

Thinking Outside Of The Box Revisited

The most emailed business article from the New York Times one recent day was entitled [*Innovative Minds Don't Think Alike*](#). The title was a little misleading. The main thrust of the piece was that as people become good at what they do, they will tend to do things the way that has always worked.

The Times stated the problem as follows:

“When it’s time to accomplish a task — open a store, build a house, buy new cash registers, sell insurance — those in the know get it done the way it has always been done, stifling innovation as they barrel along the well-worn path.”

The Times calls this the “curse of knowledge.” This curse of knowledge is a problem because in this era of high speed, rapid change in all aspects of business, those businesses that don’t innovate will die.

The answer identified in the Times is to bring into the project people with a fresh perspective. I heartily agree. But that doesn’t answer the question of who do you bring in. In some organizations it can mean creating cross functional teams and sometimes it means bringing in the consultant. However, neither solution is by itself sufficient. You do not automatically get innovation from cross functional teams or from consultants.

Don’t misunderstand; I am a great believer in cross functional teams and, as a consultant myself, in using consultants. I have created cross functional teams and guided them to success. As a consultant I have drawn on the expertise in an organization and worked closely with teams to get results. However, both teams and outsiders can suffer from their own “curse of knowledge”.

Team members may each have their own body of knowledge, be rigid and set in their ways. If not guided teams can end up more a source of friction and delay than of innovation. Successful teams must work in a culture that is open, communicates and shares. If the engineer member of the team can’t hear what the production guy is saying, the engineer will never design manufacturability into the product or process.

Consultants can be as bad. I have met and dealt with some consultants who had the perfect solution; it just wasn’t the solution to the problem at hand. I refer to this as the “hammer in search of a nail”. If my customers aren’t paying on time, putting in an expensive IT solution to make my invoicing more efficient probably won’t solve that problem. There are circumstances in which better invoicing would be part of the solution, but starting by hiring the wrong IT consultant will guarantee that the solution you will be given will involve new hardware and software.

I am not picking on IT consultants. In fact I know good ones that would look at the issue and tell you that you need to improve processes first and after you do that then call them and they can make it more efficient. These types may be few and far between though, and we have all heard horror stories concerning IT implementations.

So what is my advice? Start with the basics. If you are trying to bring innovation into a business aren't you really saying "We are not getting the results I want, we need to change"? Start with your team, it may be internal, a board of advisers, colleagues or a combination. It may involve bringing in a consultant to spark things off or to help guide the team. State the goal simply and design the plan to get there. Articulate the plan, communicate it, have solid metrics and test the results. You must go through the steps and work them. There really aren't shortcuts.

The great danger is buying a pre-packaged solution from someone who is as stuck in their box as you are in yours.

-Greg Meurer