

CEO Tip October 2013 – How Far Outside the Box Would You Like?

by Guido Quelle

In many companies, perhaps even in most, you'll hear many positive statements about "thinking outside the box." We have to start thinking outside the box; we welcome non-conformists; if you can't think outside the box every now and then, you'll never get ahead—at least that's the official position many companies proclaim.

However, the reality doesn't always match the propaganda, or more precisely it very rarely does. Day-to-day operations demand considerable amounts of time and other resources, making time to think a rare commodity—a plight complained about in many of the managerial boards we serve—and when someone actually does muster the courage to propose something out of the ordinary, their ideas are often ignored, dismissed as nonsense, or labeled as unrealistic.

In short: Unconventional thinking isn't as welcome as many companies claim. What can you as the CEO do to establish targeted (growth-promoting) thinking outside the box as part your corporate culture? In our experience, there's quite a lot you can do. Here are three basic options:

1. Definition

In many cases it's not quite clear what "thinking outside the box" is supposed to mean—sure it sounds great, but just what is it? Make it perfectly clear what you and the company consider to be "thinking outside the box," what direction is should head in, and that, far from being "nonsense," you see it as a valuable contribution to the growth-oriented future of your company.

2. Frameworks

Provide a framework for "thinking outside the box." Don't pin your hopes on unconventional thinking quickly becoming part of day-to-day operations. If this approach is uncharted territory for your company, you'll need a clearly defined framework, at least initially. For example, a future-planning meeting can be used to discuss in depth how your company's framework conditions could change in the future, what the impacts of social, technological and global developments on the company will be, and how to respond to them. It is essential that this process be controlled and not be left to itself. Our clients have had some outstanding successes with these retreats.

3. Communication

If the successes of a future-planning meeting are initially limited to plans and strategies, be sure to communicate them. Even more, be sure to communicate it when thinking outside the box produces successful innovations. These don't necessarily have to be product- or service-related innovations, but can also include internal and external process-related innovations. This type of communication has two effects: it shows that your company's policies also translate into real action, and it can encourage those who haven't yet found the courage to voice their ideas to join in and share their input.

A final note: It's important that you differentiate between creativity and innovation. When done for their own sake, creativity and thinking outside the box make no sense. The goal always has to be to produce innovations, which are essentially applied creativity and are often the result of "thinking outside the box."

Prof. Dr. Guido Quelle
Managing Partner
Mandat Managementberatung GmbH
Emil-Figge-Straße 80
44227 Dortmund