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VIEW FROM THE CUBE

To make resolutions stick, let co-workers be your conscience

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New Year's resolutions — like campaign promises — sound great at first, caked as they are with earnestness and optimism. But few people actually believe they'll last.

Let's face it. We're not very good at keeping commitments to ourselves. If you tell yourself you're going to lose 20 pounds, and then gorge on chocolates come Feb. 14, who's going to know? Just you.

The great satirist, Mark Twain, once wrote about the New Year, "Now is the accepted time to make your regular annual good resolutions. Next week you can begin paving hell with them as usual."

Although most of us don't take such a humbug stance toward this holiday tradition, we can probably all agree there is an element of futility when it comes to our lofty New Year's goals. There are those depressing statistics about the tiny percentage of folks who actually stick to their resolutions for more than a month: 20 percent or less, says one recent poll. And we've all got one of those wacky friends who musters up all of the irony he can, to say, "My New Year's resolution is to not make any more New Year's resolutions."

Want to make your New Year's resolutions stick? Here's a thought: What if our co-workers were required to assign us a list of resolutions? After all, we spend about 10 hours each day with these people, which in my case is about four more hours awake than I spend with my wife. They know us fairly well. They've heard our complaints. They've seen our indulgences. And they know what makes each of us an incredibly annoying person.

I took an office poll last week. In an e-mail to everyone in our 30-person firm, I asked for suggestions. "Knowing what you know about me," I said, "tell me what my New Year's resolution should be."

"Be honest," I emphasized. "Don't worry about hurting my feelings."

Responses from my co-workers included everything from "Be more patient with clients" and "Clean up your desk," to "Stop chewing your pens," and "Stop your damn humming and whistling."

It must say something about my good working relationships that many of my colleagues felt comfortable suggesting things that held the potential of sending me into a flurry of defensiveness. But it really took some coaxing to encourage them to be completely truthful. Ultimately, their responses varied between work-related goals and personal goals. One colleague felt unfettered enough to recommend that sometime in the coming year I should buy my wife a gift without her first asking for it. Good advice, I'll admit.

Management coaches like to exhort that if you make your goals public, you are more likely to see them through. If you tell your co-workers that you're trying to quit smoking, they'll rip you apart each time you reach for that pack of cigarettes.

Well, I've taken this tell-others strategy one step further with my colleagues by letting them come up with my resolutions for 2003. Not only will I be working toward self-betterment, I know that I will be accomplishing

something that will make my co-workers happy. And we all know the manager's axiom: happy workers are productive workers.

So, I've picked five of my co-workers' suggested New Year's resolutions. The resolutions serve me and them equally well. And they seem reasonably attainable. My right hand is raised. To my colleagues: I hereby promise to try really, really hard to accomplish these resolutions. If I fail, you're free to chastise me in some sort of politically correct, nonoffensive, office-humor kind of way. But if I succeed, you'll reward me with praise, and perhaps even allow me to leave a meeting early so that I can go buy that present for my wife.

My list of New Year's resolutions:

■ "Make fewer trips to the office cookie jar." Considering that I make only 16 or



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17 trips to the cookie jar each day (it's right by the office supplies, and since I chew my pens, I'm frequently there), I think we can all agree that 15 is fewer than 16. So, this resolution seems doable.

■ "Never again sign your co-workers' birthday cards with a preprinted return address label." Some people just don't see the humor in my cynicism about the sheer quantity of celebration cards that pass through my in-box each month. However, I respect the sentiment, and I promise not to place my address stickers on any more cards. I've already ordered a rubber stamp.

■ "You seem to be so busy all of the time. Your resolution should be to take time every day to just stop and think." This resolution is thematic of at least four other co-workers. Apparently, people think I'm strung out. From this day for-

ward, between 2:45 and 3 p.m. I plan to just think. Please don't call me then.

■ "Buy your wife a gift without her having to ask for it first." This really is my favorite one, from a co-worker who has obviously listened to me rattle on about my personal life so often that she felt compelled to help out. I appreciate that. Everyone would agree that this is a noble resolution.

■ "Put yourself in the way of adventure and unpredictability." Great, just when I've got my year mapped out with four defining resolutions, along comes the sage advice to throw caution to the wind and live dangerously without planning. Fine. I'm game. Come and get me, Mr. Serendipity.

My co-workers will be watching me carefully this year. I can remember that crushing feeling I got as a child when my

parents said, "We're not mad at you. We're just disappointed." And that was with just two people pointing their fingers at me. Imagine how bewildering it will feel for that to be multiplied tenfold. When you've got 20 or more people watching out for you — cheering you on and scrutinizing your every move — when you're held accountable for your actions, it's more likely that you'll do whatever it takes to accomplish your goals.

For fear of disappointing my co-workers, I'm going to work hard to fulfill their requests. By embracing their suggestions, I can become a better person. Heck, they might even help me to become a better husband, since now I'm off to buy that unexpected gift for my wife.

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