COMBINING STORYLINES AND CHARACTER FREEDOM

(Source unknown)

First of all, there are several campaigning styles. The most used are:

THE RAILROAD CAMPAIGN

Usually frowned upon as the least flexible, this type is very suitable for beginning
DMs and those that do not need flexibility. Campaigning in this style boils down to
having set goals and linear plots with little room for alternative situations. Most
DMs campaigning like this eventually have trouble "steering" the characters, because
they do not always have the same goals in mind.

THE OPEN ENDED CAMPAIGN

Much more flexible, this type is more appropriate for those that want to role play
and not roll play. The general idea is to set up a situation and go with the flow,
without a set goal. This is very "realistic," as the outcome of a situation is never
known in advance.

THE MATRIX CAMPAIGN

A combination of the first two, this is in my opinion the best. The DM picks not one
but several plot lines, intertwines them (hence the name matrix) and lets the players
choose their own path through them. This allows for flexibility on the players' part
and control on the DM's part. All three types call for special talents and need their
own kind of preparations.

THE RAILROAD CAMPAIGN

As stated before, DMs using this style will have the most problems with keeping the
players in (plot-) line. Because the players have so few options since they have to
follow the planned course, they tend to get the feeling they're being steered very
quickly. Few DMs have the talent to hide their manipulations. The best way to do this
is to provide the characters with logical reasons why they should do what you want.
Chasing bandits and rescuing damsels from dragons are good examples. The important
thing is to recognise the personal goals of the characters and choose an appropriate
course for the campaign. If you use bought modules, be sure to check if the
characters fit the story presented (or vice versa) or you will have wasted your
money.

THE OPEN ENDED CAMPAIGN

This gives the players boundless freedom and the DM loads of work. The DM needs to
predict which outcomes are possible and prepare for those. Naturally, the players
will always think of something else, so that the DM will also have to be a good
improviser. The way to do this properly is to have a broad image of the area in which
the campaign takes place and thoroughly work out the most important
persons/structures/countries. This way, by consequently acting out the proper parts,
the DM should have no problem keeping the campaign going. Notice I said should.

THE MATRIX CAMPAIGN

In the case of a matrix campaign, the DM needs less preparation and less
improvisational talent than with the open ended campaign, but still more than with
the railroad campaign. Conversely, the players feel less controlled. The key element
is to have at least one plot line for each character, and have them cross over and
meet as often as possible. In a real world there are also several main story threads
meeting and branching in time.

GENERAL TIPS

One thing that you will always have to do, no matter what campaign you run, is to
keep track of what happens even if the characters do not participate in it. This does
not mean that all character actions should have a deadline (they don't know the end
of the world is near, so you can easily delay it for a year) but it does mean that
they cannot simply do nothing in order to stay out of it. The most important reason
to do this, however, is to give the players the idea that the world also works
without them. Too many campaigns seem to be built around the characters, moving only
when they do.

Second, always provide motivations that suit the characters. If the characters are
cowards, simply telling them there is a dragon to be defeated won't work. If they
also happen to be very noble, telling them a good friend has been captured by it,
might. If the characters are greedy, the treasures might set them in motion.

Third, when you finally have a suitable mystery to be solved, make sure they get the
essential clues. Give them enough opportunity to find out and if they still don't see
it, provide alternate clues. The players will become desinterested if they don't have
a sense of progression. In order to keep them going, you will have to help them along
now and then.

But most important of all, be flexible. The worst you could possibly do, is force
them down a certain path. Even when running a railroad campaign you can still make
the players feel like they are the ones picking the path.