

# **Create Better, Collaborate Better**

By Dan Burrier

Much has been written about getting out of the box, but perhaps the most frustrating — and useful — guidance I have received in this came from a Zen teacher who pointed out that "the instructions for getting out of the box are written on the outside of the box."

We all have some sense of "the box" as an onerous thing that stifles original thinking, solutions and creativity, something foisted upon us by external circumstances. But solving that Zen teachers riddle help me realized that sometimes we create stifling boxes for ourselves.

On the phone recently, trying to extend a pre-existing reservation with a hotel and an online travel service in advance of the Coachella music festival:

xxxxx.Com: "We don't show that room available. You'll have to call the property directly."

Hotel Agent: "We have the room, but I can't extend that reservation. You'll have to call xxxxx.Com."

Me: "How about if I leave the old reservation as is, and make a new reservation for one night?"

Hotel Agent: "Oh. I guess that would work."

Introducing the box of "this is the way we do it." When you're inside this box, it's very hard to see the instruction on the outside named "there's always another way." And if you're a service organization putting the onus of thinking "the other way" on the customer, don't count that customer as a long-term asset.

A colleague of mine, Rob Mathias who runs our D.C. office, reminded me of the danger of another box, the one I'll call "it's my damn box, and I'll say who gets in and who gets out." In business, this is a sure recipe for groupthink. More specifically, Rob introduced me to the theory and discussion around the idea of weak ties, or weak links, in social interactions.

The idea being that in our relationships with other people we have strong ties (primary, close relationships, often peers, like-minded people, and departmental colleagues) and weak ties (secondary relationships, loose ties to the people who know our 'strong ties'). Think of "friends," and "friends of friends," on Facebook for a casual understanding of this. (Or dive in at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Weak\\_ties](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Weak_ties))

When we restrict ourselves, our interactions, our discussions, and our meetings to our strong ties, that is a limiting box indeed, one we could label alternatively, "the box of what I already know," or "the box of people I know will agree with me." A good example of operating in this box is discussing politics with someone who agrees with you: easy, pleasant, and rewarding in an opiate sort of way, but not much of a way to learn, grow, or move the world forward.

## **Some other common boxes and tricks to get out of them:**

1. **The box of believing "there is no box."** Wrong. There's always a box (see the starter list at the top of this post). Identify it. Get intimate with it. Understand the edges of the box. Boundaries give you something to leap over. There is no hurdler without a hurdle.
2. **The box of strong ties.** Recognizable when you look around a room and see yourself, your beliefs, your opinions, your experience, your culture, and your skills all mirrored perfectly back at you. When you see this box, invite new voices in. Invite "weak ties." Friends of friends. As Rob puts it, people who "shouldn't be in the meeting according to common assumptions." They're the ones who'll move things forward.
3. **The box of "I'm right."** This is particularly pernicious in creative circles. "They hired me to be creative, I'm the creative, and they should listen to me." An easy way out of this box: assume you have already lost the battle to have it your way and must find another way. Let creativity begin.
4. **The box of "Chief Innovation Officer"** or any other title. I once told a group of our people, "I'm not interested in your job description or your title. Bring who you are to the party, and we'll get something done." I believe this passionately. Park those titles (big boxes indeed) where they belong: in the dustbin. And let's get to work.

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