

Thinking outside the box

by Ed Bernacki

A REASON I'M often given for the need for innovation training is “to get our company to think outside the box”.

This may come from the person at the top who feels that the quality of solutions or ideas is not great. This stems from a sense of frustration. It also comes from people working in teams who feel that the contribution of others is not helping to find new and original solutions to the challenges they face.

If you have ever been in this situation, you will know how hard it is to deal with. Perhaps it is best to start with what this term actually means. I don't know of an official definition of “out of the box” thinking but here is my perspective starting with “in the box” thinking.

THINKING INSIDE THE BOX

Thinking inside the box accepts the status quo. For example, Charles H. Duell, director of the US Patent Office said, “Everything that can be invented has been invented”. That was in 1899; clearly, he was in the box!

In-the-box thinkers find it hard to recognise the quality of an idea. An idea is an idea. A solution is a solution. In fact, they can be quite pig-headed when it comes to valuing an idea. They rarely invest time to turn a mediocre solution into a great solution.

More dangerously, in-the-box thinkers are skilful in killing ideas. They are masters of the creativity killer attitude such as “that'll never work” or “it's too risky”. The best in-the-box thinkers are naïve to the fact that they drain the enthusiasm and passion of innovative thinkers when they kill their innovative ideas.

They also believe that every problem needs only one solution. Therefore, finding more than one possible solution is a waste. They often say, “There is no time for creative solutions. We just need *the* solution.”

There is a tragedy here. Great creative people can become in-the-box thinkers when they stop trying. Apathy and indifference can turn an innovator into an in-the-box thinker.

There is only one case where in-the-box thinking is key. This comes from a cartoon: a man talks to his cat and points to the kitty litter box. He says, “Never ever think outside the box!”



THINKING OUTSIDE THE BOX

Thinking outside the box takes different attributes that include:

- willingness to take new perspectives to day-to-day work
- openness to do different things and to do things differently
- focusing on the value of finding new ideas and acting on them
- striving to create value in new ways
- listening to others
- supporting and respecting others when they come up with new ideas.

Out-of-the box thinking requires being open to new ways of seeing the world and a willingness to explore. Out-of-the box thinkers know that new ideas need nurturing and support. They also know that having an idea is good but acting on it is more important. Results are what count.

Ed Bernacki is an ideas champion. He started The Idea Factory to work with people to find and action new ideas. His latest book, “Wow! That's a Great idea!” is available at book shops or at www.wowgreatidea.com