

Innovation Tunnelling

By Patrick Lambe

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Singapore has an innovation problem it doesn't yet fully recognise, and that is the dominance of the engineering mindset here. It's a theme I'll explore more fully in a subsequent article, but for now it's enough to notice that while engineers can be brilliant problem solvers, they can only address innovation in limited ways: as clearly defined problems, stable enough and specifiable enough to be able to plot routes towards a solution. And measurable enough to know whether you got there successfully. The result is an unambitious view of innovation as improvement rather than radical adaptation. A study we conducted early this year found that two thirds of managers here see innovation as a matter for incremental improvements rather than radically new ideas.

An additional layer to this problem is that the engineering mindset, pragmatic, resourceful and ingenious as it is, has been enormously successful in building modern Singapore. This success gives it authority. Its very dominance results in a special kind of innovation tunnelling – a lack of confidence about addressing innovation problems that are ill-defined, fuzzy, ambiguous, mutable. If you can't visualise a clear, measurable outcome, if you can't plot a course to a measurable answer, you don't attempt it. The celebrated Singaporean aversion to risk is not an aversion in the broadest sense: Singaporeans are not averse to calculated risk. Vague risk, they tend to avoid, for very good reasons.

It's unfortunate that the pressing need to build more diffuse innovation capabilities in Singaporeans is precisely in the domain of vague, fuzzy and rapidly changing problems, with unclear outcomes and dangerously incalculable risk. Singapore's dependencies are too broadly externalised to be able to rely on a buffer of internal market stability, and it cannot sustain a narrow focus on incremental innovation. It's a ship on an ocean, driven by winds that it cannot control. And this ocean is a bit stormy at present.

In brief terms, Singaporeans in general are especially good at convergent innovation where the goal is to focus and produce, but extremely ill at ease with divergent innovation, where the goal is to adapt and respond opportunistically, with relatively little supporting framework.

The Pressure to Converge

I saw this vividly in late August, when I participated in an organizational development workshop with forty other people exploring the use of something called Open Space Technology. Open Space is a method for holding meetings that are intended to open up and transform organizational communication and dynamics. It is deliberately unstructured. The dominant structure, if there is one, is the circle that participants sit in.

There is no itemised agenda, though there is always a positive, guiding theme to the meeting: how do we change our strategy to perform better in difficult times; how do we implement this organizational change initiative in a way that we can all live with; how do we frame a new mission vision and values for the next five years?

At the start of the workshop, the agenda is created by participants. Whoever feels strongly enough about an issue aligned to the theme is invited to create an agenda item, give it a timetable slot and place it into the marketplace. Once this phase is completed, participants sign up for the sessions they feel strongly enough about to attend. If nobody signs up for your session, it's not an issue, it doesn't get dealt with. If you have nothing to say, you say nothing. If you want to go drink coffee, you go drink coffee. Dangerous stuff.

On the morning of the second day, we had already rehearsed the basic steps. There was a growing sense of tension in the room, a palpable discomfort with the lack of perceived convergence in the way the workshop was conducted. For a while in the agenda marketplace, there was complete standoff. Nobody wanted to make a move. As a foreigner, I was thinking, why should it always be the foreigners or the designated leaders who have to take the lead? Some of the Singaporeans were thinking (they told me afterwards) – you see, this will never work in Singapore, we need structure and direction, then we can act.

The facilitator continued to patiently pace the circle. Slowly it dawned on us. If nothing happens here, each one of us will have made that nothing happen. We will have decided to make nothing happen. Each one of us. The ice cracked, participants stepped forward, started writing agenda items. And as the individual meetings progressed there was a sense of suddenly released energy as people took charge of their own agendas and topics.

In some cases, the release fell back into familiar forms: excessive structuring and dominant behaviour, attempts to lead the conversations too tightly. But more interestingly, where this happened, participants tended to drift away. We had all discovered our power to choose, and we had discovered our responsibility to participate where we could add value. If somebody else was diminishing our input by dominating too much, we took our value to another group where it could be more useful. We had discovered that it was possible (in Singapore) to create something meaningful out of an unstructured and essentially divergent approach to important themes that we all had a stake in.

Opportunities for Divergence

In mid-September a bunch of senior British executives traversed Singapore in a minibus, visiting companies and government bodies, to be sure, but also less common places: different ethnic communities, a dot com, an old folks home, a temple, and a yoga class. The visit was organized by innovation consultants working in association with a leading UK business school. This programme fosters innovation by taking senior executives from major corporations to new and unusual places, and asking them to bring insights back to

their own contexts. It's a deliberate attempt to counter the tunnel vision that results from lots of experience in a particular industry, combined with the dangers of seniority. When you're a senior executive, you get to define what you see, and consequently you see far less than you should.

Another British company, called 'What If!' has developed a range of techniques for helping companies recover their innovative spirit. One of the techniques they use is called building "freshness". This involves breaking patterns, routine and old habits of thinking, by introducing new stimuli and experiences. It could be as simple as taking a different route to work every day, as adventurous as shaving your head, or joining a band of African drummers for an afternoon. The store of new insights and perceptions thereby gained builds a resource that encourages alternative ways of looking at things.

Interestingly, it is here in Singapore that possibly the most sophisticated approach to divergent innovation is taking shape, directed at ordinary people as well as managers. From June through August, the National Library Board, supported by funding from The Enterprise Challenge, ran a prototype of a programme called Aspiration Pathfinder, with my firm Straits Knowledge as research and consulting partner, and forty human volunteers from several public sector organizations and a junior college.

Aspiration Pathfinder was conceived as an innovation capability development programme for individuals and organizations. It works on a simple principle: that we learn new things and build our potential for creativity through a combination of information, experiences, and encounters with people. Behind that, we are driven by the passion of our aspirations.

Aspiration Pathfinder is an ambitious attempt to harness the energy of our aspirations, and feed them creatively by exposing us to people, experiences and information. These build our ability to see the world in fresh ways, understand and acquire multiple perspectives, make independent choices tailored to what we need, and give us the confidence to step outside the zones of comfort and routine. A more comprehensive antidote to innovation tunnelling you could not imagine.

The prototype experienced all the difficulties you might expect. From the participants' point of view, there was a disconcerting lack of pre-defined outcomes, no direct linkages to measurable creativity improvements, disturbingly vague expectations about the impact of this programme on performance in the workplace. The adult participants found this especially difficult to deal with, particularly the participants trained in engineering, for obvious reasons.

Yet the prototype was also a remarkable success. The experiential elements of the programme included theatre workshops, kick-boxing workshops, visits to war memorials and spice gardens, cartoon drawing workshops, film viewings followed by discussion with a film critic, conversations with influential figures in the Singapore arts scene. The engineers, doubtful at first, became some of the most enthusiastic players and explorers.

As energy and participation grew, it very quickly became obvious that much of the value of this experience was being generated by the participants themselves, in their interactions within and between the events. The project's blending and facilitation of this mix of interaction, experience design, exposure to new things and supporting information was having a profound effect.

Many participants reported expansion of their horizons, discovery of new ways of looking at things, and an appetite for increased exploration. As one put it, "This stuff is addictive". The majority of participants said they had learned things that they could bring back and apply in their personal lives or at work.

One participant, at the close of the prototype, described the importance of the project from a uniquely Singaporean perspective. "From the start we asked ourselves what is the objective of this program. Actually, until today, I really don't know... And I think that is the strength of the program. It allows you to wonder, to ask yourself where is the connection. We will try to make the links to find where our aspiration path is. They didn't give us a rail, they gave us a trail."

Once more, the deliberate withholding of structure had pushed the onus for discovery and learning back upon the participants themselves. The particular magic of Aspiration Pathfinder had been to create a structural vacuum in the presence of rich and tantalising possibilities. The participants could not fail to be drawn. As one civil servant put it: "It makes you question. It makes you uncomfortable. It gets you out of your comfort zone and gets you cracking."

"Aspiration Pathfinder is like a pair of hidden hands opening doors to an alternative world of people and experiences." says Gene Tan, NLB's project sponsor. "Even if only one person emerges feeling, thinking and seeing differently, I think we would have done something worthwhile." Opening up perspectives, broadening the range of vision, and heightening Singapore's sense of what is possible, is no mean feat. Together with Singapore's superb pragmatism and finesse in the realm of convergent innovation, this could be a killer combination.

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