“Thinking Outside The Box and Politics”
A Project Manager Perspective

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FIRST OF ALL  - - -
WHAT DO WE MEAN BY “THE BOX”?
DO THESE DESCRIBE “THE BOX”? 

The range of thought and action in a workplace that is deemed “acceptable”.

Constraints, developed by cultures and organizations, to govern behavior.

Professional standards and procedures determined to be “best practices”.
Where is the Project Manager?
We have just described “The Box” as the workplace. (Context in PMBOK® terms)

What about the individual?
The Project Manager

Education

Experience Level

Personal Pressures

Tendencies
Why Think Outside The Box?

Do existing constraints preclude your options for success?

Is the thinking that has gotten you into trouble able to get you out?

Does continuous improvement require creativity?
Where is Your Comfort Zone?

- Inside the box?:
  - Using tried and true practices
  - Relying on prior experiences - confidence
  - Having common understanding - support

- Outside the box?:
  - Open to change - something new
  - Accepting increased risk
  - Having a vision of success in spite of problems being faced.
What Is Your Opinion About People Who “Think Outside The Box”

- Positive?
  - Innovative and creative?
  - Progressive and forward thinking?

- Negative?
  - Threatening to you or the organization?
  - Destabilizing to daily activities?
  - Risky? Careless?
What Does Senior Management Feel About “Thinking Outside the Box”? 

☐ Skeptical?:
  ☐ A risk to stability unless controlled.
  ☐ First step toward a loss of control.
  ☐ Supporting the “thinker” may prompt criticism elsewhere in the organization.

☐ Supportive?:
  ☐ Fresh approach – innovative.
  ☐ Path to accelerated growth or recovery.
Would you agree that “thinking outside the box” openly can be both risky & rewarding?

Could that be the reason why many hesitate to overtly “think outside the box”? 
Do Management Methods Encourage or Discourage “Thinking outside the box”? 

3. By Objectives? Grounded in the above but has a focus on goals, not processes. 
4. By Values? Guides activities with a focus on corporate values. 

*The demand for “thinking outside the box” grows with increased responsibility.*
Keys for Success

- Create a permissive environment:
  - You need encouragement to think outside the box.
  - You need to encourage thinking outside the box.
- Brainstorm the impossible solution:
  - You need to getting others to start thinking outside the box without being at risk.
- Motivate support
  - You need to provide recognition and reward for successful thinking outside the box.
Thinking Outside The Box Has Led to Many Success Stories.

Can You Think of an Example?
There is a Process of Sorts

The hard part is finding the “sweet spot”
Process Review – Step 1

- Brainstorm solutions and pick the most probable solution for success.
- Ensure the solution is linked to the corporate strategy or be able to show why the strategy should be changed to accommodate the idea.
Process Review – Step 2

- Assess key stakeholders (decision makers). Identify those expected to be for and those expected to be against.

- Develop rational for stakeholders to either fully support the idea or at least to acquiesce (satisfy WIIFM).

- Develop a selling strategy and start convincing skeptics.
Be ready for dissent!
- Clearly identify reasons for resistance.
- Find out what terms would be necessary to get their conditional approval.
- Never admit defeat - - Find another route.

Remember – you can get anything done as long as you do not care who gets the credit.
Three Points To Remember

1. When thinking outside the box, make sure your goals are clearly beneficial.

2. Thinking is not enough. You have to act and that will require support.

3. Getting support requires others to start thinking outside their boxes.
Overcoming Resistance

- Formal recognition for those who do:
  - “Doer of Deeds Award”
  - Acknowledgement during meetings
  - Performance goal

- Leadership by example:
  - Having a vision
  - Encouragement
  - Support initiative
Thinking Outside The Box

Everybody does it but it is not easy for some to actually take action.

Getting others to think outside the box is the hard part but essential for success!
OK - Where Do Politics Come In?

Let's talk about "politics" for a moment.
FIRST OF ALL

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY “Politics”?
Do These Describe “Politics”? 

- The distasteful part of dealing with people focused on their own interests.
- Having to work with people who want to acquire and/or maintain power.
- The self-serving side of corporate life.
- A necessary evil that must be addressed even though it contributes nothing to project success.
“Politics” Seems to be a dirty word

- If bad guys practice politics, what to good guys do?
- What do you do when things are not going your way and others control or influence the situation?
- Is your action any different from what others do when you disagree with their position?
Where is the Project Manager and Politics?

Reluctant Support

Vested Interests  →  Help

Cliquies

Corporate Internal Competition
Let's Define “Politics”

“Actions and interactions with people outside your direct control who effect the achievement of your goals.”

R. Block  *The Politics of Projects* 1983
How about “Project Politics”?

“Actions and interactions between project team members and people, outside the team, that can have an impact on the success of the project, its system, the project team, and the project manager.”

R. Block  *The Politics of Projects* 1983
What do people outside the project team control?

- Resources?
- Requirements?
- Goals?
- Techniques (policy, practices, rules)?
- User contact?
- Organization (matrix influences)?
- Vested interests (power plays and priorities)?
- HR management?
- Other?
The Bottom Line!

- A project manager who does not acknowledge the importance of politics is headed for failure.
- A project manager, uncomfortable with politics, is at a disadvantage.
- The ability to exert “political influence” is a core competency for PM effectiveness.
Key Power Elements to Political Effectiveness

- **Authority**
  - The power of position or title

- **Status**
  - The power of importance or visibility that comes with the project

- **Influence**
  - Personal charisma, referent, & expert power
Which Type of Power Do You Think Is Most Effective For Project Managers?

- Authoritative?
- Status?
- Influential?
Top Competencies of Highly Successful Project Managers

- Sense of mission and purpose
- Long term perspective
- Managerial orientation
- Political awareness
- Optimizing skills
- Focus on results
- Relationship development
- Strategic influence
- Collaborative influence
Characteristics for Political Success

- Introspection
- Emotional control
- Insight into the goals of others
- Accurate perception of reality
- Thinking creatively
- Tenacity
Strategy for Successful Project Politics

- Build good relationships before problems arise.
- Keep stakeholders informed and build their confidence.
- Strengthen your negotiating skills.
- Focus on long term relationships (don’t burn bridges).
DON’T FORGET

The first responsibility of a Project Manager:

*Find a scapegoat*
Key Points to Remember

- Your reputation is more important than victory or defeat. Once established, it is hard to change.
- Politics is not all fun. Watch out for the hardball player.
- Ethics is not dictated by the political process – it is your personal choice.