"Why do you always start at the end?"

I hear more irritation than curiosity and look over my shoulder at Sales-Lead Buddy in some surprise. This is the third time we've laid out our tentative response schedule to accommodate what we're hearing from the client about the coming RFP, as well as what we're hearing from the executive suite about the coming proposal effort.

The sales lead is the Hearer in Chief, the point through which all this information flows. He's been working this opportunity for a year, meeting with client representatives to understand their needs and to promote our capabilities, so he hears stuff from their side. *When the RFP will probably come out. What services it will include. How long the client will give us to respond. When the site visit is likely to be.*

Until the RFP hits the street he's the guy in charge as much as anybody is, so he hears stuff from our side, too. *What corporate partners we're talking to. Who might be the best proposal manager. Who's even remotely willing to be the proposal manager. (Word about Proposal Land does get around, despite our best efforts.) How many folks will be on the proposal team. What city the team will live in for the duration.*

By contrast, I hear nothing and don't much care. Well, I have opinions on proposal managers, teaming partners, and team members, but I have little influence with the executives. I have start dates and response durations that I'd prefer—I mean, I aspire to a life—but I have zero influence with the client. Besides, doing proposals is my primary work: If it be not now, yet it will come.

If it be now, 'tis not to come.
If it be not to come, it will be now.
If it be not now, yet it will come—
the readiness is all.
- Hamlet

No doubt it was in this Shakespearean spirit—*The readiness is all*—that Buddy had come to my cubicle a while back to talk schedule. When I realized he wanted more than generalities and a view of my outstanding Tigger collection, I relocated the discussion to his office and masking-taped four sheets of flipchart paper to the wall, sideways.

Seconds later, two large stickies bookended my impromptu chart, recording his best guesses for the start and finish dates of this impending race: the issue date for the RFP and the due date for our proposal submission. He was hearing maybe a seven-week response period, so I marked off the intervening weeks and we took an informed guess about the dates for the site visit. I glumly added a stickie further to the right than I wanted; further than should even be allowed.

Why so glum, chum?

I hate site visits. No, that's too harsh. I resent them.

A site visit—one to three days in duration, max—can effectively eat two or even three weeks of a proposal schedule that might be only six or eight weeks long.

How come?

The client won't/can't commit to an RFP release date so bidding teams can be ready to launch. So the client can't schedule the site visit for the same week they release the RFP. People have to validate the opportunity, get their teams together, and book travel, right? If it's a big RFP and/or a tricky location to get to, the site visit gets pushed to the right. Ten days after release? Two weeks? More? Sure. Why not?

Here's why not.

Our technical folks won't/can't finalize a solution until they've seen conditions on the ground, and they can't/won't write about that solution until they've finalized it. And we can't/can't review and improve what they've written until, well, they've written it.

And boy, chum, it needs both review and improvement.

With these three dates specified—the start and finish and the site visit—Buddy sat back and I started adding my value: my knowledge of what needed to happen and how long each step would take. I walked nonchalantly down to the right end of the flipchart paper.

Step by step, with one eye always on the start date, I worked my way backwards:

- o Before submission? Packing into boxes.
- o Before packing into boxes? Quality control checks.
- o Before quality control checks? Final production and assembly.
- o Before final production and assembly? Final writing changes.
- o Before final writing changes? Executive review, AKA Red Team.
- o Before Red Team? Internal team review and changes arising.

And so on through all the work I knew had to be done, until with some rejigging I had seven weeks of fun-filled activities, in parallel tracks wherever possible, but largely in series. A spot for everything, and not enough time for anything. *Comme d'habitude.*

A week or two later we did it again, based on new information we had. Well, I did it again, based on new information he had.

Now, five days later, he's heard something else and we're at it again. As I head to the far end, wondering idly how anyone did this without stickies, Buddy interrupts, a bit querulously I feel.

"Why do you always start at the end?"

Huh? My face goes still as I try not to show that I'm casting about wildly to find an explanation for something I do without thinking.

Ah. Here's something over in this corner. Let's see how this goes.

> "Because when the RFP is issued,
> I don't know for sure
> what to do next,
> or how long to allow for it.
> Not to be sure of finishing on time.
> But it's obvious what has to be done
> just before the last step,
> and just before that, and so on."

Pleased with my footwork I smile and nod, silently willing him to nod in dawning comprehension. Now his face goes still as he tries not to show that this makes no sense to him at all.

It's clear he's never scheduled a proposal or cooked a Christmas dinner, for that matter, but I decide that introducing a turkey into this conversation could be misconstrued. Smile now fixed in place, I turn back to my high-tech schedule and carry on.

From the end.