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[Creative Constraint: Why Tighter Boundaries Propel Greater Results](#)



March 2, 2011 by [Karen Hough](#) 8

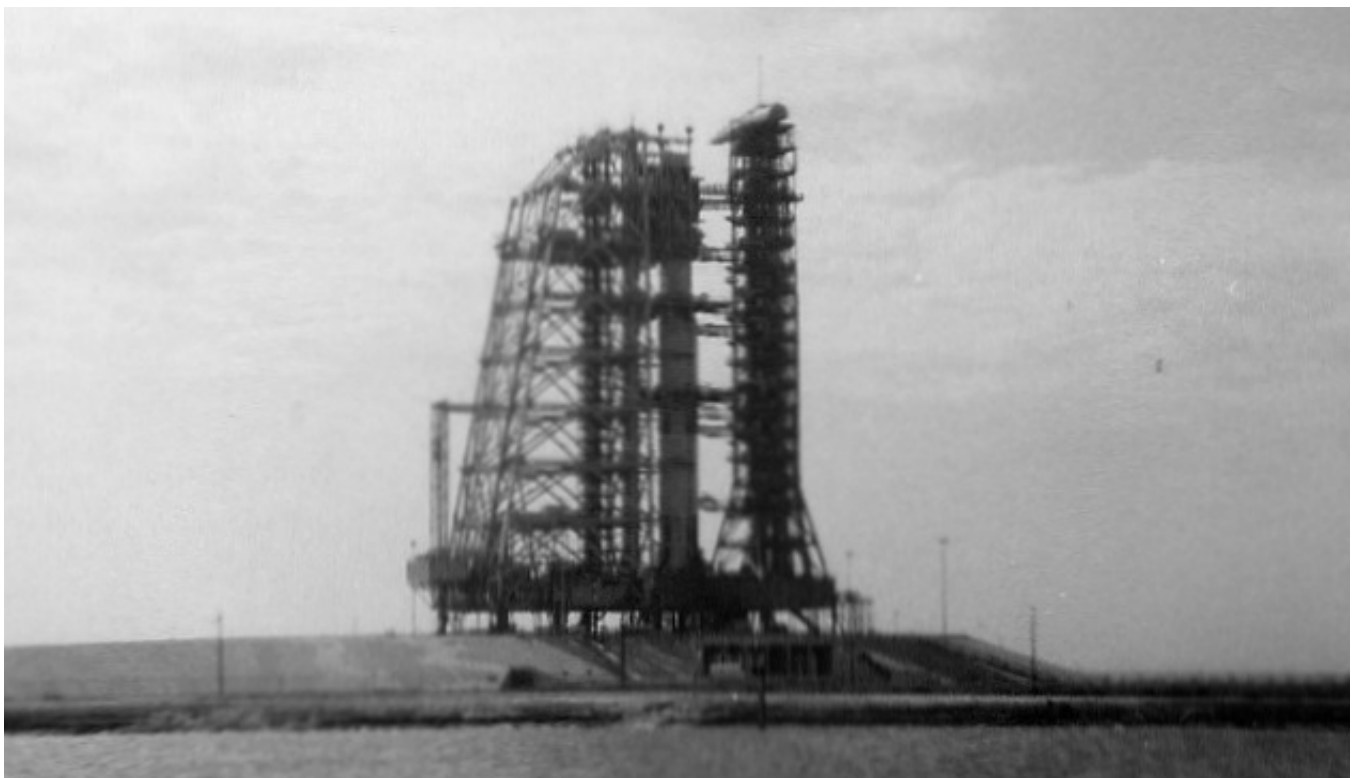
Karen Hough is the Founder and CEO of ImprovEdge and the Author of [The Improvisation Edge: Secrets to Building Trust and Radical Collaboration at Work](#) published by Berrett-Koehler. She speaks internationally and writes on negotiation, leadership, sales, and presenting with impact, and is the recipient of the Athena Award for outstanding woman-owned business.



Where do great ideas come from? Many of us imagine creativity comes from an environment of boundless possibility — no rules or restrictions. We also have a stereotype of “creatives” — they work in studios rather than office buildings, wear jeans instead of suits and are filled with endless creative solutions.

But why should creativity be the province of a totally open environment or a certain type of person? We falsely think that if our world or profession is constrained, we cannot enjoy wild creativity. That isn't the case. Here are some examples and ways that you can make creative constraint work for you and your business.

The Benefit of Boundaries



It sounds counter-intuitive, but boundaries can actually boost creativity. Think about procrastination — deadlines

are often the single factor that ensures projects get done. As Dave Gray commented [on his blog](#), “Creativity is driven by constraints. When we have limited resources — even when the limits are artificial — creative thinking is enhanced. That’s because the fewer resources you have, the more you are forced to rely on your ingenuity.”

When there are no boundaries, the possibilities may seem too large. That’s why some of the greatest art and innovation has come from a situation of constraint.

In 1970, Apollo 13 went on a lunar mission. The launch was successful, but a fault from inside the space module caused an explosion that turned the exploration into a test for survival for the crew. Carbon dioxide exhaled by the astronauts began to build up in the module. On the ground, an engineering team had to figure out a way to clean the air with only the equipment on board and very little time. It was the unbelievable constraints and the pressure of lives at risk that drove them to a totally unexpected solution. They figured out a way for the command module’s square air cleaners to be used in the lunar module’s round receivers. Who says a square peg can’t fit in a round hole?

Improvisation



Improv provides a perfect template for creating more with less. Improvisational performers see a dearth of resources — like a script, props or costumes — as a golden opportunity rather than a problem. Good improvisation also follows unspoken rules: You must accept all contributions, you must justify anything that’s introduced on stage, and everyone must participate. Yet by adhering to these boundaries, improvisers know they can be wildly creative in all other ways.

While “improv” seems to imply the absence of constraints, most scenes have to be based around suggestions from the audience. These constraints are what make improv both so enjoyable and so creative.

In many instances, boundaries are an unavoidable fabric of a person’s life. A *Newsweek* [article](#) discussed the effects of hardship on children, and how it may have fueled their success as adults. “Highly creative adults frequently grew up with hardship. Hardship by itself doesn’t lead to creativity, but it does force kids to become more flexible — and flexibility helps with creativity.”

Resiliency makes people less afraid of mistakes. Resilient people continue to try, fall down, stand up and try again. Each time they take a new tack, they try more and more unconventional possibilities. Boundaries don’t defeat them — boundaries inspire them to keep trying other options.

Applying It to Your Business

So how does this apply at work? My company once worked with the distribution leadership team of one of the largest retailers in the U.S. We were tasked to stretch the thinking, strategy and creativity of the group. We found that the executives could be lazy in their brainstorming. This was around 2003-04, and they had gigantic budgets, huge numbers of employees and seemingly endless resources. You would think that with that surplus, anything would be possible. On the contrary, they seemed to care very little for innovation, since the entire enterprise was fat and happy.

In our practice exercises, we imposed ridiculous boundaries of time and money on them, and demanded high-level outcomes. For example, we asked them to light an entire warehouse with only one light bulb, \$5 for supplies and two hours to work. Or we asked them to take a high school juvenile delinquent and make him/her able to run a new division of their company in 48 hours or less, with a \$100 budget. I finally saw them lean in, work hard, and come up with a few really startling ideas — but only because they were forced to.

When constraint becomes mandatory, we suddenly have to recalibrate how we work. The economic downturn has forced us to realize that business will never, ever be conducted in the same way. We have to be more innovative, leaner, faster and smarter. From this difficult time, companies have started collaborating with former competitors, created unforeseen relationships with their clients through social media and created products that are better, yet cheaper. They’ve discovered creative ways to address unexpected constraints.

So the next time a situation just seems too hard, too locked down, and surrounded by boundaries, think like an improviser. This could be your best opportunity for a creative solution.

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6 Comments

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1.  [Razak Issah](#)


You are right and that is a very good article. We provide our creative in tight constraint when it seems either impossible or difficult to attain. If we were to have all the room we might wish for and produce something there isn't much creativity employed.

[March 2, 2011 17:26:00 Reply](#)
 2.  [George Aspland](#)

As the founder of a VC backed startup, I definitely think that monetary constraints light a fire under the founders. In fact, I've seen companies that raised too much money squander it on bad hires and wasted R&D. Having just enough resources to reach your goal often ensures that founders focus on the bare essentials to make their business a success.

<http://blog.salestie.com>

[March 2, 2011 17:43:00 Reply](#)

 - o  [Karen Hough](#)

I couldn't agree more. I was in the middle of one of those "squandering" start-ups in the late 90's internet boom, and it was unnerving to watch the money seep away without purpose. Especially since that was early in my business career, and I was not the recipient of any of the excess! When the start-up was eventually bought, and they came under stricter management, everything improved.

[March 3, 2011 00:53:00 Reply](#)

3.  [Hjaras Hjkkar](#)

Nice article.....boundaries safe people.....its nice logic.....dailynews1001.blogspot.com

[March 2, 2011 18:16:00 Reply](#)

4.  [charlesday](#)

This is a timely subject, particularly given the President's focus during his State of the Union on: 'winning the future.' There are, I think, some very practical steps organizations can take to harness their creativity. Here are 11 that in my experience will produce measurable results.

<http://www.thelookinglass.com/blog/2011/2/23/11-ways-to-harness-the-creativity-in-your-business.html>

[March 3, 2011 01:46:00 Reply](#)

5.  [Michael Cummings](#)

Not only constrains. Constraints, yes, and freedom too. Not all loose or all tight: loose/tight, balanced just right. Like a good building: able to stand, hold, remain, and flex, bend, give as necessary. Or hadn't you heard of The Power of Limit

[March 4, 2011 05:02:00 Reply](#)