All of us know—either intrinsically or owing to some glossy 1990s motivational poster—that e-learning initiatives are intended to accomplish an assortment of useful results for our organizations: direct revenue, required skills, cost savings, necessary certifications, increased productivity, or the like. Nevertheless, the daily tasks associated with designing, developing, and maintaining a distance education initiative that achieves these objectives, and many others, are typically the distractions or troublesome misadventures that occupy our attention; often delaying our insistence on measurable performance to another day.

While there is no doubt that the accomplishment of “small” results is essential for “big” success, when these daily tasks blur our ability to see the long-term objectives we often start to make near-sighted decisions that take us away from our intended goals and organizational contributions. As a result, when our predisposition becomes a focus on the relatively less-critical (i.e., we “sweat the small stuff”), what becomes critical to our performance is how we distinguish between what is important and what is not so important. This ability to differentiate the two not only allows us to better balance our attention across competing demands, but also helps us regain control over our long-term professional and organizational goals.

Suboptimization and micro-management are just two symptoms of our difficulties with knowing what is important and what is not. Both symptoms decrease the effectiveness of the overall organization and jeopardize our ability to achieve long-term success.

So how can we break some old habits? The first divergence we will want to take away a focus on the trivial is to regularly differentiate between ends and means.

Ends are merely the results we accomplish. Ends can be anything from e-mail messages to dictated letters, comprehensive evaluation reports to completed e-learning courses. Although ends will not always leave a physical artifact, most often they end with tangible products of our efforts. As a result, the ends we create are typically the outcomes by which our success or failure is later judged.

Closely related to the ends we achieve are the means we use to realize those results. Means are thereby the processes, tools, and techniques we use in our efforts to accomplish and contribute ends. Means can be anything from a theoretical construct to a circular saw, a computer software application to a high-tech global positioning gadget.

Like ends, means can be related to physical objects such a cell phone, although often times we will use intangible means, like models and matrices, in our efforts to attain results.

By clearly delineating between ends and means, you can begin to sort through the daily activities of most any task, thereby punctuating the results you wish to accomplish and pruning your efforts that fixate on details while forgetting the bigger picture.
The differentiation of ends and means is in no way, however, intended to detract from the reality that you must attend to the daily operations of any successful e-learning project. After all, both god and the devil are found “in the details.” But when we fixate on the daily tasks for too long we risk losing sight of the “big picture,” which can lead to those debilitating occurrences of micromanagement and suboptimization.

The rather unassuming, yet compelling and valuable, distinction between ends and means can have a significant impact on how you go about determining what is really important in your daily tasks. When you are attentive to this differentiation you may find yourself spending less time describing how you “want things to be done,” preferring a focus on the results you want to have accomplished—and how those results will contribute strategically to the organization. Or you may reconsider the use of traditional evaluation criteria (such as time on task, amount of effort, or “did you do what I told you to do” criteria), opting instead to develop clear standards for the products, outputs, and outcomes (i.e., the ends or results) that are to be delivered.

It is often useful to routinely jot down a list of the tasks currently consuming your attention, and then indicate for each if you are focused on the ends (i.e., results) with long-term benefits or just the means for short-term rewards. The long-term success of any e-learning initiative will be measured by the value of the ends that it accomplished and, as a result, you will want to focus a healthy portion of your time each week on accomplishing the ends that will define your success.