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Think outside the box

This expression seems to be highly in fashion in the corporate world. It is very common to hear it in presentations, conversations, reports, and most of all, included in the feedback provided by managers to their staff members. Or, another way to say it, think creatively. Most of the time, the phrase sounds exciting and attractive to those who are listening, and demonstrates that the persona saying it is connected to the new times, but . . .

What exactly does it mean? We are all immersed in a big box, or mental framework. This frame is the long time result of our ethnic, cultural, ideological, political, social and professional background. For most of us, it is hard to recognize that the box has its limits, it does not matter how sophisticated we are. Thinking outside the box assumes going beyond the limits, crossing them to enter into different paradigms.

Can we all think creatively? Sociologist Richard Florida has the opinion that we are all creative by nature and that this inner creativity is the engine that drives development. The problem is that we resist new ideas. If we are always attached to the same mental framework we will not be able to overcome our limits.

So what can we do if we are framed by our mental models? The first step is to increase awareness that our model is only one of several. They are all valid in different contexts. That sounds simple in writing, but for some of us, to take this step, can take a lifetime.

After overcoming this step, the second one is to exit our comfort zone. The model box gives us security, pleasure and consistency. However, if we are always using the same sources of security and we are always relating to the same stimuli, aren't we limiting our creativity?

Let's see some suggestions to exit our comfort zone:

Experiment with something that you have previously rejected.

Instead of saying, "I don't like it" without even trying it. It can be a new kind of food, a musical style, a political

idea, interacting with a social minority, etc. This is a good exercise to start relating with diversity, to learn and to offer a second opportunity.

Socialize with diametrically opposed groups.

This person does not think like me, does not behave like me. What would be his/her source of motivation? This is a great opportunity for exercising empathy, and to see things from a different perspective.

Sacrifice Sunday afternoon football for community work.

This provides a unique opportunity for you to start to understand other people's needs, from their perspective. Isn't it fundamental in your business to understand the customers' needs?

Read something that you've never thought about reading.

Regardless of your gender, read for instance, a fashion magazine. What about a sports magazine, or Architecture and decoration magazine? Exercise your creativity in different ways. Your bestseller can wait awhile. This is a great opportunity to experiment with new mental models.

Listen to something you've never favored.

Watch an off-off-off-off Broadway show (instead of the latest hit). Listen to a musical style that you may consider too avant-garde. What about Opera? This is a great opportunity to learn to listen to others.

By leveraging our framework with the stimuli of others we will be able to more clearly define the factors to be considered in order to achieve the expected outcome. It does not matter if we are talking about a product, a process, a need or just a creative thought.

See you next time. We welcome your feedback.

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