



Thinking outside the unthinkable blue skies box

Purchasing people are often presented with the chance to break with tradition. The challenge is to seize the opportunity and turn it into an alternative future, says Mark Hubbard

Thinking outside the box, thinking the unthinkable, blue skies thinking - hackneyed though such buzz-phrases may be, they point to an essential concept for business people.

To really make a difference, you must be prepared to throw out everything you know and open yourself to completely new ideas.

In a recent example a buyer in Asia found herself in a situation where a primary supplier of a key component was seeking regular price increases while providing poor quality and regular delivery delays. She had a secondary supplier which was doing none of those things, but which provided only 10 per cent of the volume.

This buyer's company had used the same supplier for many years and relationships were well established. This meant the unthinkable - for this buyer - had to be considered. What would we happen if she moved the volume from the first supplier to the other?

Would the second supplier be able to maintain performance and price while delivering a much larger volume? Would the risk prove unsustainable?

It's the kind of situation we see repeated around the world. The challenge is to ditch the comfortable, well-worn status quo and adopt a way of thinking that opens up new possibilities. To do this, we need to ask certain key questions.

First, if we were starting from scratch, what would we do? Imagining that none of our current constraints existed can help us piece together a picture of how the future could work. Be bold, go back to basics and build a new scenario based on your best thinking.

Once you've constructed a restraint-free position, the obvious next question is what do you have to change to make this new future happen. This question can release the potential inherent in a new future, as it demonstrates a path which, on reflection, starts to look manageable.

Other situations require other questions: when faced with an entrenched position, we might ask "what is it that makes us buy from this supplier?" We need to test and explore the reasons presented to us for maintaining the status quo to see if they are still real.

At some point in the past, perhaps, the supplier was the only one available. However, that may not be true now. The market may have matured, and more suppliers may have entered the marketplace.

Indeed, any position where it is assumed that there is only one possible solution is almost certain to be spurious.

We are often presented with situations where the company has developed a restriction against doing something. The challenge here is to test whether the conditions under which the rule was imposed still exist or whether there is now a different way to manage the risk.

We often see situations in which risk exists in a supply position while the company rule is that no risk is allowed. This is obviously contradictory and it is clear that a more thoughtful approach to managing the risk can offer a stronger position.

This search for alternative futures must become a guiding principle in purchasing. If we do the same tomorrow as we do today, nothing will change.

Breaking the mould, going for broke, call it what you will: there's no doubt that thinking what we thought was unthinkable will create opportunities we never knew existed.

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