

Professional Development: The five New Year's resolutions every professional should make

Practical steps for advancing your career in 2013

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A new year presents new opportunities to move your career forward or stretch in ways you hadn't thought possible. Here are a few resolutions to help you take stock and get started. Pace yourself so that the steps don't become too overwhelming and are realistically achievable. And good luck in the coming months!

1. **Own your career.** Don't wait for your company's annual or semiannual performance review to consider career plans and set goals. Create your own career road map. Be proactive in thinking about where you'd like to be in a year, two years or five years from now, and formulate a strategy to get there. Communicate your career plans to your managers and, instead of waiting for them to assess your progress, ask for feedback and guidance so that you can make timely improvements or needed adjustments along the way. What's more, ask them to suggest challenging projects you can participate in to develop the skills you'll need for that next position. The key is not to sit back and let life take its course, but to take life by the reigns. Be your own career champion.
2. **Set SMART goals.** A SMART goal is one that is specific, measurable, actionable, realistic and time-bound. These criteria are key, because they force you to be clear about what it is you want to accomplish and then hold yourself accountable. Set one goal that allows you to seize opportunities, challenge yourself and stay ahead of the game. (If you have a long-term goal, pare it down into digestible chunks.) To ensure that your goals are meaningful for career development within your organization, align them with the business objectives of your firm.
3. **Hone self-awareness.** Self-awareness is a core leadership skill. After all, one must understand his or her own strengths and weaknesses in order to grow. To get a clearer picture of your skills and areas for development, in addition to performing a self-assessment, perform a 360-degree assessment, in which you systematically gather opinions about your performance from a range of colleagues. This way, not only will you be looking within yourself, but you'll also be obtaining feedback from others who may have observations about your blind spots.
4. **Create change, welcome change, embrace change.** You may have heard the saying "change is the only constant." Though that's true, here's another saying I like: "Change is also opportunity." Try something new to get out of your comfort zone, whether it is learning another tax, auditing or accounting area, or marketing your services to a different audience. Taking that first step will open doors for you, since change is all around us, personally and professionally. As you read this, there is some level of change taking place within your organization. Participate in it. In fact, be a change champion and drive the change, if you dare. In this day and age, everyone is expected to be a change agent, and you must be one to succeed.
5. **Have more face-to-face meetings.** Technology enables us to easily connect and communicate with one another via email, phone, text and social media. While convenient, it, unfortunately, can lead to the loss of impact and rapport we could have otherwise had face to face. The most impactful meeting is one that is conducted in person, allowing people to engage one another through all modes of communication: words, tone and body language, which accounts for 55 percent of the overall message. So, get out of your office and meet a client, mentor or colleague for coffee or tea. You'll build skills that will enable you to be an effective communicator.

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Changes that firms can incorporate

New Year's resolutions aren't just useful for individuals—they can benefit firms as well. Here are a few that yours should consider.

1. **Engage your talents.** In 2013, make sure your employees know that they are valued, by appreciating their contributions, ideas and feedback, offering coaching and mentoring, and stimulating their development through challenging assignments.
2. **Create a learning culture.** Invest in your employees' career development and commit to building a nurturing environment in which they can engage in continued education in all areas, not just compliance. It's great for employee engagement and retention, and in return, you'll be strengthening workforce expertise and building a talent pipeline.
3. **Align your talent strategies with business strategies.** Have you communicated your business strategies to your employees and human resources (recruiting, staffing, training) department? People are your most important asset. It is essential for them to not only fit into the big picture, but to understand how they are a *part* of it. Here are some helpful questions that firm leadership should ask themselves: Does your workforce have the skills you'll need in a few years? How can you continue to contain cost in this economy, while recruiting and retaining your talent pipeline? What are the crucial talent strategies needed to further your business?