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Ron Ashkenas' blog post on Harvard Business Review  
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### Return, Reenergize, and Reinvent

A number of years ago I encountered a puzzling [holiday phenomenon](#). I was working at what was then J.P. Morgan Bank with a back-office department in which the staff was hard-pressed to collect and reconcile data at the end of every month. Consequently the last week of each month was always [stressful](#) and came with the constant complaint that the department was short on staff. Yet somehow this same process in the month of December — when many employees were planning to take time off between Christmas and New Year's Day — was so much more efficient that a skeleton staff was able to finish the month without any problems. In essence what was difficult to complete in four weeks throughout the year was [accomplished in just three weeks](#) in December (with the same volume of work).

You're probably familiar with the adrenaline rush of getting things done to [meet a deadline](#) — whether [your deadline](#) preceded a vacation, or came from a boss, client, or professor (remember those "all-nighters" in college?). But when an entire team faces a deadline together and is highly motivated to accelerate progress, "Christmas miracles" such as those I witnessed at J.P. Morgan are entirely possible.

Unfortunately there is an addendum to this story, which is that the performance improvements achieved in December [did not carry over into January](#). Within days the data collection and reconciliation process returned to normal, so that by the end of the month the team was again struggling to get everything done.

The lesson here is that the Morgan team could have identified the first week or two of January [as a choice point](#). At this crucial moment, they could have decided to build on their December success and create a sustainably faster and more effective process; or they could have returned to their old patterns. Unconsciously they chose the latter.

The beginning of January is a natural choice point for every management team, whether or not you've experienced a Christmas miracle. The changeover to a new calendar year, coinciding with the return of many from holiday breaks, is a perfect opportunity to reflect on what was learned during the past year; set exciting stretch goals for the year ahead; and start taking actions to achieve those goals. In this spirit, Jack Welch used to ask his managers in January to think of themselves as just starting a new job — encouraging them to break free of the past year's patterns and reinvent the way that they and their teams operate. Similarly, many companies hold leadership



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conferences in January for the "top 50" (or more) so that they can get the new year off to a running start, with renewed energy and different ways of working.

If you are in a company that already uses January as a launching pad for reenergizing and reinventing your work, take advantage of the opportunity. Go to the leadership sessions with an open mind and your own creative ideas about how to improve performance. Then replicate the process with your team and help it to cascade across your organization.

If this is not part of the way your company ordinarily functions, then here are a few steps you can take independently to capture the January opportunity:

1. Reflect on the Welch question: What would you do differently if you had just been hired for your job?
2. Informally interview a few of your customers (internal or external) and ask them what they would like to change about working with you and your team in the coming year.
3. Bring your team together to celebrate the accomplishments of the past year — and then raise the bar for the year to come. How can you make 2011 a breakthrough year? How could the team become a model for high performance in the company?

By now most of us have returned from the holiday break, hopefully relaxed and ready to get back to work. But at this moment, we all face a choice: We can fall back into our old patterns and habits, both individually and collectively; or we can reinvent those patterns and generate renewed energy for the coming year.

*Now that January is here, what's your choice?*

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<http://blogs.hbr.org/ashkenas/2011/01/in-2011-return-reenergize-and.html>