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Companies hire people to add value to their business in a variety of ways. Yet rarely do organizations create a climate that encourages creativity and innovation in people. What are people without their thoughts? Nothing!

To get the best out of people we need to inspire them, listen to their deep felt aspirations and discover to our delight that what they passionately desire is what your company also needs – ideas of value.

To be meaningful in any way, we need to liberate our mind. And to be greater than we are, we need to broaden our mental canvas for entertaining better, bigger and richer thoughts. It sounds so simple, yet why is it that many managers have not attained their self-defined greatness in their lives? Could it be their fixation with status quo and redundant traditions? Could it be them not wanting to leave their zones of comfort? Could it be that they caught up in a conceptual conundrum?

Past experiences and environmental factors have shaped our attitudes, beliefs and perceptions. I call these “in-box” thinking. Some influences on us are harmful and damaging, blinding us to

opportunities in our uncertain environment. It is only through greater self-awareness, confronting our fears, engaging in rigorous self analysis and review of all those things that have influenced us in the past that we can begin to liberate our minds from the shackles of the past.

However, “In-box” and “out-of-box” thinking are both equally important. “in-box” helps us to remain rooted to our core beliefs and identity, while “out-of-box” thinking helps us to reinvent our future with greater confidence.

Our thoughts guide our actions and our actions or inaction lead to outcomes we experience in life. If we don't like the outcomes we experience at work, or at home, the message is clear: We must change the way we think!

By thinking ‘outside-the-box’ we acquire a new way with which to view our world. An open mind helps us engage in genuine and meaningful conversations with others. We become better able to challenge to challenge status quo.

Study of the lives and times of great minds inspires. Sadly, reading has yet not become a habit for many. As a result we witness the prevalence of mediocrity, apathy, ignorance, arrogance and lack of analytical thinking in our society and in some of our organizations, particularly those in the public sector.

On the flip side, several major companies in Pakistan have achieved significant breakthroughs in recent years by encouraging a sense of ownership and creativity in their people. Organizations like Pakistan Tobacco Company, Ericsson, Unilever, AkzoNobel/ICI, Engro Corp are just a few glaring examples that come to mind.

The good news is that many managers in our country, who were previously trapped by the comfort of customs and traditions, have broken loose of useless paradigms. They have found ways to save costs by reducing wastage; they have enhanced top-lines and bottom-line by improving quality of products and services, and have grown their own capabilities and those of others. Individuals can contribute astonishing results in a company once their mind opens. Opportunities for improvement are always there. They just need to be found.

A variety of learning programs that focus on creativity and innovation in the workplace are being offered in Pakistan since 1991. These programs incorporate relevant and contemporary concepts and tools. The aim is to build capacity in managers through greater awareness that empowers them to add ever greater value in companies they work with.

Managers and employees become useful to organizations by using their unlimited creative potential intelligently, particularly when they are coached and mentored effectively. You care for them, and they will care for you.

Here is a memorable story of the empty soap box, which happened in one of Japan's biggest cosmetics companies. The company received a complaint that a consumer had bought a soap box that was empty. Immediately the authorities isolated the problem to the assembly line, which transported all the packaged boxes of soap to the delivery department.

For some reason, one soap box went through the assembly line empty.

Management asked its engineers to solve the problem. Post-haste, the engineers worked hard to devise an X-ray machine with high-resolution monitors manned by two people to watch all the soap boxes that passed through the line to make sure they were not empty. No doubt, they worked hard and they worked fast but they spent a huge amount to do so.

But when a rank-and-file employee in a small company was posed with the same problem, he did not get into complications of X-rays, etc but instead came out with another solution. He bought a strong industrial electric fan and pointed it at the assembly line. He switched the fan on, and as each soap box passed the fan, it simply blew the empty boxes out of the line!

Dr. Edward de Bono is regarded by many as the leading world authority in the field of creativity. He is the inventor of the phrase "Lateral Thinking" which is now in the Oxford English Dictionary. Lateral Thinking acts like the laxative of the mind and is based directly on how the brain functions as a self-organizing information system. Dr de Bono has worked for well over thirty years in the field with major corporations all over the world.

Another example of creative thinking comes from NASA. When NASA began the launch of astronauts into space, they found out that the pens wouldn't work at zero gravity (Ink won't flow down to the writing surface). In order to solve this problem, it took them one decade and \$12 million. They developed a pen that worked at zero gravity, upside down, underwater, on practically any surface including crystal and in a temperature range from below freezing to over 300 degrees C. And what did the Russians do.....?? They used a Pencil!!!

But how do we enter the future? We need possibility thinking and learnings from our past mistakes. Creativity is about using our imagination, exploring probabilities while dealing with uncertainty! This involves risk. Venturing into the future with risk-averse thinking is madness.

Liberate your mind. Don't be trapped by traditional thinking – thinking which is only logical, sequential and selective. Logic is about hindsight. We can all be wise after the event. Learn to become wise before the event as well! Work on your concepts and perceptions and comprehend the mysterious possibilities that lie ahead!
