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## **Thinking Outside the Box**

By Merrick Colson

In today's fast paced mail communications industry, managers are no longer accepting the status quo style of management. The cliché "thinking outside the box" has become the buzz of the industry, but are we really provoking creative thought?

I'm reminded of a story that a friend of mine once told me. My friend's mother had a 10 gallon fish tank; however, for months she only filled it with 5 gallons of water. My friend decided one day to fill the tank with another 5 gallons so that the fish had more space to swim. An interesting thing took place; the fish would not swim above 5 feet of water, even though they had an additional 5 feet above them. They got stuck in a habitual routine and never thought to swim higher. Are we allowing our teams to swim in shallow water or are we forcing them to look up and swim higher?

### **Practice what we preach**

Last week, while traveling by plane to visit my customers in Southern California, the flight attendant announced the following instructions over the intercom:

"In the event that the plane loses altitude and the oxygen masks are dispatched, place the oxygen mask over your face prior to placing it over the faces of your children." The flight attendant's instructions illustrate that before we ask our subordinates to think outside the box, we should first insure that we are successful in doing so. Do we exhibit creative thought to our customers, both internal and external? Do we think of solutions to problematic issues with creativity or do we simply use the same tools that we have obtained over the years? Employees need leaders who will lead the way and provide them with a model of success. Are we simply exhibiting "do what I say and not what I do" or are we practicing what we preach?

### **Remove the Fear Factor**

In some corporations, executives view fear as a good thing and it is often used to motivate their employees. However, fear sometimes leads to marginal work performance, employee turnover, and diminished commitment to the company. Although the autocratic model of management in which managers simply tell their subordinates what to do and imply job security is at risk may work for the short term; it may have adverse consequences on long term success. Disgruntled employees may treat your customers poorly, work only to complete a desired outcome or just leave when they get fed up. They will rarely go far beyond expectations or WOW the customer. This model of management often causes lower productivity, lower customer satisfaction, and higher employee turnover. While there are many Mail Communications Managers that manage with fear or intimidation, managers that are more productive and produce highly efficient staff will someday take their place in the work force.

### **Create an environment to stimulate creative thought**

In today's work climate, many employees are asking "What's in it for me" Many Fortune 1,000 companies have created reward programs for their employees who bring forth new and creative ideas for cost reductions and service enhancements. This gives incentives to frontline employees, as well as management, to bring forth solutions to WOW the customer. The general rule of modifying behavior is we must reward action that we want repeated. The more frequent the reward is, the more frequent the desired behavior will be.

To drive creative thought, many companies have placed suggestion boxes in the workplace to give

employees a vehicle to communicate to management. Month after month, these boxes usually remain empty. In fact, in some cases, employees do not know they exist. What are we doing to drive suggestions? Because of the increasing demands of the work day, employees will not take time out of their day to write down recommendations with no rewards. So, we must ask ourselves, do we want to contribute to the value we bring to our shareholders and customers, or are we content with empty suggestion boxes? After all, we didn't put anything in the suggestion box either.

### **Spread it while it's HOT**

When is the best time to introduce creative thought to our team? There are many perfect opportunities to plant the seed; like after shareholder's meeting, after jobholder's meeting, during operational reviews, etc. Probably the best time is during the employee annual review process. During this time, we have the employee's complete and undivided attention. They listen to every word that is said because their merit increase, in most cases, is discussed. Focus should be placed on last year's performance; however, equal attention should be placed on goals, objectives, and growth. What better time to begin to start the change in thought process?

### **In Summary**

In today's market place, Mail Communications Managers that produce creative thought and bring new solutions to their customers are the ones that stay on top. Customers are looking for creative, innovative or sometimes even radical solutions for their operations. We must match our customer's intensity to be the market leaders in their industries with our desire to help them accomplish that goal. When was the last time you asked "Why do we sort mail this way? Do we have to have all these PO Boxes? You have probably asked thousands of questions in the past, but did you present solutions to your questions? It never hurts to bring old solutions back to the forefront, especially with the recent postal increase. Remember, don't just "think outside of the box", strive each day to start to "eliminate the box".

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