

The Awesome Benefits of Aggressive Tinkering



Source: www.TurfMagazine.com

I'm a voracious but, admittedly, undisciplined reader. History. Psychology. Hard science. Economics. If I find the title and the blurb on the dust jacket compelling, I dig in. I'm just now finishing "The Black Swan" by Nassim Nicholas Taleb, a Lebanese-born writer and philosopher. Taleb is a former Wall Street trader (very successful trader) who has gained fame writing about unpredictability of momentous events and the extreme difficulty of assessing how these events will impact our lives.

While some of the reading is heavy going, Taleb makes the point that most of the really big innovations that change our lives are not the result of meetings in board rooms but of "aggressive tinkering."

I love that phrase, aggressive tinkering. It gets me to thinking about all the neat innovations that have made our lives more comfortable, improved our health, provided us more leisure – you name it. Aggressive tinkering, resulting in untold false starts and failures has, nevertheless, advanced nearly every positive human endeavor from the development of new products to the way we run our businesses and deliver our services.

Having lived in the quaint village of Milan, Ohio, my thoughts turn to its most famous son and one of history's most famous genius tinkerers, Thomas Edison, who was born there in 1847. As a student in the tiny Milan school I visited the small brick home where Edison was born. In more recent years I've toured Edison's winter home and his laboratory in Ft. Myers, Fla., each time being amazed at, not only what Edison accomplished, but as much about what he tried and failed at accomplishing.

"None of my inventions came by accident," he said at a 1929 press conference. "I see a worthwhile need to be met and I make trial and error until it comes. What it boils down to is one percent inspiration and ninety-nine percent

perspiration."

During his lifetime Edison acquired 1,093 patents (singly or jointly) and, as we all know, was the driving force behind the incandescent light bulb and the phonograph. But, he often freely admitted that most of what he tried failed.

Stop and think about other "tinkerers," the famous ones, such as Steve Wozniak, co-founder of Apple Computer, or the less-well-known ones, such as Bob Plath, the Northwest Airlines pilot, who became the father of rolling luggage. As the story goes, Plath in 1986 went into his garage and designed a vertical bag with two wheels and an extendable handle that he could roll through airports and carry on airplanes.

At the risk beating the subject of aggressive tinkering to death, consider how tinkerers have also shaped our landscape industry. How about the invention and development of the zero-radius turn mower and, subsequently, the wheel motor? How about the invention of the string trimmer? Do you think that came from a board room? And more recently, my guess is that the first successful conversion of a commercial mower to run on propane resulted as much from tinkering as it did from engineering. I'm sure you can think of other equally valuable innovations that started as an idea in someone's garage or basement and are now indispensable to the services that we provide.

Never discount the value of tinkering or the role of the committed tinkerer. While, we generally assume it applies to innovations in terms of products, I submit that it's equally vital to improving our companies and the systems that drive them.

To borrow one final Edison quote: "Many of life's failures are men who did not realize how close they were to success when they gave up."