

Staying in the Box is Okay



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Everybody has heard the expression, “think outside the box.” The implication is that we want you to think differently about the way things are and not be limited by traditional solutions. That is all well and good when you are dealing with unknowns or you are attempting to incorporate innovation and creativity into a thought process. But does anybody ever tell you that every once in a while you need to think inside the box?

We should never forget that sometimes boxes are built for a specific purpose. When we use that trite old cliché about thinking outside of the box, we need to go back and ask ourselves the following questions: what is the shape of that box, what is its volume and what is its intended purpose? I would submit that there are boxes we build in the fire service that we should be living within.

Let me give you an example of such a box. If we truly believe in firefighter safety, then we don't want to encourage freelancing. We are not the least bit interested in people being particularly creative on the fireground, especially when it places them in jeopardy. If we have a policy and procedure about wearing PPE, that means wear the gear all of the time when it is required. You do not wear it sometimes, but always.

The purpose of this column is to try to get you to think a little bit about some of the boxes that we have built for ourselves that are not intended to be broken down and disregarded. They are the construct of some of the most fundamental aspects of our business. I chose firefighter safety as one of the boxes that we ought to live within because there is a very, very specific and obvious consequence when we start thinking outside of it. We don't want to encourage spontaneous behavior. We don't want to encourage improvised solutions that do have not reasonably predictable outcomes.

Going back to my opening statement, a lot of people will want us to think outside the box because they believe that we have failed to keep the fire ser-

vice contemporary. In this column I am trying to make the argument that being creative does not preclude us from adhering to fundamentally sound principles, practices and policies. Thinking outside the box does not mean gambling. It certainly does not mean utter disregard for consequence.

The box metaphor can be applied when assessing your entire department. What does the box look like? Is it a strong sturdy box with a base, four sides and a cover, so that whatever is contained within it is stable, safe and sustainable? Or, is the box fragile, shop worn and vulnerable. Is your box constructed of the right materials? I can tell you that there is a big difference between how a cardboard box stands up to weathering than a box made out of wood or metal. Is your box sturdy enough to withstand an assault from the outside?

Boxes are not bad. But the design of a box could be. There are lots of tools that we can use to design a better box. Among my favorites the self-assessment method proposed by the Center for Public Safety Excellence and the Commission on Fire Accreditation International. Nothing makes for a stronger organization than a constant reassessment of what you are doing, how you are doing it and how you can improve upon it. That is not thinking outside the box. That is building a better box, even if it not necessarily bigger.

Someone will read this article and probably take exception with my reversal of the traditional cliché. I will concede that there are a lot of people out there that do want to change the fire service. But I have spent a considerable amount of my career engaged in thought processes to bring about change. And I remain unconvinced that we have to turn the fire service upside down to become better. I think there are ample opportunities for us to recalibrate, redirect, redistribute, and come up with alternatives that can meet our needs.

So, what is it going to be: are we going to build a better box, or are we just going to remain boxed in? ■