

## 39 Quotes Concerning "A Bias for Action," "Attribute No. 1," *In Search of Excellence*

The research on what became *In Search of Excellence* began in 1977. The first publication of our fledgling effort appeared in *BusinessWeek* in July 1978. It included a list of eight "attributes of excellence" teased from our mountain of data. The first of the eight was, "Do it. Fix it. Try it." To our surprise as much as anyone else's, the eight attributes stayed intact through a gajillion drafts and presentations and then the book's publication in 1982, though a word or two did change. Now #1 was "A Bias for Action."

This is the 30th anniversary of *Search's* appearance, and while much has changed, if I were to update it, "A Bias for Action" would retain its #1 ranking. If possible, in fact, it's even more important in these destabilized times. One recent research effort, aimed at advising bosses on adapting to the whacky (now and forevermore) times, suggested that the #1 key to success was "experiment fearlessly." Sounds suspiciously like "a bias for action" to me!

Along the way, no surprise, I've collected a ton of "stuff" on this dear-to-my-head-and-heart topic—among them 39 "favorite quotes."

A Bias for Action. FIRST in 1982. FIRST in 2012. And no change predicted—for institutions *or* individuals!

My "Big 10":

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

*"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, Canadian oil and gas wildcatter, *The Hunters*

**“Can do!”**—Motto, U.S. Navy Seabees (U.S. Naval Mobile Construction Battalions)

*“Execution is the job of the business leader.”*—Larry Bossidy and Ram Charan/  
*Execution: The Discipline of Getting Things Done*

**“Ready. FIRE! Aim.”**—H. Ross Perot (versus, he said, the far more common “Aim! Aim! Aim! ...”)

**“BLAME NO ONE. EXPECT NOTHING. DO SOMETHING.”**—Locker room sign posted by NFL football coach Bill Parcells

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

*“To Be somebody or to Do something.”*—John Boyd

*“Fall seven times, stand up eight.”*—Japanese proverb

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

## **The rest:**

*“When assessing candidates, the first things I look for are 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 and Ram Charan/*Execution: The Discipline of Getting Things Done*

*“Realism is the heart of execution.”*—Larry Bossidy and Ram Charan/*Execution: The Discipline of Getting Things Done*

**“Never be afraid to try; remember ... amateurs built the ark, professionals built the Titanic.”**—Author Unknown

**“Thomas Stanley [author of *The Millionaire Next Door*] has not only found no correlation between success in school and an ability to accumulate wealth, he’s actually found a negative correlation. ‘It seems that school-related evaluations are poor predictors of economic success,’ Stanley concluded. What did predict success was a willingness to take risks. Yet the success-failure standards of most schools penalized risk takers. Most educational systems reward those who play it safe. As a result, those who do well in school find it hard to take risks later on.”—Richard Farson and Ralph Keyes, *Whoever Makes the Most Mistakes Wins***

**“Costco has figured out the big, simple things and executed with total fanaticism.”—Charles Munger, Berkshire Hathaway**

**“The art of war does not require complicated maneuvers; the simplest are the best, and common sense is fundamental. From which one might wonder how it is generals make blunders; it is because they try to be clever.”—Napoleon**

\*\*\*\*\*

**A man approached JP 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,” JP 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. JP 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.***

Source: Hugh MacLeod/tompeters.com/NPR

\*\*\*\*\*

*“Ever notice that ‘**What the hell**’ is always the right  
decision?”*—a shrewd observation, attributed to an unknown Hollywood  
scriptwriter

*In Search of Excellence /1982-2012/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”

***“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 in the wake of economic disruption

*“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 No. 5. By the time our rivals are ready with wires and screws, we are on version No. 10. **It gets back to planning versus acting: We act from day one; others plan how to plan—for months.**”*—Michael Bloomberg, *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*, 05.16.11

***“Fail faster. Succeed Sooner.”***—David Kelley/IDEO

***“Fail. Forward. Fast.”***—High Tech CEO, Pennsylvania

***“No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.”***—Samuel Beckett

*“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*

***“Reward excellent failures. Punish mediocre successes.”***—Phil Daniels, Sydney exec

*“If people tell me they skied all day and never fell down, I tell them to try a different mountain.”—Michael Bloomberg*

*“No man ever became great ... except through many and great mistakes.”*  
—William Gladstone

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

*“I have missed more than 9,000 shots in my career; I have lost almost 300 games; 26 times, I have been trusted to take the game winning shot—and missed. I have failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed.”*  
—Michael Jordan

***“Grant had an extreme, almost phobic dislike of turning back and retracing his steps.*** If he set out for somewhere, he would *get* there somehow, whatever the difficulties that lay in his way. This idiosyncrasy would turn out to be one the factors that made him a formidable general. Grant would always, always press on—turning back was not an option for him.”  
—Michael Korda, *Ulysses Grant*

***“One of my superstitions had always been when I started to go anywhere or to do anything, not to turn back, or stop until the thing intended was accomplished.”***  
—U.S. Grant

***“almost inhuman disinterestedness in ... strategy”***  
—Josiah Bunting on U.S. Grant (from *Ulysses S. Grant*)

\*\*\*\*\*

*“Execution is  
strategy.”* —Fred Malek

\*\*\*\*\*

*“If Richard calls and asks you for something, just say ‘Yes.’ If you say ‘No,’ you’ll eventually get to yes, but the journey will be very painful.”*—Henry Kissinger on the late diplomat-problem solver Richard Holbrooke

*“Success seems to be largely a matter of hanging on after others have let go.”*  
—William Feather, entrepreneur