

The **Box**

You can still find some good ideas "inside the box"



About the Author

Larry F. Hill has served as creative director for an advertising agency, national advertising manager for a large home products company, and most recently as managing communications consultant for a global consulting firm. Because of a genetic aversion to stability and a regular paycheck, he's now a freelance writer, screenwriter, and photographer. He recently sold his first screenplay, DRY SPELL, which he hopes will begin production sometime before his death. He's currently working on two other active film projects and writing a book of humorous vignettes.

He was market analysts, directional drilling, and PowerPoint presentations. I was media mix, catchy copy hooks, and PhotoShop. He was business. I was creative. The Box was concrete.

I watched the CEO of a global oil company across an expanse of polished teak the size of a soccer field. He was an acclaimed innovator in a tradition-bound industry. I was a communication consultant, there to recommend a strategy for rolling out an incentive compensation plan to his "direct reports" - people whose pay would now tie more directly to their contributions.

"These guys need to think differently. But we've been doin' things the same way for so long, I don't have a helluva lotta confidence that they can," this frustrated cowboy groused, pouring his third cup of coffee. "How do we get these guys' attention? Make 'em see how important this is to our future? They're neck-deep in memos and reports. We need something to break through. I need you guys to (wait for it...) think outside the box."

Ah, The Box.

It's hard enough for a writer to find the right words; developing an aversion to any is unhealthy. So I don't ask this lightly: Will the person responsible for coining the phrase "think outside the box" please present his or her neck for immediate public wringing? Other business buzzwords make my skin crawl (leverage, proactive, paradigm, upside, etc.), but "The Box" may well be the single most counterproductive metaphor ever conceived.

"How often do you talk to the people who work for you?" I asked.

"Once or twice a week. We're on different floors."

"Do they know what's important to you? Do they understand how you feel about their contributions?"

"Like I said about the memos..."

I continued pressing about how he communicated with this audience. He gulped two more cups of coffee and rattled off a litany of memos and presentations that had been delivered to his troop of 12 critical thinkers, three floors down.

"Could I do a video? How about a Web site? We could even put the video on the Web site. What do you think?" The coffee carafe was dry, and he'd spent far too long in this conference room paying "ridiculously high" consulting fees to someone who hadn't yet articulated a single Out-of-The-Box idea. We had carte blanche - this was his brainchild, and money was no object - so he was already envisioning introducing his family to Steven Spielberg while we shot the most creative, Miles-from-The-Box streaming video in history. He smirked at my long hair. "So, lay it on me, Mr. Creativity."

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"I think the most effective thing you can do is to sit down with each of your executives, collectively and individually, and explain to them clearly and honestly what it is you want this program to accomplish, why it's critical to you and to the company, and what you expect of them."

Oh, I was deep in The Box, baby. Talk to them?!

A few weeks after I was fired from the project, I heard that he had decided, in a flash of brilliance, to roll out the incentive plan himself by taking his direct reports offsite for a hugely successful weekend of group and one-on-one meetings. He even moved their offices to his floor to facilitate more direct and immediate communication.

I relate this story because The Box can trap anyone who's reluctant to

peek over its lip from both directions. Creative solutions lie inside, outside, underneath, and in the walls of The Box.

Conventional wisdom says business people in "non-creative" enterprises must pay "creative" people to help them get outside The Box. Creative people are often so rabid about staying outside The Box that they ignore, or worse, are unaware of the good stuff inside. This can be especially perilous for "creative businesses." We all know a writer or designer who's both a gifted artist and a lousy business person. (NOTE: Accounting is best performed from well within The Box.) The Box shapes public perceptions of entire industries - photographer, outside; dry cleaner, inside. But exceptions - and good things - occur when people focus on finding what works, rather than on whether the solution comes from inside or outside The Box.

This new column will attempt to bridge a chasm that has traditionally divided creativity and business. We'll examine businesses typically not considered "creative" except that their management has a "No Boxes Allowed" philosophy. We'll look at the business of running a creative organization. And we'll highlight businesses that have embraced creativity not because it's cool, but because of its impact on their bottom line. (Send story suggestions to larry@creativepulsemagazine.com.)

With luck, we'll have some fun along the way. But mainly we'll explore the paradigms of people trying to proactively leverage their creative human capital to generate upside business results. ☺