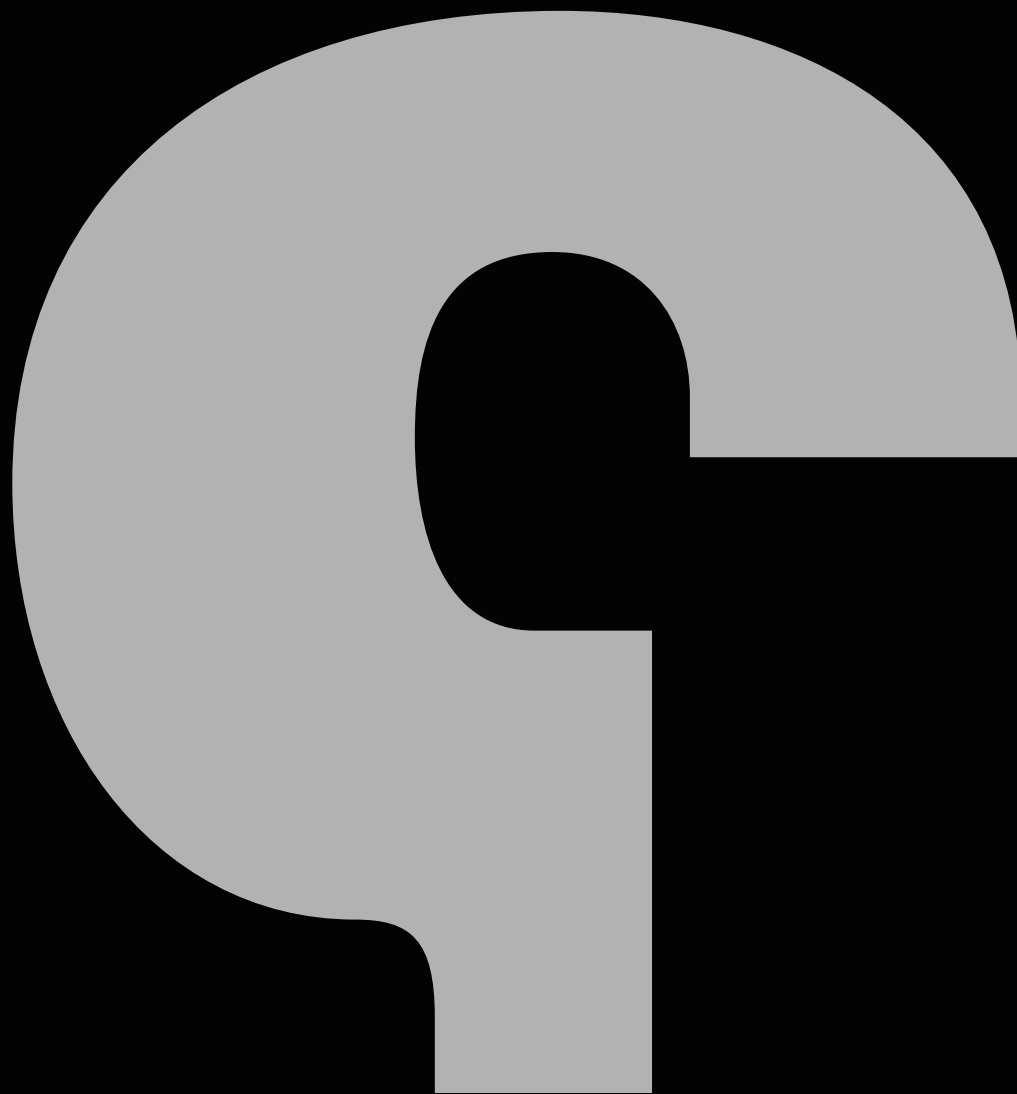




STOP SETTING GOALS
UNTIL YOU UNDERSTAND YOUR PAST
Jobert E. Abueva

We arrive at January 1, or the first day of a new year, with genuine conviction. New goals. Fresh starts. Carefully constructed plans.

And within weeks, the conviction begins to fade. The goals lose momentum. The plans gather dust. We blame ourselves. We cite willpower. We download a new productivity app and try again. We do it over and over again, but we almost never blame the process.

But the process is exactly where the problem lives. It is in the sequence or the order of operations we have accepted without questioning that sends us charging forward before we have done the one thing that makes any forward movement meaningful.

We skip the honest reflection.

THE PLANNING MISTAKE WE KEEP MAKING

I have sat in enough planning sessions to know what they almost all have in common: they begin with the targets. *What do we want to accomplish? Where do we want to be? What does the next year look like?*

What they almost never begin with is the question that would make every answer that follows more honest and more durable: what did the prior year actually try to teach us?

That missing step is a sequencing error that costs more than most of us realize.

When we set goals without first honestly examining the previous year, we carry forward every unexamined assumption, every quiet misalignment, every pattern that undermined the identical goal the last time we set it, and we place a shiny new intention on top of all of it and call it a fresh start.

The goal looks new. But the foundation is old.

Harvard Business School research confirms what most of us have experienced: leaders who engage in structured reflection before setting new goals improve their performance by 23 percent compared to those who skip it. The mechanism is straightforward. Honest examination of what actually happened, what worked, what did not, and what the experience revealed about our assumptions produces more accurate and more durable forward commitments than inspiration alone ever can.

And yet research by the Economist Intelligence Unit found that 70 percent of organizational goals are never achieved.

Leaders who engage in structured reflection before setting new goals improve their performance ...

WHAT THE WORLD'S OLDEST TRADITIONS UNDERSTOOD, THAT WE DO NOT

This is not a new insight. It is an ancient one that the modern goal-setting industry has quietly abandoned.

Consider the Babylonian Akitu, the world's oldest recorded New Year festival, observed 4,000 years ago. Before the new year could begin, the king himself was brought before the god Marduk, stripped of his royal robes and regalia, and required to make a full, honest accounting of his reign. Only after that reckoning was his mandate renewed. The most powerful person in the ancient world could not claim a new beginning until he had submitted to the honest completion of the old one.

Consider what happens at Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year that falls in September or early October. The ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are structured around teshuvah, a Hebrew word commonly translated as repentance but more precisely meaning 'return'. Jews around the world spend those days honestly examining the year behind them before committing to the year ahead. Not a resolution list but a reckoning.

Consider Nowruz, the Persian New Year on the spring equinox, where the Khaneh Tekani, literally, the house shaking, clears every room before the new year arrives. Or Enkutatash, the Ethiopian New Year on September 11, when the rainy season ends and the sky clears, the old year is genuinely over before the new one begins. Or Ugadi, the Hindu New Year of southern India, where a dish containing six distinct tastes (sweet, sour, salty, bitter, pungent, and astringent) is served before the celebration begins, requiring participants to honestly taste everything the previous year contained before claiming a new beginning.

Every one of these traditions encodes the same wisdom: **you cannot honestly begin until you have honestly completed.** In contrast, January 1 asks us to celebrate, declare, and commit before we've taken the time to understand what we're committing to. The result is predictable. And we have been experiencing it for centuries.

THE PRACTICE: WHAT HONEST REFLECTION ACTUALLY LOOKS LIKE

I want to be specific here, because "reflect on your past year" is advice that sounds meaningful and produces almost nothing without structure. Honest backward examination is not nostalgia. It is not a highlight reel alone nor a post-mortem focused on what went wrong. It is a structured inquiry into what the year revealed about what worked, what needs to be released, and what the experience was trying to teach you that you have not yet fully absorbed.

In my book, *The Janus Plan*, this is Step One: Ponder the Past. And it begins with three questions.

WHAT GENUINELY WORKED THIS YEAR THAT YOU WANT TO BUILD ON DELIBERATELY? Not what you planned to have worked on, or what looked good in the quarterly review. What truly worked: which relationships, which habits, which decisions produced results that felt aligned with who you are and what you value? These are the threads worth carrying forward. And naming them specifically, in writing, before you set a single new goal, is the act that ensures you build on what is genuinely solid rather than what merely appeared solid from the outside.

WHAT DO YOU NEED TO LEAVE BEHIND? This is the harder question. Most goal-setting systems are entirely additive. They pile new commitments on top of existing ones without ever examining which existing ones have quietly stopped serving you. The assumption that lasted eighteen months. The commitment you made when you were a different version of yourself. The belief about your own limitations or your organization's culture that the year quietly invalidated but that you have not yet examined closely enough to release.

Leaving behind shouldn't be seen as a shortcoming, but rather the act of deciding that some things do not deserve to travel into the next chapter, regardless of how long you have been carrying them.

WHAT DID THIS YEAR TRY TO TEACH YOU THAT YOU ALMOST MISSED? This is the question that changes everything. What did the experience of living this specific year, with its surprises and its disappointments and its quiet revelations, try to show you about who you actually are and what you actually value?

Most people have never been asked this question in a planning context. Most teams have never been asked it at all. And the conversation it produces, when it is asked honestly and answered in writing before anyone opens a planning deck, is categorically different from any planning conversation that skips it.

What did the experience of living this specific year ... try to show you about who you actually are and what you actually value?

WHY WE SKIP IT, AND WHAT THAT COSTS

If an honest reflection is this valuable, why does almost no one do it?

Because looking honestly at where you have been requires admitting things you have worked hard not to admit. That the direction you have been moving in was not entirely chosen. That some of what you called success was actually performance. That the gap between who you intended to be and who you actually were has been widening quietly, and you have known it, and you have kept moving anyway.

That knowledge, that we have been complicit in our own patterns, is the most uncomfortable thing that honest reflection produces. And organizational cultures almost universally reward the person who charges forward with confident declarations over the person who stops to say: wait. Let us look honestly at where we have been before we commit to where we are going.

The cost of skipping it is compounding. Every year that a person or a team commits to new goals without honestly examining the previous year, they carry forward one additional layer of unexamined assumption. The strategic conversation becomes less grounded in actual experience and more grounded in a narrative about that experience refined for presentations and annual reviews rather than for honest reckoning.

And the gap between that narrative and reality is where organizational drift lives. I have watched it happen in companies that were performing well on paper and confused about why nothing felt like progress—the gap between the polished narrative and the actual experience had simply become too wide to bridge from inside the planning cycle.

THE THRESHOLD BRIEF: A TOOL FOR ORGANIZATIONS

For organizations and teams, the honest backward examination takes a specific form I call the Threshold Brief. It is a structured pre-plan document completed before setting any goal, allocating any resource, or opening any planning deck.

It captures three things.

First, the key learnings the year produced. Not the results, which are already in the metrics, but the genuine insights the year's experience generated about strategy, assumptions, culture, and competitive position.

Second, the data that supports each learning. The specific evidence, whether market signals, team feedback, customer behavior, or internal performance patterns, validates each insight rather than leaving it as opinion.

Third, the core implications. What each learning means for the organization's planning assumptions going forward. What needs to change. What needs to be released. What the year was trying to teach the organization that the plan cannot afford to ignore.

It is called a Threshold Brief because it belongs at the threshold: the moment between what the organization has been and what it is committing to become. Completed before planning begins, it turns the conversation from a forward-looking declaration into a grounded commitment behind goals that become real.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU DO THIS WITH A TEAM

Individual practice is great, but doing this with your team is transformative. When each member of a leadership team answers the three questions individually and in writing before coming together, the planning conversation changes. Without the pressure to perform, agree, or project confidence in front of others, people are more likely to give honest answers rather than socially acceptable ones. The executive who has been privately questioning whether a strategic assumption still holds finally has a structure for naming that doubt. The team member who watched a promising initiative lose momentum without understanding why now has a question that invites honest examination rather than blame. The leader who has been carrying a commitment that no longer fits finally has permission—structural, collective permission—to name it and release it.

The planning conversation that follows is not a better version of the same conversation. It is a different kind of conversation entirely. One where the people in the room are engaging as their actual selves rather than their performative professional ones.

Honest examination of what actually happened,
... produces more accurate and more durable
forward commitments than inspiration alone
ever can.

Most organizational problems are downstream consequences of the honest conversation that nobody had before the planning session began. The Threshold Brief, the three questions asked individually and in writing before anyone opens a slide, is the structure that makes that conversation possible.

It takes thirty minutes of individual preparation. It requires nothing more than a quiet space and the willingness to be honest. And it produces the rarest and most valuable outcome in any organizational planning process: a shared foundation that actually reflects shared reality. From that foundation, intentions hold. Goals do not dissolve before spring. The plan and the reality stay closer together because the plan was built on an honest accounting of the reality, rather than on a polished version of what leadership wished the reality were.

This is the work that comes before the work. And it changes everything that follows.

THE JANUS PRINCIPLE

The practice I am describing draws its name from Janus, the Roman god of thresholds, doorways, and transitions. He is depicted with two faces: one looking backward, one looking forward, simultaneously.

He was invoked before all other Roman gods. Before Jupiter. Before Mars. Before anyone. Because the Romans understood that you cannot approach any threshold honestly without first honoring where you have been. The backward face was not a concession to nostalgia. It was the condition for genuine forward movement.

I found him at age nine in an encyclopedia in the Philippines. His image stopped me in a way I could not explain. A two-faced god who lived at the threshold and who looked both ways, not because he was lost, but because he was paying attention.

I carried that image for thirty years. Through a global marketing career across four continents. Through a breakdown in a Hong Kong hotel room in 1997, when I finally had to face what I had been carrying forward without examination. Through the slow, honest reconstruction of a life that felt genuinely mine rather than merely successful.

The Janus practice, the structured reflection before any forward commitment, is what I built from that reconstruction. And what I have watched it do for individuals, teams, and organizations over thirty years is not dramatic. It is quiet, consistent, and composed.

It changes the quality of every intention that follows. Because the intention is built on something real.

WHERE TO BEGIN

If this argument has reached you, if you recognize the pattern in your own goal-setting, your own planning cycles, your own repeated experience of watching good intentions dissolve before spring, here is where to begin.

Before you make your next commitment, ask yourself three questions, answered honestly, in a quiet space.

What genuinely worked this year that I want to build on deliberately?

What do I need to leave behind?

What did this year try to teach me that I almost missed?

Give yourself thirty minutes. Do not edit what comes. Do not perform the recovered version of yourself or the confident professional version of your organization. Write what is actually true.

What you find there is not a goal. It is something more useful: an honest foundation. The ground that has been inspected. The starting place that reflects where you are rather than where you wish you were.

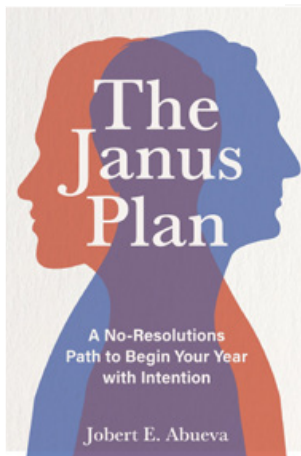
Build from that. Everything that follows will be more durable, more aligned, and more genuinely yours than anything you have built from inspiration alone.

The Janus Plan takes this practice through six complete steps, from honest backward examination to the rituals and quarterly returns that keep intention alive throughout the year. Each step builds on the honest foundation this one creates. And it all comes back to one essential, universal truth:

You cannot design a meaningful future without first taking an honest look at your actual past. 📖



Info



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Jobert E. Abueva is a global marketing and philanthropy executive whose career spans Fortune 500 leadership, international brand building, and mission-driven strategy. He has led marketing and communications across EMEA, Asia Pacific, Latin America, and North America. His leadership reflects the same cross-cultural awareness and sense of purpose formed early in his global upbringing and deepened through a lifelong commitment to service. Jobert's memoir, *Boy Wander*, earned multiple honors, including Lambda Literary's J. Michael Samuel Prize. His fiction, essays, and journalism have appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Fortune*, *Entrepreneur*, and several anthologies.

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