

Dirk Frans reflects 11 years later

You asked about reflections 11 years on. Here are the main ones and you can use them as you see fit:

1. My detailed schedule to complete the PhD was based on 350 days whereas you had said that one should assume 500 days for a PhD. I built in a difference of 150 days assuming two things. Firstly since my work was so closely related to the subject I was researching some of my "paid" days were indirectly contributing to the research although I did not count them as such. Secondly I knew from experience that almost every "project" runs into unexpected issues that delay it. The 150 days gave me the buffer. At the end I did a calculation and I think I ended up using about 400-420 days for the PhD.
2. My approach was possibly more organised than that of others and I believe that helped. Having said that it is often softer things that are even more important. An example of that is your encouraging words that got me through a difficult patch. Looking back over the PhD and in fact over life, I would say there have been many of those encouraging words that have helped me along the way.
3. In 2007, before joining IAM, I did the Strengthsfinder test (<http://www.strengthsfinder.com/home.aspx>). It indicated that among my top five strengths I have Learner, Achiever and Focus. I would now say that all three contributed to me finishing the PhD well and in time. Because I am a Learner I just thoroughly enjoy the times in my life when I have been able to study, including the PhD. Because I am an Achiever I thrive on getting things done. Early on in life I learned that breaking up an impossible task in many small possible ones was helpful. I can now see how doing that with the PhD and achieving these small steps, encouraged me all along until the end. Having Focus as a strength helped while doing the PhD because, as you told us in Leeds, there is a big temptation to be sidetracked into all kinds of interesting things one reads and finds out while doing PhD research.
4. Having done the Strengthsfinder test, and having seen how it has helped me understand myself, I would recommend that PhD candidates do it as part of their preparatory work. Once they and their supervisors know their strengths they will both know how to better arrange the support, management and supervision of the PhD. The Strengthsfinder philosophy has one other very good point. It advises people to focus on their strengths and not on their weaknesses.

I can now see how important that is because most students feel insecure starting a PhD. It is then easy to focus on what they are not good at and that can get them into a hole that nobody can get them out of. The result is failure. Focusing on what they are good at helps people to thrive. I believe some of the stories that you have on your website about people's journey bear that out.

5. Since completing my PhD in 2004 I have encouraged a number of people to do further studies including a PhD, including two of our four children. I have come to see how crucially important it is to do a PhD in a supportive and encouraging environment.
6. There are of course some people who want to do a PhD but who have very little chance of completing it. That is tough but nevertheless reality. I think those people would be best served by a very early evaluation of the likelihood that they could complete the PhD. A major factor is personality/character/strengths. Doing the Strengthsfinder test (or other similar tests) may help clarify for people whether doing the demanding and lonely research that leads to a PhD is in line with who they are. A second factor is finances. Doing a PhD is expensive and if that side of the PhD is fragile then the outcome will be unsure. Thirdly getting the right supervisor is crucial. There must be a "click" between student and supervisor. I spent 10 years looking for a supervisor who would suit me. Not only did we 'click' but he is also a world expert, committed to the poor and still doing grass roots work. Only then did I apply for a place.
7. Finally it is good for students to know that sometimes external events can temporarily or completely derail a PhD. I think of ill health of the researcher or other key people in their lives, lack of paid work/income, a major change in country or field of research etc. Frustrating as that will be, they need not consider themselves a failure because of that.

Dirk Frans
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