

YOUR LEADERSHIP

# EDGE

LEAD ANYTIME, ANYWHERE.

ED O'MALLEY  
AMANDA CEBULA

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CHAPTER 23  
INTERVENE SKILLFULLY

*Act  
Experimentally*

**Leadership requires you to get comfortable with failure.**

A scientist trying to cure cancer doesn't fret over every failed experiment. She learns from it to inform the next experiment. Big challenges — adaptive challenges — have no clear solution. Progress is made when you take an experimental approach.

Legend has it Thomas Edison failed 10,000 times trying to create the light bulb. He later said, "I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work." Just like in the research lab, each leadership experiment brings new information that can shape future experiments. Acting experimentally implies you are doing lots of experiments, and that mindset is useful in guiding your overall approach to adaptive work.



You can't exercise leadership without experimenting. You need to develop the stomach to try something, fail, learn and experiment some more.

### HERE ARE A COUPLE EXAMPLES.

- ▶ A newly elected governor feels pressure to stimulate the economy after a recession. He promotes one specific approach to stimulate the economy, invests huge resources and promises big returns. He is running just one big experiment despite the reality that no one actually knows the exact way to stimulate a state economy in the 2010s.
- ▶ A middle manager is asked to improve the productivity of two large units in an organization. It's been a long-running problem and, over the years, countless experts have tried to make it go away.

The CEO suggests merging units. Rather than run with that idea, the middle manager gathers key people from both teams (experiment 1) and asks them how to improve productivity (experiment 2).

She learns the merger idea scares the heck out of people and that the threat of merger has actually caused a productivity drop. Rather than a whole merger, she creates a short-term task force made up of members from both teams to work on a discreet project (experiment 3).

She wants to test how they work together. She also announces a one-time bonus for all teams meeting a new productivity metric (experiment 4).

Finally, she creates an informal cross-unit group to meet regularly to discuss what they are learning from the experiments (experiment 5).

The second example describes what acting experimentally looks like. The first describes foolishness. Everything is riding on the governor's experiment. A better approach would be to launch a series of experiments in the first year, testing different approaches in different parts of the state. Consolidate the learning from those experiments and make bigger experiments in years two and three and so forth.

In contrast to the middle manager's approach (several small experiments building over time with no possibility for catastrophic failure), if the governor's strategy fails, it could take years, perhaps a generation, to fully recover.

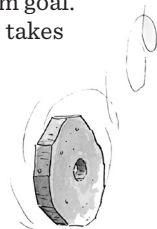
## HOW DO YOU ACT EXPERIMENTALLY?

- ▶ **DETERMINE HOW MUCH YOU CARE.** Are you willing to fail? Is what you're thinking about worth experimenting on? The more you care, the more you will be willing to experiment.
- ▶ **START CAUTIOUSLY.** Begin with less risky experiments where you are pretty sure of the outcome. Then move to situations where the outcome is more in doubt and more important.
- ▶ **TAKE A LESSON FROM SCIENCE.** Ground your experiment in a clear purpose. Know what you expect will happen and then test your assumptions.
- ▶ **GET STARTED.** Set a date. Set a time. Get specific on the “Who? What? When? Where? Why? and How?” to hold you accountable.
- ▶ **DEBRIEF.** Pause between experiments to determine what you learned and how it ties to your purpose. What did you learn if it was successful? What did you learn if it failed?
- ▶ **MAKE EXPERIMENTATION YOUR STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURE.** Over time, acting experimentally will become routine in situations demanding leadership.

### Why is this difficult?

**“Failure is bad, very bad.”** We are taught from an early age to strive for success. Experiments have the potential to fail. The risk makes us sick to our stomachs.

**“I want success, and I want it now!”** In a results-oriented society, we value immediate success over progress toward a long-term goal. There is no way around it; leadership on adaptive challenges takes time and requires experimentation.



## FIVE WAYS TO HELP OTHERS ACT EXPERIMENTALLY.

- 1. JUST USE THE WORD.** When trying to find solutions, start saying things like “Well, one experiment we could try would be ...” or “What do you think we would learn if we tried this experiment ...” Over time you’ll create a culture of experimentation.
- 2. REDEFINE FAILURE.** Let everyone know that success or failure is not about the outcome of the experiment, it’s about how much we learn — and don’t just redefine your words, make sure your actions match up as well.
- 3. MODEL EXPERIMENTATION.** Tell colleagues about your experiments. Share successes, failures and what you hope to learn.
- 4. VALUE LEARNING.** Ask open-ended questions that reveal what others have learned. Celebrate discoveries and small successes.
- 5. LEVERAGE YOUR AUTHORITY.** If you are in a position of authority, use it to show you believe progress on tough challenges is made with a series of experiments. Use your authority to focus attention on areas ripe for experimentation.

“The country needs and, unless I mistake its temper, the country demands bold, persistent experimentation. It is common sense to take a method and try it: If it fails, admit it frankly and try another. We need enthusiasm, imagination and the ability to face facts, even unpleasant ones, bravely. We need the courage of the young. Yours is not the task of making your way in the world, but the task of remaking the world which you will find before you. May every one of us be granted the courage, the faith and the vision to give the best that is in us to that remaking!”

— FRANKLIN DELANO ROOSEVELT, 1932



Senior management at our company has been doing a lot of micro-managing lately. I'm trying to keep a project moving forward but keep getting stopped when I have to get approval or explain something. What can I do so I don't keep getting slowed down?

- FAST FREDDY

Dear Freddy,

Here are a few experiments to try.

1. Create a clear "midpoint" for your project and ask your manager whether it's OK if you don't check in until you get to that midpoint.
2. Share your observation, and ask why they think it's happening. Don't assign meaning to what is happening or blame senior management.
3. Ask your manager what parts of the project concern her most and what you could do to alleviate concerns ahead of time.
4. Suggest to your manager that you both focus on outcomes rather than your activities. See if you can get her to hold you accountable just for those outcomes.

Each of those small experiments helps you learn more about your situation and how to be effective. Experiment away!

Onward!