

# The Discipline of Finishing

When it comes to working on and completing projects, are you the hare or the tortoise from Aesop's fable? Make sure you know the best way to work and how to keep on track so you'll finish as you should and be successful.

**M**ost of us are a lot better at starting projects than we are at finishing them. That's because anybody can start a project, but it takes discipline to finish one.

Discipline can be imposed either internally or externally, but, without it, projects languish. And one of the best ways to hide lack of discipline is—you guessed it—to start new projects. The result is an impossible schedule of conflicting demands, an office with no place to sit, and a human spirit completely sapped by all the unfinished business hanging over it.

Time management tools and personal organizer technologies don't always help with this problem because it's too easy to change priorities every week. Instead of helping you change your pattern, these systems can end up merely creating evidence to justify the scattered way you spend your week. Only discipline leads to real change.

All of us have experience with externally imposed discipline. Perhaps the most common one is the deadline. We've put off some proj-



ect repeatedly, but now the deadline looms. We pull out all the stops, ignore everyone and everything else, work day and night, and actually finish something. It's one of the most satisfying experiences we ever have at work. End-of-the-month, -quarter, or -year closings; important presentations; a variety of workplace crises—all are examples of what good finishers we can be when we apply this method.

Most of us are also capable of generating this degree of discipline internally. And for any project small enough that we can “just do it,” it's the best way: Clear the decks, and don't do anything else until you've finished. But don't start any project in this mode that you can't finish before you have to shift to something else! Why not? Because you'll end up like the hare

in Aesop's fable of the race with the tortoise.

While the short-term, all-out sprint has its place, you're going to be in deep trouble if it's the only arrow in your quiver. Some projects are simply too large and long term to be handled this way. You can't keep everyone revved up in crisis mode forever, and the longer you manage to keep the crisis alive, the more likely it is to get interrupted by another crisis of supposedly greater urgency or importance.

Another problem with complete reliance on the sprint is that there comes a time in every project when the ball is in somebody else's court. What do you do while you're waiting for a colleague's input or a senior management decision? Sprinting off in some



new direction is disastrous. It's death to finishing the first project. And nine times out of 10, the new project ends up as another energy-sapping piece of unfinished business, too. But sitting around on your hands isn't the right approach either.

That's when it's time to learn from the tortoise. The tortoise is the long-distance runner. The lesson here is steady routine. Break up the project into bite-sized pieces, and do one every day or every week. Forget about trying to dedicate two hours a day. That's a recipe for failure. Crises and fire-fighting will steal that time. Set aside 15 or 30 minutes per day, or preferably a two-hour block the same time each week. If you dutifully work even 15 minutes every day on one thing, you make it a habit. Eventually, the job gets fin-

ished. If you can't manage this degree of discipline internally, then force it on yourself by scheduling. Regularly scheduling time at a special site, with a colleague, or on a needed piece of equipment are good ways of imposing discipline on yourself.

### **Most of us are better starters than we are finishers.**

The important thing about finishing is knowing when to use each method. If you know you can sprint the whole race without taking a break, then, by all means, be a hare. It's the best and fastest way to complete something. If you can't complete the project at a sprint, then get serious about breaking up the project into tiny

pieces and setting up an inviolate routine. Beware of chopping a long-distance race into a series of unbroken sprints. You won't be able to keep up the pace. You won't finish. If the race is long enough, the tortoise really does finish first.

If you're a poor finisher, try organizing your work according to these two approaches. You'll probably start a lot fewer things, but you'll end up finishing many more. **SF**

*Kennard T. Wing, CMA, is the principal of Kennard T. Wing & Company in Havertown, Pa., which helps healthcare and nonprofit organizations improve their overall effectiveness. He is also Affiliated Faculty in Organizational Dynamics at the University of Pennsylvania. You can reach him at [ken@kennardtwing.com](mailto:ken@kennardtwing.com).*