New Year's resolution solution

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For me, most of my New Year's resolutions have had about as much chance of surviving beyond a week or two as the proverbial snowball in hell. I can't remember how many times on Jan. 1 I swore off smoking, went on a diet, or vowed to keep my checkbook balanced, only to renege on my promise to myself while staving off feelings of guilt with some good-old self-indulgent rationalization. And that's the thing about resolutions: We know they are the right thing to do and that they are good for us, for our health, for our families, for our financial security—but they require that we change some habits, and sometimes that's not an easy thing to do. And habits are just that: acquired behavior patterns regularly followed until they have become almost involuntary. We do them without thinking.

As letter carriers, we sometimes fall into habits in our jobs that, when we honestly stop to think about them, we recognize as being bad for us. But we rationalize our behavior by minimizing any negative consequences we might face ("It will never happen to me") or convincing ourselves that it's really not that big a deal ("Everybody else does it").

"Why not make a resolution to take your time to do the job right and follow all of the rules the best that you can?"

Way back in ancient times when I carried a route, I'd find myself taking shortcuts and doing things that I knew I should not be doing, but I'd find some way to rationalize them in my mind to avoid any anxiety they might create. Most of these were things that I'd tell myself that I was doing to "save time," when in reality, I was doing them that way because I didn't want to exert the effort to do them correctly. I'm thinking of things like not performing a thorough vehicle inspection, leaving attempted delivery notices without actually attempting the delivery of the item, skipping curbside boxes blocked by a parked car, not always wearing my seatbelt, driving with my door open when I should not have, and handling mail when the vehicle was in motion, just to name a few.

The thing is that, even if these actually "saved" any significant time, which is doubtful, why should that have mattered to me when I was being paid for every hundredth of an hour I worked? Who was I trying to impress anyway? The manager who would only expect more and more? Surely, had any of my shortcuts resulted in an accident or a complaint, I would have had no excuse and the manager would not have come to my defense. Even worse, some of these were downright dangerous and I knew it didn't make any sense to do them. But still, these were habits I'd picked up that I had a hard time trying to break. And this might sound a little corny to some, but what helped me to break them was getting involved in my union.

My first union "job" was that of shop steward. I sort of came by this through the process of elimination. No one else wanted to do it and I was the young guy with a big mouth. But becoming the steward made me realize that others were watching me. My fellow carriers were watching to see if I would do my job defending the contract and the supervisors were watching to catch me doing something so that they could make an example of me.

Whether it was true or not, believing this made me a better and safer carrier. I found myself making it my goal to do everything by the book and taking pride in doing so. Instead of doing the minimum I needed to get by, I'd find myself going out of the way to follow every work safety rule while giving the best possible service to every one my customers, not just the ones I liked.

I had several good reasons for this. I wanted to set an example for other carriers, to show them that they didn't have to "run" their routes but could go by the book, take the time to do things safely and correctly, and everything would be OK. It also protected me from the added management scrutiny I acquired from being the steward; I didn't have to worry about being "caught" doing things wrong and subjected to discipline for it. But most of all, it made me feel good to do the right thing and follow the rules, even when no one else was watching. And when they were, I enjoyed explaining the rules to my co-workers and managers when they would ask me why I was dismounting to deliver to blocked mailboxes, attempting parcels at the door before leaving them with the apartment manager, and putting my transmission in park or neutral before delivering every curbside box.

That doesn't mean that I never messed up. I'm human and I had my lapses now and then, and I have the letters of warning to prove it. Well, actually not really. I threw them away a long time ago, but you get the point.

So, as we begin a new year, if your plans to go on a diet or stop smoking don't work out for you, why not make a resolution to take your time to do the job right and follow all of the rules the best that you can? It might seem a little difficult at first to unlearn some bad habits you've practiced for years, but you will make your job less stressful and more enjoyable sooner than you might think. And if you need some help doing that, think about getting involved in your branch. I promise that the effort you spend helping others will return to you many-fold. And to those of you reading this article thinking, "I do that already," my hat is off to you. Happy New Year and may 2017 be your best one yet.