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The Resolution You Will Break

As one year closes and another begins, people make resolutions. *This year*, they tell themselves, *I'm really going to get ahead in my career*. A promotion, a new title, more money—whether inside or outside the company.

Career resolutions suffer the same unhappy fate for one simple reason: most people are clueless. I've seen this happen, time and again, with people at all levels—those just starting out, middle managers, even senior people. They want to get ahead but rarely know how to go about it.

For one thing, they focus on the money, which immediately makes things awkward.

Money is a high-anxiety topic everyone hates. In relationships, money is one of the main reasons couples fight, more than in-laws or who should take the garbage out.

In the workplace it's just as problematic. No one knows how to engage in the money conversation. Most people try an indirect approach: "It's not really about the money..." (Really? Of course it's about the money. Or else they'd just blurt it out during a meeting with a manager. "I need to make more money!")

And everybody ends up in the same unhappy place—clueless, frustrated, and with no real plan for how to get ahead.

One of the worst cases was Scott, whom I knew socially back in the day. He'd brag that all he had to do was pretend he had another offer and tell his boss he was going to leave. And it always seemed to happen right after the new year—right when the credit card bills from holiday shopping rolled in.

One day, Scott really did have an offer: a double-your-salary opportunity. He expected to waltz into his boss's office, flash that letter, and get his salary doubled. Instead, his boss told him, "Sounds like a great opportunity. Good luck to you."

Weeks later, I ran into Scott and asked how his new job was going. He said something about it not working out. Then he admitted that he had to beg his former boss to get his old job back. "I had to take a cut," he mumbled. "Like 20 percent from what I was making before."

So much for Scott's "resolution" about getting ahead. And if you don't have a plan, I'm sorry to say, the same could happen to you.



Illustration by Peter Horvath

Your Resolution: Take Control

The best resolution is to take control. Don't be so focused on the promotion, the title, or the money, which are the outcomes. You can't skip the line on this one. You need to do the hard work, which I sum up in one of my favorite acronyms: MORE.

M / Meet Face-to-Face

The goal is to initiate a dialogue with your boss by meeting face-to-face. This means regular, ongoing in-person discussions about the boss's priorities and short-term goals and how you can contribute to team success in a big way.

At every level, it's performance first, pay second. The discussion you're having with your boss (or, if you're the boss, that you're having with your team) should center on what needs to get done. How can you (or your team) help accomplish these goals? When self-interest is aligned with shared interest, good things can happen for all.

O / Own Your Objectives

No one is going to promote you or give you more money just because you decide so. You need to own your performance objectives. Set expectations with your boss for what

you're going to deliver and when. Establish a series of check-ins with your boss to make sure you're on track and to update him or her on what's been accomplished. This will not only ensure that your efforts are focused on what's most meaningful to the boss and the team's performance, but you'll also increase your chances of becoming an outlier on performance. That's how you get to be an outlier on pay, too—by being indispensable and as close as it gets to being irreplaceable.

R / Research the Market

When I give a speech, I know there's one sure way to get everyone's attention: talk about money. I'll ask, "How many of you think you're underpaid?" I've yet to see anyone raise their hand for being *overpaid*.

No matter what you might think about your paycheck, you can't just pick numbers randomly or decide

you really need to make X to support your lifestyle. Do the research—it's like selling your house: you need comps. Job sites can give you an idea of what different positions pay. Start networking: ask recruiters and reach out to friends. Without market intelligence, you don't know how you're priced—above market, below market, or fair value.

E / Envision Your Endgame

Money is the by-product of a well-managed career path. That's why you need to define your end goal. What are you aiming for, really? Remember, more money will come from more responsibility—can you really handle that? Know where you're headed: a better job, more challenges, and new opportunities to grow. That's why your resolution should be to take control. If you keep this commitment, you'll be on the path to MORE. ▮