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Beginning with the end in mind

In this phase of global uncertainty, the need to plan is more important than ever before

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The current air is dismal and full of despair. Truly, in 2008, the global environment changed from a time of irrational exuberance (when the year began) to a period of irrational pessimism (as we find now).

The general air of gloom is so strong that one can get carried away by it to believe that the end of the world is nigh. At such times, if you ask someone to set goals, you are met with a quizzical look of disbelief as the value of long-term planning is being questioned.

The truth is far from this. In fact, more than ever before, the need to plan is important now.

To quote Dwight Eisenhower, the former president of the US and head of the victorious Allied forces in the final phase of the World War II, "Plans are nothing; Planning is everything." To plan ahead essentially means that we give ourselves a reason to live.

A plan enables us to focus our energies and direct them meaningfully to achieve a desired goal. Without this, our energies are dissipated with numerous distracting choices that are competing for our attention everywhere — be it studies, sports or investments, etc.

In the face of multiplicity, you would be lost in a maze of choices if you lack goal clarity. As Alice learned from the Cheshire Cat in Wonderland, "If you don't know where you want to go, any road will take you there."

Lets look at five simple steps that will help us in the planning process:

Where do you want to go? Ask this question in the context of the timeframe you are planning for (ie, your plan period) — be it 12 months, 24 months or longer. Having chosen your time perspective, firm up your desired end goal. In Stephen Coveys words, "Begin with the end in mind." This becomes the target or objective that you will seek to secure by the end of your plan period.

How will you know that you have reached there? From your target, you now need to work back and create milestones for measurements to indicate whether you are on track towards your goal. Remember, your actions are directed to goal achievement, but you need to consciously and constantly check bearings to see whether you are on the right road to the destination. Living in auto pilot state or cruise control mode could result in nasty surprises at the end of the plan period.

Where are you now? This is a quick and easy assessment of your current status. Knowing your present strengths and vulnerabilities is a good way of getting a realistic assessment as the starting point for the future is today. Understanding the opportunities, threats and challenges before you would enable a better preparation for the journey to the future.

What are the methods you could employ to reach your goals? Knowing where you want to go and knowing where you are today means that you have assessed the gaps that need to be bridged. Therefore, brainstorming options for covering this gap are an important element in your planning process. After having generated a menu of options, you can choose the best alternative. You can be confident of reaching the chosen destination by implementing this strategy well.

Remember, this model is not to be seen in isolation. The world around us is constantly changing. It must be emphasised that no plan is complete without simultaneously creating a contingency plan. Hence, you need to constantly monitor and modify plans to ensure achievement of your objectives.