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Thinking ‘Outside the Box’ Wastes Time

Coming up with fresh ideas is hard enough without the tedium of brainstorming sessions.

Despite their cachet as buzzwords, thinking “outside the box” or “blue-sky thinking” aren’t the best way to foster creativity in a corporate setting, say management consultant Kevin Coyne and McKinsey & Co.’s Patricia Gorman Clifford and Renée Dye in Harvard Business Review. Very few people – most of them not in management – are good at developing new ideas without being given some guidance and boundaries.

More often than not, pushy people dominate brainstorming sessions, while others remain silent. Empowered by the mantra that “there are no bad ideas,” the session produces random notions along the lines of “Let’s paint it blue!” “We can sell it in Germany!” “How about an upscale version?” and “The problem is the sales force.”

Few of these ideas end up being taken seriously by the participants, and few deserve to be. In their experience, the authors have found that managers are at their most creative when focused on specific, provocative questions. This brings out the best in people who are used to being creative within limits, while also keeping the ideas within the realm of the possible.

Ideally, the questions should force managers to approach their product or business from an unconventional direction, and should be carefully selected before the sessions have even begun. Instead of asking generic questions like “How could we cut costs?” a supervisor could ask “What element of our business would we have to eliminate to cut costs 50%, and are there customers who do not need that element?”

As another hint, the authors recommend dividing any large brainstorming meeting into groups of four people, to encourage shy individuals to talk and blowhards to listen to them. — *Robin Moroney*