

Have you ever touched a hot stove? Of course, you have...even if it was by accident! And when you did, you experienced a major paradigm of guidance for life...and for great decision-making. And that guidance is this: *action is research*. That's right, when a person acts, that person can and should alertly glean helpful research from the results! Say, do you now deliberately avoid touching a hot stove? Of course! That's because your research from your previous actions with hot stoves tells you to *not take that action again!*

Well, duh, you might be saying, that's pretty obvious! Well, it *is* obvious...but here's the real point! The research learned from our actions is invaluable! So, let's take a look at the idea that *action is research*.

The American inventor Thomas Edison was by any measure one of the greatest practical inventors of any era. His name was well-known in America for many decades. Edison's name is on over 1,000 patents in the U.S.—and some of his far-reaching inventions include the ground-breaking audio-recording machine he named the phonograph...a vastly-improved microphone for use in telephones that was utilized by the dominant Bell telephone monopoly for nine decades...and the remarkable incandescent light bulb that could burn for hundreds of hours—widely replacing gas lighting and candles. Here's what Edison said about that, "We will make electricity so cheap that only the rich will burn candles." Sure enough, nowadays, look who buys candles instead of using light bulbs: high-end weddings and fancy restaurants!

Hey, Edison started over a dozen companies, including one in the top tier of U.S. companies during the whole of the 20th Century: General Electric. In fact, Henry Ford actually worked as an engineer for Edison before founding his car business. Late in Edison's life, those two men were next-door neighbors in Florida.

Many knowledgeable people describe Edison as a genius. But—in what's probably Edison's most famous quote—here's what Edison himself said regarding that: "*Genius is one percent inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration. A genius is often merely a talented person who has done all of his or her homework. Opportunity is missed by most people because it is dressed in overalls and looks like work.*"

Yeah, Edison himself said it's ninety-nine percent perspiration! Here's the key: does that mean that Edison instantly grasped the answer to all he was trying to do? No, it's quite the opposite: *he had to experiment with ideas...with his hypotheses!* In other words, he took actions to determine whether or not his insights were accurate and viable. For context of that, here's another very telling quote from Edison...

"Results? Why, man, I have gotten lots of results! If I find 10,000 ways something won't work, I haven't failed. I am not discouraged, because every wrong attempt discarded is often a step forward." That's right, all of Edison's actions were research, even wrong ones! Now, going deeper...how about this Edison quote?

"Negative results are just what I want. They're just as valuable to me as positive results. I can never find the thing that does the job best until I find the ones that don't." That's right, action is research! But when some of the results are negative and then counting those failures as contributors to success, wow, what a great trait! Here are two things Edison said about cultivating that key mentality: first about himself.

"When I have finally decided that a result is worth getting, I go ahead on it and make trial after trial until it comes." Then he offers this advice. *"Nearly every man who develops an idea works it up to the point where it looks impossible, and then he gets discouraged. That's not the place to get discouraged."* Then Edison tops it off with this. *"When you have exhausted all possibilities, remember this: you haven't."*

Oh, but you might say, that may work for a famous inventor...but I'm running a business! Well, do you recall that Edison started over a dozen companies, including General Electric? The same principle applies.

Fred Smith was the extraordinarily successful founder of FedEx, the global shipping company, and was the CEO for over 50 years—retiring as CEO in 2022. The very nature of his implementing mass hub-and-spoke logistics requires handling countless packages around the world every day. That definitionally required that, early on, FedEx took actions that had not been fully perfected and used failed actions as research...but then *also used successful actions as research!* Now, two quotes from Smith: *"Fear of failure must never be a reason not to try something."*...and *"the riskiest strategy is to try to avoid risk altogether."*

With that, we can identify one very persistent enemy of the fullest excellence both for people and for their organizations—and that's *perfectionism!* Oh, we know that there are lots of underperformers we want to avoid like the plague, and we do want top-notch people! But the strongest stewards...managers...leaders do *not* voice an expectation of perfectionism from their teams. Instead, they simply hold very high standards with a thoughtfully quick forgiveness when high achievers are, well, all too human...and fail!

But I can hear some of you now, saying, *hey, are you clueless?* What about Six Sigma, the extraordinary manufacturing goal that was birthed in Japan and picked up by Motorola in the U.S. years ago—you know, where great companies expect less than one flaw per million units produced? But wait, how do you think they get to that pinnacle? Yes, by embracing trial and error! By taking action, then constantly improving!

Look, here's the apparent paradox...for both individuals and organizations. High standards, measured results, and then even higher goals are always the right focus—but perfectionism is actually debilitating! Yeah, you mastered simple arithmetic, but you didn't stop there...that's because you needed to get better equipped for real life. And you didn't stop when you didn't get your first algebra problem correctly answered! *The action of taking the algebra test was research*—you discovered you didn't know how to solve the problem...*yet!* You persevered in algebra because you knew the skill was needed for engaging well in your future workplaces! But did you earn a perfect score on every algebra test? Likely not, but you kept advancing in your skill because you learned from your mistakes, eventually mastering understanding you didn't have, *all because your wrong answers gave you valuable feedback.* What was really important was that you didn't become debilitated by a perfectionism of getting *every* question correctly answered.

You know, like Edison on a personal level, who actually made his mistakes a veritable feast of learning, turning that process into a lifelong practice of repeatedly honing and refining until he invented all kinds of cool stuff. *Action is research!* Yes, high standards and goals—but without debilitating perfectionism! Same for the Japanese Six Sigma practices by Motorola at the enterprise level! Trial and error. Fix the errors. Try again. Refine. Try again. In this way, high standards are ultimately achieved. Does that sound like debilitating perfectionism? Nope, no debilitation going on there, just more “trying.” *Action is research.*

Do you recall a previous podcast where we talked about the strategy of *skunkworks*, where an enterprise isolates its innovation and experimentation for the next level, even while the rest of the organization keeps rolling on with the current high standards. Well, that's one effective path where action is research.

And another effective path is to deliberately expose undiscerned imperfections to get real-world feedback. In the world of software development with very complex and even conflicting user preferences, there are always users who are dissatisfied with some feature or another. That's because they naturally want software totally customized to their peculiar needs. But the software must meet the needs of perhaps millions of people. And so tradeoffs are built into the software.

Steven Sinofsky was a top executive for Microsoft whose task for years was shipping fresh Windows software to a worldwide marketplace. He now has a website called “Learning by Shipping.” Great name, love that! Lesser companies are tempted to try to make their software “perfect” before getting real-world feedback—but great companies get feedback, change some coding, and ship again...then repeat that! That's astute trial and error through users of complex software! Learning by shipping. *Action is research!*

Hey, we Christians are thrilled that Jesus gave us grace at the Cross and we are no longer under Mosaic law, praise God! We need not be perfectionists focused on fulfilling every part of the law...but that doesn't mean we don't have high standards for loving our neighbors! And, you know what, some of our neighbors will receive our love gladly...while others will reject it. Yeah, we might just have to tweak just exactly how we love those particular neighbors a bit differently! *Action is research!* We “learn by shipping” God's love to others. But we are indeed called to renewed action, that is, to continue to love others: *we ship again!*

Yes, action is research, even and especially in the gospel-love outreaches of the Kingdom of God! So don't expect perfect results every time you reach out with God's love! Learn by shipping!

A&A: Application & Action

1. Is it your consistent, intentional practice to step out and prudently take action even when success is not guaranteed? Give examples. If not, why not?
2. Are you at a workplace enterprise that still embraces the risks of failure...failures that can actually lead to greater excellence? Discuss.
3. Is your local church's focus on "learning by shipping" when it comes to loving others? Is your personal focus there as well? Discuss.