



Getting Outside Your Box

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

If I hear the phrase "think outside the box" one more time, I'm going to blow. That old saw has been around for decades and is so hoary the cardboard has all rotted away. For purposes of trying to make a point, I am going to use the analogy one more time as it applies to people rather than ideas, then try to forget the phrase ever existed.

The concept I wanted to share is the question, "How can you know when you are operating in a box, and what steps can you take to get out of it?" Perhaps a corollary question might be, "Why would you want to get outside your box?" These questions sound innocent and easy enough to address, but the more you think about them, the more intriguing they become. To begin with, let's define what being "in a box" means, in the context of this article.

You are in a box when you are imposing some kind of walls or barriers that contain you and prevent the freedom to do things that would enrich your life in some way. With that broad definition, I doubt there is a person alive who is not in some kind of a box every day of his or her life.

Here are some tips for recognizing the boxes you are creating for yourself and getting out of them.

Take Personal Responsibility

It is easy to blame circumstance, luck, situations, other people, low IQ, lack of money, and a host of other external factors for a feeling of helplessness. Blaming external factors is really taking the easy way out. The cold reality is that you almost always have the ability to at least influence external factors, and you always have the opportunity to choose your reaction to them. If you step up to the personal power that is built into every human being, you can find creative ways to eventually burrow through the sides of the boxes that constrain you.

Learn to Recognize Your Boxes

If you have a blind spot about the box that contains you, it is impossible to feel the anticipation of what it might be like to get rid of it. My grandfather made a plaque when he was a boy that now hangs in my shop. It reads, "Success comes in cans...failures in cans." Whenever we think we cannot do something, that is a signal that we are in some kind of box. That may be a good or bad thing, but at least we need to be conscious of it.

Look For Creative Solutions

Looking for alternative solutions to the blockages that hold us back can be a kind of game that really pays off. The logical approach to take may be only one of numerous ways to break out of your box. Let me try an example. Suppose I wanted to know what it is like to be a ballet dancer. If you could look at me, you would immediately giggle, because my build is the opposite of what is required. The straightforward approach would be to buy some of those tie-on slippers and sign up for ballet lessons. Just the thought of me trying to do a pirouette in tights causes me to hide under the bed. Am I blocked from experiencing that aspect of life? Not at all! There are dozens of ways I can become more aware of what it is like to be a ballet dancer. Reading, watching documentaries, corresponding with dancers, going to the ballet, etc., are all alternative ways to have that life experience.

Listen To Your Inner Voice

If you have an inkling that you would like to try painting, why not give it a shot? My father was a businessman for his career. He was always on the road trying to make a living selling wire forms. It never occurred to him that he might like to paint. In his mid-50s he decided to give it a try and found that he loved to paint. When he retired at 70, he had many years of joy as a professional artist and painted over 2000 excellent watercolor paintings that kept him active and enjoying life until he lost his sight at 95. He is still going strong at 99 and enjoys the memories of a full life pursuing his passion.

Document Your Goals

If you have not documented what you would like to do, how can you tell what other boxes you might like to sit in for a while? Lou Holtz tells a cute story about how he lost his job one time and was really depressed being out of work. His wife bought him a book on setting goals. Without ambitious goals, the spark of life is missing, so Lou started writing down some goals. He wanted to go to the White House for dinner, he wanted to be on The Tonight Show, he wanted to coach at Notre Dame, he wanted to be Coach of the Year. After he got done writing down all his goals, he was pretty excited. He went to his wife and said, "Look at these goals, I've got 107 of those suckers and we're going to do every one of them." His wife replied, "Gee, that's nice. Why don't you add 'get a job'?" So they made it 108. He said his whole life changed.

Just Do It

Too many people are living on a desert island called "Someday Isle." Do you know how many people have started a book but never finished it? I know dozens of people in that circumstance. I also know others who say "I've got a book in me, and someday I am going to get to it." Or someone else might say, "Someday I am going to take a cruise." I think we need to be careful with the phrase "someday I'll," because it means we are content to sit in our box and perpetually dream about some other experience. What a tragedy to be lying on your death bed and regret not doing things that you always dreamed of doing. If you can no longer climb your mountain, at least you can go to the mountain, see it, and smell the fresh air.

Have the resolve to be some of the things that you have imagined in your dreams. If you are creative, there are ways to rip open the side of your box and perhaps create a bigger box or leave entirely for some period of time. What fun, and isn't that what life is supposed to be all about?

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