

# Working Solutions

## Make Holidays Your Own!

So it's that time of year again. We take one look at the calendar and we're hit with pictures of perfect holidays: kids frolicking in the snow, huge families laughing around a special meal, and smitten couples exchanging gifts in front of the fireplace. The pressure is on: *Make the traditional holiday images come to life or else!*

But what about those of us who aren't included in those snapshots? What if we're single, without little ones to decorate the Christmas tree or light menorah candles? More and more of us are divorced and part of blended families who are dealing with multiple traditions in the same house. The truth is that lots of all-American families today don't have a mom, dad and 2.5 Norman Rockwell children. For many of us, the pressure becomes too much, especially with all our economic woes. There's only one thing to do if you don't belong in a traditional holiday portrait: **Make the holidays your own by discovering your own traditions.**

### Figure out what you want and what you can afford

Basically holiday stress is caused by unrealistic expectations, in one word, stress is "should". During the months ahead for everyone but particularly those of us who don't live anywhere near "It's a Wonderful Life," can use a reminder to concentrate on our needs and what we want to do, not what we've come to believe we should do.

Before the holidays, spend time with yourself. Set aside a couple of days to examine what you're really looking for during the holidays. If you had it your way how would you paint the picture? Are the holidays about extended family or about solitude? Is this the time to explore cultural roots and re-connect with religion, or a chance to reach out to strangers? Forget about what everyone else says or what your mother's always done. What do you want your holiday traditions to be?

### Going it alone or not

If you're single, you might look into doing volunteer work at a local soup kitchen, food bank or homeless shelter. Or maybe you want to do something totally self-indulgent. What's stopping you from spending a relaxing day hiking or biking? Rely upon your family of friends who may have all sorts of interesting things cooking. Also, friends with kids are not off limits during the holidays. If you want to be around children, find the families in your circle who'll welcome a guest for a holiday meal and then ask what you can contribute. Maybe you could be helping them fulfill a tradition.



**“Set aside a couple of days to examine what you’re really looking for during the holidays”**

## How about saving money and also doing something unique to reach out to others?

The best ways people often recall the holidays is when they have reached out to others and come up with a unique and memorable way to celebrate.

For example:

- Instead of trading gifts offer to take your loved one out to dinner in January
- Babysit for your favorite couple so they can go to a movie or dinner
- Write a tribute to someone you love, frame it with a favorite photo to let them know how much they have meant to you over the years
- Put the spice and herb ingredients for your favorite soup or casserole in a festive bag with instructions on how to make it
- Craft a basket with a combination of candles, homemade baked goods, small decorations, acorns, twigs or pinecones
- Select or make a festive binder or “holiday book” where you’ve collected your favorite ideas for recipes, decorations and gift ideas



## Working after Retirement a Plus

A new national study shows that retirees who transition from full-time work into a temporary or part-time job experience fewer major diseases and are able to function better day to day than are people who stop working altogether. And the findings were significant even after controlling for people’s physical and mental health before retirement. The coined term is “bridge employment,” defined as employment during the period of time between one’s career and complete retirement. This can be a part-time job, self-employment, or a temporary job.

Source: Press Release, Oct. 13, 2009.

## Is Multitasking the answer to hectic holidays?

You’ve got more on your calendar than you know what to do with, and now the holidays are upon us. Besides your normal chaotic life, now you have to find a way to squeeze in all the decorating, cooking, holiday parties, gift shopping, etc, etc. The answer to all your woes is “*More Multitasking!*” right? Not so fast. New scientific studies reveal the hidden costs of multitasking. Key findings, since technology increasingly tempts us to do more than one thing (and increasingly, more than one complicated thing) at a time. Joshua Rubenstein Ph.D of the FAA and Ph.Ds David Meyer and Jeffrey Evans from the University of Michigan describe their research in the August issue of the *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Perception and Performance*, published by the American Psychological Association (APA).

Whether people toggle between browsing the Web and using other computer programs, talk on cell phones (while driving!), pilot jumbo jets (while looking at calendars, as two pilots were doing as they overshot their landing by 150 miles) or monitoring air traffic, they’re using their “Executive Control” processes—the mental CEO—found to be associated with the brain’s prefrontal cortex and other key regions. These interrelated cognitive processes establish priorities among tasks and allocate the mind’s resources to them. “For each aspect of human performance—perceiving, thinking and acting—people have specific mental resources whose effective use requires supervision through executive mental control,” says Meyer.

To better understand executive control, as well as the human capacity for multitasking and its limitations, Rubenstein, Meyer and Evans studied patterns in the amounts of time lost when people switched repeatedly between two tasks of varying complexity and familiarity. The measurements revealed that for all types of tasks, subjects lost time when they had to switch from one task to another, and time costs increased with the complexity of the tasks, so it took significantly longer to switch between more complex tasks. Time costs also were greater when subjects switched to tasks that were relatively unfamiliar. So the bottom line on multitasking...**slow down**. Take it one task at a time and breathe deep. Soon it will be the New Year and you will have lots you want to accomplish, all that you care to, in sequence, while utilizing your newly discovered Executive Control process.

## Imagining a World of No Annual Reviews

In a recent article published in the NY Times, Carol Bartz, CEO of Yahoo since January says immediate feedback is vital for workers and called the annual review process antiquated. Carol came out of retirement to run Yahoo. "I was so bored when I retired that I lost that whole section of my life. I missed the whole people interaction. I'm somebody who loves politics in the company—as in how do you help and enable people to get along. Politics is not a dirty word. People say "Oh, we don't have politics." Everybody has politics. And so be an expert at it. Figure out how to influence people to get things done.

Asked, "What are the most important leadership lessons you've learned?" Carol Bartz gave several replies:

- 1) She said a lot of leadership is picking the right team and making sure they are so much better than you are, as well as involving them in a decision.
- 2) On receiving feedback up: "I ask simple questions, like 'How am I doing? What should I do differently'. At first people are shocked when you ask them that. You have to keep probing to keep it safe. They will eventually come around and say 'Well just this'.
- 3) On giving feedback: "I have the puppy theory. When the puppy has an accident on the carpet, you say something right then because you don't say six months later, 'Remember that day, January 12<sup>th</sup> when you soiled the carpet?' That doesn't make any sense. This is what's on my mind. This is quick feedback. If I had my way I wouldn't do annual reviews, if I felt that everybody would be more honest about positive and negative feedback along the way. I think the annual review process is so antiquated.
- 4) Her best career advice: "You need to build your career not as a ladder, but as a pyramid. You need to have a base of experience because it's a much more stable structure. And so that involves taking lateral moves. And it involves getting out of your comfort zone."

## Financial Stress and Lost Sleep

If financial worries keep you awake, you are not alone. A study in June 2009 found that 69 percent of Americans are experiencing this problem to some degree. You can be penniless or an over-extended millionaire and still lose sleep due to financial stress. It is an equal opportunity problem. The top worries include lack of money for retirement, followed by health care expenses and concerns over the ability to make a mortgage or rent payment. Talk to your doctor to rule out a sleep disorder. Avoid alcohol as a sedative to put you to sleep. Your nervous system will rebound and you'll wake up, or your deep sleep cycle will be disturbed. Check the Website of the National Sleep Foundation ([www.sleepfoundation.org](http://www.sleepfoundation.org)) for plenty of tips. *Source: GfK Research and CreditCards.com.*



## Self-Motivation: Struggling to Exercise

It's that time of year again... Time for New Year's resolutions! Here are some tips that can help you keep on target with your "I will plan and implement an exercise regimen."

Structure and accountability are the keys when trying to establish an exercise routine. Structuring exercise is the how, what, when, and where of your exercise program. Accountability is answering to someone or something if you don't follow through. (Mutual support from an exercise buddy is a good example) Accountability gets you past the "I-don't-feel-like-doing-this" hump. Stick with it and before long the next phase kicks in—emotional reasons to keep exercising. Acquire strong enough reasons and almost anything is possible. So here's a tip: read about the "16 Desires of Life" first formulated by professor of psychology and psychiatry Steven Reiss (easily found online). Reiss believes almost all these desires are inherent to humans. You're hardwired for them. They include independence, acceptance, idealism, social contact, and tranquility. How many can you link to your reasons for exercising? Write them down and feel a new desire to exercise!



### Better Relationship with the Boss

Be proactive and meet with your boss to fix a difficult relationship. This workplace stressor can become tougher to repair down the road. Gain clarity by defining the real issue first. Set your intentions. Your goal is an improved relationship, not finding fault. Have you played any role in the development of a difficult relationship or have communication problems added to it? Accept the universal principle that each party in conflict plays a role in contributing to the conflict; otherwise, you won't get very far. At the meeting, explain your concerns in unemotional language. Use "I" statements. "I've grown concerned..." "I sometimes feel we..." Be positive—not cocky or passive aggressive—and don't corner your boss. Always let him or her respond and have the last word. Later, have ongoing contact with your boss going forward.



### Take Charge of Morale

Everyone wants high morale, but when morale suffers, help often arrives too late. Whose job is it to "improve morale"? Most people would shout, "Management!", but this is frequently not the case.

Instead, you may be the first line of defense. The danger signal is a deterioration of your or your group's commitment to the mission of your employer or a loss of faith in the importance of your work. If you detect these signals, it's time to gather your group before rumors and backbiting begin.

What can the group or its members do to intervene and improve morale? Poor morale increases absenteeism and turnover, lowers productivity, and contributes to the likelihood of inappropriate behavior, even violence. This meeting must not be a blame session, but a strategy session. *Warning: Do not ask "what's wrong with us?"* Ask instead "what works to improve morale?" This strategic tip removes conflicts from your discussion.

Assign a monitor to keep this rule and hold everyone to it. Now ask, "What works to 1) make communication between us more effective, 2) improve our ability to feel recognized for our contributions, 3) help us feel more control over what we do and how it is done, and 4) improve positive feelings we have toward each other?" You may generate suggestions for your supervisor, but don't drift away from your primary goal of improving morale. Hold a follow-up meeting and repeat the process.

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