

# **LeaderPerfect Newsletter**

January 1, 2004

## **Benchmark Your Progress**

by Dr. Mike Armour

As I write, it's New Year's Day 2004. A day for making resolutions. For looking ahead. And for a moment or so, looking back.

The morning's newspaper offers a recap of the past year's "top news stories." A sidebar adds an compendium of top news stories for the past ten years. There's a hauntingly tragic theme to the listing. For 2003, not surprisingly, the top story was the Iraqi war. In 2001, the 9-11 attack. In 1997, the death of a princess. The year before that, the explosion of a TWA jet over Long Island. And back still another year, the Oklahoma City bombing.

Not one "top story" over the past ten years was something to celebrate. Scandal, disaster, and crisis were the common thread.

Which brings me back to New Year's resolutions. I've noticed that when people talk about their personal resolutions, they normally mention fixing things that are out of whack. Things like losing weight. Or getting out of debt. Or completing those half-finished projects. Few of their resolutions are goals related to last year's accomplishments and how to capitalize on them.

Which likely means that our review of the past year focused more on the bad news than the good news. That we zeroed in on setbacks more than successes. What a shame!! When we preoccupy ourselves with shortcomings and setbacks, we lose sight of how much progress we've already made. As a result, we rob ourselves of the positive energy and motivation that come from feelings of genuine accomplishment.

### **Losing A Sense Of Progress**

Let me illustrate by borrowing from the world of work. Several years ago Shoshana Zuboff, a professor of social science at Harvard Business School, wrote an insightful book entitled *In the Age of the Smart Machine*. It chronicled the impact of computerization on scores of "worker-bee" jobs in America. She looked at clerical workers in New York. Paper mill workers in the deep South. And hundreds of others in jobs far from the top management suite.

What she found was an interesting self-image crisis among workers. In an unanticipated way, the computer had taken away their sense of daily accomplishment. And they were wrestling with unprecedented morale issues as a result.

For instance, clerical workers had historically been able to measure their workday achievement by visually monitoring the number of files that moved from their in-basket to the out-basket. With the advent of computers, however, a file was called up from ether space, the worker made some type of input, and the file departed once more into ether space, headed for destinations unknown. Gone was the feedback of seeing one stack of files grow shorter while the other grew taller. And with that loss of feedback, gone, too, was the sense of daily accomplishment.

To cite another example, Zuboff discovered that computerization had cost paper mill workers their primary source of confidence that the paper-making process was running properly. Historically the workers would test the pulp slurry by squeezing a sample between their fingers, sniffing it, and perhaps even tasting it. Through this sensory feedback, they knew that things were running as they should.

Automated paper mills changed all that. Now, sitting at a control console, workers monitored numbers on a screen. The display actually gave them more information than the old sensory-feedback system. But absent that familiar feedback, they struggled to feel confident that they were performing well.

## **Making Your List**

Like those workers in Zuboff's study, we all thrive on benchmarks that confirm our progress and success. That's why it's important, while making New Years resolutions, to spend some time listing — literally listing on a piece of paper — the significant things that were accomplished last year.

When you start this exercise, be prepared for a surprise. As the list grows longer, you're going to be amazed at how many good things that happened last year have already slipped from quick recall. You had to think about last year at length before they came to mind.

If they are that far from conscious recall, then they've lost their motivational "oomph." They've receded so far into the background that they give you little or no sense of accomplishment.

That's the value of this exercise. It restores those milestones to conscious awareness, where they serve to motivate. They offer a firm reminder of how far you truly came last year. Yes, there were setbacks and shortfalls. Granted. But that hardly tells the whole story. The full story probably has much more to celebrate than to wring our hands over.

For some strange reason, we more readily recall bad things that happened last year than we do good things. Dwelling on things that went wrong, however, motivates none of us.

So put this article aside. Get out a pencil and paper. And start building your list. Then, with those achievements fresh in mind, generate some additional resolutions for the new year, resolutions that build even further on past year's progress and achievement.

© 2004, MCA Professional Services Group, LLC

*This article may be posted to a web site so long as all copyright notices are preserved, along with an associated link to [www.leaderperfect.com](http://www.leaderperfect.com). You are also free to circulate this document in hard-copy form so long as the copyright statement and this notice remain attached.*