

# People in a Box

*Imagine an organization whose people feel energized, gratified, and acknowledged on the job.*

*Imagine an organization in which people routinely improve their ideas, products, and decisions by seeking out work partners and team members who have differing points of view.*

*Imagine an organization where people whistle on their way to work.*

These images may seem overly idealistic in our current climate of corporate malfeasance, whistle-blowing and greed. But consider the possibilities for an organization that engages its people's differences to achieve higher performance and greater success; an organization where people are treated as vital resources rather than overhead; and where employees are valued as core assets, as much for their talent as their differences.

In the Industrial Age, workers were valued for their hands and their feet, not their minds. Management knew best and people were asked merely to do as they were told. Today, that model no longer works because of the

challenges facing organizations from the outside, as well as the attitudes and beliefs of the new generation of employees.

The baby boomers are the last generation where "loyalty to the company" has been assumed. As today's high school and college graduates enter the work force, commitment to the organization is confronted anew each workday, and company loyalty is a proposition continuously challenged.

Increased competition, new communication technologies, changing demographics,

globalism and a new world and social structure have rendered the old ways of treating people obsolete—not to mention the constant dangers of terrorist attacks and "Orange Alerts."

Some of today's challenges could have been anticipated. But many more could have been avoided by understanding differences, listening to people on the fringes and speaking out against the illusion of a "steady state."

Our ever-changing world requires people to think outside the box—and beyond. Customers have

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changed, and their expectations are continually growing in terms of what they want, when they want it and in some cases who will produce, deliver or sell it to them.

To successfully navigate these changes, organizations need to be more nimble, smarter and better able to problem solve and make decisions.

#### **The Status Quo No Longer Works.**

Creating a sense of stability and having a goal of maintaining the status quo are dangers in today's world. A degree of risk-taking has become a business necessity.

In fact, a goal of maintaining the "status quo" may be a sign of an organization going out of business. Constant improvement and taking risks to change—even in good times, are the realities of today's successful enterprises.

But to do this, organizations need people with a wide range of problem-solving skills and know-how.

#### **A Journey into the Unknown.**

Leading a highly successful organization has become a journey into the unknown. Those who succeed will do so because the people in their organizations have the breadth and depth of skills and behaviors that allow them to shift course, and solve problems along the way. This is radically different from the "narrower-the-better" attitudes of today, and the "I don't pay you to think" attitudes of the past.

One of the phrases that has embedded itself in the corporate

lexicon in recent years is *thinking outside the box*. Organizations constantly ask their employees to break the mental constraints of the past to produce innovative, risk-taking ideas today that they hope will move the organization forward.

But most organizations keep people firmly *inside* a box. They often subscribe to outdated policies and practices that limit people's ability to contribute, and may be slow to adopt new practices that will truly unleash and leverage new thinking. While many organizations talk about innovation and risk-taking, these ideals are rarely applied to the way they handle their greatest asset: their people.

#### **The Constraints of the Box.**

Historically, organizational charts have been drawn as a collection of boxes. These charts fueled the organizations' self-perception of existing inside a box; inside some secure and bounded entity. Even though "the box" metaphor is no longer considered accurate, many of its implications remain: not only the notion of the organization having a fixed boundary protecting it from the world, but also the replication of the box imagery inside the organization. One need look no further for an example than at the rigidity by which many organizations treat their people.

Prescribed, boxed-in descriptions of departments, teams and even individual jobs are basically saying that everyone fits into a box, making it convenient to administer policies and proce-

dures. People have historically felt constrained by the rules and regulations of organizations, and rightfully so. When people have gone outside their box they often have been punished. But flexibility and respect for differences are key to organizational success and higher performance, so the notion of keeping people in a box needs to cease.

#### **Moving Beyond Empowerment.**

Recognizing this, many organizations are trying to move beyond the rhetoric of valuing and empowering people to actually "living" that rhetoric. Organizations readily acknowledge the need to get talent in the door, but once there, the culture often works to keep them "in line"—that is, in their box. Many of the old systems, hierarchies, barriers, and attitudes are still in place, keeping people controlled, confined and restricted; cutting off their ability to fully contribute.

#### **The Loss of Talent and Ideas.**

When an organization doesn't leverage its people's uniqueness and individualized thinking, potential benefits are lost. For example, a Latina engineer might be hired by a design team to provide insight into preferences of Latinas or Latinos, while being overlooked as a potential contributor to broader engineering expertise. She ends up boxed in by her coworkers, who see her value limited to her apparent difference from the rest of the team. Her technical and design skills may not be fully recognized or utilized, and the organization loses an opportunity to tap her varied abilities and

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perspectives. The individual feels marginalized, leading to dissatisfaction with the work and the organization.

If an entry-level person in your organization has an idea right now that could dramatically improve a product, service or system, what are the chances that the idea will be heard and enacted? For many organizations the chances are pretty slim. And the impact of that voice not being heard (or valued) is a loss to the bottom line.

**Breaking Out of the Box.**

Recently, a large corporation surveyed its people about how much of their skills and talents they are bringing to the workplace. The average response was 50 percent. If true, then this means that organizations are utilizing barely half of their human talent, which calls into question how long they can remain viable. Some companies are changing workplace practices

to nurture new thinking and create an open environment that allows ideas to be shared. Tapping people's talent in this way gives these organizations an edge over competitors.

**A Culture of Inclusion.** Breaking out of the box mandates that organizations trust and support their people to be innovators and risk-takers. They must create a culture that enables individuals to bring their voice and ideas to the workplace so they may truly make a difference. It means embracing new models of partnering, leading and working in teams. Importantly, it requires a culture of inclusion.

**Inclusion Is... A sense of belonging: Feeling respected, valued and seen for who we are as individuals; There is a level of supportive energy and commitment from leaders, colleagues and others so that we—individually and collectively—can do our best work.**

Picture an organization where individuals freely speak up, going right to the source with their ideas rather than navigating politics and chains of command. Envision leaders so committed to developing people through education, coaching and “stretch” opportunities that people move easily through the organization, contributing new ideas and fresh perspectives along the way. Imagine an organization where the right people at the right place doing the right work at the right time—where teams are versatile and able to work across the enterprise with fluidity and ease. This is the essence of being out of the box.

**Changing Behaviors to Make a Difference.** Breaking out of the box can best occur when people are educated to respect each other, and to value each person's talents and differences. Out-of-the-box behaviors have the potential to change nearly every aspect of an organization's opera-

tions. It is a radical change. But the improvements that result can be astonishing.

People learn to work differently: Every project team scans the organization to make sure it has the “right” people for the work team. Disagreements often lead to better decisions (read: solutions) based on a 360-degree vision of the problem; and work assignments are made with consideration for outside-of-work responsibilities, so people freely give their whole selves without their jobs consuming their lives.

**To Sum Up.** Breaking out of the box is critical to leveraging the human differences that exist in every organization, and having those differences work in service of the organization achieving its goals and objectives. Achieving higher performance requires enabling people to be powerful and fully contributing partners, enabling them to do their best work. If organizations want people to think outside the box, they must break the box.

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