

SKIP LEVEL

strategic leadership for leaders ready to think two levels up

EPISODE 125 · WORKSHEET

EPISODE 125

Build Your Own Box

What if the reason your team is stuck is not too little freedom, but too much? Drawing on David Epstein's Inside the Box, Maya and Marcus show why constraint is creativity's companion — and why two levels up, your job is designing the box: one goal, one deadline, one scope.

KEY STRATEGIES & IDEAS

1. Total Freedom Is the Enemy

Total freedom is the enemy of creativity, and constraint is its companion. The brain defaults to familiar patterns, so unlimited options produce unoriginal work. Constraints push it past those defaults into deeper problem-solving.

2. Seuss and Fifty Words

Dr. Seuss revolutionized children's literature by accepting a bet to write a book using just fifty words. Fifty words. The limit did not shrink the book. It made the book.

3. Murakami's Constraint

Frustrated with his early, unoriginal writing, Haruki Murakami wrote in his limited English, then translated it back into Japanese. The constraint did not limit his voice. It found it.

4. Box, Not Cage

A cage controls every move. A box just says: here is the space, now be brilliant inside it. Design the edges, not the middle. You set the goal, the deadline, and the boundaries. Inside those edges, the team has real freedom.

5. Fog Is Not a Box

If you cannot name the goal, the deadline, and the scope, you have not designed the box yet. You have just handed them fog, and fog is the last place your team needs to find themselves bumping into each other.

The proof: Dr. Seuss wrote a book using just fifty words, and Haruki Murakami wrote in limited English, then translated it back into Japanese. In both cases the constraint did not limit the work. It made it.

Joe Dutkiewicz

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ACTION & REFLECTION STEPS

- [ ] **Step one — name the box.** Take your team's current project and write down three things: the one goal, the deadline, and the scope. If you cannot name all three, you have not designed the box yet. You have just handed them fog.

My project's goal, deadline, and scope:

- [ ] **Step two — shrink one thing this week.** Pick one project and cut its scope or shorten its deadline, on purpose. One deliberate constraint. Watch what happens to the team's focus when the space gets smaller.

The project and the constraint:

- [ ] **Step three — set the box before the work starts.** Do not add guardrails halfway through as a rescue. Give them at kickoff, when the team can still be creative inside them. A constraint imposed late feels like punishment. A constraint set early feels like the game.

- [ ] **Step four — audit your own freedom.** Find one place where you gave your team total freedom and got mush in return, a vague brief, an open-ended ask. Replace it with a box: one goal, one deadline, one rule. Then compare the two results.

Where I gave total freedom and got mush:

Think two levels up. — Maya & Marcus

Joe Dutkiewicz

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