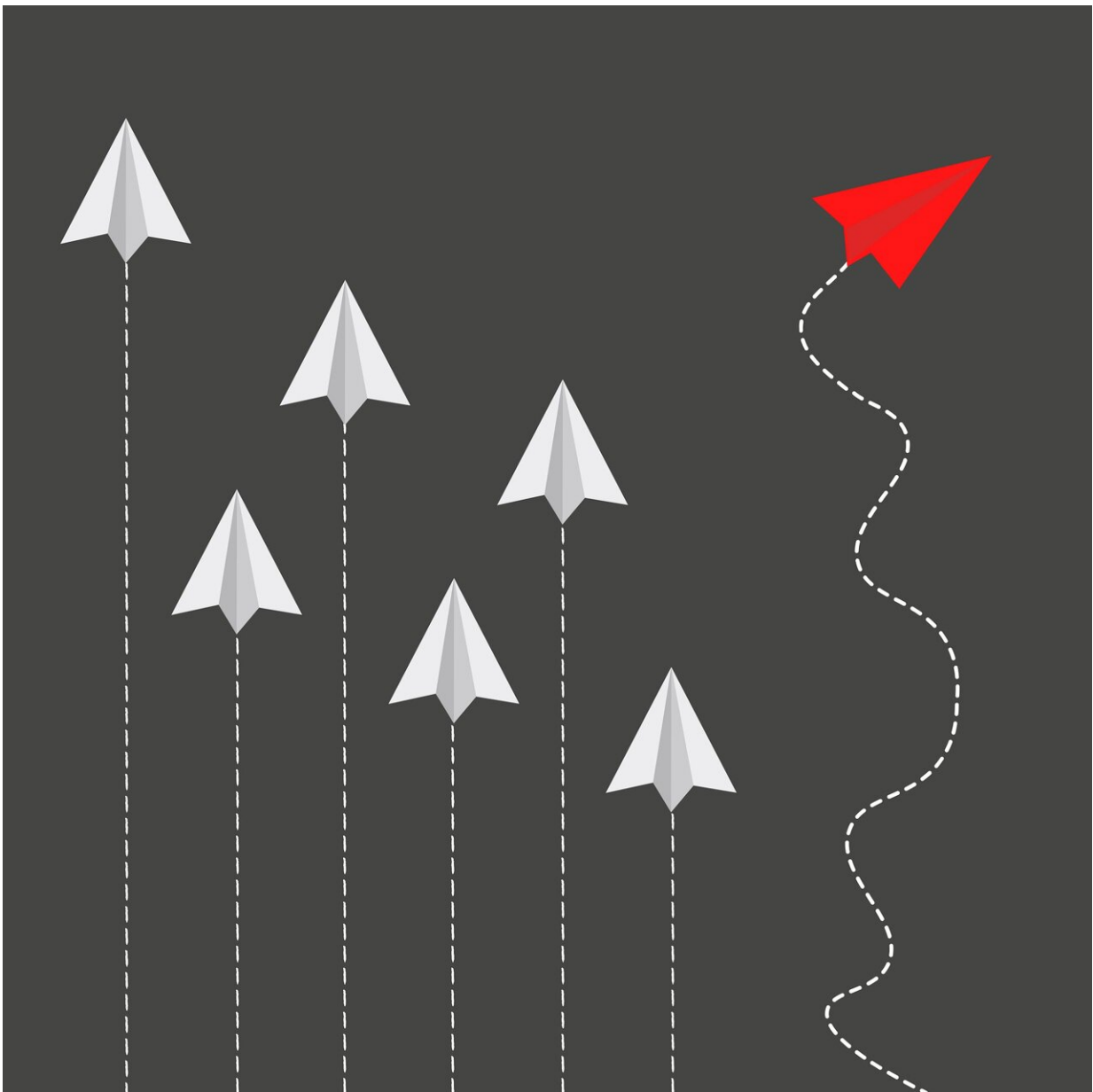


Why New Year's resolutions fail, even though people know how they can succeed

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More than 35% of Americans make a New Year's resolution, like losing weight, eating healthier or saving more money.

Let's say you resolve to get more exercise. If you're like a lot of people, you commit to your goal—but leave your plan for how to accomplish it flexible; you decide day-to-day whether to go the gym and what you'll do once you're there. In January, you skip the gym a few times. In February, you just might abandon your plan completely.

"Setting yourself up for success and sticking to a goal is hard," says Sydney E. Scott, assistant professor of marketing at Olin Business School. "But is the issue your willpower, or your plan?"

Now imagine a friend has the same resolution. "If you're like many people, you might advise your friend not to be flexible, but instead to determine the details of their plan in advance," Scott says.

That would be good advice.

Follow your head

Adding detail and structure to a plan helps people achieve their goals. So why choose a more detailed—and more effective—plan for your friend, but not for yourself?

New research from Scott and Elanor F. Williams, associate professor of marketing at Olin, shows that people opt for flexibility in their own plans because they think flexibility is more appealing.

"People like the idea of having some wiggle room in their plans," Williams says. "But their recommendations to others reveal that they do know that it's less effective to be flexible than to have a more structured plan."

Why do they choose a plan that's less likely to work? "People follow their hearts more when choosing for themselves than for other people," Scott says. "In other words, people give very good advice to others for how to plan for success but fail to follow that same advice for themselves."

The paper "In goal pursuit, I think [flexibility](#) is the best choice for me but not for you," in the *Journal of Marketing Research*, also suggests some options to make people more likely to add structure and detail to their own plans.

"Telling people to follow their heads as they decide, or highlighting that structure is a way to stay on track, encourages them to choose more structured plans for themselves, too," Scott says.

More information: Sydney E. Scott et al, EXPRESS: In Goal Pursuit, I Think Flexibility Is the Best Choice for Me but Not for You, *Journal of Marketing Research* (2022). [DOI: 10.1177/00222437221143755](https://doi.org/10.1177/00222437221143755)

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