To Keep Your Office Resolutions, Start Small

By EILENE ZIMMERMAN

Q. It’s two weeks into the new year, and you can already see your work-related resolutions start to fall by the wayside. This happens every year, so why do you keep setting these kinds of goals?

A. We live in a very goal-oriented culture. And we are accustomed to setting goals for the new year in the belief that they help us move forward in big and small ways, says E.J. Masicampo, an assistant psychology professor at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, N.C., who studies goals and goal planning. “Goals can be extremely effective, depending on how people set and approach them,” he says. “They can inspire you and help you keep the bigger picture in mind.”

Q. Then why do so many goals or resolutions go unfulfilled?

A. One reason that New Year’s resolutions often fail — especially big, sweeping ones — is that people ultimately decide they aren’t worth the trouble, says Eric Schumacher, an associate psychology professor at the Georgia Institute of Technology in Atlanta who studies goal-oriented behavior. “The reward is so far in the future that we don’t stay motivated to keep moving toward it,” he says. “When you set smaller, specific goals, your brain can activate behaviors it knows will help you achieve them.”

If, for example, you have a vague goal of moving into management this year, your brain will probably have trouble pinpointing the behaviors you need to get there. But if you instead set a smaller goal beneath the larger one, such as networking with two additional people each week, you now have a specific behavior associated with achieving that bigger goal, Mr. Schumacher says.
Another reason we fail to achieve goals is a lack of emotional investment in them, says Anne Dranitsaris, a corporate psychotherapist and owner of Striving Styles, a consulting firm in Toronto. She says we set resolutions believing that our thoughts drive our behavior, even though we are often “motivated to action by our emotions.” So it’s important to know what motivates you — for example, the need for recognition or power and control — and set goals with that in mind, she says.

For example, if you know you’re motivated by recognition from colleagues, setting a goal to be a good team player will be hard to achieve, says Ms. Dranitsaris. That’s because “being a team player means being more collaborative; you need to distinguish yourself from others, not be more like them,” she says. An example of a better goal is to be your department’s top sales performer. “You would stand out not only to your peers but to your leader, which will be satisfying for you,” she says.

Fear and anxiety, however, can undermine your efforts. If your goal is to find a new job, and if you are a very social person with many friends at the office, you may be anxious about leaving that behind. As a result, you procrastinate and decide you need someone to help you redo your résumé, when you are perfectly capable of doing it yourself. “Next thing you know it’s April and you haven’t found the right person to do it,” says Ms. Dranitsaris, co-author of “Who Are You Meant to Be?”

Maybe a goal is simply not worth keeping. Becoming too narrowly focused on certain objectives can make you so single-minded that you don’t see other opportunities to learn, innovate or improve, says Peter Bregman, C.E.O. of Bregman Partners, a leadership consulting firm in New York.

Q. Some goals are short term and some are long term. How do you set goals that are, most of all, achievable?

A. Set an overall goal and then smaller milestone goals at short intervals, says Sheronde Glover, the chief executive of the Business Practitioner, a business consulting and training firm in Atlanta. “With goal-setting, what’s missing is
usually the action steps,” she says. “People think about what they want, but they don’t think through what will actually need to happen to get there.”

Say you have the goal of a specific promotion at work. “Clarify what it would take to get into that position,” she says. “Maybe you don’t have all the leadership and public speaking skills you will need, so your first goal becomes enhancing those. That may involve joining a Toastmasters group, taking a management course or working with a particular coach. Establish what needs to happen in three months, six months and nine months.”

Ms. Glover says you should also consider the time, effort and money that may be involved: “If you work all day and have a family, where do you fit Toastmasters in? Think through the sacrifices and compromises you will have to make.”