Edison on Innovation

102 Lessons in Creativity for Business and Beyond

Alan Axelrod
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For Anita and Ian
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He had more than a thousand patents to his name, including those for electric lighting, electric power generation, the phonograph, the basics of movie making, and even wax paper. If Edison wasn’t a genius, who was, is, or could ever be?

There is no question that Thomas Alva Edison was and remains the name-brand marquee inventive genius—a “modern Prometheus” no less or, at the very least, the “Wizard of Menlo Park.” And for us nongeniuses, that is precisely the problem. Real geniuses may create any number of wonderful things, but otherwise they’re really of no use to the rest of us. What can we even pretend to learn from them?

*Imitate Beethoven. Think like Einstein.*

Could any advice be more useless? Such people are made of different stuff from the rest of us. If we could “be like” them, we would be one of them.

When I first began thinking about this book, I wanted to call it *Edison Was No Genius*. The title and the idea came to me while I was engaged in 2005 as a consultant on creativity and leadership training by The Henry Ford, the famous museum and collection of historical buildings (including one of Edison’s workshops) founded by Henry Ford in Dearborn, Michigan. The professional staff of The Henry Ford was pondering the feasibility of establishing a program of creativity training seminars for key leaders of American industry. The question the staff posed was this: Could the institution’s unparalleled collection of the artifacts and records of technological innovation be used effectively to teach others to be innovative in a focused and consistently productive way?
The answer, I said, was yes, and I began to think of *Edison Was No Genius* as a set of cases in point. The book soon evolved into *Edison on Innovation*, and its principal thesis is an invitation to all readers to consider the inventor not as a demigod from Olympus, a being apart, a divinely gifted lucky stiff, but as one of us, different in degree, to be sure, but not in kind.

What is the value of seeing Edison this way? Certainly not to diminish him, but to transform our perception of him from a figure for dumbstruck admiration into an example for practical emulation. And why emulate Edison?

First: Based on the evidence of his 1,093 patents, some of them at the heart of modern civilization, I can think of no more creative human being on the planet.

And second: Because he can be emulated. As will be explained in “Lesson 1: Stop Thinking and Act Like a Genius,” the historical record is sufficiently extensive, detailed, and accessible to provide a clear picture of Edison’s creative method. Based on this picture, *Edison on Innovation* formulates and presents 102 “lessons” in creativity.

This volume is not a biography of Thomas Edison but a book for inventors and for innovators of all sorts. It is, in fact, a book for anyone who needs or wants to be creative—on demand, practically anywhere, practically anytime. The truth is that most of us, most of the time, feel as remote and removed from creativity as we do from genius. We believe that creativity, like genius, is something that just happens, not something we can make happen. What the example of Edison demonstrates is that creativity of the very highest order can indeed be made to happen, summoned up at will, and even reduced to a reliable working method and set of principles. That method and those principles are what *Edison on Innovation* is all about, and I am confident that this introduction to Edison’s creative career, creative method, and creative habits will be a revelation to anyone whose business requires the continual creation of new ideas and the practical realization of the best of them.

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