



INNOVATION is a common buzzword nowadays. We are told: innovate or die.

Many companies even embed innovation as a core value in their vision and mission statements, SIM included. We know that in this age of rapid and often unpredictable changes, innovating to stay ahead is imperative. Singapore’s next phase of growth will not come from our cost competitiveness, good location or infrastructure. It will be from our ability to quickly and continuously respond to changing rules of game; better still if we change the rules of the game – a surer way to stay ahead.

Likewise, SIM must innovate to remain relevant and differentiated. Recent examples abound of corporate stagnation and ultimate demise, from Kodak to HMV. When I talk to students about innovation, they are often enthusiastic. The most common questions they ask are the ‘how-to’s and checklists’ to becoming innovative. For organisations to embrace and encourage innovation, more than lip service is required. Putting in place a structure, system or process to drive innovation is important. So is leadership in setting the right climate and allocating resources and training people to support it. These are

indeed important and useful, but the mechanism of innovation can also become an end in itself. I remember our obsession with suggestion schemes and the chasing of Quality Control Circle (QCC) numbers in the early days of our quality movement. We often missed the spirit when we get so caught up in the means.

Surveys have been done to measure countries' abilities to innovate. Singapore scored the second lowest in terms of its self-perception of innovation. Of course, the United States emerged top but the most surprising finding was South Korea, which came in at the bottom. Surely, few of us would see Koreans as terrible innovators?

In contrast to self-perception, other assessments have shown Singapore to be doing quite well – often among the top 20 innovative nations in the world, definitely above average. Here's the irony: we are proud to tell the world that we are number one or number two in this or that. Yet, we often underrate our own ability to innovate. Perhaps we are hesitant to share our ideas for fear of how others will rate us and measure us against impossibly high benchmarks set by outliers like Leonardo da Vinci or Steve Jobs. But I think a more important reason is the way we understand or think about innovation.

### **Incremental, continuous improvement**

Innovation does not necessarily entail radically disruptive changes. It is also about incremental, continuous improvements. Most innovations are existing ideas or technologies, sometimes from different disciplines or industries, married to create a novel way of serving a need or solving a problem. Apple is a master in this. Arguing that not all innovations have to be totally new breakthroughs, some gurus believe Singapore has the potential to be a top innovator, contrary to our self-perceptions.

Hence, to students who ask “How can I be innovative”, my answer is: forget about innovation.

What I mean is, forget about thinking or expecting innovation to start as a magical creative burst. While creativity is important, innovation starts with a problem-solving process: understand a problem or need, find the most creative and effective solution, and, finally, implement the idea as a new or improved product, service or process. We need to shift our obsession away from the bells and whistles of “innovation” to focus on problems we want to solve, values we want to introduce, and new products or services we want to provide. In other words, by focusing on the desired outcomes, innovation happens naturally as part of the figuring out of how to get there.

The correct question to ask is not: How can SIM become a more innovative organisation? But more specifically: What does SIM have to do to get people ready for the new economy?

## **Torque of Innovation**

Each one of us can be an innovator in our everyday work if we make innovation our personal responsibility. If we see and understand the intrinsic reward for innovation, we don't have to wait for the organisation to incentivise us to innovate. We can prime ourselves to be innovative by adopting what I call the T.O.R.Q.U.E. mind set – a mind set that sets in motion innovation as a way of thinking and a way of life:

1. Keep in **TOUCH** with our customers' needs as well as shifts in the industry (our own as well as other industries) to ensure that we have a pulse on what is of real value to our customers and organisation.
2. Have an **OPEN MIND** and allow ourselves to be enriched by the diversity that different people, environments and life experiences bring. Stay curious and keep our mind stimulated and pliable to new ideas and opportunities. This richness of input will create a corresponding richness of output in our thinking.
3. Have a reasonable margin of **RISK TOLERANCE** to fuel the spirit of adventure in us. If we only want to stay comfortable by sticking with the safe and proven, we will never take a step into the unknown and know what exciting opportunities lie ahead.
4. Be willing to **QUESTION ASSUMPTIONS**. Assumptions that have worked in the past often become doctrinal truths. However, they cannot remain inviolable when circumstances have changed. We need to break the frame created by old assumptions and avoid groupthink. Question orthodoxy and think afresh.
5. The ability to **UNDERSTAND LINKAGES** between things seemingly unrelated is what drives innovative thinking. This depends on the diversity of the ideas and experiences that we expose ourselves to. Steve Jobs once said that the bigger our 'bag of experiences', the more varied the connections we can make between things, such as technology and the liberal arts.
6. Finally, be **Enthusiastic** about innovation. Passion and openness to others' ideas will in turn enthuse and encourage them to think differently. Ideas breed ideas and success breeds success.

Diversity is strength. We are one of the most multi-racial, multi-cultural and multi-lingual communities in the world. We have a rich "mind soil" for new ideas to take root. Similarly, there is diversity in SIM in the range of things we do, and among our staff and the wide profiles of students, associates, professional members and partners. We have what it takes to innovate. Are we undermining our confidence and conviction to innovate and as a result short-change ourselves? Or are we bold and confident, believing that each one of us can make a difference, no matter how small? – *November 2015*