We are always saying no to something in our lives. Choosing to do one thing usually involves saying no to something else. In Stephen Covey’s *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, the second and third habits, “Begin with the End in Mind” and “Put First Things First,” are two interrelated habits that allow us to determine our goals and priorities and then align our life choices and time to accomplish what is most important to us. In the second in a series of columns on Covey’s seven habits, I will take a look at what those two habits mean and how they can be applied to life.

Practicing the first habit, “Be Proactive,” involves the realization that you are the programmer of your life. When you work on the second habit and begin with the end in mind, you already have written the program and are now going through the ongoing process of rewriting it. Beginning with the end in mind means that you understand your mission, have internalized it, and have determined your core values. In other words, you have identified what is important to you and how you will live. Values are our guiding principles. For example, we can value people and their ability to reason, and we can also live with honesty and integrity. According to Covey, the first three habits are the “private victory” that allow us to move from dependence to independence. When we are able to determine what is important in our lives and make the choices to keep those priorities, we have the skills necessary to be independent.

**Beginning with the End**

As professionals, we face significant demands from our work environment. But we also are committed to various other roles and responsibilities in our lives. At the core of these habits is the understanding of the roles and responsibilities that are most important and aligning our life choices to support those. Covey opens the chapter on habit two by having readers imagine their own funeral. What do you think people would say about you? What kind of coworker, friend, or family member are you? This exercise helps us realize what we want to be remembered for, and those are what matter to us most. Covey writes, “If you carefully consider what you wanted to be said of you in the funeral experience, you will find your definition of success.”

Contemplating that which is most important to you as well as what you want to accomplish within your lifetime helps you develop your priorities. Covey notes that “all things are created twice. There is a mental or first creation, and a physical or second creation to all things.” Beginning with the end in mind is a check to see if your ladder of success is leaning on the correct wall. If your ladder of success is leaning on the wrong wall, then climbing it more efficiently will only get you to the wrong place faster.

If you choose not to be proactive and don’t determine what you want to accomplish, your priorities will be determined for you. According to Covey, “We empower other people and circumstances outside our Circle of Influence to shape much of our lives by default.” It’s easy to get distracted by everything going on in your environment. If you don’t take the time to think about what you’re trying to accomplish and your goals, you will find yourself living passively instead of proactively. We
can lead busy lives and accomplish many things, but a key question is, “Are we accomplishing what is most important at this moment?”

Much of how we live and make decisions is determined by how we center our life, i.e., what’s valuable to us. Is your life centered on your spouse, family, money, work, possessions, friends, pleasure, self, or principles? Covey notes that if you are centered on people or things, your center will shift because those things can change based on circumstances out of our control. If you are centered on principles, however, you have a solid core that won’t change. It will allow you to be secure even when things may not be going as you desire. Covey notes that “the personal power that comes from principle-centered living is the power of a self-aware, knowledgeable, proactive individual, unrestricted by the attitudes, behaviors, and actions of others or by many of the circumstances and environmental influences that limit other people.”

Putting First Things First
We each have many different roles in our lives: parent, employee, manager, spouse, and many more. Beginning with the end in mind is all about focusing on the important activities that exist in our different roles. But which roles are most important? Each role should have goals, but make sure that you don’t have too many roles. Covey states that you shouldn’t have more than seven roles, and having only three to five is preferable. Taking the time to understand each role and determining the goals to accomplish in each area better equips you to fulfill each role effectively.

Fulfilling your role as an employee begins by asking yourself, “What is the most critical part of my role to the company?” If you’re in sales, what activities produce long-term sales for the company? If you’re in engineering, what activities produce the best quality, best cost, and easiest-to-produce unit designs? If you’re in manufacturing, what activities enhance your ability to do your job, and what functions of your job are critical to the company’s success?

For example, if the most important aspect of a salesman’s job is to make phone calls to produce sales, then understanding that is part of beginning with the end in mind. If producing products is the most important aspect of your job, each function you perform is critical to the customer receiving a quality product.

Lastly, part of beginning with the end in mind also involves sharing opportunities for improvement. As a company employee, you are a member of a team. Sharing the opportunity to improve helps the whole team and company succeed, something that’s invariably part of any successful end goal. Every organization should spend some time focused on improving its effectiveness and efficiency to allow the organization to expand its capacity, achieve its goals, and improve its competitiveness.

Becoming and Staying Prioritized
There are various time management tools and prioritization techniques that can help you stay on track as you put these habits into place. If something is very important to you, schedule time for it. Just as scheduling meetings is important for day-to-day work, it’s also important to schedule time for your priorities.

We all have busy lives that are interrupted with new tasks and commitments. As these detours arise, our day-to-day work might be pushed aside. If our week is already prioritized, however, we would know what tasks are most important to complete on time. Categorizing this list is important
for knowing what could be done, what needs to be done, and what can wait. This process will enable you to quickly determine if new tasks are more important and what you can change in your schedule to accommodate them.

Another critical aspect of putting first things first is being able to say no to certain requests. Covey states that “you are always saying ‘no’ to something.” When you choose one task, you’re prioritizing it over another and saying no to something that might be less important. Realizing that you can say no without feeling guilty empowers you to say no when it’s necessary. Additionally, if you don’t say no when you should, you will either neglect priorities or, worse yet, take on too much, resulting in not fulfilling your responsibilities.

This is where delegation, another tool for putting first things first, takes over. Properly delegating tasks to other employees enhances your capacity as well as the capacity of your staff. Understanding how to be an effective delegator is an important part of putting first things first. Over time, investing in your staff and making the extra effort to teach them by delegating new tasks to them will allow you to increase the amount of tasks that can be delegated. In the end it will improve your organization’s capacity and increase your ability to focus your time on the most value-added tasks at hand.

These are just a few tools and techniques that will help you prioritize your time. The challenge is to take the first step to determine what is most important to your success, the success of your family, and the success of the organizations you belong to. Then you can make the commitment to set your priorities and keep them. It’s too easy to let the interruptions and distractions of being busy keep you from being the most effective in your life roles. It starts with determining the most important tasks you could do today that will have the greatest impact on achieving your goals. And if you aren’t already working on those tasks, ask yourself why.

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