Knowledge Worker
Think *Inside* the Box
(June 2011)

We are regularly told to think outside the box. Try telling that to Jack. The problem with giving that advice to Jack is that he can't get out of the box. I've got news for you; neither can you. Neither can I nor can anyone else for that matter. None of us can think outside the box, not really. All of our thinking is imprisoned inside the "box" formed by our beliefs, preconceptions, values, biases, knowledge and perceptions to name just some of the "sides" of our individual boxes. We can't get outside the box because it is who we are. Even when we try to get outside the box our efforts to do so must take place inside the box. We're stuck with it and, like Jack, we're stuck in it.

Why do you want to get outside the box anyway? Are you looking for new ideas, new insights, creative or innovative approaches to old problems or maybe to new ones? What's wrong with what's inside the box? Is it not up to the task at hand? How would you know if you did get outside the box? My answer is that you wouldn't. You couldn't. All you can recognize is what your box will let you recognize. Getting outside the box is a doomed endeavor.

Have you ever seen an Ouroboros? It's a symbol of a snake or a dragon chewing on its own tail. There's one in the picture on the left. It would make a good logo for efforts aimed at getting outside the box. The box can only chew on itself.

What are we talking about? We're talking about learning, growing, improving, changing and being open to new ideas and ways of thinking. We're talking about your mind – and mine – and everyone else's. But we can't get outside our minds. To paraphrase Pogo, "They is us."

However, we can do something about what goes on in there.

The best thing you can do is open the box. You see, the stuff in a closed box is fixed, static, unchanging and, quite literally, in the dark. A closed box can do only what it already can do. But, if you open the box, you can let new stuff in and that new stuff will interact with the old stuff and create some more new stuff inside the box. You can, then, change what the box has in it and what it can do but you don't need to get out of the box to do that; you just need to let more stuff in. Indeed, as I've been hammering home, you can't get outside the box anyway.

Another thing we can do is bring together a bunch of different boxes and let their interactions generate stuff that's not to be found inside any one of the boxes. Guess what? Once that's done, this new stuff is now inside the box.   (Well, it makes its
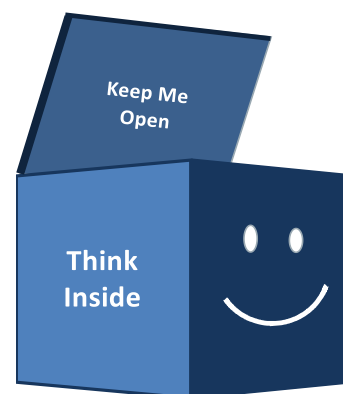
way inside the ones that were open. The closed ones don't change.) Anyway, there's no escaping the box.

So, the next time someone starts blathering and babbling to you about the importance of thinking outside the box, smile and say, "That sounds like a really good idea. Just exactly how do you do that?"

If you get some good answers, let 'em inside your box and make use of them to the extent your box will let you. But don't take the advice literally. Remember: You can't get outside the box.

Me? I'm going to focus on keeping my box open and on letting more good stuff in there. Who knows? Maybe, just maybe, my box will be happy with creating more good stuff inside and ignoring all that advice to think outside.

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About the Author

Fred Nickols, CPT, is a knowledge worker, writer, consultant, and former executive who spent 20 years in the U.S. Navy, retiring as a decorated chief petty officer. In the private sector, he worked as a consultant and then held executive positions with two former clients. Currently, Fred is the manager partner of Distance Consulting LLC. His website is home to the award-winning Knowledge Worker's Tool Room and more than 200 free articles, book chapters, and papers. Fred is a longtime member of ISPI and writes this monthly column for *PerformanceXpress*. A complete listing of all Knowledge Worker columns and access to them is available here.