
CHAPTER 2

Don't Fence Me In

Clint was a 35-year-old sales professional with a captivating smile and a firm handshake. His enthusiasm made a lasting impression on the people he met, and his communication skills were quite strong. Also to his credit, Clint had a memory like a steel trap. Months or even years later, he could remember faces, names and facts with remarkable detail—a valuable asset in the world of sales. Combining that ability with his natural charisma, he had a real talent for snagging great job offers wherever he interviewed. His resume featured an impressive parade of Fortune 1000 firms as previous employers. However, the unusually long length of that parade hinted at a serious problem.

Clint struggled to remain employed with any company for more than a year. In fact, he spent the better part of his career changing jobs, industries and even states. At first glance, that nomadic employment behavior seemed odd for someone with such obvious skills and a proven history of sales success. He consistently met or exceeded his assigned sales goals, and he usually developed great rapport with his co-workers and staff members. So why did all of these blue-chip companies hand Clint a pink slip if he didn't run for the door first?

Buoyed by his ample self-confidence, Clint seemed to believe the value he brought to each employer gave him permission to bypass the companies' written *and* unwritten rules. He didn't feel the need to follow the Purchasing department's procedures for turning in expense reports. He skipped the company picnic because that would infringe on his personal time. And, despite the standard for business-casual attire, he sometimes showed up at the office wearing shorts. He was the employee who would sit down to craft a detailed memo to the CEO pointing out the flaws in the latest company policy. According to Clint, it was his job to shake things up. Even his *duty*. And seriously, what difference would it really make if he didn't attend the team's off-site social gathering? As long as he was exceeding his sales goals, everything else should be irrelevant. Needless to say, Clint felt very comfortable with his color-outside-the-lines approach.

Clint's managers initially agreed. They tried to cut him some slack because of his exceptional performance. At least for the first few months. Although his sales figures did produce the "wow factor," his supervisors soon grew weary of his "rules don't really apply to me" stance. While every other employee considered corporate procedures and events to be mandatory,

Clint viewed them as optional. He felt and acted like an exception to every rule.

That attitude became an uphill battle for which Clint's managers quickly lost the enthusiasm to fight. Whatever benefits he brought to the company were just not worth the trouble of trying to get him on board with policies or directions handed down from senior management. And before long, Clint was busy sending out more resumes once again.

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Perception Disconnect

Clint suffers from what I refer to as *Don't Fence Me In* syndrome. This professional blind spot affects those who are often quite successful but habitually resist what they perceive to be the cruel constraints of authority—unnecessary rules that limit their individuality, their creativity and, most of all, their freedom. These are the people who perform well but hit a major roadblock when it comes to following the standard procedures. If they are “ordered” to do something, they instantly feel emotionally claustrophobic.

If Clint were a cowboy, he'd essentially be saying: *“I'm happy to compete in your rodeo, and I'll probably win. But you need to find some new judges, because the current ones are incompetent.”*

And your arena is way too small, so I'll be participating in the big open pasture two miles down the road." No thanks, cowboy. This rodeo will be just fine without you.

Those who are plagued by *Don't Fence Me In* syndrome seem to struggle with the fact that business is a game. Assuming they want to be employed and earn a paycheck, they've chosen to play the game. So—like it or not—they need to follow the basic rules. Certainly, no one is suggesting that companies would be better off with an army of cookie-cutter, order-following Stepford wives for employees. Creative thinking is critical for companies to gain a competitive edge and differentiate their products and services in unique ways. On the flip side, every business has certain “rules of engagement” that define its corporate culture and provide a proven structure to support the next great innovation. You can't play Monopoly if someone throws out the board.

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Corporate renegades like Clint are typically quick to identify the *external* factors that have plagued their careers, from lousy supervisors to preposterous corporate strategies. From Clint's perspective, he would rather move on than be forced to work within the parameters of such narrow-minded leadership. Clint believed that taking a stand against corporate policies and customs demonstrated his leadership and ingenuity, but his managers simply perceived him as difficult and defiant.

Highly productive and innovative?

PERCEPTION GAP

Or rebellious and uncooperative?

If you think you might have a tendency toward *Don't Fence Me In* syndrome, give some thought to why you consciously (or subconsciously) resist authority and bristle at the idea of playing by the rules. Does this pattern reflect some lingering resentment from your past and perhaps an unfulfilled quest to express your independence? Were you permanently scarred by the personality style of a dominant or ineffective manager? Or—*prepare for a potentially awkward moment here*—does your ego simply get a bit carried away because of your superior performance? Exploring these possible causes may help you become more effective at managing your leader-resistant responses.

People who fall into the *Don't Fence Me In* category should begin to think about the structure and norms of business in a new way. Just because you follow those basic rules doesn't mean that you are being smothered by authority or shamelessly catering to office politics. Playing the game is a smart, savvy way to get ahead...not a humiliating, white-flag-waving surrender. Making that critical shift in thinking is one of the most important steps you can take to begin changing your reputation as a rebel among supervisors and managers.

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It may also help to look at the game of business from a broader perspective. Together, you and your company are battling the competition. You're on the same side rather than being opponents. Will your actions or advice support your company's ability to succeed (and, coincidentally, its ability to pay your salary)? Or are you throwing a giant wrench into the well-oiled machine just to watch the sparks fly? While you are on the payroll, your success and your company's success are solidly intertwined. Remind yourself: *it's a teamwork thing*. And as the old saying goes, you don't want to cut off your nose to spite your face.

Unlike an exasperating teenager who argues for the sake of arguing, professionals with *Don't Fence Me In* syndrome may actually have noble intentions. They often believe they have a valid and even valuable purpose behind their conflicts with authority. They may even feel an obligation to share their viewpoints for the greater good of the organization. Without a doubt, successful companies need employees with innovative ideas and the confidence to share them. But in the midst of following these good intentions, the central issue with this blind spot emerges. People with *Don't Fence Me In* syndrome have trouble determining exactly *how* or *when* to provide their input gracefully.

Start by determining whether you should actually voice your objection in a particular situation. Will you be viewed as

attacking a non-negotiable rule or process? Are you genuinely striving for innovation or simply asserting your dominance? Are you championing a fresh idea or just trying to get your own way? Can you make accommodations to support your team without sacrificing your beliefs or personal time?

If you decide to speak up, find out who should actually receive that input and investigate the optimal format and timing to share the information. Make sure that you provide your comments in a way that feels positive and supportive (rather than forceful and adversarial). While there are no specific guidelines for disagreeing with a cultural norm or tradition, you can develop a basic strategy for responding with more finesse.

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The key is to recognize that fine line between providing helpful suggestions and creating unnecessary diversions from standard protocol. When a corporate team is distracted, performance and productivity take a huge nosedive. Keeping a tighter rein on your nonconformist tendencies may be one of the best ways to help your team generate better results. And should you decide to offer a dissenting opinion, pay very close attention to how you go about it.

PERCEPTION 9-1-1

Five Fast Fixes for Don't Fence Me In Syndrome

- 1. Reframe the picture.** Look at following the rules and taking orders in a different light. You aren't being *forced* to change; you are *choosing* to play the game with a different strategy—one that will ultimately be more successful.
- 2. Go with the flow.** If you notice a pattern of objecting to anything and everything, step back. Do you really disagree with an idea or concept? Or is saying “no” a habit that helps you feel more in control of the situation and less restricted by the people in charge? If it's the latter, remind yourself to be flexible.
- 3. Ignite your team spirit.** In the game of business, you and your company are wearing the same jerseys. For the good of the team, focus on working together to achieve your goals rather than constantly fueling your flair for individuality.
- 4. Study the stars.** Find the people in your company who are playing the game well—adhering to the cultural norms yet still differentiating themselves as high-potential leaders. In what situations do they speak up to challenge an assumption? And how do they do it? Watch closely and take notes.
- 5. Tiptoe through the minefield.** When you do feel the need to disagree, tread lightly. Express your opinions to the right person at the right time. Thoughtfully select your words and tone. Position your objections in a way that demonstrates your concern for the company's best interests.

Clint's Call for Help

After Clint parted ways with yet another employer, his frustration level reached new heights. One of our mutual friends gave him my name and suggested he contact me for an objective look at his bumpy career path. As we sat down at the conference table for our first meeting, he cut right to the chase with one simple question: *"Why does this keep happening to me, over and over again?"*

I asked Clint to describe what led up to his departure from the last few companies. His response included a stream of vivid details about power-hungry supervisors, clueless management teams and inane corporate policies. He seemed particularly annoyed with the occasional requests to participate in after-hours events that infringed on his own free time. There was an obvious theme running through Clint's tumultuous career: his defensive posture toward taking directions from his superiors and adapting to company rituals. He had a classic case of *Don't Fence Me In* syndrome.

Clint was so sensitive to being controlled that virtually every action and decision he made was colored by how he could avoid being managed. If he followed the rules, he felt like a disappointing suit sell-out.

When we discussed the possible reasons behind his hair-trigger resistance toward anything that threatened his autonomy, he immediately talked about his first job out of college. He explained that he worked for a man who had a real zest for climbing the corporate ladder. Clint viewed this man as inordinately

demanding, as well as condescending. While many people feel taken for granted by their bosses at some point, this sounded like a constant drain on Clint's professional self-esteem. After 16 grueling months, he walked out and vowed never again to be controlled or abused by another employer.

Following that experience, Clint seemed to push back against anything and everything that even remotely seemed like a demand from upper management. To give in would be a sign of weakness and submission. Apparently that reaction became an automatic response for Clint. No matter where he worked, he couldn't seem to view a manager as a helpful guide and supporter. He only saw a threatening antagonist charged with keeping every employee confined to the company's prescribed "personality cubicle." He was so sensitive to being controlled that virtually every action and decision he made was colored by how he could avoid being managed. If Clint followed the rules, he felt like a disappointing suit sell-out.

With Clint's long history in sales, I wanted to show him the parallel between being a successful salesperson and being a successful employee. I first asked Clint to tell me about the techniques he used to generate new business and make a sale with a prospective client. He was quite animated in his description of the process: learning to "speak their language," demonstrating an understanding of their needs, gaining credibility, developing trust, and showing a sincere interest in helping them succeed long-term. He clearly understood that a good salesperson is very much like a chameleon, blending in and creating a sense of sameness that puts others at ease. My response was direct: if you are willing to mirror the values of a client's business to make the sale, wouldn't the same principle apply to your own company?

When Clint thought about it that way, he instinctively understood the idea. By respecting the culture, norms and traditions of his employer, he could build credibility and trust in a way that would enhance his career.

In one of our subsequent meetings, Clint and I talked about the difference between following the basic rules and losing all semblance of his individuality. I pointed out that the strongest branches on the tree are the ones that can bend without breaking in the fierce winds. The branches that refuse to bend are the ones that snap off quickly and get tossed to the ground. Being flexible and adapting to cultural norms are signs of strength and business savvy, not helplessness. We used some role-playing exercises to help him learn to identify when it was appropriate to push back against a cultural norm in a respectful way versus adapting to improve the end result for the corporate team. This was a new mindset for Clint, but I could tell he was beginning to make the shift.

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Shortly after that, Clint landed a new job and reported that he was applying the thought processes we discussed with positive results. He was using his external sales techniques on his internal clients. He was paying close attention to the strategies used by the company's top executives who worked within the accepted cultural norms yet successfully set themselves apart.

He seemed to be embracing the concept that his talents and skills could be fully utilized within the confines of the corporate structure and existing rules.

The last time I spoke with Clint, he told me that he had remained employed with that company for several years—the longest tenure of his entire career. He added that he was now starting his own business, and he was excited about the opportunity to establish the norms and policies that would define his new workplace. I felt certain that the same increased self-awareness that enabled Clint to be better managed would serve him well in his capacity as a manager and owner.

“Individual commitment to a group effort—that is what makes a team work, a company work, a society work, a civilization work.”

VINCE LOMBARDI
(Legendary U.S. Football Coach)

APPLIED SELF-AWARENESS

If your professional blind spot might be *Don't Fence Me In* syndrome, these action items will guide you through the process of making some positive changes:

- 1 Look for the root of the problem. Why does following the rules make you feel emotionally claustrophobic? Have you always balked at authority? Or when did that pattern begin? Understanding the cause of this blind spot will give you greater control over your inner rebel.

My Action Items: _____

- 2 Remember that business is a game. Adopt the mindset that you have chosen to play the game. Following the rules is a proactive strategy to help you win, not behavior being forced upon you at gunpoint.

My Action Items: _____

3

Find role models within the company who can successfully present unconventional ideas while working within the framework of the corporate culture. Follow their lead. If you are still struggling to identify the unwritten rules of the workplace, ask straight out.

My Action Items: _____

4

Develop a specific strategy for presenting different approaches in the most influential and effective ways. Use a cooperative tone rather than an adversarial one. Choose words that demonstrate your posture as a team player rather than a solo act. And make sure you share your thoughts with the right person at the appropriate time.

My Action Items: _____

5

Practice mentally working through authority-driven scenarios with productive results. Before responding to actual situations, think about those successful behaviors and communication patterns. Breathe. Count to ten. Whatever it takes to suppress your authority-averse reaction and substitute a more effective one.

My Action Items: _____

6

Challenge yourself to see things from your boss' perspective or the company's viewpoint. Consider the reasons behind the rules or regulations in place, and try to give the benefit of the doubt. Resist the urge to assume that someone is trying to take advantage of you or doesn't trust your judgment.

My Action Items: _____

7

Present a positive attitude (rather than a sense of irritation) when you attend after-hours events such as social gatherings or team-building exercises. View them as an opportunity instead of an imposition. Be ready to engage with your colleagues, and genuinely focus on developing stronger relationships. The connections you nurture in a more casual setting might just be the catalyst for getting to lead the big project or receiving your next promotion.

My Action Items: _____

8

Work on your impulse control. Identify the physical signs that you are feeling stifled by authority. Does your blood pressure go up? Does your face turn red? Does your breathing become more labored? If you sense the stress level is climbing, take extra caution to shut down the external responses that broadcast your discomfort (eye rolling, clinched jaws, exasperated sighs, closed body language).

My Action Items: _____

9

Enlist the support of a trusted colleague to offer real-time feedback. Ask this person to provide a subtle signal if you appear to be launching into an unnecessary, authority-focused attack.

My Action Items: _____

10

Consider a position or career that allows you to break away from a hierarchical structure and be your own boss. If you simply can't break the habit of championing unsanctioned approaches, you might find success and happiness as a trailblazing entrepreneur.

My Action Items: _____
