

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**

Preface: 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’s # 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 battalions—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

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.

WTTMSASTMSUTFW/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

*“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

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that ‘What the
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‘strategic
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—Herb Kelleher/Southwest Airlines

*“You miss
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never take.”*

—Wayne Gretzky.

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DO SOMETHING.**

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

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

“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.

*“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*)**

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

—Samuel Beckett

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Punish mediocre successes.”***

—Phil Daniels/Australian businessman

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