

Thinking outside the box

By Brian Lockhart

The phrase to 'think outside of the box' was a term that made its way into the general lexicon a few decades ago.

It is a metaphor that suggests thinking differently, unconventionally, or viewing a situation from a different perspective. No one is entirely sure where it started but it is generally attributed to some management consultants who coined the phrase.

It was a popular way of telling your business staff to take on challenges by providing new and different solutions.

Unfortunately the phrase became so popular that it ended up losing all real meaning, because every time there was a meeting someone would say, 'let's think outside of the box.' When you repeat the same phrase at every meeting, sooner or later the concept is lost and the people at the meeting just hear 'blah blah blah.'

I used to go to meetings where the words 'verbiage' and 'transparent' became company buzzwords for some reason - so much so that after a while managers were using those words so often that half the time it made no sense at all.

'Lets start his meeting. How's the new verbiage?? 'Oh, very transparent!'

Not to mention most business meetings are an absolute waste of time because at the end of the meeting, no matter which suggestions have been made or ideas tossed into the fray, most people are going to do what the VP tells them to do anyway.

'Now lets go out there and market our new product - bags of broken glass - to elementary school children,' the VP says at the end of the meeting while all the managers smile and nod in agreement. I've seen that plenty of times in the corporate world.

Smile and nod and collect a paycheck.

When it comes to outside of the box thinking however, some people have been able to do just that with incredible results.

Bill Gates didn't become the world's richest man by following a linear way of thinking. And there's a whole list of others that had an unorthodox idea and parlayed it into incredible success.

Elon Musk comes to mind - quite the smart fellow.

During the Second World War, the Allied Bomber Command was doing a study on the damage aircraft received during bombing runs.

When an aircraft returned to base, they would make a note of all bullet holes from attacking enemy fighter aircraft to determine the most likely places a bomber would be struck. They compiled all this information and made a detailed diagram showing bullet strikes and damage indicating the most common place on the fuselage and wings that were hit. The damaged areas on the diagram were marked with red dots.

The idea was to build the aircraft with more protection in those areas to shield the crew and protect the aircraft.

It sounds like a logical way to strengthen the aircraft and minimize casualties.

However, one man, a mathematician, who was indeed thinking outside the box, pointed out the diagrams were all wrong.

At first he was criticized for having the audacity to challenge the high command.

When questioned about his preposterous judgment of the plan, he pointed out that they were only studying the aircraft that made it back to the airstrip.

Instead of looking at the red dots, he reasoned, they should be looking at the areas of the aircraft diagram that had no dots at all. That represented the aircraft that were shot out of the air and because they never returned to base, their damage wasn't noted.

The areas with no red dots meant those were the parts of the aircraft that were most vulnerable.

He was of course right, and his outside of the box thinking caused the air command to rethink the entire strategy of protecting aircraft and crew.

This phenomenon is called survivorship bias. At its simplest, it's when we look at the things that survived when we should be focusing on the ones that didn't.

The same strategy can be applied to many areas of life.

It's easy to look at the obvious and find faults.

It's much more difficult to look at the missing pieces of a puzzle and find a solution.

Sometimes just taking a step back and looking at the bigger picture allows you to focus on other areas where you can improve.