

Out-of-Box, In-the-Box, New-Box, Other-Box, No-Box Thinking

By Robert Alan Black, Ph.D.

For years supporters and detractors of creative thinking in the workplace have talked about Out-of-the-Box Thinking. The supporters, often consultants and researchers, have stressed the easiest way for people to be creative was to think out-of-the-box, to break their paradigms or mindsets, their ways of thinking.

The detractors have pointed out often the damage such thinking can produce and stressed the counteractive effects upon the total organization and its more global goals and mission.

Within organizations particular departments have been labelled out-of-the-box: R&D, Marketing, Human Resource Department and Creative Services and resisted by the finance, purchasing, administration, shipping, and other departments who prefer to stay in their carefully constructed boxes or the boxes provided for them.

As a consultant, speaker and college professor I have promoted the development of out-of-the-box thinking in all people, all departments for about 20 years, normally to a thundering thud of silence.

Occasionally creative type departments will entertain the idea of learning how to leave boxes but generally they already know how. Their problems center on the debris, anger, frustration they leave in their wake when they do tear down or damage boxes.

Recently in an email message, Chris Barlow, Ph.D., professor at IITs Management Department and long-time fellow CPSI faculty member and colleague challenged me on an apparent emphasis on out-of-the-box thinking as the primary source of creative thinking.

Instantaneous flash of the obvious occurred. An Aha!

Stressing mainly or even only out-of-the-box thinking excludes a wealth of other sources of creativity:

in-the-box, no-box, new-box, other-box thinking

Immediately jumping out of a box or tearing it down eliminates many possibilities of ideas and solutions that can come from staying in-the-box. If we stay in our box we can examine what has worked?, what hasn't worked?, what might work if we only....?, how can we capitalize on what is working while still changing or improving it?

By forcing ourselves to leave our box we cut ourselves off from the not-yet-understood or not-thoroughly communicated or experienced existing knowledge within our existing box. Or as Sid Shore has tried to teach us for many years, What's Good About It (our box)?

By using new box thinking instead of out-of-the-box thinking we provide ourselves with controllable and measurable limits or useful restraints.

New Box Thinking is a controlled form of out-of-the-box thinking. The best analogy is one that Edward de Bono has used often to describe the difference between vertical thinking (box) and lateral thinking (out-of-the-box, actually new box). He has written that vertical thinking is comparable to digging the same hole deeper to find the treasure and horizontal or lateral thinking is digging new holes in many locations (new boxes).

Out-of-the-box thinking would go beyond simply digging new holes it might involve looking in the air, under the sea or using other tools or methods beyond simply a shovel As Abraham Maslow has told us, If you see your only tool as a hammer (shovel), then you will see all your problems as nails (holes to be dug).

Other-Box Thinking involves leaving yours and entering someone else's once again with the What's Good About It? philosophy. An example might be for the creative department to send people to work in the finance, purchasing, shipping, manufacturing departments to learn what the grass on the other side of the fence is really like in the other boxes. Benefits might be:

- 1) greater understandings of the benefits of the other boxes,
- 2) a sharing of commonalities within boxes,
- 3) ways to integrate and interlock boxes.

Another example often used in today's business and industry is for employees from a manufacturing company to visit and work with people in their various supplier or vendor companies to understand their boxes and to share about their own with them.

No-Box Thinking might mean complete open thinking with no limits or Virtual/Transparent-Box Thinking. No-Box thinking challenges the greatest majority of people because of the tremendously potential risks involved. Anything can wrong at any time. There is no box to provide any protection. No fortress or castle walls. Yet if people are encouraged to use out-of-the-box thinking as part of their job, a small percentage at first expanding as they are ready.

3M is reported to encourage their research people to spend up to 15% of their time on exploratory projects, thinking out-of-the-box, while still accomplishing the 100% of their work they have contracted to complete within the other 85% of their time. Post-It notes are but one example of this approach.

It's interesting that in elementary schools and some middle schools across the country teachers have been using this reward approach to provide students with time during their school day for out-of-the-box thinking time and projects of their own choosing, if and only if they complete their required work early.

Virtual/Imaginary Box thinking may provide the best of both in and out thinking. The box is there in the form of policies and principles yet the employees are allowed to look out of their box or even venture out knowing that they can always return to the security and safety of their box.

Next time you consider breaking out of your box consider these other options.

1. Re-look at the box you think you are in. It may actually not have permanent, impregnable walls as you current believe or think.
2. Look within to solutions you have never considered or can reconsider from the past. Work within the box.
3. Visit other boxes, within or without your organization. Much can be learned and shared with the inhabitants.
4. Experiment at least part of the time with having no boxes. Perhaps keep a tether attached back to your box just in case. Even the most experienced mountain climbers rarely climb unattached.
5. Encourage the use of virtual or transparent wall material for your box.
6. Gradually teach others the benefits of out-of-the-box thinking, while you learn the benefits you have never considered that lie within the boxes where you already are.

Remember our boxes are in our minds most of the time.