

## This Box Is Very Small



Recently, I coached a team of well-respected nurse leaders. We had embarked on a leadership development initiative to increase their effectiveness as individuals and as a group. We were well into a candid review of the team's concerns and opportunities when one of the prominent group leaders said, "It would be nice if we could do that, but we can't. Remember, the box we are in is very small."

She was referring to the numerous systems and complexities in which they operate. She was talking about the stands taken by other senior leaders, their board of directors, their organizational policies and politics, and layers of regulations and accreditation criteria.

While some team members may have questioned her statement, most took it literally. This leader's belief that "the box is very small" created or solidified a reality for the rest of the team.

Without some type of intervention, from that moment forward this team might have acted on the belief that "this box is very small." That collective certainty would create a tight boundary around their possibilities and future achievements.

Here's the issue. Was this statement really true, either partially or completely? Either way, how much latitude did this team have to effect change, do things differently, and implement new and better systems and ideas? What responsibility did members of this team have to respectfully question this assertion?

Listen carefully to the words and their effect. "The box we are in is very small" sounds a lot like "We can't do that" and "They won't let us." As professionals and nurse leaders, what obligation did the team have for speaking up for what they believed was right, even if it was outside the box? Was it their collective duty to take responsible risks and stand up for what they believed?

Under what circumstances do you find yourself saying the equivalent of "the box is very small"? Do you hear yourself saying,

"We can't" and "They won't let us" more than you would like? If you answer "no" to these questions, congratulations! If you answer "yes," please keep reading.

What if the team above operates in a bigger box than they think? What if the team can reshape the box? What was stopping them from seeing and seizing the opportunities they actually had? Here are some possibilities.

1. **We believe stories that are only partially true.** Stories are central to the perpetuation of our culture at all levels. But—and this is a truism—not all stories are of equal value or equally true. We all know this, but in some circumstances, we treat stories as if they are and will be completely true now and in the future. This occurs when such assertions resonate enough or when they are spoken by leaders we believe.
2. **As leaders, we do not always examine the accuracy of our words.** This is important: the stories we tell about our organizations and ourselves are not always valid. Are we intentionally lying? No. Most of us are well meaning, intelligent, fast-moving individuals, and we make assessments and draw conclusions because it is our responsibility to do so. We must make snap judgments on the basis of available information. We mix that information with our beliefs. Usually, our rapid response serves us and our organizations well—*except when the statements we make are partially false and inappropriately limiting.*
3. **We are not always comfortable with taking risks.** All the literature tells us it is important for leaders to take risks. Nothing would change if we perpetually stayed with old ways. Every reader knows this. But when it comes to actually taking risks, nurse leaders self-report that they are often loathe to do it. We are not comfortable challenging the size of the box.
4. **It can be easier to "play small."** Leaders can grow tired of standing up for their beliefs, taking the high road, and working with others to implement new

ways of doing and thinking. It is tough work. It can be particularly draining if others create roadblocks, say “no,” and are otherwise unsupportive. Leaders can lose their passion, their energy, and their enthusiasm for the good fight. The problem is that the good fight is the reason most of us signed up for this field and these roles. “They won’t let us” becomes a very costly story. It robs us of our energy and robs others of their best contributions.

So what do we do? How do we address self-limiting beliefs and statements that limit others, too? How do we create stories that are “right-sized” rather than too small?

1. **Spend time with people who think differently.** They are all around you. They are in different disciplines, they are younger, they are older, and they are in fields other than health care. Those who are different are probably right there in your own team. Seek them out. Listen generously.
2. **Take risks that are worthwhile.** If you are not comfortable taking calculated risks, practice. Start small. Role-play. Think about the worst that can happen and plan accordingly. Remember and appreciate times when you have taken risks and succeeded.
3. **Challenge your own assumptions.** Think carefully about how accurate your beliefs are, especially if they limit you and others. If you doubt your ability to self-assess, talk with someone you trust. Review your ideas. Listen to yourself and ask yourself whether you really believe what you are saying. Reflect out loud with a friend, colleague, family member, or coach. Ask these other people to provide you feedback or to ask questions that will help clarify your thoughts, expand your views, and speak from a place of possibility.
4. **Challenge the assumptions of others.** In the story above, no

one challenged the statement offered by the leader because they respected and liked her. But we do a disservice to the team, the leader, and our organization when we do not question. There are ways to challenge assumptions with respect. For instance, one of them could have said, “Laura, I see exactly what you mean by that. Can we figure out a way to pursue this anyway?” What if we...”

5. **Ask questions.** Some effective risk takers begin by asking genuine questions. Their questions invite others to re-examine what they are saying. In the story above, for example, a team member might have asked, “Are there areas of opportunity for us despite this?” or “Maybe the box is bigger than we think. Remember when we took a risk and we succeeded, even though we were sure they would shoot us down?”

These behaviors are worth trying. They can help all of us be more effective, and the reward is great. We can make more significant contributions, and we can act from a fuller version of our own power and strength.

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