

# A Leadership Minute

On Problem-Solving

"We are entering a quarter in which we expect robust growth. Paradigms are shifting, but the team has drilled down to the heart of the challenge."

...Urban Dictionary; the definition of **Execubabble**



"Sir, What is the secret of your success?" a reporter asked a bank president.

**"Two words."**

"And, sir, what are they?"

**"Good decisions."**

"And how do you make good decisions?"

**"One word."**

"And sir, what is that?"

**"Experience."**

"And how do you get Experience?"

**"Two words."**

"And, sir, what are they?"

**"Bad decisions."**

...Anonymous

WHATEVER YOU THINK...  
THINK THE OPPOSITE

## How Many Times Has Your CEO Said, **Let's Think Outside the Box?**

About a zillion? Almost as much as he says "drill down" or "paradigm"? Yeah, well, we can't help you with that. But we can help you with that box thing.

Now deeply embedded in business culture, the exhortation to **think outside the box** usually means to be more creative or original when developing solutions to the big hairy business problems we face today. You know; come up with something new. We figure there must be some serious inside-the-box-thinking going on out there...*Fast Company* recently reported the use of the phrase by the *New York Times* alone at once every nine days!

Like many bits of business "advice", **think outside the box** is about as useful as screen door on a submarine. Here's the thing: it's not **what** you think, it's **how** you do it. And if you don't really understand the **how** part, that box may become a coffin for your business.

Here is just one example of **how** we think that can lead us right into that coffin:

Try adding these numbers up as fast as you can:

$$\begin{aligned} 2 + 2 \\ 4 + 4 \\ 8 + 8 \\ 16 + 16 \end{aligned}$$

Okay, now pick a number between 5 and 12.

**You picked 7, didn't you?**

Hey, what happened here? Well, first we reinforced a pattern (this one is called *arithmetic memory*) by having you work some simple addition problems. Then, when we asked you an unrelated question, you made the answer fall into that pattern.

When we think, we often try to fit new or different information into a pre-existing pattern. **Should we add broccoli to our baby food product line? Nah, babies hate broccoli; let's stick with peas.**

You dream you are on a sinking ship with your two children. You can only save one. What do you do?

### Wake up

Start off on the right foot by making some wrong decisions.

### Why aren't we more creative?

- ❖ We commonly begin our analysis of a problem with the **conclusion**
- ❖ We focus on solutions we **intuitively** favor
- ❖ The solution we intuitively favor is often also the **first one** that seems satisfactory
- ❖ We confuse **discussion** with **analysis**
- ❖ We focus on the **substance** (data, arguments, and conclusions) not on the **process**



**Business Navigation Group** helps clients improve the performance of executive leadership teams and achieve success in key initiatives. We have offices in the United States, United Kingdom and Italy.

For more information:  
[www.biznavgroup.com](http://www.biznavgroup.com)

Also, we routinely confuse correlation with causation. **The average American eats less than 1/10th of 1 serving of broccoli per day. So, Americans must hate broccoli.**

As well, we individualize the positive but generalize the negative. **My baby likes broccoli but nobody else's will.**

## Our brains have minds of their own

And don't even get us started on the whole notion of **problem definition**. We humans seem to be great at coming up with tons of solutions but we spend almost no time at all understanding the problem first. In fact, we rarely question most of the problems we are asked to solve. We usually just launch right into developing solutions. Boss wants answers, now! So then, what's our next baby food product? If we hadn't dismissed broccoli because we let our brains take over how we think, we may have first **restated** and then **refined** the problem.

Do babies hate broccoli? Or do their moms? Or do our stockholders? Are we trying to develop products that are good for babies or products that we think will sell? Is broccoli as good as or better for babies than peas? Do we have to find a new supplier to make broccoli for babies? Would we need to build a new production line to process broccoli for babies?

Understanding the problem first usually requires spending some time looking at it from all stakeholder perspectives. Not just our own. If we hate broccoli, babies may never like it either because we let **how** we think impair **what** we think.

If you let that brain of yours go off on its own, you could be thinking inside another kind of box in a big darn hurry. Kind of dark in there...

For more on **problem-solving and decision-making**, check out the Executive Team Leadership Workshop on our website.

