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„Crossing Your Personal Rubicon“

*The Road to hell is said to be paved with them: good intentions that we never realize.
But you can do something about that*

Do you plan to make New Year's resolutions ? Or do you resolve to do nothing, because you know that you will surely fail to make good on your intentions? Why don't people carry out what they claim to have always wanted to do? Time and again, we make big plans but do not follow through. At the Max Planck Institute for Psychological Research in Munich (now the Max Planck Institute for Human Cognitive and Brain Sciences), the late Heinz Heckhausen and his successor Peter Gollwitzer extensively studied this problem. The two motivational psychologists developed the so-called Rubicon model, which describes a plan's various stages of maturation from wish to realization. The model's name refers to the river in northern Italy that General Julius Caesar and his army crossed in 49 B.C., thereby disobeying the Senate and triggering a civil war in the Roman Empire. „Crossing the Rubicon“ has come to mean the act of passing a critical point of no return.

New Year's resolutions are, in our minds, usually somewhat less than this kind of firm threshold. They merely represent simple desires or motives that emerge from our unconscious needs and are, as such, only the first step in the process of realization. For these desires to become actual resolutions – or firm intentions – we have to cross our own psychological Rubicon. Only with purposeful aim can we overcome the various pitfalls that inevitably lurk on the way to every long-term goal.

How does one realize that he or she has made his first step toward realization? Try to remember something that you always wanted whole heartedly. You probably felt a strong positive feeling – something like an electrifying energy or just simple joy. Such bodily feelings are called somatic markers – signals from our emotional memory, where our experiences are weighed and memorized. These emotions can help us find out how far a wish has advanced toward fulfillment and can thus help us revitalize those half-forgotten New Year's resolutions.

Consider, for example, the plans of schoolteacher Joan Smith (not her real name). Fearing burnout, she resolves to reduce her workload in the new year. But after several weeks, Joan becomes aware that she is not realizing her goals. Why? It is obvious: she has not crossed her Rubicon yet. When she talks to the school principal, she expresses no joyful emotion about limiting her workload. „Well, I know I should cut down on work,“ she sighs, „but somehow I don't want't to. I'm not that old! I keep telling myself that I should say „no“ when the next project comes up. And every time, I find it so interesting that I become excited. I just agreed to go on a school

trip or take a snowboarding course in order to test some new pedagogic concepts. You know, this trip is led by a young colleague; he is such a talented teacher ...“

As soon as Joan starts talking about the physical education teacher's new ideas, clear somatic markers appear: her face brightens, her cheeks redden, her eyes are wide open and her gestures become emphatic. Her enthusiasm for her work is highly visible.

Plum Tactics

How can she resolve her work dilemma? Joan still wants to do fascinating projects. „If I could pick only the plum jobs and leave the boring rest to someone else, that would be great!“ she says longingly – thus showing that she has crossed her personal Rubicon. Consequently, she begins to regard her workload under her „plum“ rule. She delegates less interesting tasks and focuses her energy on projects she finds stimulating.

*Emotional signals can help us find out **how far a wish has advanced toward fulfillment** and can thus help us revitalize those half-forgotten New Year's resolutions.*

In contrast, Henry Jones can't seem to get out of his hardworking mode. At age 45, the food importer has recently become a father again. He rarely saw his two sons – now teenagers – during their early childhood and wants to reduce his hours so he can spend more time with his baby daughter, Eva. Despite positive somatic markers – for instance, when talking about baby Eva's first steps and his intense feelings as a father – he simply does not succeed in carrying out his plan. His problem is that he is struggling to reconcile the (usually helpful) ability of the brain to automate repetitive processes.

Within fractions of a second, our mind perceives a given situation, analyzes it, and searches our personal repertoire of memorized activities and reactions for an appropriate behavior or response. If certain situations occur fairly often and if a particular behaviour or strategy solves them successfully, the repetition reinforces links between nerve cells in the brain that cause these reactions. Recurring situations create durable neuronal networks that respond to certain stimuli with established responses – fully automated and unconscious.

Useful as this process is most of the time, however, it also makes it difficult to change established routines. Henry says his small business was successful because he was „always prepared“. As his father taught him: „To be independent is not a job. It must be in your character. Henry learned that lesson too well. Neuronal networks created in early childhood are particularly persistent and resistant. Henry's instinctive „always prepared“ network makes him say, „No problem, I will deliver the antipasti on Saturday night,“ while at the same time he is thinking, „No, I have promised to tell Eva a bedtime story!“

He is fully conscious of his intention but unable to change his behavior.

Fatal Triggers

How can Henry escape his habits? He must develop specific and precise guidelines for certain situations and memorize them: „If X happens, I will do Y.“ To his effect, he keeps a log for a week and notes the occasions when he catches himself sabotaging his intentions. In this way, he can determine the triggers that activate the old, unwanted routines. Once he has identified those triggers, he can exchange them for stimuli that activate a new neuronal „free time“ network whenever the situation occurs and thus reinforce his intention, until „free time“ is fully automated and replaces his „always prepared“ network.

At the time of the baby's birth, Henry resolved to take off every Wednesday and Friday afternoon to spend time with his family. He instructed his secretary not to make any appointments, but after just a few weeks, he caught himself working on those afternoons. Now he knows why: he undermined the achievement of his intention with his personal digital assistant. Whenever Henry consults his daily schedule on the PDA, he learns that he squeezes additional appointments into the remaining available free time. He also finds that he sometimes drops by to see a customer while he is on his way home. This „salami tactic“ of cutting thin slices off his spare time soon whittled it away.

The trigger for the always-prepared network is thus unmasked: free slots in the appointment list of his PDA. Henry then decides to turn his electronic organizer into a helpful tool to protect his reserved free time. He sets his PDA to display daily overviews in a so-called block mode, in which thick black strokes represent specific time segments.

The trick works. „As soon as I see these strokes, I find it easier to decline a new task,“ Henry reports some weeks later. „And I am no longer tempted to put something there or move something there.“

And what about your New Year's resolutions? Will you cross the Rubicon or find yourself running up and down the riverbank? To find out, you should first look for your own positive somatic markers. Do you experience an energizing, good feeling related to your resolution? If so, congratulations, you have already made the critical first step. If the realization stalls, however, try Henry's strategy: keep a logbook to identify the trigger and help you establish a new neuronal network.

*Hardworking Henry **struggled to reconcile his desire for free time with the (usually helpful) ability of the brain to automate repetitive processes.***

Choose Your Path

If, however, your decision-making memory remains silent or reacts negatively, you must make a choice. You can give up on your intention. (Unless your health is threatened, why not just ban the scale from your bathroom forever and thus bury the idea of a diet for the rest of your life?) Or you can run through various possible solutions, either in your own mind or by talking to people whom you trust.

If crossing your personal Rubicon still poses difficulties even after such efforts, it may be worth using a coach or psychologist as a ferry. Usually a few sessions are sufficient to bring the other riverbank within reach.