

Chapter 1

THINK INSIDE YOUR BOX

Craig is a friend of mine who's spent the past several years trying to build a practice in internal medicine. Beset by sky-high malpractice rates, he often speaks of how frustrated he's become with the world of medicine and how he wants to get out.

During one conversation, he told me that he was buying up urban real estate properties and trying to rehab them for resale. So far, he's made no money on the deals, but he's convinced that real estate is the way to increase his income.

He's just one of a long list of physicians who have taken the idea of "thinking outside the box" to mean they should delve into an area in which they have no experience. Some, like my friend Craig, read the myriad books on buying distressed properties with no money down or getting rich in penny stocks and think, "Yes, this is what I need to do to make the money I deserve."

With distressing regularity, it seems that whenever a group of doctors gets together, talk will at some point turn to buying a restaurant or opening a bar. They may think nothing of investing \$100,000 or more in a venture that statistics show will fail nine times out of ten. Eight or more years of college and medical school give them no better preparation for such a venture than someone else's high school diploma.

While it's true that some people do get rich by venturing into an unfamiliar area of expertise, most of the players in any endeavor already have considerable knowledge and experience to fall back on. Buying distressed properties isn't much of a stretch for a real estate broker, and many of them have done so successfully. We physicians usually have no such specific knowledge.

In my own research into the components of creativity, I found that the most important factor, when it comes to innovation, is what might be called domain-specific knowledge. True creativity arises from the deep and intimate understanding of your field. As healthcare providers, no one has more intimate knowledge of medicine than we do, and nobody has a better opportunity to understand the techniques and procedures we practice every day.

If you're a doctor, you've spent 12 or more years mastering your profession. Doesn't it make more sense to put all that knowledge to work in finding new ways to improve the place where you already find yourself?

In other words, don't think outside the box. Instead, think differently within your own box. Stick to what you do best. Don't strike out into unknown territories

in which you possess no special knowledge or advantage. When you're working within an area that you know, even failures will present new opportunities for advancement and knowledge. On the other hand, if you're working in an area that you don't know, you are in essence a novice and a beginner. Your failures will come while in the process of acquiring elementary skills that many others already possess.

Denise Shekerjian, writing in *Uncommon Genius*, her study of the creative impulse as reflected in 40 winners of the MacArthur Foundation Fellowship, noted, "The trick to creativity, if there is a single useful thing to say about it, is to identify your own peculiar talent and then settle down to work with it for a good long time. Everyone has an aptitude for something. The trick is to recognize it, to honor it, to work with it. This is where creativity starts."¹

If we, as physicians, are to know true success and be able to unleash our full measure of creativity, we must return to what we know and do best – the practice of medicine. There's no need to try to solve problems in other fields when we have so many problems and so many opportunities in medicine.

Everyday we confront the various crises that have plagued this profession for many years. These include rising malpractice rates, uninsured patients, mounting paperwork, and declining reimbursements. There is the continuing need to find new and better tools and techniques to treat our patients.

Perhaps the greatest challenge of all is the question of who really runs medicine these days. Nearly everyone realizes that healthcare providers no longer control their own profession. While doctors prescribe drugs and use medical devices every day, the burgeoning profits generated by these products belong to large, faceless corporations. It often seems that those who know the least about healthcare and patient needs – whether they are insurance companies, pharmacy benefit managers, drug companies, or managed care organizations – are those who have the greatest control over what physicians do and how they're able to treat their patients.

For the nearly 700,000 physicians in America, the days of private practice – in which doctors use their best judgment to make decisions for patients – are long gone. Most now work for large hospitals or HMOs that are bureaucratic and heavy-handed in their approach. Managers and administrators tell doctors where, when, how, and with whom they must practice, even down to the smallest details.

The frustration with this situation runs wide and deep. Studies show that more than 45 percent of doctors are dissatisfied and thinking of giving up their practice. In addition, 63 percent would not recommend clinical practice as a profession to their children. Those doctors who do continue their practice seem to always be thinking of how to move into some other field of endeavor.²

I know those feelings very well. I was once a young resident finding my way through the ins and outs of the medical system. Even then, I was disgruntled and

unhappy with the system. I was profoundly dissatisfied with the large medical center where I was serving, with its rigid bureaucratic structure that neither demanded much from its staff nor offered much to its patients. At that time, I was already thinking about getting out of medicine and finding something that was more satisfying.

Fortunately, the exit strategy that came to me wasn't a means of escape at all. Rather it was a way to revitalize my life and work through the path of invention. As you will read in the coming chapters, I found inspiration in my own situation and invented a medical device that could serve both doctors and patients in new and better ways.

My story is just one small example of how unleashing the creativity inside you can lead to a sense of accomplishment, renewal, and freedom. Each of you can find your own path and can do so by asking some simple questions. The first of these questions is, who is better qualified to find solutions to medical problems than a medical professional? You are in a perfect position to deal with the many frustrations that beset your practice and your specialty.

The problems and the opportunities are legion. You can look around and see any number of situations that can only be termed ridiculous if they weren't so serious in their implications for doctors and patients alike.

"We have a host of high-tech diagnostic instruments and we can do heart transplants on an almost routine basis," says Dr. Dan Budnitz, a scientist with the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "Yet when one of these \$100,000 operations is over, we write down what we did with a pen and paper and then stuff it in a filing cabinet."

In another example, Dr. Budnitz notes that when he takes the family car into the dealership for service, the technician has at his fingertips a computer link that gives detailed information on every service that has been performed on his car – even at dealerships on the other side of the country. Yet when he takes his child to the family pediatrician, the doctor doesn't know about the treatment his son received at the local hospital last night.

As physicians, we can wait until a government bureaucrat or an insurance company imposes a solution that primarily benefits them or we can take charge and begin to find our own solutions within our own profession.

While I'm not advocating that you run out and change the world right now, I want you to begin to realize that because of your domain-specific knowledge, you have within your grasp the power to begin finding solutions for the problems that plague you. Creativity and innovation are above all about recognizing frustrations, defining problems, and then developing solutions. Creativity is a process that works, whether it's about finding a better surgical technique or developing a system of universal medical records.

You can always endure your frustrations, sometimes even pretending they don't exist, or you can begin recognizing them, defining the shape and contours of the problem they represent, and then discovering innovative solutions. How much better and more exciting will our lives be when we take back control of what should, in all rights, be ours in the first place?

In these pages I offer a solution to this frustration and a challenge to take back control of your profession and your life. It is a process that you can apply to the way you run your office, manage your staff, treat your patients, and, even more importantly, the way you live your life. Innovation when applied to your practice can create a more exciting and satisfying experience for you, your staff, and your patients.

I will also show you how to be a creative source of new ideas that are not only useful, but potentially profitable. Too many people waste their time and never achieve their potential. For a doctor not to be an innovator within his profession seems much like an agile and athletic seven-footer who turns down a big-league basketball scholarship. He has the right to do so, but it certainly seems like a waste of talent and opportunity.

If you choose, you can stake your claim to at least a small share of the profits being reaped through the sale of medical devices by becoming an inventor of said devices, just like the individuals profiled in Section V. Innovations by physicians, when applied to this \$1.4 trillion industry, can result in the creation of new medical inventions and procedures that may not only reward you, but also improve the lives of patients on a grand scale.

The U.S. medical device and supply market generated approximately \$75 billion in sales in 2002. Creativity and the invention process represent one way out for the physicians who want to become a part of the industry and win their share of the profits. More importantly, they represent a way to win back autonomy and become empowered to serve both your patients and your profession.³

I use the medical device field as perhaps one of the best examples of utilizing the creative process in an extremely elegant, yet imminently practical way. For those of you who want to use your creative impulses in this field, these sections will serve as a road map to success. For the rest of you, it will serve as real-life examples of how the creative process can be put to practical ends.

Let's not pretend that getting involved in creating new medical devices is the answer to all of your problems, or that it is the right choice for everyone. But for some of you, it can provide a path and an opportunity to be autonomous once again. The medical-device industry is just one example of creativity at work, as you will see in the chapter on developing an office where creativity can flourish, and in the profiles of innovative physicians later in this book.

The Five Step Process is just as much at work in other fields of endeavor, such as writing novels or works of poetry or producing television dramas. Whatever path you choose for yourself, being in a position to come up with a viable idea becomes the ultimate in self-reliance and creative expression.

Doctors such as John Stone and Neil Shulman became poets and writers. Through the written word they were able to find a way of renewing and revitalizing the practice of medicine. Through their works they found insights and new avenues of communications that they in turn have shared with the rest of us.

You also find these qualities of creativity and innovation on display in the inventor profile section. The doctors cited there have found an escape from the healthcare rat race through the process of inventing medical devices. Richard Schatz, for example, is an eminent cardiologist practicing in California. He collaborated with Julio Palmaz and helped develop the heart stent – one of the most important advances in the treatment of heart disease in this century. After reaping a vast fortune from the sale of the device to Johnson & Johnson, he has been able to maintain what he calls a boutique practice, in which he sees only the most challenging cases. He no longer feels the pressure to take every case in order to pay the bills and maintain his lifestyle. If autonomy and independence appeals to you, then you might just have the passion to follow through with your ideas, like Dr. Schatz did, to achieve great success.

On the other hand, researchers like Dr. Joseph Sodroski of Harvard are exploring the most fundamental structure and function of the virus that causes AIDS, and in the process, have charted a course that is leading to not just better understanding, but better treatment as well. Better treatment for AIDS includes drugs, such as those developed by Emory University researcher Raymond Schinazi that are helping transform what was once a fatal disease into a chronic and manageable one. The drive to develop better treatments for injury and disease can be found in the work of Dr. Scott Boden in the area of the spine and Ron Crystal in the development of gene transfer. These and other brilliant minds are creatively pushing the boundaries and making life better for both patients and the medical profession that seeks to treat their conditions.

Creativity and innovation, of course, can take many forms. Some physicians, for example, have jumped ship, abandoning the big corporate employers and choosing instead to form small private practices. Clearly, these small business owners are not doing it for the money, since running a solo or small group practice can be extremely difficult. They are thinking inside their own box and going back to an earlier and purer form of work structure.

Obviously, self-employment is not for everyone. Many doctors don't want to deal with the challenges of personal entrepreneurship. Yet there is a path that can

revitalize their commitment to medicine and allow them to reap new sources of income, as well as much greater personal satisfaction.

As you make innovation a part of your professional life, you will find, as I have, that it creates a new passion for your field as well. You'll begin thinking about the processes of medicine in new ways. You'll start reading journal articles to acquire new knowledge, and, best of all, you'll look at everything you do in light of the creative process. Idea generation and problem solving will become second nature.

Through the process of developing your creativity, many of you will find qualities that you had lost or perhaps never even knew you possessed. You will find new worlds and new ideas opening up for you, and in the process, medicine and its practice will become what you always hoped it would be – innovative, exciting, rewarding, and, most of all, revitalizing.

REFERENCES

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