

## **ACTION**

**76. "Trying My Damnedest!" Wrong Answer!** Long story, but as a junior officer (U.S. Navy) in Vietnam, I once answered a general with, in part, "I'm doing my best." He erupted, a true Vesuvius. It is not enough, he said with an icy stare, to do one's best [in taking care of my sailors], I must do it, period. [A parallel Churchill quote goes like this: "*It is not enough to do your best—you must succeed in doing what is necessary.*"] All I can say, 43 years later, is that the lesson took.

Consider: "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 it to 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 contents of the note:

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

**77. Captain "Day" and Captain "Night": A Tale of Two Deployments and Two Suggestions.** As a combat engineer (Seabee) in Vietnam, I made two deployments and had two commanding officers, or COs. To this day, I call them "day" and "night." My first CO, Dick Anderson (CAPTAIN Anderson!), was "day." Our job was to build stuff—roads, bridges, camps, gun emplacements, etc.—mostly for the U.S. Marine Corps. Captain Andy's approach could be summarized in three words, subsequently made immortal by Nike; namely, "Just do it." Above all, Captain Andy wanted no damned excuses. The upshot was that we got a lot of work done, and done well, in short order.

Deployment #2 brought Captain "Night," whose name shall not be mentioned. He had a different style of "leadership" entirely. It's often called "by the book." He was a stickler for the formalities. I sometimes thought and think that he was more interested in typo-free reports of jobs not yet done than hell-and-high-water-completed construction. I had a crappy time, as did pretty much the whole set of junior officers; and our track record in getting things done for our customers was less than sterling.

Between the two, I had pretty much all I needed for a successful management career. When faced with a thorny issue, I try to follow Captain Andy's rules—and avoid the approach of Capt. Night at all costs.

**78. If You Want To Find Oil, You Must Drill Wells.** Right after publishing *In Search of Excellence*, I received a nice note in the mail accompanied by an inscribed book: *The Hunters* by John Masters, a successful Canadian Oil & Gas wildcatter. Here is the excerpt I underlined 25 years ago, and have battered seminar participants with ever since:

*"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."*

Message: YOU HAVE TO DRILL!

I sometimes, and not in jest, call "it" "the only thing I've learned 'for sure' in the last 44 years." Namely, *She or he who tries the most stuff ... wins!* Naturally I've collected a ton of supporting quotes to support my bias for a "bias for action." A few of my favorites:

*"We have a strategic plan. It's called doing things."*—Herb Kelleher, founder, Southwest Airlines

*"READY. FIRE. AIM."*—Ross Perot (and others)

*"Blame no one.*

*"Expect nothing.*

*"Do something."*

—Locker room sign posted by football coach Bill Parcells

*"You miss 100 percent of the shots you never take."*—Wayne Gretzky

This document is #23 in a series of 48 highlights from Tom Peters' *The Little BIG Things: 163 Ways to Pursue Excellence* (HarperStudio, 2010). For more information, visit [tompeters.com](http://tompeters.com).

