

Creating Your Own Future

*Seven Practices for
Turning Resolutions into Reality*

Bruce Elkin

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Seven Practices for Turning Resolutions into Reality

“Quitting smoking is easy!” claimed my friend Kim. “I’ve done it hundreds of times.”

We’d been talking about New Years resolutions. Coming up with resolutions is not difficult, I’d argued, but putting them into action and sustaining them can be. Kim thought making resolutions was a fun kind of New Year’s ritual but didn’t expect it to really produce results. I did.

Most people, I think, want their resolutions to produce lasting results. However, many of my coaching clients report that for years, early in January, they’d set goals, written out plans, and tried to live up to the resolutions they’d made. They’d resolved to quit smoking, lose weight, get in shape, be a nicer person, make more (or less) money or any of a thousand things they thought they should do. However, each year, something had happened to upset their plans. They’d ignored their resolve and, eventually, drifted back into comfortable but ineffective habits. Instead of reaping results and good feelings, they felt frustrated, guilty, and depressed.

Sound familiar?

If it is, don’t beat yourself up. That will just make things worse. There *is* another way. You can learn to make resolutions that lead to the results you most want to create. The seven practices outlined below are not a magic formula. They have, however, helped millions just like you turn resolutions into reality. There are three keys to making these practices work for you.

First, see resolutions as results—things you want to *create*—rather than solutions to problems. Don’t think about those twenty pounds you want to get rid of. Think about the lean, fit, healthy body you want and how you’d feel if you created it.

Focussing on problems—on what you *don't* like and *don't* want—feels bad. Research shows it depresses people. It decreases energy. It's hard to sustain. You're more likely to create relief than results. However, *creating*—bringing into being what you *do* want—feels good. It's engaging. It energizes you. It is easier to sustain lasting results. The bonus is that, when you're creating what you want, most of your problems quietly dis-solve.

The second key is to accept that your ordinary self is good enough. You do not have to be anyone other than who you are to create what matters. True, you may have to learn some new skills and strategies but you can do that. Not knowing, yet, how to make resolutions produce doesn't say anything about the kind of person you are. It just says you don't know how to do it—*yet*. So what? You can learn. That's what the practices below are for. They can help you learn how to create almost anything. So, accept yourself. Learn to create. Enjoy your results.

The final key is practice. Desire alone does not lead to success. You need to practice creating just as you would practice a sport or an instrument. Practice develops personal mastery—the capacity to create. Practice makes potential possible. Practice enables you to turn visions into reality. As the great violinist Jascha Heifetz once said, “The only way to get to Carnegie Hall is to practice, practice, practice.”

Keep these three keys in mind as you experiment with the following seven practices.

1. Create a clear, compelling vision of what you want to create.

Creators focus on what they want to bring into being, not on what they want to get rid of. "I wish I could lose weight" becomes "*I choose to create a lean, well-toned and athletic body.*" "Quitting smoking" becomes "*Creating the clean, strong, fit and healthy lungs of a non-smoker.*" By the way, every person I've worked with who chose to be a non-smoker succeeded. Most of those who chose to quit smoking had the same experience my friend Kim had.

It's fine to start creating with a concept like “success” or “a great relationship.” However, you must be able to envision the specifics of the success or relationship that you want to create. Does success involve making a lot of money? Or does it involve being able to live richly on very little?

Vision focuses energy and generates power. You increase your odds of producing the results you most want by focusing concepts into visions that are clear and compelling. They don't have to be perfectly clear, just clear enough that you would recognize them if you created them. Which, for example, is more compelling? The concept, "A new car." Or, the vision of "A candy-apple red, 2003 Miata convertible with a black top, beige leather interior, and a six-speaker Alpine CD and stereo system."

Envision your result as if you have already created it. Describe it in the present tense. "I am fit, healthy, and energetic. I weigh "x" pounds, wear size "x" slacks, and can ski all day without fatigue. I feel terrific and people compliment me on how healthy and robust I look."

This is not positive thinking or affirmation. You are not telling yourself you *will* get this result or that you already have it. You are simply picturing what it would look like if you created it. Later you commit to your result by choosing it and then taking action to support your choice.

Vision does not have to be realistic; it has to be what you *truly* want. You, like the Wright Brothers, won't know if it's realistic or even possible until you try it. So let your aspirations soar. Be visionary. Grounding vision in reality is the next step. Later, in the action phase, you can set realistic goals that help bridge the gap between where you are and where you want to be.

2. Assess Current Reality Accurately and Objectively

Vision by itself has little power. If it's not rooted in reality, vision is merely wishful thinking. You need to know your destination *and* your starting point. If you want to go to Vancouver and think you're in Victoria, but you're really in Calgary, you will waste precious time and energy searching for a ferry terminal. Creators carefully assess where they are and what they have in relationship to the results they want to create. Moreover, they never limit their vision to make it fit current reality. Instead, they change reality so it supports their vision.

Unfortunately, however, many of us ordinary folks tend to misrepresent reality to ourselves. Instead of describing reality we judge it. For example, we might say, "Everything is screwed up," when only a small part of our life might not be working. Or we might say, "Everything is great," when it really isn't. When we distort reality, exaggerate it, or leave out what we don't like about it

and add what we do, we create a shaky foundation for action. By not telling the truth about the reality, we decrease the likelihood of creating the results we want.

The key to assessing current is describe, don't judge it. Describing reality adds clarity and power to your actions. Instead of saying, "*Everything* is screwed up," you might say, "I'm behind in a couple of assignments at work but my relationship with my partner is improving, my health is top notch, and I'm putting \$100 a month into an RSP." The second statement is much more likely to motivate you take action than the first. The first statement is likely to make you feel helpless, hopeless, and depressed.

3. Hold Vision and Reality Together to Set Up Creative Tension

Hold a clear picture in your mind of where you want to go *together with* an accurate, objective description of your current reality. Doing so sets up a discrepancy—a gap—between vision and reality out of which a useful, *creative* tension emerges. Creative tension drives out the emotional tension that accompanies problem solving. It generates energy that you can use to move from where you are to where you want to be. Moreover, it allows you the flexibility to explore and experiment without getting lost in the process.

Imagine a rubber band stretched between Vision and Current Reality. The tension in the rubber band wants to resolve. There are only three ways it can do so. You can let go of your vision and give up your goals. You can lower your vision and compromise your goals. Or you can change reality so that you move toward your vision. Only the latter leads to successful results. The key to success is orchestrating creative tension by making choices and taking actions that support your vision. Holding vision and reality in mind together forms a kind of container for creativity, a framework in which you can experiment, explore, and try out different strategies and tactics.

4. Take small steps. Create and adjust.

Many of us are closet perfectionists. We demand that our first steps be perfect. So, either we give up when we falter, or the fear of failing prevents us from acting in the first place. The key to getting started is taking small, easy steps. See each step as an experiment that teaches you what to

do next. If you don't like a result, adjust your action. If you make a wrong decision, make another one. Mistakes are merely messages; failure is simply feedback. Try again, or try something else. Go for getting better, not for being perfect.

If you're not sure where to start, I suggest you work backward from vision to non-threatening "first steps" by asking, "*Can I do this today?*" If you can't, ask, "*What must I get done first?*"

If, for example, your vision is to be fit, healthy and energetic enough to run a half-marathon but you get winded walking up stairs, you obviously can't do it today. So what must you do first? Build an aerobic base. Can you do that today? No. What must you do first? Use the questions to work back to small steps that you can do right now. That's where to start. Identify your first steps and then do them.

Identifying first steps overcomes inertia and fear. Taking several steps successfully creates a pattern of success. Patterns of success increase confidence and help you stretch toward larger steps. Doing so builds momentum. Personally, I think momentum is far more important than motivation. Even the biggest results are usually made up of small, steady actions that build the momentum needed to follow through to completion.

5. Build Momentum

Any time things go wrong can be a "strategic moment." In workshops, I teach students to use unwanted circumstances as a chance to re-create creative tension, get back on track, and build motivation. The "Strategic Moment Technique" includes five steps. When something does not go the way you would prefer it to go:

1. Notice what is happening. Notice what you are saying to yourself about the situation, about yourself, and about any others who might be involved.
 2. Ask yourself if what you are saying is consistent with what you *really* want. Is it true? Is it accurate and objective? If it isn't, change how you describe it to make it so.
 3. Ask yourself, "What *do* I want?" Envision a fully realized picture of what you want.
 4. Formally choose what you want. Say, "I choose..." and add the vision of your desired result.
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5. Move on. Take whatever next step occurs to you, or do something else and come back to what you were doing later.

This technique is simple yet incredibly powerful. You can use it when you are angry, frustrated, depressed, or any time things don't go the way you'd like. It quickly shifts your focus from problem solving to creating and your mood from negative to energetic. Most important, it keeps you moving, building momentum that can act as another force on your behalf.

6. Practice, Practice, Practice!

Few of us are born with the skills and talent to achieve all our visions. But, we *are* learners. We can try things, correct mistakes, and practice until the new becomes natural. Practice may not make us perfect, but it will make us better—and the road to success *always* runs through better.

For example, one of my clients wanted to be a “good guitar player,” but was put off because she wasn't “good.” So she never practiced. Then a friend showed her a simple, three-chord country song. After a little practice and coaching, she played it. Now she was confused. She wasn't good, but she could play a song on the guitar. I helped her see that, instead of demanding that she be good, she could focus on getting better. I also helped her change her judgment that she “was not good,” to a more accurate description that she “was not good, *yet*.” In no time she was playing well. Making success an all or nothing leap often leaves you with nothing. Creating success is a step-by-step process of patience and practice.

7. Know When You Reach Your Goal

It's not enough to say, "I want to be successful". Without guidelines for judging results you are like a dog chasing its tail, seeking success but never knowing when you achieve it. To get the full power of the creative process you have to know when you've completed your creation. You're done when reality matches your vision. This is why vision is best when it's specific rather than general. Then you can assess your result against the specifics and see if it matches your vision. If it does, you're done. Move on to your next creation.

Completing a creation and living with the results generates new energy with which to initiate new creations. When Picasso was asked what his favorite painting was, he immediately answered,

“My next one!” Finish fully, acknowledge your results and celebrate your success. Success builds on success.

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“Those who do not create the future they want,” warns systems expert Draper L. Kaufman, Jr., “must endure the future they get.” Now is the time to become the creator of your own future. Focus your vision and action on what you *most* want. Think big, start small, and get better. Learn from your mistakes, build momentum, and follow through to completion.

Applying these practices consistently could make a major difference in your life. Doing so has helped clients of mine create new small and home-based businesses, shift careers, redesign and renovate their home, build the studio they’d always wanted, find their dream job, spend winters in Mexico, craft a mutually loving relationship and just generally feel freer, more engaged, fully alive, and in the flow.

Again, these practices are not a formula. This is just one recipe for success. True success comes when you can create your own recipes. Mastering your own creative process will help you invent your own tools for creating results and becoming the person you most want to be. Go for it!

The philosopher Goethe said, “*What ever you can do, or dream you can do, begin it. Boldness has genius, power and magic in it.*” So why not be bold this New Years. Take charge of your future. Try these seven practices and see if you don’t turn your resolutions into reality.

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