporations and cities have aging inventories and infrastructures; likewise, many executives have aging bodies, making it harder to get away with intemperance. With age, the metabolism changes. Maintaining health requires more wisdom. The older we become, the more we are in the crosscurrents between the need for more self-discipline and temperance and the desire to let down and relax and indulge. We feel we've paid our dues and are therefore entitled to it. But if we get permissive and indulgent with ourselves - overeating, staying up late, or not exercising - the quality of our personal lives and our professional work will be adversely affected.

If we become slaves to our stomachs, our stomachs soon control our mind and will. Gluttony is a perversion of appetite, and to knowingly take things into the body that are harmful or addicting is foolishness. More people in America die of overeating than of hunger. "I saw few die of hunger; of eating, a hundred thousand," observed Ben Franklin. When I overeat or overindulge, I lose sensitivity to the needs of others. I become angry with myself, and I tend to take that anger out on others at the earliest provocation.

Many of us succumb to the longing for extra sleep, rest, and leisure. How many times do you set the alarm or your mind to get up early, knowing all of the things you have to do in the morning, anxious to get the day organized right, to have a calm and orderly breakfast, to have an unhurried and peaceful preparation before leaving for work? But when the alarm goes off, your good resolves dissolve. It's a battle of mind vs. mattress! Often the mattress wins. You find yourself getting up late, then beginning a frantic rush to get dressed, organized, fed and be off. In the rush, you grow impatient and insensitive to others. Nerves get frayed, tempers short - and all because of sleeping in.

A chain of unhappy events and sorry consequences follows not keeping the first resolution of the day to get up at a certain time. That day may begin and end in defeat. The extra sleep is hardly ever worth it. In fact, considering the above, such sleep is terribly tiring and exhausting.

What a difference if you organize and arrange your affairs the night before to get to bed at a reasonable time. I find that the last hour before retiring is the best time to plan and prepare for the next day. Then when the alarm goes off, you get up and prepare properly for the day. Such an early-morning private victory gives you a sense of conquering, overcoming, mastering - and this sense propels you to conquer more public challenges during the day. Success begets success. Starting a day with an early victory over self leads to more victories. Second, to overcome the restraining forces of pride and pretension, I resolve to work on character and competence.

Socrates said: "The greatest way to live with honor in this world is to be what we pretend to be."

This is to be, in reality, what we want others to think we are. Much of the world is image-conscious, and the social mirror is powerful in creating our sense of who we are. The pressure to appear powerful, successful and fashionable causes some people to become manipulative. When you are living in harmony with your core values and principles, you can be straight-forward, honest and up-front. And nothing is more disturbing to a person who is full of trickery and duplicity than straight-forward honesty that's the one thing they can't deal with.

I've been on an extended media tour with my book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, and I've become aware of how everyone is very anxious about the entertainment value of the program. Recently, I was in San Francisco, and I thought I would make my interview more controversial by getting into the political arena. But my comments threw the whole conversation off on a tangent. All the call-ins commented on political points. I lost the power to present my own theme and represent my own material.

Whenever we indulge appetites and passions, we are rather easily seduced by pride and pretension. We then start making appearances, playing roles, and mastering manipulative techniques. If our definition or concept of ourselves comes from what others think of us from the social mirror we will gear our lives to their wants and their expectations; and the more we live to meet the expectations of others, the more weak, shallow, and insecure we become. A junior executive, for example, may desire to please his superiors, colleagues, and subordinates, but he discovers that these groups demand different things of him. He feels that if he is true to one, he may offend the other. So he begins to play games and put on appearances to get along or to get by, to please or appease. In the long run, he discovers that by trying to become "all things to all people," he eventually becomes nothing to everyone. He is found out for who and what he is. He then loses self-respect and the respect of others.

Effective people lead their lives and manage their relationships around principles; ineffective people attempt to manage their time around priorities and their tasks around goals. Think effectiveness with people; efficiency with things.

When we examine anger, hatred, envy, jealousy, pride, and prejudice or any other negative emotion or passion we often discover that at their root lies the desire to be accepted, approved, and esteemed of others. We then seek a shortcut to the top. But the bottom line is that there is no shortcut to lasting success. The law of the harvest still applies, in spite of all the talk of "how to beat the system."

Several years ago, a student visited me in my office when I was a faculty member at the Marriott School of Management, Brigham Young University. He asked me how he was doing in my class. After developing some rapport, I confronted him directly: "You didn't really come in to find out how you are doing in the class. You came in to find out how I think you are doing. You know how you are doing in the class far better than I do, don't you?"

He said that he did, and so I asked him, "How are you doing?" He admitted that he was just trying to get by. He had a host of reasons and excuses for not studying as he ought, for cramming and for taking shortcuts. He came in to see if it was working.

If people play roles and pretend long enough, giving in to their vanity and pride, they will gradually deceive themselves. They will be buffeted by conditions, threatened by circumstances and other people. They will then fight to maintain their false front. But if they come to accept the truth about themselves, following the laws and principles of the harvest, they will gradually develop a more accurate concept of themselves.

The effort to be fashionable puts one on a treadmill that seems to go faster and faster, almost like chasing a shadow. Appearances alone will never satisfy; therefore, to build our security on fashions, possessions, or status symbols may prove to be our undoing. Edwin Hubbell Chapin said: "Fashion is the science of appearances, and it inspires one with the desire to seem rather than to be."

Certainly, we should be interested in the opinions and perceptions of others so that we might be more effective with them, but we should refuse to accept their opinion as a fact and then act or react accordingly. Third, to overcome the restraining forces of unbridled aspiration and ambition, I resolve to dedicate my talents and resources to noble purposes and to provide service to others.

If people are "looking out for number one" and "what's in it for me," they will have no sense of stewardship, no sense of being an agent for worthy principles, purposes, and causes. They become a law unto themselves - a principal.

They may talk the language of stewardship, but they will always figure out a way to promote their own agenda. They may be dedicated and hard working, but they are not focused on stewardship - the idea that you don't own anything, that you give your life to higher principles, causes, purposes. Rather, they are focused on power, wealth, fame, position, dominion, and possessions.

The ethical person looks at every economic transaction as a test of his or her moral stewardship. That's why humility is the mother of all other virtues because it promotes stewardship. Then everything else that is good will work through you. But if you get into pride into "my will, my agenda, my wants" then you must rely totally upon your own strengths. You're not in touch with what Jung calls "the collective unconscious" the power of the larger ethos which unleashes energy through your work.

Aspiring people seek their own glory and are deeply concerned with their own agenda. They may even regard their own spouse or children as possessions and try to wrest from them the kind of behavior that will win them more popularity and esteem in the eyes of others. Such possessive love is destructive.

Instead of being an agent or steward, they interpret everything in life in terms of "what it will do for me." Everybody then becomes either a competitor or conspirator. Their relationships, even intimate ones, tend to be competitive rather than cooperative. They use various methods of manipulation such as threat, fear, bribery, pressure, deceit, and charm to achieve their ends.

Until people have the spirit of service, they might say they love a companion, company or cause, but they often despise the demands these make on their lives. Double-mindedness, having two conflicting motives or interests, inevitably sets a man at war within himself and an internal civil war often breaks out into war with others. The opposite of double-mindedness is self-unity or integrity. We achieve integrity through the dedication of ourselves to selfless service of others.

Implications for Personal Growth

Unless we control of our appetites, we will not be in control of our passions and emotions. We will, instead, become victims of our passions, seeking or aspiring our own wealth, dominion, prestige, and power.

I once tried to counsel a junior executive to be more committed to higher principles. It appeared futile. Then I began to realize that I was asking him to conquer the third temptation before he had conquered the first. It was like expecting a child to walk before crawl. So I changed the approach and encouraged him to first discipline his body. We then got great results.

If we conquer some basic appetites first, we will have the power to make good on higher level resolutions later. For example, many people would experience a major transformation if they would maintain normal weight through a healthy diet and exercise program. They would not only look better, but they would also feel better, treat others better, and increase their capacity to do the important but not necessarily urgent things they long to do.

Until you can say "I am my master," you cannot say "I am your servant." In other words, we might profess a service ethic, but under pressure or stress we might be controlled by a particular passion or appetite. We lose our temper. We become jealous, envious, lustful or slothful. Then we feel guilty. We make promises and break them; make resolutions and break them. We gradually lose faith in our own capacity to keep any promises. Despite our ethic to be the "servant of the people," we become the servant or slave of whatever masters us.

This reminds me of the plea of Richard Rich to Thomas More in the movie, *A Man For All Seasons*. Richard Rich admired More's honesty and integrity and wanted to be employed by him. He pleaded, "Employ me." More answered, "No." Again Rich pleaded, "Employ me," and again the answer was no. Then Rich made this pitiful yet endearing promise: "Sir Thomas, employ me. I would be faithful to you."

Sir Thomas, knowing what mastered Richard Rich, answered, "Richard, you can't even so much as answer for yourself tonight," meaning, "You might profess to be faithful now, but all it will take is a different circumstance, the right bribe or pressure, and you will be so controlled by your ambition and pride that you could not be faithful to me." Sir Thomas More's prognosis came to pass that very night, for Richard Rich betrayed him!

The key to growth is to learn to make promises and to keep them. Self-denial is an essential element in overcoming all three temptations. "One secret act of self-denial, one sacrifice of inclination to duty, is worth all the mere good thoughts, warm feelings, passionate prayers, in which idle men indulge themselves," said John Henry Newman. "The worst education which teaches self-denial is better than the best which teaches everything else and not that," said Sterling.

Making and keeping these three universal resolutions will accelerate our self-development and, potentially, increase our influence with others.