

It's Time To Rise Above Flatland!¹

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Learn From A 19th Century Theologian²

In the latter half of the first decade of the 21st century, the volatile economic environment became enormously challenging to businesses, large and small—an economic crisis on a worldwide scale that some said had not been seen since the Great Depression. Homes foreclosed. Banks failed. Jobs lost. Consumers not spending enough. Faced with this enormous challenge, what does a business do to survive and keep its head above the bottom line?

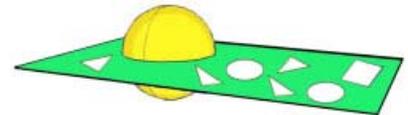
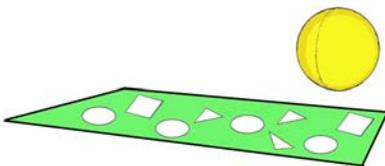
Somewhere in the 1960's, a phrase came into being that became so popular in business environments over subsequent decades that it is now a cliché: *Think outside the box!* Thinking outside the box is a catchphrase urging people to look at a problem from a new perspective without preconceptions. For you as a manager, it means having a willingness to get outside of your usual way of looking at and doing things and be willing to see it all from a different perspective.

The Flatland Perspective is a handy visual to help you focus “outside the box.” It is based on a little novella written in 1884 by theologian Edwin A. Abbott about a two dimensional world.

Visualize a piece of paper with squares, triangles, and circles drawn on it. Now, imagine that this piece of paper is a two dimensional world called Flatland, where creatures only have length and width, but no depth. Instead of the three-dimensional human beings in this world, Flatlanders are those two-dimensional squares, circles, and triangles. Enjoying a comfortable life in their flat world, they know nothing of the third dimension. They have no concept of cubes, pyramids, or spheres.



Now imagine that a sphere approaches Flatland. He slowly moves downward to intersect with the plane of Flatland. Since Flatland has only length and width, the two-dimensional Flatlanders see him as a circle where he intersects their world. It is as if you sliced a piece of paper through a ball: only a circle would appear on the paper, not the entire three-dimensional ball.



The sphere attempted to explain this phenomenon to the Flatlanders.

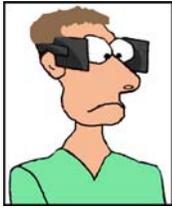
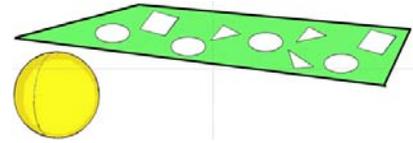
He told them about the third dimension. As he moved up and down through the plane of Flatland, the size of the circle changed. When the tip of his sphere entered Flatland, he was seen as a small circle; when the middle, fatter part of him passed through Flatland, he was seen as a larger circle. He described to the Flatlanders how his actual shape in the third dimension would account for his changing size in their world.

Alas, the poor Flatlanders could not grasp what he was saying. Their two-dimensional perception gave them two-dimensional beliefs. They could not see him as a sphere. They could only see him as a circle that kept changing size. This frightened them. He's certainly not a circle! He must be an extremely clever juggler or a Magician! Or even worse, he must be some kind of demon!

¹ Take a moment and explore Arnie's other Timely Tips at; <http://www.arniedahlke.com/timelytips.htm>

² Retrieved from: <http://www.math.brown.edu/~banchoff/abbott/life/index.shtml>

They decided to seek him out and destroy him. In fact, the hero of the story, who told his fellow-Flatlanders he understood the third dimension, ended up in prison because of his new belief. Frustrated, seeing he wasn't going to get anywhere, the Sphere left Flatland.



The message of that little book is very clear: *Bound by our own point-of-view—our own belief systems—we find it very hard to step outside ourselves and see our world from a radically different point of view.* Like the two-dimensional beliefs of Flatlanders, our truths often become our blinders, narrowing our vision. In order for us to see new ideas, new concepts, and new ways of thinking and doing, we need to look at the world from another perspective, another point of view.

Many businesses in an economic crisis are Flatlanders. In an attempt to survive, they think short-term instead of long-term. They turn to traditional methods of staying alive: cutting labor costs, contractor costs, materials costs, and services. They try to pair down, while at the same time, doing business the same way!



Help Your Organization Rise Above Flatland!

As a manager, you can help your organization rise above Flatland. You are charged with the responsibility of achieving a variety of goals. It is important for you to constantly challenge yourself in search of new and more effective ways of reaching those goals. You need to look at your organization from a different angle.



Begin by challenging your perceptions of the people reporting to you. Don't put them into simple categories based on your previous associations, such as "this is a dumb person," "this is someone who can't be trusted," "this person is too argumentative and too difficult for me to waste my time." Reasons behind their behaviors are just as complex as your own. What looks like an unmotivated person may really be someone who is distracted by some tragic events in his or her personal life. Get to know your people. Listen to them with empathy instead of judgment. See each of them as unique. Discover what each does best.

Next, work with them to get all of you thinking beyond your old ways of doing things. Harness their thinking and creativity. Pull them together in groups to brainstorm and invent new ways of doing things that will improve the efficiency of your processes and the quality of your products and/or services. Commit yourselves to build greater customer value. Together, as one creative team, invent new approaches and then translate those new ways of doing things into goals and implementable action plans.



Think long-term. As an old friend of mine once argued: "Take a leap into the future." Stimulate people to envision a better organizational future and invent new, innovative ways of accomplishing it.

Involve Everyone In Rising Above Flatland!

