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Out of the Box Thinking: Challenges for Leaders

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THE QUALITY OF BEING PREDICTABLE WITH GREAT CONFIDENCE

Introduction

When new leaders take over their roles, they are often know to change the ways of business. This has essentially two dimensions:

- (i)The business situation is constantly evolving, thereby, calling for new ideas and business paradigms and
- (ii)The stakeholders have different comfort levels on the appropriateness and competencies of particular leaders, thereby, supporting and welcoming change through the new leader.

At a recent District Assembly of Rotary International, the District Governor Elect asked all the leaders to be unreasonable. In other words, he set the tone to a new year where the focus would be on challenging practices, limits and ways of working... Motivational speeches like these are not uncommon in management history. They drive the essence of change: a strong will for creative and innovative ideas. In other words, we are talking about Out-Of-The-Box Thinking (OOTBT).

Research into OOTBT has probably been as old as the research involving human thinking. And the focus has mostly been on the following areas:

- (a)What makes us think different?,
- (b)How could we generate different thoughts?,
- (c)How should we measure the difference? and
- (d)How can we make it a habit?

However, very little has been understood, even today, on the management aspects of OOTBT. It has been vouched in a lot of papers that OOTBT results from the inborn talent of creativity and cannot be learned effectively. It is, therefore, in some way, comparable with earlier notions of IT. The question today is no more about IT and its presence... rather it is on the challenge in actually deriving the best strategy by incorporating the IT factor. For IT will continue to be present and will continue to influence your strategy. The subtle difference, in this case, is that IT is a discrete element in the ocean of strategy factors and OOTBT is an integral part of the cognitive process that sails through that ocean.



Challenge 1: Knowing What It Means To The Leader

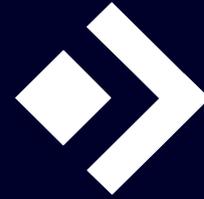
The first challenge in OOTBT is knowing what it really means to the leader. While almost everyone acknowledge the need for OOTBT, most leaders have difficulty in valuing the OOTBT culture. Typically, leaders take positions between two extreme postures viz.:

(i)The 'Promoter' Posture: where the leader tries to bring in OOTBT consciously and systematically and tries to participate in the entire process. In other words, the leader is actually a kind of a doer, who understands the potential as well as the limitations of the OOTBT process. He usually has many first-hand experiences and is able to set expectations and drive the process better.

(ii)The 'Approver' Posture: where the leader believes his primary role is to approve rather than participate and encourage the process. Both these postures have their advantages. Generally speaking, the 'approver' is a leader who either has thought along those paths before and decided they are infeasible or is fairly distant to the OOTBT concept and is having misaligned expectations while evaluating the process outcomes. All said, the 'approver' posture is usually more objective in evaluating the results obtained from the OOTBT process. At the same time, lack of awareness could be a serious risk, often manifesting in premature rejection of ideas. The 'promoter' posture normally inclines at providing a strong impetus to innovative learning and thinking. A leader who climbs the 'natural ladder' at a company is typically one who leans to the 'approver' posture. Unfortunately, the 'approver' posture tends to make people rigid due to their positional authority and is a major challenge for modern day leaders.

Challenge 2: Past Baggage!

The second challenge is, often times, related to the 'past baggage' the leader carries. Most leaders assume office with great aspirations and dynamism. They are, most times, abundant in ideas to change and improve their businesses. And the best part is that, they are successful in implementing many of them, bringing out amazing results. However, if one looks at the trend over a period of time, they tend to wax and wane in their abilities to think different. What compounds the challenge is that most leaders continue to have the impression that they are still able to think radically different. This 'past baggage' actually doesn't push them enough to look at new ideas and thoughts. No prizes for guessing what happens in this case! So, if you are seeing more 'creative' ideas consistently being generated by your competitors over the past few months, you probably might want to systematically work-around your experiences and take expert guidance to bring out your best-of-the-best.



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Challenge 3: Insufficiency in Concept

The third challenge is more fundamental as it is related to the process itself. The general view of many leaders is that idea generation is the most important step in the OOTBT process. While this is largely true, the battle is only half-won at this stage. What is more important is to ensure that the idea or the concept is reasonably sufficient. In other words, most leaders spend a lot of time in generating new ideas and concepts. However, their busy schedules often don't permit them to think-the-concept-through. This leads to an interesting situation where ideas are just thrown around without adequate checks and balances, and even taken up for implementation. So, if you are witnessing situations where most of your ideas are just not taking off the right way or are not giving you the desired results, you probably might need to re-look at the entire ideation-to-implementation process.

Challenge 4: Rigid Dynamics of the Organization

The fourth challenge is linked with the rigid dynamics of the organization. Leaders develop organizations. And as they keep doing this, they start bringing in a new culture and a new stability in the strategic direction. As the leader is not in isolation, he is 'bound' by his relationships. With time, these relationships become more developed and predictable. The predictability actually helps the organization leverage on its experience curve or the learning curve. However, it also creates an illusion of an unstable work environment when the leader starts thinking different. So, even if the leader is able to continue thinking OOTB, the organization creates a large inertia and, ultimately, the elephant can't dance!!! If you are facing a lot of overt resistance to change in your organization or even covert manifestations as lengthy discussions on new ideas, and if you find that these are not based on a cooperative posture, you probably need to drive change by methodically and radically working over the rigid dynamics of your organization.product base.

Challenge 5: Fear of Failure

The fifth challenge is the fear of failure. Definitions of failure could vary and so would the applicability of definitions to individual leaders. However, at the end of the day, nothing succeeds like success! And in today's world, failure is definitely a no-no for many leaders... especially those who are just coasting along the pages of history, trying hard to maintain their status-quo. The attitude towards failure has a lot to do with the education and the learnings/experiences of the leader. Risk averse leaders often take to OOTBT a little too late, for their thresholds of discomfort are fairly high and rarely breached. Moreover, decisions with high-stakes are most times delayed... to ensure the strategy is virtually risk-free. This contradicts the very fundamentals of economic development and hits the roots of OOTBT. Do you see most of your critical projects getting delayed in their initiation? Do you also see many projects getting inordinately delayed in their completion? If yes, they are probably a victim of the 'fear-of-failure' syndrome. these areas.

Challenge 6: Politicking

The biggest challenge to OOTBT is actually politicking within the organization. Unsupportive staff is the single largest reason for failure as it not only skews the culture, but also affects the very core of the productive organization. A leader who is unable to maneuver the political currents to bring out change, gets restricted to working 'within-the-box' rather than doing anything drastic. Defusing / Stripping off the political mines in an organization is hard work and requires a controlled methodology to keep it contained, efficient and effective.

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Closing Remarks

At Consulting Connoisseurs, we have unique delivery mechanisms to address such complex issues associated with OOTBT. We use diverse techniques, based on the Systems Approach, across a wide range of offerings, ranging from consulting advisory, brain storming coordination, developmental workshops to active change agent deployment, change management, target change and business transformational services. Our services are meant to assist clients to strategically leverage from the approach of the OOTBT rather than teaching the organization how to think OOTB. Our methodology is unique and you will experience the difference in how we engage and partner with you to realize your dreams and your strategic objectives. We guarantee you will enjoy making that decision. Contact us for more details on how we can collaborate.

So friends, to summarize: **Thinking is Hard Work!** And it is up to each one of us to ensure that we appreciate this fact and leverage on this amazing ability of ours. Our freedom is limited to where we set it! It is, therefore, important for you, as a leader, to understand where you have set your 'box' and realize the growing need to change the ways of business through OOTBT. Contact us to fix an appointment to help assess your business situation and benefit from our services. Timing is the key to any successful business and, in the market dynamics, timing is complemented by OOTB business models. Call us today, call us now!

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About the Author



Rotarian Nikhil S. Gurjar is the President of Consulting Connoisseurs, a new generation management consulting company based out of Navi Mumbai. The company specializes in providing solutions based on both conventional methods in management consulting as well as the state of the art tools using modeling and simulation. With several years of experience in Europe and the US, Nikhil Gurjar is one of the few experts in the country who understands and uses these tools for business applications and policy research. He is also associated with agencies like CII, PPMAI, MSME for different types of services. Before the launch of the company, Nikhil was the Head of Planning at a very large Greenfield steel project in the US. For more details, visit www.consultingconnoisseurs.com.