



From an innovation point of view, the new bike-sharing phenomenon arguably provides an opportunity to appreciate the power of divergent thinking and doing, which can be a catalyst for creative value creation. ST PHOTO: ALPHONSUS CHERN

Bike-sharing chaos and out-of-the-box thinking

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"I want to ride my bicycle... I want to ride my bike... I want to ride my bicycle... I want to ride it where I like." Although a bit dated, these lyrics (which originate from the song Bicycle Race released by British rock band Queen in 1978) came to my mind recently when I observed the clumsy attempts by a fellow baby boomer to master one of these new bikes-for-share which have popped up all over the island - almost overnight.

Many of us have seen them "standing around", and there is intense coffee-shop talk about the need for proper bike rental etiquette. "How could he abandon the bike here? So inconsiderate!" a commuter might think if a bicycle is left behind near a bus stop (or worse, if it is spotted next to someone's home - chained).

Rather than analysing now why people throw bicycles from HDB blocks (as happened recently), let us take a step back and analyse the new bike-sharing phenomenon positively from the perspective of innovation and creativity.

Just like Uber, Nespresso and Airbnb, the business models of bicycle-sharing companies oBike,

ofo and Mobike feature a unique customer value proposition which continues to propel these new bike-share services forward. (One day they might help to achieve the dream of a "car-lite" Singapore.)

The bicycles can be "parked" almost anywhere, and it is very convenient for another person to pick one up - provided it is functioning and safe to ride.

As a service innovation, bicycle-sharing systems help to solve the so-called last-mile problem in cities by enabling (some) people to move from a transportation hub to their final destination.

While I have yet to use this mode of transportation, having cycled regularly when I was younger, I am always pleased to see these colourful bikes "standing around" - often at places where we would least expect them. I have even made mental plans to use one of them to explore various interesting places near my office which depict Singapore's rich heritage. I do like them because they spice up our urban landscape a little. They symbolise a little messiness and creative chaos which, according to creativity experts, urban innovation hubs require in order to function well.

From an innovation point of view, this new bike-sharing phenomenon arguably provides an opportunity to appreciate the

power of divergent thinking and doing, which can be a catalyst for creative value creation in an environment geared towards greater entrepreneurial risk-taking.

In contrast to convergent thinking which is about finding the "correct" solution to a problem (for example, highlighting the moral obligation to "dock" such bikes at a docking station) or answering standard questions that do not require much creativity, divergent thinking and doing is a method which helps to generate creative ideas by exploring many possible solutions.

The distinction between convergent and divergent thinking can be traced back to the research works conducted by American psychologist J.P. Guilford (1897-1987). It is about spontaneity, out-of-the-box thinking and non-linearity - that is, an environment where "blue sky ideas" can emerge. Isn't that what the joy of cycling is about, at least if it is not too hot? Isn't that what our Singapore society, which is so well organised, needs in order to remain relevant in an era of VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity)?

Divergent thinking is often found among people with personality traits such as non-conformity, curiosity, and the willingness to take risks. So, could those "errant

cyclists", who seemingly do not care about returning their bikes in a "proper manner" (for example, at a docking station) and leave them wherever they wish, be labelled as "divergent users"?

While our common analytical (convergent) sense would tell us that these non-conformists must be disciplined, perhaps we can stop for a moment and conduct a little thought experiment so as to try and acknowledge the creativity potential of such "socially disruptive" behaviour.

One could put oneself in the shoes of a cyclist who might have found unexpected serendipity (that is, a fortunate discovery by accident) during cycling while looking at a particularly beautiful cloud formation. Spotting several "abandoned" bikes in a park might imply that this particular spot may have served as an urgently needed resting place for exhausted, sweaty and dehydrated bikers - and perhaps indicating the potential demand for a pop-up drink stall and/or a pop-up shower facility in this particular space or community.

While these scenarios may sound unrealistic, "thinking divergently about cycling" may help to drive home the point that we should, from time to time, question our routinised, convergent ways of thinking in order to appreciate the power of transformational,

out-of-the-box thinking which is critical to make innovation work. In that sense, one may also applaud the creative business behaviour of bike-share companies which are strategically placing their bikes at the least expected of locations, to encourage the public to use them.

While getting out of the box may be risky because "the boss might not be pleased!", remaining inside the box all the time is hardly an option in an era of big bang disruptions. Coming up with new actionable ideas is paramount to kick-start innovation.

Coming back to the theme of "improper" bike rental etiquette (within the confines of the law), one may go a step further and argue that such perceptions are outcomes of our own tight mental boundaries. Out-of-the-box, divergent thinking can open up new ways of perceiving reality and help to develop more creative ideas, which in turn can give us a competitive edge in differentiating ourselves and the organisation we work for. Going against some of the accepted ways of doing things, as perhaps subtly suggested by Queen's Freddy Mercury in his Bicycle Race song, might be one way of doing so.

Safety, of course, cannot be compromised. Leaving a bike on a footpath and blocking a wheelchair user who is unable to push it away is unacceptable. So, one's "divergent behaviour" should not be at the expense of another person's safety. Also, abandoning a malfunctioning bike "divergently" on a grass patch (and thereby passing on the problem to someone else) would indeed be very inconsiderate.

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