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Creativity in a Box

“There is no way I can hit my goals without a higher marketing budget.”

“We can’t get it done in that time.”

“If we cannot survey our entire customer base to assess their satisfaction level, we are cooked.”

I have thought and said self-limiting statements like these hundreds of times. Scarce money, time, and other resources are real constraints, but successful people find ways to turn constraints into advantages.

Michael Eisner was chairman and CEO of the Walt Disney Company from 1984 to 2005. He once shared a story about the making of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. One of the most memorable scenes in the film finds Indiana Jones (played by Harrison Ford) squaring off against a scimitar-wielding foe. The previous three minutes were action-packed with fistfights, running, and acrobatics. When Indy is confronted by the swordsman, we expect a swordfight and more hand-to-hand combat. However, Jones simply pulls a pistol from his belt and nonchalantly shoots the enemy dead. Almost everyone who has seen this movie remembers this unexpected turn of events.

Eisner explains that this wasn’t how the scene was originally written. In fact, there was extensive choreography planned and rehearsed. The scene was filmed in Tunisia and required hiring hundreds of extra cast members, renting equipment, blocking off streets, and other coordinated efforts. On the day of filming, Ford woke up with the flu and didn’t have the energy to perform the fight scene. He asked to reschedule the shoot, but the film’s budget wouldn’t allow for a second day of shooting. The production company’s finite resources would not allow them to pay the extras another day’s wage. This real financial constraint forced director Steven Spielberg to improvise. Ford was able to stand on his mark, pretend to shoot the bad guy, and go back to sleep in his trailer. An unlimited budget would likely have resulted in a rescheduled session and an elaborate fight scene but, ultimately, a less memorable outcome.

You and I face real limitations and constraints. We never have enough time, staff, material, or financial resources. But we can thrive—not just despite constraints but because of them. Eisner calls this “creativity in a box.” The financial “box” of a budget led to the historic scene in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. The “box” of our constraints can lead us to produce amazing outcomes.

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We may need to understand the dimensions of our specific “box”—to know exactly where we stand and the extent of our resources. Once we do that, we can apply some creativity. Asking “How might we . . .” questions can help to engage creative problem-solving. The fact we are asking a question opens up a creativity loop in our brains, and the word might leaves open multiple possibilities, such as:

“How might we reach 10,000 prospects with a \$1,000 marketing budget?”

“How might we deliver this project by Tuesday?”

“How might we assess customer satisfaction without asking them directly?”

Each of these questions could yield an amazing result that would never have existed with an unlimited budget, timetable, or ability to survey customers directly.

Limitations and constraints can produce better results than what we might have achieved without them. We need to apply creativity within the box.

Questions to use with your team or group:

1. What constraints do we face right now?
2. If we had no constraints (money, time, resources), what would we do to hit our goals?
3. If we had no resources, what would we do to hit our goals?
4. Pretend to switch roles with someone else on the team. If you were in his/her job, how would you tackle their issues?

This is a free chapter from “*Thinking for Success: 52 Stories that Upgrade Your Thinking to Boost Productivity, Problem Solving and Relationships*” by John Knowlton.