

# Sometimes it's best to start without the end in mind

CLOSE TO HOME

BY JOHN McPHERSON



In Stephen Covey's insightful book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, one of the habits is to "start with the end in mind." Before you begin a project, have a clear picture in your mind as to what the final product will look like. That's good advice.

But sometimes it's best to adopt the opposite strategy: start a project even though you *don't know* how it's going to turn out, in which case you'll "build the bridge as you walk on it."

The former strategy (start with the end in mind) is preferred because you can move fast, steward not waste resources and momentum through trial and error, easily communicate the project to team members, stay on budget, and enjoy a predictable process and conclusion. It's a very efficient model. For example, if you're going to build a house, have detailed drawings about every major and minor aspect *before* work commences, and the project can progress more smoothly.

But sometimes you might have a young, unformed idea that you want to pursue (perhaps an entrepreneurial pursuit) and you don't have a clue as to what the end might look like, in which case, you just need to start. For example, my daughter, Lauren, recently started a new business dealing with environmental sustainability. Her business plan was novel. When she launched the business all she could see were the first few steps (trademark the name, start an LLC, open a checking account, build a basic website, etc.). After that, she just "walked through the fog" each day (for the first few years) until a clear and viable business formed.

Sometimes you *do* know exactly what you want to accomplish but don't know *how* it's going to happen, in which case, you also just need to start. For example, when I finished my undergraduate degree, I knew I wanted to earn a Ph.D. so I promptly registered for graduate school. I had no idea how I was going to pay for it, how I would negotiate school with the demands of a young family and work, what was involved in completing the degree, and whether or not I had the moxie to finish. The "end in mind" wasn't ambiguous, but how to get there was. I naively launched into the unknown and five years later had the post nominal.

Perhaps I'm describing the difference between an explorer (someone who starts without the end in mind) and a pioneer (someone starts with the end in mind). An explorer has a general goal (ex. discover the new world) but is not sure how to get there; he has a compass but no map. A pioneer follows the path forged by the explorer (he has an end in mind), and may even improve the process. An explorer has a high

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*Think with me*

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tolerance for risk—failure is an option; for a pioneer, less so.

I'm not advocating that you identify exclusively with one approach or the other. In the course of life you'll probably engage in both. I have found it helpful to recognize which role I'm adopting because the demands are different.