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Thinking Outside the Box

After being repeated constantly, clever sayings often have a way of becoming clichés. See you later alligator! After while crocodile! After a while, when people use statements like that, people don't hear anything. They begin to accept it as a form of verbal shorthand. Sometimes clichés are downright irritating. For example, doesn't it get under your skin when you are having a bad day and someone says to you "have a nice day?"

One of the clichés that meets this category for me is to hear the admonition that somebody wants the fire service to "think outside the box". I would like to nominate that phrase for one of the most overused clichés today.

Have you heard that phrase in a recent conversation? Have you used it in communicating with others yourself? Almost invariably when that phrase is directed towards you, it's because you just came up with an answer that doesn't meet somebody else's definition of a right answer- and therefore they are telling you to somehow think differently about the problem. The problem with that is no one has ever defined what the words "thinking outside of the box" really means. So, you might go away from the conversation a little confused

What does that expression really mean? The term is most often used as a request for someone to be more creative in their thinking. But, so what?

Every time I hear someone use that phrase – I automatically begin to wonder what size box are they thinking about. There are little boxes that are easy to escape. There are big boxes that cannot be gotten out of. So, how big is your box? To begin with we have to apply some degree of description to the box in order for it to have characteristic of being a box.

A box has 6 sides; the bottom, 4 sides and a top. And every box has a dimension. You can have a shoe box, or a refrigerator box.

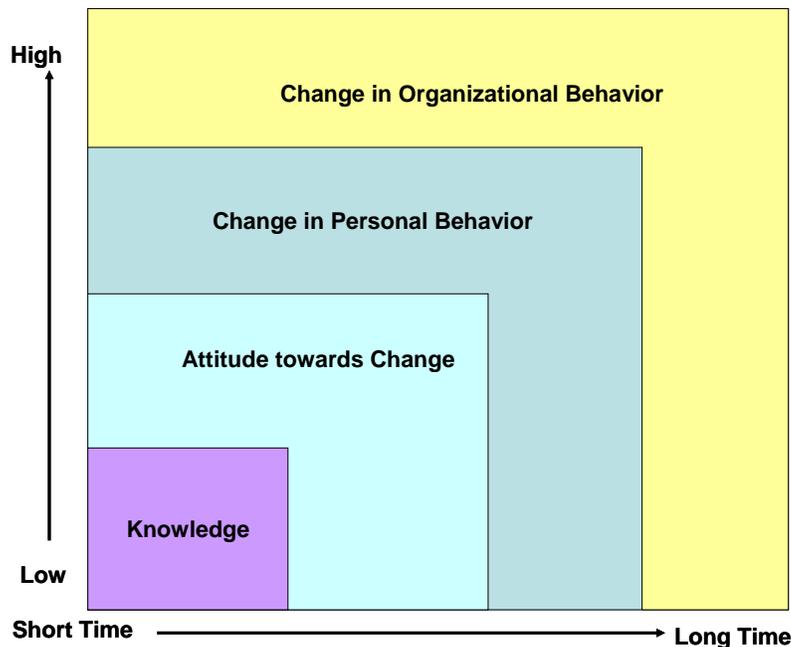
I am going to suggest that the most fundamental elements of determining our thought process are a combination of two things; the element of knowledge and the element of time. For purposes of this column I would like to suggest that there are at least 6 different models that are created in the form of 2 dimensional format that are the basis for everyone's theoretical framework – their box as it were for – for dealing with the world.



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Illustrated here in a model, time is from the day that you first begin to breathe and knowledge is the amount of information that you absorb as you pursue acquisition of facts over your lifetime. One has to accept or reject information as it is acquired over time.



This model implies that there are four levels of “building your box.” They are acquisition of knowledge, adjustment of attitudes, changing personal behavior and then changing organizational behavior.

A knowledge base is critical for determining where a person or an organization can go. The development of knowledge base can be made broader by the pursuit of knowledge. Thinking that something is the right thing to do is not as important as acting upon it. Therefore, the body of knowledge must include a personal acceptance that it is the right thing to do.

The box is made broader by individual behaviors. That is a person who agrees that the information they have they continue to apply it against real world problems because they actually act on it. Then of course once that body of knowledge has been accepted, acted upon and there is interaction, the next level is the degree to which the organization overall accepts it, embraces it and then utilizes it. One might refer to this as the group dynamic.

The term for this is called the degree of acceptance. In other words the longer that you believe in something and however valid it is in solving your problems the broader the base becomes by adding your personal acceptance to the body of knowledge.

This creates two different elements. Time implies experience and knowledge implies curiosity. If you



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look at the illustration you will see that if you have a very little amount of experience and you have not acquired any significant amount of knowledge then by the very nature of it the box that you are going to be building is going to be fairly small. However it is also true that time does not make a person wise and that knowledge does not make a person smart. Is it a matchbox, a shoe box, a shipping box or one of those refrigerator crates that you use to move heavy appliances? Thinking outside of the box means that you have to start by defining the box itself. That is not so simple. The mythological boxes referred to by most of our critics are the one we live in that limits our knowledge. Therefore, being creative means thinking beyond what we already know.

However, it is based on the assumption that by thinking the same way you must be living within the parameters of some kind of a box. How big is that box? It would be pretty hard for me to visualize that someone could make that statement “think outside the box” – to someone like Thomas Edison, Albert Einstein, or Steven Hawking. Their box is or was huge.

The poster child for that particular human attribute was probably Leonardo Da Vinci. This Renaissance man was constantly attempting to learn more about more and had an insatiable curiosity. In his codices, there is an inscription in Italian “Dimmi” across the top of many of his illustrations and drawings. Translated in English, the phrase means “tell me”. If Leonardo were alive today he would likely be a very wealthy man of his inventions and insights. But he was not just a visionary, he was doer. He was once quoted as saying “I have been impressed with the urgency of doing. Knowing is not enough; we must apply. Being willing is not enough; we must do.” And that depends upon attitude towards knowledge.

Most of us are just common ordinary people who are periodically challenged to look at things a little differently. As fire chief we are often challenged to think outside the box for the very simple reason that we are being cast as being a traditional industry with a very limited number of options to solve our problems. It is also true that we determine a lot of what options and alternatives are available to us by building a bigger box to contain our own knowledge as we pursue an agenda in providing fire protection. The challenge then is to thoroughly understand this process of creativity and to keep it in context as it is applied to the resolution of issues in our fire departments. But, most of us are not Leonardo’s.

Now if we were going to build our own box using these concepts for a base, it doesn’t take much to visualize that a person with a limited amount of knowledge and a limited amount of exposure that chooses not to accept any external ideas probably doesn’t have much influence over the environment and subsequently lives in a pretty small box. The corollary to that is that as a person broadens their knowledge base does so the context of accepting it and utilizing it as much as possible to solve problems and then gains acceptance with a larger group of people, tends to be more successful and therefore “has a bigger box”.



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For people like you and me the box has to do with our personal set of experiences. What we think, what we are and a lot of how we behave are really dependent upon a lot of real fundamental things that accumulate over a period of our lifetime. We build the box that we live in. The bottom of the box is essentially all the fundamentals and values that we hold dear. The four walls of the box are made up of knowledge, wisdom, experience and those things that we acquire and have the capacity to change over our lifetimes. Then of course there is a lid on that box. That is the future.

Some people live in little tiny boxes. To ask them to think outside of the box is almost an act of insignificance. They don't know much; don't care about much and subsequently even if they do think outside of their box they are not going to accomplish much. Other people have such a big box that asking them to think outside of it is an overwhelming difficult task to perform. There is so much that has to be dealt with that it is very difficult for a person to believe that everything that they have done to develop themselves today has been a waste of time.

And there is one other factor regarding this proverbial box we all live in. Once you go beyond what you know and what you find acceptable there is always the fear of failure. When we ask someone to think beyond the parameters of the four walls of their box we are asking them to take a lot of risk. After hearing that cliché used time and time again I often used to think silently that every time someone says that I would like to substitute it with build a new box. Climbing out of the one that you live in is not as nearly important as taking the one that you have and making it so that it has a greater capacity. So, you are not thinking outside of the box, what you are doing is building a bigger box. That means you must deal with many different aspects of your life simultaneously in order for that box to expand.

If we go back to the early part of the article I said that the bottom of the box is fundamental. Therefore, increasing your knowledge of some of the most fundamental things in life is important to building a bigger box. Of course this is an abstract argument and I can't say there is any science behind what I am suggesting but I would submit to you that people that don't know much don't have much professional curiosity, have limited sense of values and really do not have a sense of purpose aren't going to be able to get outside of those limitations regardless. The base of their box is just too small.

As a result it is pretty difficult to develop any of the four sides of the box without changing some fundamental things in the first place. Nobody can do that for you. It is something that is so internalized that it has to be done in the privacy of your own mind. Satisfaction with a status quo and an unwillingness to learn anything new makes it very difficult for the four sides of your box to have any degree of dimensional capacity at all. To give this metaphor a visual image, imagine a shoebox versus a refrigerator box. Both of them are boxes. But getting outside of one is relatively easy and getting outside of the other requires a tremendous amount of physiological commitment.

Again, I would ask, how big is your box? As you examine your own perspective on this you are liable to



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find out that there are a lot of things you know and a lot of things you don't know. There are a lot of things that you accept but there are many things you reject. There are some things you believe in but do not act upon and there are some things that you have acted on as an individual that are not acceptable to the group. This box building can get downright complicated.

There are individual behaviors that match up with some of these things that determine whether a person is perceived as being a traditional thinker or is capable of expanding beyond their existing body of knowledge. That is the essence of this creative aspect of thinking outside of the box.

As I have examined this cliché I think that about 90% of the time that it is expressed it is because someone is trying to influence another person to stop thinking the same old way that they have in the past. And usually it has to do with coping with change. For years now I have been exposing the fact that change is something that comes about not from the instantaneous perspective but rather something that occurs over a lengthy period of time.

The following model more or less explains that phenomenon.

On the left hand side of the model is the concept of time and across the bottom is the concept of knowledge. People do not change the shape of their perspective in the blink of an eye or the flash of a lightning bolt. They must understand it, they must grasp it, they must be able to give it relevancy and that takes a little more time. As you explore this model you will also notice that even if you understand something if you accept or reject it, it is going to limit what your ability will be to utilize that information. That is individual acceptance. That takes more time and of course it is more complicated. Looking at the next level on our model is called individual behavior. Groups don't change unless individuals do. You are not responsible for a groups behavior you are responsible for your own. Therefore in this model what it says is that if you know about something and you accept it you may change your way of behaving towards it, which subsequently leads to a much higher level, which is group behavior. The model simply infers that it's more difficult and more time consuming to go to the level of group acceptance and then moreover the last stage, which is societal acceptance.

Going back to my analogy about building a bigger box, if you looked at that model as lying on the base of the four walls you can see how you can build a bigger box. Education is one of the keys. Curiosity is another. Engagement is another, commitment another. You build a bigger box as you gather people who believe in the same change and then when that change becomes overwhelmingly acceptable to others the box gets even larger.

As stated earlier once you go beyond the known and accepted in any endeavor there is a fear of failure. On the other hand this is where most achievement and success is found. Nobody has ever become famous by doing the same thing that everybody else did within a mediocre fashion. Expanding your



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knowledge is dangerous. It is exciting. However, it is also one of the most rewarding experiences that you can engage in at a personal level.

More often than not people stay inside their boxes because they are unwilling to change their most fundamental beliefs. This is often called the paralysis of analysis. There have been whole generations of human beings who have lived their lives in a very narrow fashion by subscribing to the idea that you not only don't want to know anything – you don't want to know anything new. That is almost a sure fire guarantee that you will go nowhere fast.

So, what this article is really saying to you is that if you want to think outside the box – build a bigger box. Challenge what you know on every level, whether it is technology, human behavior or the way that you do things in your professional setting. The outcome of all this will be that you will eventually affect others and those others are really what bring about change.

Changing yourself seldom leaves a mark. Changing others is what really changes the overall system.

As I completed this article I was reminded of a Christmas present I received once that was a box within a box within a box. A present, which was quite valuable, was found in the smallest box but it was contained within the parameters of a series of larger ones, which only increased the anticipation of finding the kernel of truth if you want to change the world change yourself.

Da Vinci's admonition of "tell me" was a meaningful behavior. It involves being on the outside looking in instead of on the inside looking out. To translate this in to the real world of the fire service one has to learn to be critical of what one's own organization, one's own approach to problem solving and go external to the organization. In essence you must climb out of the box in order to think out of it.

There are actually some individual behaviors that if you exhibit you are unlikely to be accused of being inside the box. Going back to my reflection on Leonardo Da Vinci no one ever accused him of being a small thinker. To the contrary, his behavior and his process clearly kept everybody else wondering how they were going to catch up with him. In a modern context being that eclectic and that diverse was probably very difficult. Yet, there are a couple of behaviors that were exhibited by De Vinci that anyone of us could emulate if we chose to do so.

The first of these is a tremendous amount of curiosity. Going back to the statement of his little notation at the top of all of his drawings, the Da Vinci of 400 years ago is not much different than the person of today who constantly asks the question, well why do we do it that way. I coined the term in a Fire Chief article many years ago called Professional Curiosity. What professional curiosity is, is it begins with wanting to know more and more about things as you gain experience in the field. In a sense a person in order to have insatiable curiosity has to develop two skill sets. The first is to constantly be pursuing new



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information and the second is to become an effective listener.

With regard to our model that we drew before, professional curiosity begins with reading materials, going to workshops, seminars, becoming aware of what is on the internet, etc., it is always looking for something when in fact you are not sure what you are looking for. The knowledge base expands in proportion to professional curiosity.

This concept is also linked to another skill set which is referred to as elimination of inadequate knowledge. It could also be referred to as information half life. People that tend to think outside of the box are not thinking with the same knowledge they had twenty years ago. If one pursues knowledge for knowledge sake there is a tendency for you to realize that some things you know are no longer accurate. The individual behavior of a person who reduces information half life is that they challenge themselves by adding new skills and abilities as they gain experience.

Another specific behavior of people that fall into this category are those that learn from their own mistakes. The term experimentation is not wide spread in the fire service. We tend to think of ourselves as having a solid foundation of technology, yet, they never seem to learn lessons when our methods and technology fail us. I would submit for example, that anytime a firefighter dies in a vehicle crash and is not wearing a seatbelt, they haven't learned much from the past.

Probably the last behavior we could subscribe a person who is capable of thinking outside of the box is that they have a very low fear of rejection. They are risk takers. They are people who are not as concerned about what other people think as they are about what other people will do with the outcome of their endeavors. Thomas xxx Edison perhaps was one of our leading advocates of such a mentality. It is rumored that he had 1,800 failures before he ever found a proper kind of substance to work for an incandescent light bulb. Instead of being defeated by that he reveled in the fact that he now knew 1,800 things that didn't work.

The second illustration that goes along with this article, sort of exemplifies how these behaviors link to the fundamental model that we first discussed. For example, insatiable curiosity is a pillar for broadening your body of knowledge. Avoiding information half life is a pillar that allows a person's education to make a meaningful difference in the way they behave in the world. Learning from ones mistakes and going back to examining the reasons why the failure occurred, is the third pillar. Then the ability to withstand criticism becomes the pillar. It doesn't take too much of an imagination to visualize that the foundation of our box and the height, width and depth of that box is going to be generated by the behaviors and approaches that have been expressed within the model.

Going back to an earlier statement, a person could have a limited amount of knowledge and accept or reject it at a very limited level and therefore they would have a very small box to live in. Others have



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the ability to look beyond what they already know and what they would like to know and they have a tendency to create a much larger influence. Therein lies the nature of “thinking outside of the box”.

Another way that one can actually be said to get out of the box is to seek out options and alternatives that have not emerged from their own knowledge. That is what brings the person to a new level. It is their ability to network and their ability to evaluate other options and alternatives that have been offered up by external influences.