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BEYOND BORDERS

Ken Hudson on harnessing the power of your 'out of the box' thinkers.

A few years ago, Apple launched a series of advertisements around a theme line of "Think Different". In one of the ads they highlighted a number of famous people like Einstein and Gandhi who they described as mavericks, trouble makers, rebels or misfits. Their basic point was that dramatic progress often results from the efforts of people who see the world differently and want to change things.

My experience is that this is exactly the same for organisations. To create non-linear results requires people that are adept at thinking in a non-linear way. I have called these the "out of the box" thinkers and they represent perhaps 5% of all your employees, but just like the heroes mentioned in the Apple ad they may hold the key to breakthrough innovation and growth.

I believe harnessing the power of your out of the box thinkers represents a new and potentially more productive way to think about innovation. The out of the box thinkers are those that can make new connections, love working with ideas and enjoy the challenge of working from a blank piece of paper. It is not artistic ability but the skills and confidence to solve everyday problems in a novel and useful way.

These people are often not valued by managers however. In fact, they are often treated as original thinkers but more trouble than they are worth. These people want to challenge the status quo and create new ideas and solutions. They are often criticised as being full of new ideas but lack follow through. Perhaps worst of all, it is suggested that they are not real team players because heaven forbid they are independent of thought.

The important point is that the out of the box thinkers are found throughout the business. They could be found in finance, marketing or human resources. They may be managers or entry level employees. What they share is an affinity with new ideas.

Yet my experience suggests that the out of the box thinkers are the real innovation drivers in your business. They need to be recognised and valued. Most of all they need to be



given better opportunities to express their creativity in a way that is consistent with the priorities of the business. The out of the box thinkers should be given those difficult challenges where business-as-usual thinking has not worked. They need to be involved early in the concept building stage of a project and formed into some form of loose network so

they do not feel isolated.

This approach to harnessing the out of the box thinkers in your business hinges on two questions: how to identify the out of the box thinkers in your business, and how to best use their talents. I will deal with these two questions in turn.

IDENTIFYING OUT OF THE BOX THINKERS

There are three broad approaches. Each one has strengths and weaknesses and are often more effective when used together.

- **Advertise** - My PhD research into organisational creativity suggests that truly creative people tend to self identify. Ask a group of say 100 people do they love working with ideas or are they the first in a group to create new ideas and perhaps five of them might step forward. Most of the rest of us usually qualify this question with "it depends", "sometimes", etc. This group define themselves by their ability to think in a lateral way. This approach is quick and simple but it does rely on people's own ability to judge their own creativity. This view may not necessarily be shared by others.
- **Peer nominated** - Another way of identifying the out of the box thinkers is to ask for peer nomination. Simply ask everyone in the business who are the true out of the box thinkers they work with. For example, we have worked with one of Sydney's largest architect firms and out of the 80 people in the practice one person was nominated 27 times. The next highest was 8. This approach also has its drawbacks, as it can count against people who are introverted and have just joined the business.
- **Use some sort of test** - At The Idea Centre we have developed an "Original Thinking Quiz" which measures the degree to which



a person can develop an original and quick response to a series of ten questions. We have used this quiz as a screen to help us create a creative consumer panel. From our experience people who do well in this quiz are more likely to perform creatively in a brainstorming type session than others. All 80 members of the architect firm have completed the quiz and we can now compare and contrast the results of the peer nominated with the quiz based approach.

USING THE TALENTS OF OUT OF THE BOX THINKERS

Once you have identified the out of the box thinkers the next step is to determine exactly how to best use their talents. I have outlined some suggestions below.

- Establish a monthly problem solving workshop - Out of the box thinkers love to work on problems where the answer is not obvious or requires a left-field approach. My suggestion is that managers might brief this group and outline the problem and ask for some new ideas or insights. If all goes well, the manager can walk away from say a 1.5 hour lunch time workshop with a bundle of new perspectives and suggestions to test. The problem owner would still be charged with implementing the solution. There is no rule, for example, that every team has to be

an implementation team. You can also post problems on the intranet and ask the team to contribute their ideas.

- Create an out of the box team to look for white space opportunities - Almost by definition most silo-based businesses have trouble identifying or creating white space opportunities. The out of the box team by its nature may often be in a better position to advance these because of its diverse nature and the ability of team members to make unusual connections.

These people enjoy novelty and are better placed to push the innovation barrow.

- Ensure that an out of the box thinker is part of every brainstorming or cross functional team - Most brainstorming fails to produce breakthrough ideas. Partly this is a result of having the same people at the session. This conformity of perspectives ensures that the group has a collective mindset that is difficult to escape from.
- Appoint the out of the box thinkers as innovation or creative mentors - Another practical use of the out of the box thinkers is to appoint them as the innovation champions. These people enjoy variety and novelty and are better placed to push the innovation barrow. I have worked with many innovation

groups where the members themselves were the least open to new ideas.

- Set up an informal out of the box network - These employees have a special creative problem solving ability. They need to be cherished. The simple act of forming this group and publicly recognising them will go a long way to ensuring that your pool of new ideas continues to flourish.

In summary, we are living in a time, as Tom Peters suggests, where "we are down to one idea, which is innovation". The out of the box

thinkers can help any business to create greater value and growth. These people are no better or worse than others in the business. In fact, a big idea which just sits there has a latent potential and can only be realised by the out of the box thinkers creating a new possibility working closely with the in the box thinkers to make the idea better and testing it in the market place.

Who are the out of the best thinkers in your business? ■

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