

Stepping Outside the Box: Some Additional Thoughts

Part II

Robert Brooks, Ph.D.

This will be my last article until September. I want to wish my readers a relaxing summer and to mention that in addition to all of my previous articles being posted on my website, some other articles are on the SchwabLearning.org and CDL.org websites.

I received many responses to last month's article about thinking outside the box and thus, as I have done with other topics in which there was great reader interest, I decided to expand on last month's theme in this article. Several readers sent me examples of instances in which they had successfully stepped outside the box and changed their typical scripts. One person offered an interesting idea. She wrote, "I really appreciate the anecdotes about thinking out of the box. Maybe you could solicit your readers to send in their stories that they could share with the rest of us. It sure would help out the 'creatively challenged' among us."

I think this is an excellent idea. If you have examples of times that you or others you know have donned a creative cap and deviated from usual ways of thinking and behaving to deal more effectively with a problem or issue, please e-mail me with the details. I would be happy to share these accounts with my readers so that we are all helped to move from the "creatively challenged" category into the "creative" box. As I wrote last month, I believe that we all have the capacity to think and behave differently. One of the greatest obstacles to doing so is the belief that we do not possess whatever genes it takes to be creative. If people believe they lack creativity, it is difficult to engage in the task of seeing things in a new light.

Given the obvious interest in this theme, I should like to share some additional examples and thoughts; hopefully, even more examples will be forthcoming from readers in the next few months. I received one from Rich Wheland, a school social worker in the Pittsburgh area. I have gotten to know Rich and find him to be a very creative, caring, and compassionate person. I affectionately refer to him as my "Western PR Agent" since he has taken a number of ideas about which I have written and applied them in his own unique style. In last month's article I described a mother who changed her script and

responded in a compassionate way to her son after he had damaged two of his family cars in an accident in their driveway. Rich offered the following account:

“Was reading your last newsletter—the mom and the kid with the car accidents. Had to tell you one moment outside the box experience that I am very proud of. My 16-year-old son wanted to borrow my brand new minivan—the best car I had ever owned—to drive his girlfriend to Station Square (shops and fancy eating places)—through downtown Pittsburgh to the South Side (we live north of Pittsburgh). OK, it was Sunday nite, traffic at a minimum. Hours later he comes in, head down. He made a wrong turn and in the process of turning the car around he scraped a pole that had been cut off to about 24” high. It was dark—didn’t see it. He was rattled.

“I got up and proceeded silently down two flights wondering what I was going to say. God was with me: as I looked at the scrape, I said, ‘Hmm, not as big as my first one,’ then went back into the house. Later he told us his long-term girlfriend had lectured him all the way home. And Dad didn’t. He didn’t marry her either. Married the best daughter-in-law a dad could ask for.

“Oh, for a few more of those moments. . . .”

Is it any wonder that I admire Rich?

Several years ago I spoke with a school principal. She described an ongoing problem that occurred during recess that I am certain is familiar to many educators. In comparison with classroom activities, recess tends to be less structured and more difficult to supervise. The principal noted that incidents of teasing and bullying occurred frequently during recess. It was never easy to identify the “culprits,” and punishments such as keeping students in from recess seemed to have little impact. She said that at one of the staff meetings we finally came to the conclusion that “what we have been doing is not working so why keep doing it.” This was a major step forward since as I noted in last month’s article, an obstacle to stepping outside the box is the assumption that it is the responsibility of others to change first. This staff, guided by a creative principal, recognized that if the problem of teasing were to be addressed more effectively, the responsibility for the first move was on the staff’s shoulders.

What they did might not work in every school, but it was highly effective in this school. Typically, the time of recess was scheduled based on grades, that is, kindergarten

through second grade had recess at the same time, third and fourth grade were grouped together, and then fifth and sixth grade. The greatest difficulties with teasing and bullying at recess occurred with the fifth and sixth graders. The staff decided to change the existing pattern. Rather than have all of the fifth and sixth grade classes take recess at the same time, they split them in half as they did the younger grades. Thus, older students were now at recess with younger students.

Some might immediately see this as a risk, worrying that the older students would transfer their bullying from their same-age peers to these younger children. The staff anticipated this possibility and discussed with the older students the importance of “watching” the younger children, of showing them how to play certain games, and of “teaching” the younger children not to tease each other. Peer mediation techniques were taught the older students to use with the younger students, which, of course, had the benefit of helping these older students learn alternative ways to deal with their own bullying and aggression.

The principal described the positive results to me, “For so many months we pursued an unproductive path. The change we made was actually not that big, was not very difficult to implement, but what a positive impact it had.”

The observation of this principal echoed the recommendations I made in last month’s column that people not attempt to make major alterations in their behavior all at once but rather take small steps. Each successful small step boosts our confidence for taking the next step and then the next. I made this recommendation given the number of times I have heard people minimize their creative abilities.

In this regard, Roger von Oech, author of “A Whack on the Side of the Head,” reported that one study found (not surprisingly) that “creative people thought they were creative, and the less creative people didn’t think they were. As a consequence, the people who didn’t think they were creative never put themselves in a position where they could use their creativity. They didn’t allow themselves to get into an imaginative frame of mind, play with their knowledge, take a few risks, or look for the seventh right answer.

“One of the major factors that differentiates creative from less creative people is that creative people give themselves a license to pay attention to their small ideas. Even

though they don't know where one of these will lead, they know that a small idea could lead to a big breakthrough, and they believe they are capable of making it happen.”

This is another example of the power of one's expectations in directing one's life. Remember, expectations can be changed. Von Oech notes, “If you want to be more creative, believe in the worth of your ideas, and have the persistence to continue building on them. With this attitude, you'll take more risks, and break the rules occasionally. You'll look for more than one right answer, explore for ideas outside your area, tolerate ambiguity, be foolish every now and then, play a little bit, engage in asking ‘what if’ questions, and go beyond the status quo.”

Of course, if one has a negative mindset, their response to von Oech's advice might be, “But I'm not creative and I don't believe in the worth of my ideas.” It is especially for that reason that I recommend selecting one small area for change, an area that affords the best possibility for success.

I recall a manager at a high tech company who experienced a great deal of tension with those in his department. As we discussed the situation, it became obvious that his style was to remind staff what they had done wrong but rarely to provide positive feedback when they had been successful. He subscribed to the belief that “they get paid well. That's reinforcement enough.” Yet, when I asked him to describe factors that motivated him when he first started in his field and even to the present day, he did not mention salary. Rather, he offered several examples that involved receiving positive feedback from a supervisor and successfully finishing a task. The relevance of this answer to current problems with his own staff might appear obvious to the reader, but had not occurred to him previously.

I wondered how he might use his new insight to think outside the box and change his usual way of responding to his staff. Although very bright, he fell into the trap of thinking negatively. He said, “I'm good with high tech problems but not with people problems.” As von Oech would contend, if you don't think you can be creative, you won't be. I empathized with this manager's plight but asked him to think about one small step he could take. He smiled and recalled a time that one of his supervisors had sent him a short note of appreciation for a job well-done. As one might guess, he began to send notes to his staff. He said that at first some of his staff seemed to feel he had an ulterior

motive (this often occurs when one steps outside the box since others are not prepared for the change). But soon the climate of his department “became noticeably more positive, more productive, and even more relaxed.”

He added, “The culmination was when my staff made me a surprise birthday party, something they had never done before. And each person wrote me a really nice note.”

So in ending here’s a little extra credit “homework” assignment during the summer months. Define one area in your life that you would like to change and then step outside of the box as you view the problem from a new perspective and consider new solutions. Try one and don’t be concerned if it’s just a small step. Have fun. If the solution doesn’t work think of another one (von Oech mentioned the “seventh” right answer). And feel free to write and share your experiences with me. It will certainly help me to discover new ways to step outside the box.

Have a wonderful summer.

<http://www.drrobertbrooks.com>