



New Year's Resolutions for Software Professionals

Michael Cinquino (00:00)

Welcome everyone to this episode of Ascendle Unscripted. Today we have Susannah Mitchell, VP of Operations at Ascendle, and Lynzi Cashman, Director of Delivery, both Ascendle Unscripted veterans at this point. Welcome both.

Lynzi Cashman (00:13)

Thank you.

Susannah Mitchell (00:13)

Thank you.

Michael Cinquino (00:15)

Always. So we're going to be talking about New Year's resolutions for software professionals, but not New Year's resolutions, because I guess we're going to understand that New Year's resolutions usually don't do so good.

Lynzi Cashman (00:27)

Yeah, I couldn't agree with that more. I think the best resolution I've ever made was the year that I said I'm actually not going to make a resolution. Kept it perfectly, beautifully, checked it off at the end of the year. So I was quite successful in that.

Michael Cinquino (00:43)

Did good things happen even though you did not make a resolution?

Lynzi Cashman (00:47)

They did, but what I didn't do was beat myself up for taking the road less traveled, if you will. I enjoyed the journey more than the end goal itself, per se.

Michael Cinquino (01:01)

Susannah how about you? What's your feeling around New Year's resolutions?

Susannah Mitchell (01:06)

Yeah, so I'm not ready to give up on the concept yet. I did this past year have a round that worked. And so this has been a topic I've been thinking about - how to set, you know, an annual goal that you can actually stick to and achieve. So I love this topic right now.

Michael Cinquino (01:26)

Usually they don't, I guess that the numbers are against everyone though, right? The numbers say that it doesn't work. So I feel like maybe one of the places we can start off is given that that's the case, what approach, Susannah, that you've not given up yet, and Lynzi, I know you're not giving up. Lynzi maybe you're doing it for this year. Lynzi, you doing resolutions this year?

Lynzi Cashman (01:49)

I am doing what I'll say is a flavor of resolution. So I'm creating a vision for what I want 2025 to look like. Then creating goals, doing activities that support that vision. So it's a flavor of a resolution, right?

Michael Cinquino (02:07)

Hmm. Susannah, are you maybe this year doing something more traditional? Are you doing something vision-questy like Lynzi?

Susannah Mitchell (02:18)

So similar to Lynzi, I am still hardening mine. I have not chosen it. It's definitely a fact that New Year's resolutions are ineffective. There are studies around this. They fail for all sorts of reasons. The top three reasons they fail are reasons that I have fallen victim to. They're not specific. They're unrealistic, or they're not actionable. So going into 2025, personally, I'll be choosing a goal, but a very specific, actionable, even call it a SMART goal that looks a certain way to make sure that I can actually achieve it.

Michael Cinquino (03:05)

My next question for each of you is how do we feel about SMART goals? Because this is something that almost everybody knows or has some idea of. Susannah I'll start with you since you just mentioned it. SMART goals, is that something for software professionals that you recommend as a strategy or technique or tactic?

Susannah Mitchell (03:26)

Absolutely. think New Year's resolutions are just like any goal. They have to be specific. They have to be actionable. They have to be measurable. You need to be able to hold yourself accountable to them, just like any goal that we would recommend get set within any level or context - not just software development organizations, but organizations in general. So I think that applies to New Year's resolutions as well. And I think it's a key to success when thinking about how to pick something to anchor on and actually fix and make a difference over the course of a year.

Michael Cinquino (04:02)

Lynzi, given it's year end, do you have any suggestions or recommendations around how to identify what Susannah just talked about? Because it sounds like the first step is really identifying what is that area that we want to work on or concentrate on or see some growth in. Is there anything that you're doing or Ascendle traditionally does towards year end, looking ahead to the next year?

Lynzi Cashman (04:26)

Sure. So one of the things that I talk a lot about internally and then with our clients as well is this concept of broadly specific. And so of course the S in SMART stands for specific, but you don't want to narrow your focus so much that you aren't allowing for growth of that goal for growth of yourself and then evolution of that goal as you grow. And so what I mean by broadly specific is you want it broad enough that the journey you take during the year to encompass the goal, but yet specific enough that you know that you've accomplished your goal. So it's for sure an oxymoron, Like giant shrimp, Microsoft Works right? Like, had to get a little IT joke in there for us. I think it's an important oxymoron to really spend some time with and examine because

As human beings, as IT professionals, as software professionals, as team members, as leaders, we're all always evolving and growing. And so we can't be so specific and so microscopic, if you will, at the beginning of the year, that it doesn't allow for the evolution of the year and the evolution of our own change.

In order to get back to really the crux of your question, talking about how to set these goals, I think it's important to first reflect on what do I want my 2025 to look like? Whether that is, let's just talk professionally, but do I want to learn a new skillset? Do I want to grow into leadership? Do I want to just grow my own confidence so that way I can push back on clients, push back on leadership. Obviously not Susannah and I, but other people. Do I want to just feel more confident speaking up in a meeting, right? Because those are all different areas of growth that are personal in nature yet have impacts professionally. And so understanding what is that vision for the year and then putting goals against that to grow my confidence, let's say that's a goal.

Lynzi Cashman (06:47)

That's really broad, right? But yet you'll know there are specific things you can do and there are ways to know if you accomplish that, right? Because you can look back in the middle of the year and say, am I actually doing the things that I said I wanted to do? Am I feeling more confident? How is that manifesting? What should I continue to do to grow that confidence? What are the things that I'm doing that actually aren't helping at all? And so, having that broad vision to set those more specific goals while still allowing room for the journey.

Michael Cinquino (07:23)

Before I go further, Susannah, you got it way faster than I did, the Microsoft Works joke. Not everybody's going to get that.

Susannah Mitchell (07:29)

I'm used to Lynzi's humor.

Lynzi Cashman (07:32)

Sorry.

Susannah Mitchell (07:32)

It was a good setup, Lynzi. I give you a 10 out of 10 for that one.

Michael Cinquino (07:40)

Because I was like, wait, yeah, there was like a scaled down version of Word and Excel called Microsoft Works. It was like the free version that you didn't have all the features.

Susannah Mitchell (07:50)

Great.

Michael Cinquino (07:51)

we can agree that Microsoft Works is gone probably for that very reason that Lynzi just mentioned. Susannah, how do you identify broadly specific as something that Lynzi just mentioned. How do you identify when the year turns over or when you are looking to pick something? How do you identify that? Do you have a process?

Susannah Mitchell (07:54)

Yeah, I think it's about the set of questions that you ask. So I think my answer is going to be similar to Lynzi's. I step back and ask, what's actually going to have an impact? What's a change that's going to be meaningful? Not to be too sappy with it, but to bring it back to reality. Is there something I can eliminate that's really holding me back? Is there a change that I want to see that I can model, like a small portion of in order to move that needle. Oftentimes there is something that's creating churn in my life and what is it that's creating that? It's interrogating those things to really get to the heart of a problem that helps pick the goal that's going to be meaningful. And of course the meaningful goals, the ones that really will create change that feels good and creates that virtuous cycle. Those ones that are the best to pick.

Michael Cinquino (09:18)

Can we talk about flexibility for a second? Because, Lynzi you alluded to it, but with the world changing so quickly, how do you strike a balance between chasing indicators where you're changing your goal every three weeks and then having some flexibility in one extreme to the other? There are some strategies around this, right, where you can remain flexible but not change the goal every three weeks kind of thing. You never really make any headway then and you don't do any deep work as they say. That one's up for grabs. Whoever would like to jump on that one.

Lynzi Cashman (09:57)

Sure, so I think with the flexibility, I think that's key, right? I mean, you and I have talked about some agile things in the past before, Michael, and one of the key tenants of agile is being responsive to change over following a plan. And I think that building in flexibility to your goal is part of that broadly specific piece that I talked about earlier, right? And it's not,

you don't get right the first time, right? Like, none of us are great at something the first time we try it. But I think allowing yourself flexibility to let that goal change with you, but then also the flexibility to say, maybe that goal doesn't serve me anymore. You know, I mean, things happen personally and professionally. Maybe you have a goal to get into leadership at your current company, and then unfortunately you experience a layoff. Well, the goal you had at the beginning of the year doesn't serve you anymore, right? Because you can't get into leadership at your company if you don't work there anymore. It's not mental gymnastics to reach that conclusion. But it's being flexible enough to understanding that, OK, that goal doesn't serve me anymore. What is something that does serve me? And not being so beholden to that, well, I set that goal at the beginning of the year. I have to accomplish it, right?

Michael Cinquino (11:25)

So to just get a point of reference before we go further, Susannah, can you maybe give us an example of something maybe from the world of Ascendle or something that we can kind of understand? Like this could be a goal in the world of software for the year for a hypothetical client or maybe something you've seen in the past that we can talk about now.

Susannah Mitchell (11:48)

I think it's easy to talk about goals theoretically, but some real examples might be helpful here. potentially, if we first pick the issues that might exist and then think about goals. So in the development organization, some examples of issues that might be hanging over your head could be bad cross-team communication. Needing to estimate work, but being worried that your estimates will be wrong and so therefore not being comfortable estimating work.

Michael Cinquino (12:24)

Can we use communication as an example? Because a lot of folks know that 86 % of all problems are related to communication in business. And that seems to be a common theme, not just in Ascendle Unscripted, but globally in a way. If communication was a goal, what does maybe something from the past, something that either of you have seen, where communication becomes a goal, and how would an organization approach that going into a new phase, a new year?

Susannah Mitchell (12:55)

So I think communication issues can be a problem at every level of a development organization. One that's top of mind for me is at that leadership level, at the folks who are leading the effort in general within their development organizations, whether that be product, development management, or even the CEO level.

One of the major communication hurdles is being disconnected, not knowing what's going on and not giving, having the input into what's going on. So it can be kind of broken both ways. So a good goal for that level might be as simple as I commit to showing up to

every sprint review and providing feedback in the moment at sprint review. It's a simple goal.

But I think that that's a SMART goal. It's actionable, it's measurable, and it's very specific. But it's also broad because it's, as Lynzi said, it's related to a bigger issue, which is I want to make sure that I'm being heard and that the team is being heard and that we're having good communication.

Michael Cinquino (14:05)

Lynzi, do you have an example from your purview?

Lynzi Cashman (14:09)

Yeah, absolutely. I've seen where communication has been an issue at the team level is where there's a lack of communication and honesty around developer work. And so let's say a developer gets finished with their particular sprint backlog items ahead of schedule and they don't raise their hand and say, hey, I'm available to help or I need something more to work on. They just go into the backlog and start working in the backlog and that can cause an issue come the next sprint planning when the product owner says, okay, I'm ready to go. Here's our sprint plan. And that developer raises their hand way too late and says, I actually already did all of that. And that is definitely something I've seen in the past. And it blows that product owners whole plan away in terms of feasibility, in terms of flexibility and so now there's a scramble to get everything resorted to then have a successful sprint. So if people communicate honestly and productively then those sorts of issues can be solved much much sooner.

Michael Cinquino (15:24)

So we always end with questions, but before that, given that we're talking about goals, do you think you all could come together and maybe share some sort of checklist for a year turning over or going into goals? If you're going into a new year, what are some things that a leader, someone in software in this realm can ask themselves so that they know that they're not checking a box, but they're making sure that they are hitting every note, if you will, going forward so that they can go into a new year, a new phase, and know that they're going to be able to have a North Star, if you will. So if we were going to create a checklist now, what would that look like?

Susannah Mitchell (16:08)

I think that there's a line of questioning that a leader can ask that can help with this goal setting. And I don't think it's very challenging. Are the teams delivering predictably? Do the teams know what they should be working on? And do the teams feel they are making progress against those company goals? Are the company goals clear to everybody? Are we building the right thing? Are we building it predictably? Are we building it at a high level of quality? These are questions that can be asked that can help point towards what the root causes might be and help set some goals.

Michael Cinquino (16:49)

Lynzi, from your view, what could be a checklist?

Lynzi Cashman (16:54)

Sure. So similar to Susannah, it's really just a list of questions coming from the individual perspective, the individual team member perspective, regardless of level across the organization. But asking yourself, what is my vision for the year look like? What is something? This is just a classic retrospective technique. What is something I want to keep doing? What is something I want to stop doing? And what is something I want to start doing?

And so they're simple questions, but if you really take it to heart, it can be a really deep and meaningful experience where you introspect and understand like what are truly the changes that I want to see in myself this year? And then I always fall back on the Mahatma Gandhi quote: "be the change you want to see." And so if the changes that, if you want to see those changes in your organization, you have to be those changes first, right? And lead by example, regardless of level in the organization.

Michael Cinquino (17:57)

Lynzi, one follow-up question to that. I love start, stop, and keep doing. I think the phenomenal feedback, I use it in almost everything that I do. Question for you. Stop, because when stop doing something comes up, usually when you think about goals or we think about goals, it's like, I want to do this or get that or make this happen. It's usually not, want to stop doing this. So two parts to that. One, do you feel it's as valuable to stop doing something? It might be to start doing something. And then I guess I was going to ask what the measure is, but I think I may have answered my own question. Did I do it or not? Kind of thing.

Lynzi Cashman (18:34)

Yeah. And it could be something as broad as I want to stop rushing through my work so quickly that I have X number of bugs. So I will be more deliberate in my coding and then I'll do whatever self unit testing I need to do. So that way my tester finds fewer bugs, right? That's very binary.

But then also from the more like emotional perspective if you will Imposter syndrome holds a lot of people back from speaking up from contributing from growth - like we just leap in front of our own way because our insecurities are saying you actually can't do that. Stopping that imposter syndrome wherever you can that's a really powerful stop doing right? And that's not something that can necessarily be quantified, but you will be able to see the growth in yourself when you stop that negative self-talk of, I can't do it.

Michael Cinquino (19:38)

So Lynzi, you feel like, or Susannah, do you feel like it's important to turn a don't do into a positive, a more active, you know, Michael, don't eat three chocolate bars a day. It's like,

okay, well, is there way to flip that over where it becomes a positive goal and not a negative, just don't do that. It's like you were saying - broadly specific earlier, Lynzi, do you think it's important to turn the negatives over into something positive? Or is it good enough just to go, we're not going to rush anymore? I'm not going to rush anymore. So because why? Because it's equating a lot of bugs. And at the end of the day, it's taking me a lot longer because we have to go back and forth on this. the question is for both of do you feel it's important to make every goal positive or is it OK to just say one of these things is going to be no, we're not going to do that anymore?

Lynzi Cashman (20:32)

I'm going to give you a really good consultant answer. It depends. You already guessed. It's like you've met all of us before. But it depends on the person. It depends on the goal. It depends on the context.

Michael Cinquino (20:37)

Got it.

Lynzi Cashman (20:51)

It just depends, because some people really respond well to that firm line in the sand of like, I'm not going to do this. And other people respond better to, I'm going to flip this in my mind and I'm going to look on that more positive side. So it's more action oriented of things I want to start doing. So it truly just depends on that person. But Susannah would love to hear your thoughts.

Susannah Mitchell (21:18)

Yeah, so I don't know that I actually know this, but it's certainly interesting when we think about it. If you think about through, for example, like the dieting lens, there are studies that say it's better to add good behaviors than to restrict, right? So you're going to find more success with, I'm going to add a salad every day versus I'm not going to eat french fries. There's just something in our psyche that doesn't respond well to being restricted.

So how does that translate? I'm not exactly sure, but it might be interesting to distill this question down and think about, you know, instead of the positive or negative, are you focusing on the outcome? it, you know, positive or negative outcome versus the habit itself? And I think if you focus on the habits, then that can be something that you build more positively and see that same impact. So translating that to software professionals, it might be, you know, I want to be more engaged, just isn't more of an outcome. It's positive. But if you focus on the habit, it might be more. I want to bring an improvement item to each retrospective. Lynzi, to tie back to your example - for the leader, it might be I want to test the software each time sprint review has ended. So it's more about the habit than the bigger outcome, whether positive or negative. But I do think there might be something to investigate there with the positive. Certainly other areas of goal setting have told us this. Positive is more powerful.

Michael Cinquino (23:03)

Could pattern be another name for habit, Susannah?

Susannah Mitchell (23:07)

Absolutely. You know, we're thinking about New Year's resolutions. So habit comes to mind. I'm going to go to the gym four times a week type of thing, but definitely the patterns as well, especially in a scrum setting where you reset every two weeks. It's kind of already built in there. So plugging into that, there's already a cadence that you can pick up on that pattern.

Michael Cinquino (23:30)

So going away, we always love to give some sort of takeaway, something that's actionable right now. Lynzi, I would love to start with you. What's one big actionable takeaway for someone who's watching this, that they can go do it right now, or soon after right now? What do you feel like the big takeaway in your view would be?

Lynzi Cashman (23:47)

I think that the biggest takeaway is to ask yourself the hard questions and don't give yourself the easy answer.

Michael Cinquino (23:58)

Can you give an example?

Lynzi Cashman (24:00)

Sure, so if you are asking yourself, is there something that I genuinely want to start doing in the new year, whether that is habit or a pattern. There's so much pre-work to be done in terms of what are the things that I feel that I'm already successful at? And then where are the areas where I know I'm not as successful?

What needs to happen to close that gap? And it can't just be, be better. that's just not a great goal, right? But it has to be hard enough that you're really going to challenge yourself. And so truly, properly introspect. Try to step out of your own self, your own ego, and understand the impact that you have on other people. Read the rooms that you're in. We're wrapping up 2024. We still have some things to do, right? And so...read the room, read the expressions of people, if they're on camera, hopefully they're on camera, but who are on camera, understand, am I continually picking on the same people? Am I putting somebody on the spot and then they recoil from that? And it's, actually, I should not do that anymore. I should understand how they like to work. So I said lots of words, but to boil that back down, introspect. Understand how other people may see you and then really tune into the impact you have on others.

Michael Cinquino (25:52)

Susannah, how about you?

Susannah Mitchell (25:56)

Yeah, building on this theme of impact that Lynzi was just talking about, I think the key takeaway is similar to what was said, focusing on something that's actually going to matter, right? Is there something that is going to make a difference in my daily life that I can, because it is so impactful, keep this change top of mind every day? And then I think you know, the other guidance is back to where we started. Make sure the goal is SMART and think about that habit versus that outcome. What is the change you need to be making? What is that daily piece? Not, you know, only focusing on that big goal at the end. Otherwise, you risk falling into that all or nothing trap that can feel overwhelming and is one of the reasons we all give up on our New Year's resolutions by January 31st.

Michael Cinquino (26:58)

One of the things that came up for me as you both were speaking was the question of how is the world reflecting itself back to me? And going back to what you mentioned before of what's one thing I should start, stop, and continue doing? Your analogy there Lynzi of the Zoom screen or of looking at the world, reminding the world to be client-centric, to be other-centric, and to pay closer attention rather to how the world might be reflecting itself back to you or what that looks like could be an indicator of what needs to change.

Lynzi Cashman (27:38)

Absolutely. so, no, was just going to say if you're in a meeting and you see nobody paying attention and nobody participating, I think that's a really good indicator to ask yourself what is actually happening underlying. Is there an issue going on that requires all of the people to help solve it, which can happen, And so if that's the case,

Michael Cinquino (27:39)

Is there any? Please go ahead, Lynzi.

Lynzi Cashman (28:05)

Well, let's stop having this meeting and then you all go off and solve that issue. We can repurpose this meeting for that time. If it's continuous, let's examine the need for the meeting. Let's examine the method of communication. Maybe your own presentation techniques. Some of us are maybe a little sillier than we should be, but I do think it always makes for an engaging meeting.

Susannah Mitchell (28:28)

I appreciate it, certainly.

Lynzi Cashman (28:30)

You don't know who I'm talking about.

Susannah Mitchell (28:33)

You.

Michael Cinquino (28:35)

What could this be telling me? It seems like a question that could be a very powerful question to ask in almost any context.

Lynzi Cashman (28:44)

I think the only thing that I would add is that the journey is just as important as accomplishing the goal.

Michael Cinquino (28:54)

What does that mean?

Lynzi Cashman (28:56)

What I mean by the journey is just important as accomplishing the goal is that the on the path to accomplish your goal, you're going to go through so much self-discovery. You're going to go through so much personal growth, professional growth, and that even if at the end of the year, the end of the quarter, the end of the half, whatever your time box for your goal is, even if you can't check it off 100%, that doesn't mean that it was all in vain, right? And so even though it may be a no, did not accomplish it. I think the second part of that statement is, but this is what I learned. And so appreciate the journey.

Susannah Mitchell (29:43)

So I think one piece of practical advice might be to take the lesson we have learned from practicing Scrum and think about an incremental or micro goals that can be practiced week over week and build to that end state eventually and set the goal as those small pieces which speaks to that, you know, focus on the habit piece. But we've learned this lesson in how we build software. So I think it can be applied to how we create annual goals for ourselves.

Michael Cinquino (30:18)

Thank you very much and thank you audience as always for joining us for another episode of Ascendle Unscripted. Susannah, thank you. Lynzi, thank you.

Lynzi Cashman (30:27)

Thank you. It was.

Susannah Mitchell (30:27)

Thank you, Michael. This was a fun one.

Michael Cinquino (30:31)

Hope to see you again soon.