

Dear Dr. Mazie,

I have moved three times this year to work on different right of way projects. I have also witnessed many starts and stops in the private sector. With all the changes taking place in our industry, I'm realizing the importance of planning for my future. As we begin the new year, can you give me some tools so I can take charge of my career?

Curtis in North Dakota

This is a great question. Beginning a new year motivates many people to take stock and make future plans. Just think about all the New Year's resolutions we make. The most common ones involve losing weight, working out regularly and quitting smoking. We pronounce our plans proudly and with good intention, only to fall short on our follow-through within a short period of time.

In theory, the idea of setting new goals in January makes perfect sense. For many, our organizations start the year with a fresh budget and a new strategic plan. It's also when we are faced with reviewing our personal expenditures for the previous year and begin preparing for tax time.

Developing a personal and professional game plan at the beginning of the year has many benefits. Some of these include:

- Encourages you to focus on exactly the kind of life and work you want.
- Defines the skills and competencies that are important to you.
- Helps you establish the right balance between your work and personal life.
- Provides a roadmap to use when facing difficult decisions.
- Gives you more confidence in the choices you make.
- Generates a sense of control over your own life.

So how do you get started? First, realize that your goal is to take charge of your destiny, safeguard your career, and merge and integrate your personal needs, desires and wants with your business life.

Here are some basic steps to help you plan for the life you want:

Define three short-term goals: Where do you want to be one year from now? If you don't know where you are headed, how will you know when you have arrived? Pick three specific (and realistic) things you want to achieve, and write them down.

Define three longer-term goals: Where do you want to be five years from now? Take a moment to envision your ideal lifestyle. Identify what is really important to you. Write down a list of things you want to have accomplished by then and describe the lifestyle you will have.

List your core strengths and weaknesses: Be objective, be honest and be specific! It's not easy to do an objective review of your own core strengths and weaknesses. But it's a critical step toward achieving the lifestyle you want for yourself. Seek constructive feedback from your family, work associates and trusted friends.

Develop an action plan: Look at your one-year goals in conjunction with your strengths and weakness, and then identify exactly what is needed in order to achieve your short-term objectives. Again, be very specific. After all, you are in charge of your own goals and progress.

Keep track of your performance as the year progresses. It will give you the confidence you need to keep pushing forward. Use your plan as a guide, adding to it as needed throughout the year, seeing it as a friend, a confidant and a living document. At the end of the year, compare your goals with where you are. Did you achieve your goals? Do you need to carry over one or more to the next year? See how these will impact your five-year goals and revise those accordingly.

As you keep tabs on your own progress, you will be able to make decisions in the coming year with greater ease and security. The more you envision the life you want, the easier it will be to attain it. I know from experience that personal planning works, and I have confidence that, if you take some time to plan your future, you will likely get the results you are seeking.

A nationally recognized speaker, workshop leader and trainer, Dr. Mazie Leftwich, Psy.D has a clinical background in applied psychology with expertise in organizational and personal development. She is Senior Vice President of Contract Land Staff, LLC, where she oversees training and team excellence programs.

