

HERE'S A MODEL DESIGNED TO HELP FOREMEN AND FIRST-LINE SUPERVISORS
FEEL MORE COMFORTABLE ABOUT THE IDEA OF TESTING
THEIR CONSTRAINTS TO SEE HOW "REAL" THEY REALLY ARE . . .

INCREASING PERSONAL EFFECTIVENESS

BY RICHARD D.
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Short conversation between Ralph
and John . . . two foremen:

JOHN: "Hi, Ralph — How are things going this morning?"

RALPH: "Hello, John. Rotten! I'm up to my ears trying to get things started this morning and Jake over in Methods wants me to look at a new setup he's playing around with."

JOHN: "That's typical! Those guys seem to think we've got nothing else to do but to do their work for them. I've got the same problem with my boss. He keeps dumping these special projects on me. It's getting to the point where I can't keep up with what's going on out in the shop."

RALPH: "Yeah, I know what you mean! But, we've got to do these things. If you don't, you get a reputation of being 'uncooperative,' and that goes hard on you at appraisal time."

JOHN: "Yeah, that's right. Boy,

I sure wish I could say no to some of these requests . . . but I guess I'll just have to live with it, just like I've been doing."

RALPH: "Yeah, it's the system. If you don't learn to live with it, it's out the door for you."

JOHN: "Right on. Well, I've got to go see the boss and report on the latest project."

RALPH: "OK, John. I've got to go over to Methods and play some more games. See you later."

An untypical conversation? Not really. The subject may change but the sentiments are all too common. Being hemmed in by the "system" . . . being "delegated" work that should be done by someone else . . . not being able to say no to special requests . . . not having time for the more important things such as Planning . . . and a hundred other things . . . Managers at all levels feel these constraints and feel powerless to change them. So, they adapt — and are less effective than they could be. Not so much perhaps at the upper levels of management, but very true at lower levels . . . first and second-

line management in particular.

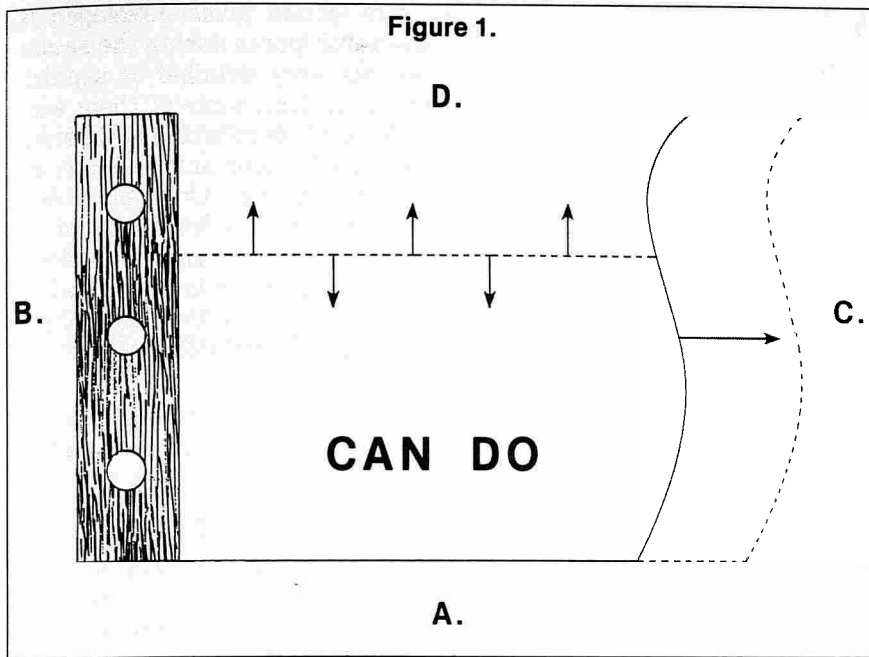
At the General Electric Management Development Institute (Croton-on-Hudson, N.Y.), we've taken a close look at this problem, particularly at the foreman and first-line supervisor level. We've found, for the most part, that managers "box" themselves in. Their own perceptions of the constraints surrounding them keep them from doing the things they would like to start doing or keep them from stopping some of the things they are now doing.

An interesting model was developed by Bob Harper and Ned Herrmann, members of the Professional Development Operation Staff, for the GE Motivation Workshop (see Figure 1).

Wall A of the "CAN DO BOX" is a fairly rigid wall. It consists of basic policies, practices, procedures, budgets, etc., by which the business is run. They are, in effect, real limits on what we can do and they are generally set by upper management.

Wall B of the box is like reinforced concrete. These are the

Figure 1.



super constraints — the edicts — which come down from upper management: The “no head-count increase” edict; the “10 per cent reduction in budget” edict, etc. Bucking these is like running full tilt into a concrete wall.

Wall C is a little different. You might liken it to a silicone-rubber membrane. From inside the box, it looks solid but, if you push on it, it gives . . . it's flexible. These are the everyday operating policies, practices, procedures and interpersonal or intergroup relationships.

Wall D is a very unusual wall. In effect, it is illusionary or all in our minds. These are the constraints we impose on ourselves . . . our “ogres.” These are partly based on facts but are greatly embellished by our imagination of dire consequences. “*They* won't let me do it” . . . “If I did that, I'd have the union on my neck in no time flat” “I did that a couple of years ago and, boy, did I get slapped down.” The area within these walls is the area within which we personally operate — where we feel we CAN DO the things we need to do to function effectively. However, these walls or constraints, real or imagined, box us in — limit our effectiveness — many times, unnecessarily. But, we *can do* something about it . . . two walls of the box are movable!

In the General Electric Foreman/Supervisor Program, we've developed a three-hour module around this idea of constraints called “Increasing Personal Effectiveness.” The primary objective of this module is to help foremen and first-line supervisors feel more comfortable about the idea of testing their constraints to see how “real” they really are. To make this session as “real world” as possible, the participants build on their answers to the question: “On my job, these are the things I would like to: a) start doing, and b) stop doing.” In small groups they share their answers, identify what is keeping them from doing these things (the constraints), and locate the constraints on one of the walls of the CAN DO box, i.e. — non-flexible (can't do much about it); edicts (no way can I get around it); flexible (I can influence or change it); or, self-imposed (it's all in my mind).

“Joshua In a Box”

A very interesting film is used to help “tee-up” this kind of thinking. It's called “Joshua In a Box”, from Stephen Bosustow Productions. (By the way, the film and the CAN DO box concept were developed independently.) In the film, Joshua struggles to get out of a box, even to the point of smearing himself (on the concrete wall). He finally breaks through (on the flexible

wall) and gets out. But, his reaction to his new-found freedom is very interesting — it quickly changes from triumph, to anguish, to the rapid construction of a new box.

The typical reaction to this film is that Joshua feels hemmed in by organizational constraints and is fighting them. But, when he gets out, he feels very uncomfortable . . . perhaps even frightened by his freedom and develops a new set of constraints which will guide his actions.

The point we try to make with this film is that we can't operate without constraints but we need to know what these constraints are, which are the real ones, and which are the ones we impose on ourselves. When we analyze these constraints in the light of day, we generally find that there is more room for maneuverability than we realized.

The limits of perceived constraints can be tested — with minimum risk. By using questions such as those in Figure 2, anyone can quickly establish the real limits. In the case of the flexible and self-imposed constraints, it may require a willingness to experiment — to take a risk — to push a little on these walls and see what happens. Nine times out of 10, we find that they do give and that we can enlarge our CAN DO box.

The module carries this a step further. When the teams have identified their constraints and have them located on one of the walls of the CAN DO box, they make flip-chart reports to the class. Following the reports and a brief discussion, each participant identifies four or five constraints (from the flip-chart reports or others suggested by the reports) that most apply to him or her. These are then rank-ordered starting with the constraint the participant feels would be easiest to influence or change and ending with the constraint felt to be the most difficult to influence or change.

Then in teams, each participant shares one constraint he or she would like to influence or change with the other team members. The team members offer suggestions

Figure 2.
TESTING CONSTRAINTS

RIGID CONSTRAINTS

- Basic policies, practices, procedures, budgets, etc.
- These are the basics by which the business is run.
- They are real limits on what we can do.
- Generally set by upper management.
- TEST

- Are these, in fact, real limits?

SUPER CONSTRAINTS (SPECIAL EDICTS)

- These come, go and change depending on conditions and manager.
- Usually temporary and short-term
- TEST

- Is "that edict" still in effect?
- Is it really an "edict"?

FLEXIBLE CONSTRAINTS

- Policies, practices, procedures, budgets usually associated with everyday operations.
- Interpersonal or intergroup relationships.
- Can differ according to manager or organization.
- We **CAN**, and many times **DO**, influence these.
- TEST

- What are the "real" limits?
- How much flexibility is there?
- What more can I do within the specified limits?
- Who specified the limits and why?
- Which limits have I generated and are they valid?
- How willing am I to experiment — take a risk?

SELF-IMPOSED CONSTRAINTS (OGRES)

- Generally based on attitudes, assumptions, perception and prior experiences.
- Partly based on fact but greatly embellished by imagination.
- TEST

- Which of my assumptions are valid?
- How does my prior experience relate to this situation?
- How much of this is FACT?
- Who are "THEY"?
- How do I **know** "THEY" won't let me?
- What can I do to get "THEM" involved?
- How willing am I to experiment — take a risk?

on what actions might be taken. When all have shared, each participant takes a few minutes to outline an action plan to influence or change the constraint. When the class reassembles, the participants share their action plans and receive additional suggestions and encouragement to put the plans into action.

The reaction of the 60 foremen and first-line supervisors who experienced the module during its

testing phase were eye-opening to say the least. Over 95 per cent of the constraints identified were located on the self-imposed and flexible walls. Many of these, as related by the participants later, were originally looked on as being rigid, nonflexible constraints. We expect the field results to reflect these reactions.

On the next page are some examples of the kinds of constraints identified.

The action plans developed by the participants during the session are not very detailed or sophisticated. In fact, some of them seem to be very simplistic and obvious. That isn't important. What is important is that they provide a starting point, a fresh look at the situation, which can be developed into a detailed action plan back on the job. Here are two examples of action plans resulting from this exercise:

- One foreman ran a three-shift operation and was very concerned about the intershift rivalry that existed. An example of this was when one shift skipped preventive maintenance procedures in order to meet its production schedule and the next shift ended up having to do it at the expense of their production schedule. Each shift was measured on their output and had a "I'm - going - to - make - mine - and-the-hell-with-you" attitude. The action plan: Look at production goals on a 24-hour basis rather than a shift basis. Instill common goals among the shifts and develop a helping relationship rather than a competitive one.

- Another foreman (a new woman foreman) had a situation where operators were taking extended breaks and her relief operators were complaining about this. Her action plan: two possibilities . . . 1) have the operators keep a down-time log noting the time they start a break and return or, 2) have the relief operators keep a log noting what time they relieved an operator and for how long.

These particular action plans were suggested by other members of the class who had success with them. Implementing these plans involves the risks we take when we push on the flexible and self-imposed walls. The payoff potential, however, probably far outweighs the risks taken.

This is an exciting module, and one well worth the small risk of encouraging foremen and first-line supervisors to test their constraints. The potential benefits to their company could be substantial.

Here are some examples of the kinds of constraints identified.

Things I would like to START doing:

Activity	Constraint	CAN DO Box Wall
•“Discuss company benefits with employees”	•lack of knowledge •against company policy	•self-imposed •self-imposed
•“Change employee evaluation procedure”	•employee relations dept. policy	•flexible
•“Be more firm with reprimands”	•adverse reaction from employees	•self-imposed
•“Re-evaluate labor rates”	•labor contract	•super constraint
•“Delegate more”	•boss •company policy	•flexible or self-imposed
•“Develop a more questioning attitude”	•look ignorant •get reputation of being a “nit-picker”	•self-imposed •self-imposed

Things I would like to STOP doing:

•“Saying ‘Yes’ to all requests”	•get reputation of being uncooperative •possible repercussions •peer pressure •demands by boss	•self-imposed •self-imposed •flexible •rigid or super
•“Doing nonsupervisory work”	•takes too much time to get someone else to do it •want employees to feel I’m working “with” them	•self-imposed •self-imposed
•“Making hasty decisions”	•production schedule •production pressures •upper management demands	•flexible •flexible •super
•“Doing so much paperwork”	•dept. requirements •can’t delegate it •boss	•rigid •flexible •flexible
•“Being overcritical”	•look like a weak boss	•self-imposed

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