

Your Personal Coach

By
Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

I'm in the midst of making big changes in my career. As I've tried to explore all the possibilities, my friends keep telling me to "think outside the box" and come up with creative ideas about how I might apply my skills to another kind of job. Okay, I agree. But I don't know what to do next. Can you give me some practical suggestions? It's harder than it sounds.

-- Gail T.

Dear Gail,

Your friends are giving you terrific advice. 'Thinking outside the box' means to generate and entertain vital and creative ideas that solve problems and encourage growth.

We all know how easy it is to get stuck in ruts in various aspects of our lives. And we may get rut-bound as well in the way that we approach change or challenges. I'm not just talking about a commonplace rut, but rather a long, deep pothole that threatens to keep us running in place, but never moving forward

We have to break out of old, habitual thinking patterns before we can explore new ways of seeing things.

First make a commitment to yourself to keep an open mind as you explore your career options. Eastern teachings call this state "beginner's mind" -- children naturally 'begin' their life's journey with this vibrant "beginner's mind"-- it means to empty yourself of expectations and stay open to all possibilities. Beginners Mind is innocent of preconceptions and prejudices. It is an empty cup waiting to be filled.

The brilliant economist John Maynard Keynes puts it in western terms when he writes about the importance of staying open to our creative potential: "The difficulty lies not so much in developing new ideas as in escaping from old ones."

You have to release your present assumptions. Just the other day, I was carrying several boxes of files as I tried to go through a doorway. I struggled and strained to juggle the boxes as I twisted like a contortionist to turn the doorknob, then shove the door open with my foot. Of course, during all of these gyrations, both file boxes fell to the floor and their contents scattered all over the place. Great, I thought. What's the lesson in this? Ah, I have to let go of what I'm carrying in order to go through a door.

Thinking outside the box means letting go of what we are holding on to in order to go through new doors. Forget about what you *should* or *must* do with your career. Give yourself free rein. Let go of the expectations that you are carrying and, instead, think about your career possibilities in fresh, creative ways.

This may be a thought-provoking idea to get you started through your own new door: what career path would you choose if there was no possibility of failure? Use this and other brainstorming techniques that allow you to consider all kinds of ideas, even wacky and outrageous ones. Generate as many radical ideas as you can. Remember, it is *quantity* not quality that is important at this stage of the brainstorming process..

Write down every single idea that occurs to you. Focus on your career and reflect on what you would love to do. Think about how you can earn the income you need or

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want. Explore the outer reaches of what you might do with the training and experience you already have.

For example, if you are a nurse but don't want to do clinical nursing any longer, your experiences could be an excellent background for medical textbook sales or as an account executive with a pharmaceutical company.

If you love your city or town, work in retail sales and are great with people, you would be an excellent addition to the economic development office encouraging businesses to locate to your area. You get the picture.

This is very important: At this first stage of the brainstorming process, do not evaluate, judge, or criticize any of the ideas you are writing down. Once we do that, we immediately step back "into the box" of limited thinking.

The creative process screeches to a halt when, starting down the path of a new idea, we immediately say to ourselves, "Oh, that wouldn't work," or "That's stupid." Tell that inner critic to take a hike for awhile, for it is only in the wild exploration of possibilities that creative solutions are born.

Only after you have listed every possible idea that speaks to you in one way or another, should you begin the process of evaluating those ideas. Now, it's time to ask questions:

- Will this work?
- Is this what I really want to do?
- Can I earn the income I need?
- Do I have the skills, experience, or education I need for this career path?
- If the answer to the last question is "no," than ask: Can I acquire the additional training or experience I need? Do I want to do this?

In addition to doing this brainstorming exercise by yourself, you might also ask your friends to help out by offering their own creative ideas to your career questions. Invite them over and write the ideas on a large poster board or flip chart. Group brainstorming is fun and very productive, but the same rules apply. Generate crazy ideas first, combine some of those to create even wilder ones, and only then should you evaluate and judge whether these possible career paths are likely to be effective or practical.

That's how you think outside the box, Gail. I hope you find the process liberating, and productive.

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2005 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) Columns are archived at www.fullpotentialliving.com.