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## Outside the Box Thinking

Business leaders have been encouraged to think “outside the box”, so much so that the phrase has taken on buzzword status. Unfortunately, many current attempts at outside the box thinking fail because, ironically, they are undisciplined and unreasoned. Looking back in history, we can learn from a fascinating example of outside the box thinking described in the Harvard Business Review:

During World War II, the statistician Abraham Wald was assessing the vulnerability of airplanes to enemy fire. The available data on returning aircraft showed that some parts of planes were hit disproportionately more often than other parts. Military personnel concluded, naturally enough, that these parts should be reinforced.

Wald however, came to the opposite conclusion: The parts hit least often should be protected. His recommendation reflected his insight into the selection bias inherent in the data, which was based only upon those planes that had returned. Wald reasoned that a plane would be less likely to return if it were hit in a critical area and, conversely, that a plane that did return even when hit had probably not been hit in a critical location. Thus, he argued, reinforcing those parts of the returned planes that sustained many hits would be unlikely to pay off.

Wald’s broader, more insightful idea was not the product of unfettered imagination, but rather the result of a thoughtful analysis of information that was plainly evident and, more importantly, of information that was missing. An unconventional, creative approach may help us venture outside the box, but we mustn’t overlook the need to include well-reasoned, logic-driven, good old-fashioned thinking.

*- Larry Gard, Ph.D.*