

# Thinking Outside the Box

By Jean Cunningham

When facilitating a lean kaizen event, I often hear myself saying to the team members, “Think outside the box.” But what does that phrase really mean? And what kind of “box” are we speaking about? It originated as a coaching suggestion in driving an audience to the solution to the “Nine Dot Puzzle”. When I use this phrase – I am asking the team members to think differently about how they do their work - or think about it from a new perspective. And with a lean bent, how can they do things more efficiently – with fewer handoffs - removing waste from the process and therefore, eliminating the restrictions of continuing to do things “the way they’ve always been done.”

At a recent kaizen event I facilitated – I found the team members were not convinced that they were empowered to make these type of “out of the box” recommendations – and found many reasons why suggestions put forward by the team “would never work.” I also repeatedly heard “we tried that before and it was never implemented.”

These negative statements are highly detrimental to the creative genius that could (and should) be unleashed in a kaizen event. They stifle the ability of the team to recommend and implement those types of changes that will have a significant effect on the “leanification” of the process being examined.

So what needs to be done to ensure this “out of the box thinking” occurs? When planning a kaizen event – ensure that Senior Management has bought into the process being evaluated and understands that the outcome of the event will mean “change.” Also – ensure that your team includes individuals who can “think outside the box” and be creative when it comes to solving day-to-day problems. And lastly, implement changes that the team suggests! This is especially important in a business process where the changes may not be as evident as those that are adopted during a shop floor kaizen.

As Albert Einstein said, “We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them.” We need to be able to “think outside the box.”

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Where did the phrase “Think outside the box.” originate?

It is used widely today to encourage creative thinking (nice!) or to disparage questionable “normal” solutions (not so nice!). Management consultants have used the phrase when driving an audience to the solution to the “Nine Dot Puzzle” where the challenge was to connect the dots with four or fewer straight lines.

The puzzle is ancient and there are many solutions, but for every solution, the lines must be drawn “outside the box”.

