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Start fresh

Begin 2005 with a clean slate and a clean desk

This column honors the Japanese tradition of Osoji. In Japan, Osoji is practiced in the days leading up to the New Year. I've borrowed the tradition, and I slide it a little further along the calendar, to the month of January.

Osoji, for the Japanese, is both a literal and metaphoric cleaning of the physical and spiritual stains of the past year. It is a preparation for new beginnings and can ratchet up the likelihood of keeping our resolutions to do better.

The New Year is a turning point, and a time when many of us boldly craft these resolutions, write them down and share them with friends. We promise to bolster our willpower, to really mean it this time.

By June, at least half of us will have fallen back on old habits.

I'm not even sure what willpower is. Grit and determination are helpful, to be sure. Still, we all have very creative minds that can quickly build a case for breaking our resolutions. I do know the chains of habit are powerful. I don't believe that relying on motivation works. If I only exercised on the mornings I felt motivated ... well you see what I mean.

So if we sincerely want to forge some new habits, I think we need to build an infrastructure to support the change. Habits and systems are cousins, and part of the support is taking a good look at the systems that keep in place the habits you want to implode. Then use Osoji time to sweep away those old systems and prepare a clean place for the new. The Japanese do this as part of cleaning their houses, offices, schools and shops.

During the past year, three times I locked myself out of my car. Three times I called my sweet husband to come rescue me with my extra keys. He never complained. Still — even for an intuitive — that is at least two times too many. I looked at my faulty system

of locking the car from the interior door.

I began only locking it from the outside with the keypad. I put a piece of duct tape over the interior lock to prevent my falling back into the automatic behavior should my mind be preoccupied. I did all of this after a thorough Osoji cleaning of my car inside and out. It's working, and I am confident that soon the new system will be ingrained habit.

In an American office setting, an entire organization can be involved in Osoji. I've done this and found everyone got into the spirit of the thing. You set aside a day for cleaning out old files, neglected parts of the workplace, dusty plant leaves—whatever. Tell everyone to wear old clothes and come ready to purify everything and get ready for a fresh start.

At the end of the day, relax together with a pizza or something and applaud yourselves for your good work.

Osoji is a time, too, to take into account things you did not complete during the year, to burrow through that pile of stuff on your desk—or your floor—and do what you want with each piece of paper in the pile. Usually, we can toss much of the stuff, and quickly attend to the rest. It is so refreshing to give yourself a clean desk. William James said, "There is nothing so fatiguing as the eternal hanging on of an uncompleted task."

And nothing is so energizing as knocking off those tasks, off, one by one.

Part of maintaining that clean desk is using Walt Disney's mantra, "Do it Now."

Another part is staying in reality, and out of the fantasy that you can accomplish a ridiculous amount of work — and do it well. You need space on your desk, and space in your life, and I wish plenty of both for you in 2005.

Whatever happens with our resolve for change, we don't need to beat ourselves up

over it. We can learn from it. It's all data. We can look at what we might put in place to support the change. Maybe we don't even really want to make that change, or there are blocks that need to be removed first.

Emerson said something that sounds like a suggestion for a daily Osoji practice: "Finish each day and be done with it. You have done what you could. Some blunders and absurdities have crept in; forget them as soon as you can. Tomorrow is a new day. You shall begin it serenely and with too much spirit to be encumbered with your old nonsense."



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