

Excellence. NO EXCUSES!

Excerpt:

**A BIAS
FOR
ACTION!**

Tom Peters

29 May 2014

The **ONLY** Thing I've Learned
(**NO** Bull!)

1/48*

*The One & Only one thing I've learned "for sure" since 1966—48 years.

In Search of Excellence/1982
The Bedrock “Eight Basics”

1. **A Bias for Action**
2. **Close to the Customer**
3. **Autonomy and Entrepreneurship**
4. **Productivity through People**
5. **Hands On, Value-Driven**
6. **Stick to the Knitting**
7. **Simple Form, Lean Staff**
8. **Simultaneous Loose-Tight Properties**

A Bias for Action, 1966-2014

Let me not weary you with a long tale of the work that led to *In Search of Excellence*. I will simply say that the research was done and the writing had been outlined. It included, as centerpiece, eight chapters that were the heart of the matter—the “Eight Basics of Excellence.” Well, of course, something had to come first. “People as asset #1”? “Getting close and then closer to the customer”? “Internal entrepreneurship”? Great candidates all! But we (my co-author Bob Waterman and I) chose—without any hesitation—another that we labeled **“A Bias for Action.”** In our travels, we had concluded that big businesses’ #1 problem was, to use our shorthand, **“Too much talk, too little do.”** As the norm, companies were weighed down with bureaucracy to the sinking point. (Indeed, some did sink.) But the companies we most admired—3M was a classic example—were inclined to generate an idea, test it in a flash, correct it in a flash, again and again, and then again, until it was discarded or became the basis for something new. Something had to be #1. And that characteristic, that “shut up and do now” bias for action was it.

That was some time in 1980, two years before the book was published. And here it is 2014. Fully thirty-four years later. And I *still* have not changed my mind. A lot has changed to say the least, but now, more than ever, those who get an inkling and try it in a flash and fix it in a flash are still the pick of the litter. From Google or Facebook to GE and the stores on main street in your town.

As I look back, 1966 was actual the personal launch of this paramount idea for me. After college, I went into the U.S. Navy—they’d paid my way through school. And, skipping steps, became an officer in a Seabee battalion. (Seabees stand for C.B., construction batallions—combat engineering units that by and large support U.S. Marine Corps ground units. The motto of the “Bees,” from the start in 1942 was **“Can do.”** Or: Stop the talk, start the “do.” It was embedded in a history dating to World War II and the important battle for Guadalcanal. And 24 years later I was living the legend in Danang, Vietnam. My “CO”/Commanding Officer epitomized “Can do.” And, in retrospect, directly anticipated “A Bias For Action.” I heard “Shut up and get in the field and do it—barriers are 100% irrelevant” so many times that my brain ached.

And, to essentially repeat, 48 years later, my beliefs haven’t changed one bit—except to get stronger with the passage of time. Heavens knows, in 2014 “a bias for action” has become the “age for action”—as everything moves/accelerates faster and faster.

(“A Bias for Action” is *Innovation Tactic #1 without challenge. BUT ... as Appendix FOUR I have included a list of no than 121 [!] innovation tactics.*)

1/48: Action Rules! The 1 Thing (Only) I've Learned (For Sure) in 48 Years!

A Bias for Action. (No. 1/"Basics of Excellence"/*In Search of Excellence*/1982)

**Ready.
Fire.
Aim.**

(H. Ross Perot on EDS; as compared to GM's "Ready. Aim. Aim. Aim. Aim. Aim. ...")

Just do it! (Nike)

Move fast, break things. (Facebook)

Experiment fearlessly. (Trait #1/Great innovator companies/*Bloomberg Businessweek*)

Relentless trial and error. (Corporate Survival Trait #1 in crazy times/*Wall Street Journal*)

"You miss 100% of the shots you never take." (Wayne Gretzky)

"Fail. Forward. Fast." (Tech exec/Philadelphia)

CAN YOUR BUSINESS FAIL FAST ENOUGH TO SUCCEED? (*Economist* conf. title)

"Fail faster, succeed sooner." (David Kelley/IDEO)

**No matter.
Try again.
Fail again.
Fail better.**

(Samuel Beckett)

"Reward excellent failures. Punish mediocre successes." (Phil Daniels/Australian businessman)

Whoever Makes the Most Mistakes Wins. (Richard Farson/book title)

"The Silicon Valley of today is built less atop the spires of earlier triumphs than upon the rubble of earlier debacles." (Paul Saffo/tech futurist/Palo Alto)

“The secret of fast progress is *inefficiency*: fast/furious/numerous failures.” (K. Kelly)

S.A.V./Screw Around Vigorously (TP: only possible success strategy for crazy times)

Demo or die. (MIT Media Lab credo)

“Don’t ‘plan.’ Do stuff.” (David Kelley/IDEO)

“Effective prototyping may be the most valuable core competence an innovative organization can hope to have.”/“Minimize ‘mean time to prototype.’” (M. Schrage/MIT)

“This is so simple it sounds stupid. You only find oil if you drill wells.” (J. Masters/wildcatter)

“We have a ‘strategic plan.’ It’s called ‘doing things.’” (Herb Kelleher/Southwest Airlines)

“Can do!” (Motto/U.S. Navy Seabees/My starting point in 1966 in Vietnam)

“Execution *is* strategy.” (Fred Malek)

WD40 (Water Displacement, 40 tries to get it right.)

**BLAME NO ONE.
EXPECT NOTHING.
DO SOMETHING.**

(NFL coach Bill Parcells/locker-room poster)

“Quality is a probabilistic function of quantity.” (M. Gladwell/“Creation Myth”/re J.S. Bach)

“Ever notice that ‘*What the hell*’ is always the right decision?” (Anon. screenwriter)

“I think it is very important for you to do two things: act on your temporary conviction as if it was a real conviction; and when you realize that you are wrong, correct course very quickly.” (Andy Grove)

“Active mutators in placid times tend to die off. They are selected against. Reluctant mutators in quickly changing times are also selected against.” (Carl Sagan & Ann Druyan, *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors*)

“If things seem under control, you’re just not going fast enough.” (Mario Andretti)

The most successful people are those who are good at plan B.” (James Yorke, mathematician)

“I’m not comfortable unless I’m uncomfortable.” (Jay Chiat)

“If it works, it’s obsolete.” (Marshall McLuhan)

“The only way to whip an army is to go out and fight it.” (Ulysses S. Grant)

“The genius of Grant’s command style lay in its simplicity. Grant never burdened his division commanders with excessive detail. ... no elaborate staff conferences, no written orders prescribing deployment. ... Grant recognized the battlefield was in flux. By not specifying movements in detail, he left his subordinate commanders free to exploit whatever opportunities developed.”—Jean Edward Smith, *GRANT*

“Execution is the job of the business leader.” (Larry Bossidy)

*Do right and damn the odds.
Stagnation is the curse of life.
The best is the cheapest.
Emotion can sway the world.
Mad things come off.
Haste in all things.
Any fool can obey orders.
History is a record of exploded ideas.
Life is phrases.*

First Sea Lord Admiral John Fisher

W.T.T.M.S.W. /Whoever Tries The Most Stuff Wins.

WTTMSASTMSUW/ Whoever Tries The Most Stuff **And Screws The Most Stuff Up** Wins.

WTTMSASTMSU**TFW**/Whoever Tries The Most Stuff And Screws The Most Stuff Up

The Fastest Wins.

“Ready.
Fire.
Aim.”

H. Ross Perot/EDS founder, former GM board member *“The first EDSer to see a snake kills it. At GM, the first thing you do is organize a committee on snakes. Then you bring in a consultant who knows a lot about snakes. Third thing you do is talk about it for a year.”*

“We made mistakes, of course. Most of them were omissions we didn’t think of when we initially wrote the software. We fixed them by doing it over and over, again and again. We do the same today. While our competitors are still sucking their thumbs trying to make the design perfect, we’re already on prototype version #5. By the time our rivals are ready with wires and screws, we are on version #10. It gets back to planning versus acting:

*We act from
day one;
others plan
how to plan—
for months.”*

—Bloomberg by Bloomberg

*“The difference between ... **Bach** ... and his forgotten peers isn’t necessarily that he had a better ratio of hits to misses. The difference is that the mediocre might have a dozen ideas, while Bach, in his lifetime, created more than a thousand full-fledged musical compositions. A genius is a genius, psychologist Paul Simonton maintains, because he can put together such a staggering number of insights, ideas, theories, random observations, and unexpected connections that he almost inevitably ends*

up with something great. ‘Quality,’ *Simonton*

writes, ‘is a probabilistic function of quantity.’”

—Malcolm Gladwell, “Creation Myth,” *New Yorker*, 0516.11

*“When assessing candidates, the first thing I looked for was energy and enthusiasm for ... **execution.**”*

Does she talk about the thrill of getting things done, the obstacles overcome, the role her people played—or does she keep wandering back to strategy or philosophy?”

—Larry Bossidy, from *Execution: The Discipline of Getting Things Done*

**A man approached J.P. Morgan, held up an envelope, and said,
“Sir, in my hand I hold a guaranteed formula for success, which
I will gladly sell you for \$25,000.”**

**“Sir,” J.P. Morgan replied, “I do not know what is in the envelope,
however if you show me, and I like it, I give you my word as a gentleman
that I will pay you what you ask.”**

**The man agreed to the terms, and handed over the envelope.
J.P. Morgan opened it, and extracted a single sheet of paper.
He gave it one look, a mere glance, then handed the piece of paper back
to the gent.**

**And paid him the
agreed-upon \$25,000 ...**

The formula:

- 1. *Every morning, write a
list of the things that
need to be done that day.***

2. *Do them.*



“Can do!”

—Motto/U.S. Navy Seabees

(My starting point in 1966 in Vietnam/48 years ago)

*“Screw it.
Just do it.”*

—Richard Branson

*“Ever notice
that ‘What the
hell’ is always
the right decision?”*

—Anon. screenwriter

*“We have a
‘strategic
plan.’ It’s
called ‘doing
things.’”*

—Herb Kelleher/Southwest Airlines

*“You miss
100% of the
shots you
never take.”*

—Wayne Gretzky

**BLAME NO ONE.
EXPECT NOTHING.
DO SOMETHING.**

—NFL coach **Bill Parcells**
(locker-room poster)

*“Intelligent people
can always come up
with intelligent
reasons ... to do
nothing.”* —Scott Simon

*“Thinking is the enemy of
creativity. It’s self-conscious
and anything self-conscious
is lousy. You simply must ...
do things.”* —Ray Bradbury

Demo or die.

—MIT Media Lab credo

*“Effective
prototyping may be
the most valuable
core competence an
innovative
organization can
hope to have.”*

—Michael Schrage

“The way to make a better aircraft wasn’t to sit around perfecting a design, it was to get something up in the air and see what happens, then try to fix whatever goes wrong.”

“Instead of trying to figure out the best way to do something and sticking to it, just try out an approach and keep fixing it.”

—Eric Abrahamson & David Freedman, Chapter 8, “Messy Leadership,” from *A Perfect Mess: The Hidden Benefits of Disorder* (On Burt Rutan, perhaps the world’s best aircraft designer and developer.)

*“Don’t ‘plan.’
Do stuff.”*

—David Kelley/IDEO

*“Fail faster,
succeed
sooner.”*

—David Kelley/IDEO

**FAIL.
FORWARD.
FAST.**

—High tech exec, Valley Forge, PA

*“Stay
Hungry.
Stay
Foolish.”*

—Stewart Brand (Generally attributed to Steve Jobs)

***“Learn not to
be careful.”***

**—Photographer Diane Arbus to her students (Careful = Glued
to the sidelines, from Harriet Rubin in *The Princessa*)**

“We normally shoot a few takes, even if the first one is terrific ... because what I’m really hoping for is a ‘mistake.’ I think that most of the really great moments in my films were not planned. They were things that naturally occurred and we said, ‘Wow, look at that—that’s something we want to keep.’ That’s when you hit the truth button with the audience.” —Robert Altman, on winning his Academy Award

*“No matter.
Try again.
Fail again.
Fail better.”*

—Samuel Beckett

*“A man’s errors
are his portals of
discovery.”*

—James Joyce

Ideas Economy: **CAN
YOUR
BUSINESS
FAIL FAST
ENOUGH
TO
SUCCEED?**

Source: [ad/Economist Conference/0328.13/Berkeley CA](https://www.economist.com/conference/2013/03/28/ad/Economist_Conference/0328.13/Berkeley_CA) (caps used by *Economist*)

*“The secret of
fast progress
is inefficiency,
fast and
furious and
numerous
failures.”*

—Kevin Kelly

“The Silicon Valley of today is built less atop the spires of earlier triumphs than upon the rubble of earlier debacles.”

—Paul Saffo, tech futurist, Palo Alto

“The essence of capitalism is encouraging failure, not rewarding success.”

—Nassim Nicholas Taleb

***Reward excellent failures.
Punish mediocre successes.”***

—Phil Daniels/Australian businessman

“In business, you reward people for taking risks. When it doesn’t work out you promote them—because they were willing to try new things. If people tell me they skied all day and never fell down, I tell them to try a different mountain.”—Michael Bloomberg

“It is not enough to ‘tolerate’ failure—you must ‘celebrate’ failure.”

—Richard Farson (*Whoever Makes the Most Mistakes Wins*)

*“I’m not comfortable
unless I’m
uncomfortable.”*

—Jay Chiat

*“If it works, it’s
obsolete.”* —Marshall McLuhan

*“Execution is
strategy.”*

—Fred Malek

*“Execution is
the job of the
business
leader.”*

—Larry Bossidy

*“Amateurs
talk about
strategy.
Professionals
talk about
logistics.”*

—General Omar Bradley

Conrad Hilton, at a gala celebrating his career, was called to the podium and asked, *“What were the most important lessons you learned in your long and distinguished career?”*

His answer (**in full!**) ...

*“Remember to tuck the shower curtain inside the bathtub.”**

*You get 'em in the door with “location, location, location.” You keep 'em coming back with the tucked in shower curtain. (NB: Profit rarely comes from visit/transaction #1; it is a byproduct of coming back/transaction #2, #3, #4 ... #44.)

(FYI: I usually start **ALL** my presentations with Mr. Hilton and the shower curtain—and the abiding centrality of execution.)

“In real life, strategy is actually very straightforward. Pick a general direction ... and implement like hell.”

—Jack Welch

*“Costco figured out
the big, simple things
... and
executed with
total
fanaticism.”*

—Charles Munger, Berkshire Hathaway

*Do right and damn the odds.
Stagnation is the curse of life.
The best is the cheapest.
Emotion can sway the world.
Mad things come off.
Haste in all things.
Any fool can obey orders.
History is a record of exploded ideas.
Life is phrases.*

—First Sea Lord Admiral John Fisher

1/48* : WTTMSW

Whoever

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***TP/1966-2014**

And: WTTMS**ASTMSUTFW**

Whoever

Tries

The

Most

Stuff

(And

Screws

The

Most

Stuff

Up)

(The

Fastest)

Wins

(WTTMSW Writ **VERY** Large:
*Trial and error, many many many trials
and many many many errors very very very
rapidly will be the rule—think dotcom
boom and bust and, in fact, the incredibly
valuable residual in terms of
entrepreneurial training and ideas
surfaced and approaches rejected.
Tolerance for rapid learning—and
unlearning—will be a, perhaps **THE**,
most valued skill. FYI: “Gamers”
instinctively “get” this—lots of trials, lots
of errors as fast as possible—in ways their
error-avoiding elders can only imagine;
hence, for this reason among many, “the
revolution” is/will be to a very significant
degree be led by youth.)*

*“The ecosystem used to funnel lots of talented people into a few clear winners. **Now it’s funneling lots of talented people into lots of experiments.”***

—Tyler Willis, business developer, to Nathan Heller in “Bay Watched: How San Francisco’s New Entrepreneurial Culture Is Changing the Country,” the *New Yorker*, 10.14.2013

Do **(RELENTLESSLY)** or ... **DIE***

(*Literally. Individual. Company. **Nation.**)

*“Experiment
fearlessly”* —*BusinessWeek:*

“Type A Organization Strategies: How to Hit a Moving Target”:

TACTIC #1

*“Relentless
trial and
error”* —*Wall Street Journal:*

CORNERSTONE of effective approach to “rebalancing” company portfolios in the face of changing and uncertain global economic conditions.

Optimism, Pessimism, Curiosity, Experimentation

I just rediscovered John Kay's masterful book, *Obliquity: Why Our Goals Are Best Achieved Indirectly*. There's no idea I hold more dear.

John Kay/*Obliquity*: No fan of optimism. Optimists are bound to be disappointed until broken. (POW studies.) (FYI: I agree.)

John Kay/*Obliquity*: **The #1 leader sin is thinking you know more than you actually do. Life is about discovery, not certainty.**

Kay: Overconfidence is Sin #1. Sin #2: See Sin #1.

From Hamlet: **By indirection direction find.**

Ross Perot: Ready. Fire. Aim.

Act your way into thinking [*invariably*] beats think your way into acting. (Source: me.)

“Tell the truth, but tell it slant. Success in circuit lies.”/Emily Dickinson (Source: *Obliquity*, by John Kay)

Vala Afshar: “Strong leaders adopt a beginner’s mindset—open, curious, free of prejudice, and hungry to explore.”

Per John Kay/*Obliquity*:

**Overconfidence is
Sin #1.**

Sin #2: See Sin #1.

Comment: “If not optimism, then what?”

If not optimism, what: Belief in the joy of the next experiment.

If not optimism, what: A bubbling openness to ...

**Remorseless
Experimentation.**

If not optimism, what: To me optimism is a lightweight’s disease. I favor avid support for EEM ...

**Extreme
Experimentation
Mindset.**

If not optimism, what: **I am an unabashed pessimist ...**

**but I am driven to
the point of clinical
madness to ...
keep on exploring.**

If not optimism, what: **Curiosity!**

Vanity Fair: What is your greatest strength? **Mike Bloomberg:**

Curiosity.

(From Vala Afshar: “I have no special talent. I am only passionately curious.”—Albert Einstein)

Optimist: It’ll work next time. Samuel Beckett: “Fail. Fail again. Fail better.” (Tech exec: “Fail. Forward. Fast.”)

Optimist: I just know it'll work out. Realist: **Get off your ass and try something else.**

Optimist: Donald Rumsfeld. Realist/borderline pessimist: Dwight David Eisenhower.

Ironclad goals are maximum security prisons. Success invariably translates into ending up someplace wildly different from where you'd imagined.

Mikael Pawlo: “It is easy to be described as a cynic, pessimist, or just a plain bore—but never let the optimists get to you!”

Anne Perschel: “Optimist—glass is 1/2 full. Pessimist—glass is 1/2 empty. Realist—drinks what's in the glass while the other 2 debate.”

Thriving Amidst Uncertainty: The Power of Decentralization—a De Facto “Bias For Action”

*“Rose gardeners face a choice every spring. The long-term fate of a rose garden depends on this decision. If you want to have the largest and most glorious roses of the neighborhood, you will prune hard. This represents a policy of low tolerance and tight control. You force the plant to make the maximum use of its available resources, by putting them into the rose’s ‘core business.’ Pruning hard is a dangerous policy in an unpredictable environment. Thus, if you are in a spot where you know nature may play tricks on you, you may opt for a policy of high tolerance. You will never have the biggest roses, but you have a much-enhanced chance of having roses every year. You will achieve a gradual renewal of the plant. In short, tolerant pruning achieves two ends: (1) **It makes it easier to cope with unexpected environmental changes.** (2) **It leads to a continuous restructuring of the plant.** The policy of tolerance admittedly wastes resources—the extra buds drain away nutrients from the main stem. But in an unpredictable environment, this policy of tolerance makes the rose healthier in the long run.”*

—Arie De Geus, *The Living Company* (De Geus is best known as the developer of “scenario planning” at Royal Dutch Shell)

*This is yet another flavor of “a bias for action.” Decentralization—at its best and most powerful—is about multiple independent tries. A big company becomes a de facto collection of small-ish companies. While one may face a lousy market, another will be blessed with unexpected growth opportunities. In practice, it’s not so simple. There is in particular a tendency to have units run by very similar people with very similar approaches—this destroys the variety decentralization was explicitly designed to counteract.

Creating a “Try it. NOW.” Culture

This emerged from a speech to the American Hospital Association in 2010. To deal with the humongous issue of patient safety ... I suggested the entire institution ought to be turned into an energetic “*patient safety learning lab.*” Slightly edited, here is my list of characteristics of such a lab. (The application, I believe, is universal—albeit on a different scale depending on organization size.)

Attributes of a “Try It. NOW.” Culture

“Experiment fearlessly” (*BusinessWeek/Innovators’ #1 attribute*)
It’s all about attitude!

One Big Innovation Lab!

Accessible micro-experiment budget!

Hyper-quick approval process!

Hyper-quick prototyping! (Measure “mean time from idea to prototype”)

Mini-project teams born in a flash!

Do “everything at once”/“Let 1,000 flowers bloom”

No “bad ideas” except inaction

Transparency/Publish everything

“Get it right the 79th time”

Reward clever/excellent failures

**Celebrate constantly!/
Wee rewards!/
Recognition!/
“Mad scientist club”!**

Master “nudgery” (Little BIG Things)

Encourage/Reward cross-functional excellence (A special category!)

**Unlimited “best practices” travel budget!/
“Visit Excellence”!/
Steal excellence from everywhere!**

LEARN from best practices/But allow 100% variation
Coalition of Fearless Experimenters

Crowdsource EVERYTHING!

Social networking with peers

100% participation!

100% leaders on board

100% customer-vendor participation

Process ideas from all

Measure but don't stifle!

Training in process improvement for 100%

Training in prototyping for 100%

Training for 100% in engaging teammates

Training in listening for 100%

Training micro-team leadership for 100%

MBWA/“You must be the change you wish to see in the world.”

Action, Experimentation, Surprise, Transformation, Excellence, and a Life's Work Courtesy ... the Magic of Spontaneous Discovery

“How often I found where I should be going only by setting out for somewhere else.”—Buckminster Fuller

“By indirection direction find.”—Hamlet, II. I

“To be playful is to allow for unlimited possibility.”—James Carse

*“No one rises so high as he who knows not where he is going.”
—Oliver Cromwell*

*“What are [aircraft designer Burt] Rutan’s management rules? He insists he doesn’t have any. ‘I don’t like rules,’ he says. ‘Things are so easy to change if you don’t write them down.’ Rutan feels good management works in much the same way good aircraft design does: Instead of trying to figure out the best way to do something and sticking to it, just try out an approach and keep fixing it.”—Eric Abrahamson & David Freedman, Chapter 8, “Messy Leadership,” from *A Perfect Mess: The Hidden Benefits of Disorder**

*“This is so simple it sounds stupid, but it is amazing how few oil people really understand that you only find oil if you drill wells. You may think you’re finding it when you’re drawing maps and studying logs, but you have to drill.”—John Masters, *The Hunters*, by John Masters (Masters is a wildly successful Canadian Oil & Gas wildcatter.)*

“Thinking is the enemy of creativity. It’s self-conscious and anything self-

*conscious is lousy. You simply must **DO** things.”—Ray Bradbury*

**The summer of 2009 was the summer of brush clearing.
And, it turned out, much more.
Much, much more.**

It started as simple task to be checked of the “to do” list. After a day or two, scratches from head to toe, and enjoyment, I set myself a goal of clearing a little space to get a better view of one of our farm ponds. That revealed something else ... to my surprise.

At a casual dinner, I sat next to a landscaper, and we got to talking about our farm and my skills with hand clippers, hand saw, etc. In particular, she suggested that I do some clearing around a few of our big boulders. Intrigued, I set about clearing, on our main trail, around a couple of said boulders. I was again amazed at the result.

That in turn led to attacking some dense brush and brambles around some barely visible rocks that had always intrigued me—which led to “finding,” in effect, a great place for a more or less “Zen garden,” as we’ve taken to calling it.

**Which led to ... more and more.
And more.**

(Especially a rock wall, a hundred or so yards long, that is a massive wonder—next year I’ll move up the hill behind it—I can already begin to imagine what I’ll discover, though my hunch will be mostly “wrong,” and end up leading me somewhere else.)

To make a long story short:

I now have a new hobby, and maybe, ye gads, my life’s work for years to come. This winter I’ll do a little, but I also plan to read up on outdoor spaces, Zen gardens, etc; visit some rock gardens—spaces close by or amidst my travels; and, indeed, concoct a more or less plan (rough sketches) for next spring’s activities—though I’m sure that what I do will move forward mostly by what I discover as I move forward. (What discovers itself may actually be a better way to put it—there’s a “hidden hand” here.) As I’m beginning to see it, this is at least a 10-year project—maybe even a multi-generation project.

I proceeded by trial and error and instinct, and each experiment led to/suggested another experiment (or 2 or 10) and to a greater understanding of potential—the “plan,” though there was none, made itself. And it was far, far better (more ambitious, more interesting, more satisfying) than I would have imagined. In fact, the result to date bears little or no relationship to what I was thinking about at the start—a trivial self-designed chore may become the engine of my next decade; the “brushcutting project” is now leading my wife and me to view our entire property, and what it might represent, in a new light.

I suspect that your interest in my brushcutting may be modest at best. The point here, obviously, is much more general:

JGG.

(Just Get Going.)

F.A. Hayek called effective capitalism a “spontaneous discovery process.” On a not-so-grand scale that’s (precisely) the point here:

SPONTANEOUS DISCOVERY.

There was no grand plan.

There was no plan at all.

The starting point was ... STARTING ... a boring task requiring not a smidgeon of imagination—with about a week's duration.

The doing per se wiggled itself into something totally different than anything I imagined or—more important—ANYTHING I COULD HAVE IMAGINED AT THE START.

My reading of the history of innovation suggests to me that this process-that-is-really-not-a-process is in fact the mainstay of effective discovery.

(FYI: I got a pacemaker for Christmas several years ago; the #1 no-no is using a chainsaw. (The magnetic field is fearsome.) Taking that warning a step farther, I decided to do this project entirely with hand tools. Of course that means more exercise—a good thing. *But the “great wonder”—again, totally unexpected—is that the resultant slowness and quiet is the de facto engine of my entire spontaneous discovery process.*)

(FYI II: This was first drafted almost five years ago. Status report 2014: The obsession continues. The experiments continue. The spontaneous discoveries continue. The surprise continues. The snow melt is on as I speak. So out I go!)

RADICAL Nudgery: **The Little BIG Things**

We tend to think big actions are required to induce big change. Nothing could be further from the truth. Marketers have known this—and acted upon it—for decades, perhaps centuries. Recently, the “field” of nudgery has been subject to a Renaissance.

I don’t care whether it’s new or old—or practiced by marketers or psychologists or economists. It is important and invaluable—albeit with moral downsides associated with “social engineering,” growing by orders of magnitude in the age of Web-ubiquity. (The latter, for better or for worse, is not the topic here; the power of the phenomenon per se is the limited point.)

A few **(PRETTY DAMNED AMAZING)** examples:

Glaring Eyes: **-62%**

Case: Bike theft rampant in a European city. Test: Put posters above big bike rack areas with a pair of glaring eyes; theft reduced 62% in experimental areas. (PLUS ONE/via the *Atlantic CITIES*/04.29.2013)

6.5 feet away = **-63%**

Case: Serving plate located 6.5 feet or more from dining room table after first helpings are served. Second helpings reduced by 63% versus leaving the serving plate on the table.

Slight curvature: **2X**

Case: “When [designer] Friedman slightly curved the right angle of an entrance corridor to one Las Vegas gaming] property, he was ‘amazed at the magnitude of change in pedestrians’ behavior’—the percentage who entered increased from one-third to nearly two-thirds.” (Natasha Dow Schull, *Addiction by Design: Machine Gambling in Las Vegas*)

Odor #1 vs. odor #2: **+45%**

Case: “Pleasing” odor #1 in gambling machine space vs. “pleasing” odor #2: +45% per machine revenue. Needless to say, Las Vegas sports an entire army of incredible well-trained professionals whose role in life is to attract more patrons to casinos and keep them there as long as possible—machine gambling now accounts for 85% of casino profits. (“Effects of Ambient Odors on Slot-Machine Usage in Las Vegas Casinos,” reported in Natasha Dow Schull, *Addiction by Design: Machine Gambling in Las Vegas*)

Size change = **1.5X**

Case: Walmart increases shopping cart size. Sales of big-biggish appliances increase 50%. **Impact:** millions upon millions of dollars to the bottom line.

Altered Bag sizes = **\$B++**

Case: Frito Lay/Pepsico, following a string of new product introduction disappointments, “merely” introduces new bag sizes (“family,” “single serve,” etc.); instead of cannibalization of the markets for prior sizes, entirely new markets are created—billions of dollars in size.

Socks = **-10,000**

Case: NHS/UK estimates that if every hospital inpatient was given compression hose to wear, as many as 10,000 lives lost to DVT/deep vein thrombosis would be saved each year.

Size alteration = **2X/100%**

Case: Change conference room table shape from oblong to round. Number of comments doubles; number of people commenting approaches 100%.

Avatar height = **+Self-Esteem**

“When I work with experimental digital gadgets, I am always reminded of how small changes in the details of a digital design can have profound unforeseen effects on the experiences of the people who are playing with it. ... For instance, Stanford University researcher Jeremy Bailinson has demonstrated that changing the height of one’s avatars in immersive virtual reality transforms self-esteem and social self-perception. Technologies are extensions of ourselves, and, like the avatars in Jeremy’s lab, our identities can be shifted by the quirks of gadgets. It is impossible to work with information technology without also engaging in social engineering.”
—Jaron Lanier, *You Are Not a Gadget*

(PLEASE ... re-read these cases. The results are nothing short of ...

STAGGERING.

“Nudgery” is a hyper-potent—and under-applied—change tool.)

Bottom line: This notion applies ...

EVERYWHERE.

And: The best news of all is that this process can be applied ... *by*

anybody at any level in

any field at any time

*with little muss or fuss or expense and
with very little visibility associated with
the failed experiments that will
necessarily ensue in large numbers as*

*you work/ **RELENTLESSLY***

***EXPERIMENT** your way toward
something with high impact.*

That is:

- (1) Amenable to rapid experimentation/
failure “free” (no bad “PR,” few \$\$)
- (2) Quick to implement/Quick to roll out
- (3) Inexpensive to implement/Roll out
- (4) Huge multiplier
- (5) An “Attitude”*

(*This is the biggie—a “culture” of everyone “trying stuff” is far harder to instill and maintain than it might first appear.)

Consider a process, perhaps like this:

- (1) Half-day session/generate 25 ideas
- (2) One week/5 experiments
- (3) One month/Select best 2
- (4) 60-90 days/Roll out

Have at it.

The rewards could well be a first-order ...

WOW!