



Say Goodbye to SALLY

By Noah Barsky, CMA, CPA

As with most sage advice, we often receive it too early in our careers to truly appreciate it. Yet one message that caught my attention as a recent college graduate remains with me to this day. A great manager told me that the biggest enemy in my career would be a coworker named Sally. He admonished me to never trust her, never rely on her, and never to be tempted by her hollow friendship.

My astonishment at such scathing words from that friendly, soft-spoken, and ever-professional gentleman still echoes in my memory. While my mind raced with thoughts of how to safely navigate potential interactions with her, circumvent the hazards she would place in my path, and repair any damage she might cause, little did I know that Sally wasn't a person at all. Yet my eager and presumptuous mind afforded her the two "l's" in the common female name.

In reality, this “coworker” was merely an acronym—SALY—for Same As Last Year. Such a cleverly presented image of an insidious colleague resonates more strongly than a cutely phrased and forgettable play on words. SALY is a convenient, but troublesome shortcut that has been the undoing of many people, plans, and processes.

Changing Our Mind-set

Now that we’re a month into a new year, it’s out with the old and in with the new. Of course, there’s often a mighty difference between what’s said and what’s done. But for us financial professionals—at any stage in our careers—let this new year offer a meaningful resolution to strengthen our resolve to eradicate SALY from our habits.

SALY is much more than simply a shortcut when updating work papers, renewing a business plan, updating routine performance analyses, revising disclosures, or refreshing a standard report. SALY is a mind-set. Action can change mind-sets, and monotony can dull awareness. To replace any old insalubrious habit, we must find a new one to shatter the routine and fill the natural vacuum. For example, research shows that radical departures to new diets and exercise regimens, while well-intentioned, hardly survive a month.

In the context of business, subscribing to platitudes such as “think differently” and “question assumptions” offers as little lasting traction as personal resolutions to be kinder and more empathetic to others. Conceptually, peace, love, and understanding are universally embraced as worthwhile pursuits, but implementation is certainly quite a challenge. Business mission statements and strategic objectives are often filled with similar lofty and ambiguous language that starkly contrasts with business conduct and practices.

Getting Started

As financial professionals, we can incorporate many very practical and relatively cost-free behaviors into our routine as an antidote to the dreaded SALY affliction. They include, but definitely aren’t limited to:

- ◆ Read one thought-provoking business book this year. Highlight the most important passages, and note them inside the front cover of the book. Reflect on your selections, and think about applications to your business. Maximize the value by sharing your newly found discoveries and epiphanies with others.
- ◆ Have lunch or coffee once a month with a colleague outside your functional area to see what’s happening in other areas of your organization. Take time to develop



your business insight in a casual manner. Financial professionals are rarely accused of knowing “too much” about business operations, so it’s likely that your curiosity will be welcomed, rewarded, and reciprocated.

- ◆ Find one article (or even one paragraph) in *Strategic Finance* or other timely publications that you can share with your supervisor, your peers, or your staff. Stimulate worthwhile workplace discussions and idea sharing with a short reading that relates to your business. Each issue offers a wide array of potential ideas including, but not limited to, skill development, strategic thinking, world-class company practices, technology tips, and contemporary management accounting techniques.

- ◆ Review a quarterly earnings or investor conference presentation by senior leaders of your company or organization—or, even better, one from your competition. These resources are readily available online and offer quick and powerful glimpses into the executives’ thinking. Such “executive eavesdropping” should provide many key insights and countless opportunities to tie your specific responsibilities and projects to the aims of senior leaders.

- ◆ Spend one hour perusing what’s offered on the IMA® website (www.imanet.org). Your membership entitles you access to numerous professional publications and resources that can help solve real business challenges facing your workplace. The nature and content of each can provide external validation of your current practices or give you tools that can help you progress toward your desired goals and outcomes.

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◆ Seek out an interesting finance or accounting blog that challenges conventional thinking. These Internet maverick thought leaders often aren't wed to conventional publications or limiting editorial oversight. Although you must carefully evaluate such free thinking, it nonetheless will likely intrigue and inspire you and may even alter some of your strongly held opinions and perspectives. Additionally, the digital nature of such forums makes subscriptions to updates simple and usually free.

◆ Attend one nontechnical half- or full-day executive education or management development program that will take you out of the office, away from e-mail, and into a setting that invigorates and reenergizes your thinking. Meeting professionals from other businesses can offer fresh outlooks on common challenges. Though this is likely the most expensive suggestion, if you select it wisely and pursue it seriously, you may find the value far exceeds the price. The inspiration from such a day may be far amplified by the benefit of altering listless workplace routines.

◆ Set aside 15 minutes a week to think about the broader purpose of strategy, your markets, and emerging trends. Doing so over the course of the year will provide continuity, external perspective, and, cumulatively, a greater investment of time than any single day, week, or month may permit.

A Step at a Time

Try one or, better yet, *all* of these ideas. Each represents a starting point to approaching things somewhat differently in the new year. If you're running an annual research survey or business



analysis, carefully consider questions, suggestions, and comments that arose in the past because they have merit in improving the work output. Review and streamline meetings and report formats to focus employees and best utilize scarce time. Challenge yourself and your staff to regularly identify business risks and diagnose their drivers. Analyze performance results with less of an emphasis on what happened and with more of a sophisticated inquiry into why and what *will* happen. Doing so can help you and your colleagues instinctively think and act more proactively this year. As I mentioned earlier, history tells us that diet and exercise changes rarely take hold, so why not invest those intentions and energies in new business thinking and action!

If we can make one or two changes at a time and not try to tackle everything at once, maybe we won't find ourselves in the waning moments of next December realizing that the year gone by was essentially the same as last year. Farewell, SALY. **SF**

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