

# FOSTERING CREATIVITY FOR BUSINESS

To grow its economy, Singapore needs creativity in the form of fresh ideas and perspectives, new business processes or even entirely new business models

BY KEVIN FITZGERALD

**T**HE debate about whether Singapore's education system fosters enough creativity – or not – seems never-ending. Recently, *The Economist* news magazine said: "It has the world's best schools, but Singapore wants to be better" – better meaning more creative. But are we not missing the point if we focus only on the education system? There is one area which needs a lot more attention when it comes to talking about creativity: the country's businesses.

But what does creativity for businesses – small or large – mean, exactly? It is easier to discuss the attribute in the context of music and art, but more difficult in the context of corporate culture. Ultimately, creativity means bringing fresh ideas and perspectives to the table, and that can take the form of new business processes or even entirely new business models.

To say it in Oscar Wilde's words: "An idea that is not dangerous is unworthy of being called an idea at all." And dangerous ideas are what companies need if they want to adapt to and thrive in ever-changing market conditions.

Grab, for example, initially started as a ride-hailing service, but has since branched into food delivery and even mobile payments – far from its original business proposition, but with great success.

## THE STATE OF CREATIVITY IN SINGAPORE

The University of Toronto's Global Creativity Index ranks Singapore as the ninth most creative country in the world, based on the 3Ts of economic development: talent, technology and tolerance.

While this is a great achievement, Singapore scored lower than expected when it comes to tolerance, which hinged on how accepting a country's people are of cultures, lifestyles, mindsets and ideas different from their own.

And does this not form the basis of creativity in schools, at home or at the workplace? Singaporeans need to learn to wholeheartedly embrace things that they may not be completely familiar with, and that fall outside their comfort zone. Without being tolerant and open-minded, we cannot come up with new and innovative ideas.

## WHOSE BUSINESS IS CREATIVITY, ANYWAY?

But being open to change can be difficult due to the constraints experienced by small business owners, many of whom I have worked with. In particular, a good number have told me that they lacked the manpower or money to challenge the status quo.

Thus, the Singapore government's support in these areas has

helped to move the needle. It has rolled out multiple Industry Transformation Maps to update – which often means digitalising – various economic sectors.

Financial aid, such as the Productivity Solutions Grant and the Enterprise Development Grant announced in last year's Budget, is part of this blueprint especially designed to equip our businesses with the tools to implement change.

Beyond government efforts, though, we need to see more urgency from local businesses themselves to get creative. This starts with the core of any organisation: its employees.

The first thing that often springs to mind is the playground-like offices of famous US technology companies that offer music rooms (LinkedIn), slides (Google) or hammocks (Facebook) – designed to make people feel creative and bear ideas which might even change the world.

But that is not the only approach. Companies need to find a way to make employees feel more invested in the work they do, day in and day out.

By creating a culture which encourages the contribution of creative ideas, supported by employee training to develop soft skills to help foster collaboration and a fluid exchange of ideas, organisations will naturally see employees start to challenge the norm.

## CREATIVITY REQUIRES A FINANCIAL CUSHION

Ultimately, no creative idea will change the world if it stays an idea.

Businesses also need the means to execute creative ideas in the first place: funds. This is a challenge that keeps small-business owners awake at night.

In fact, a Xero study found that nine out of 10 small businesses in Singapore have clients who pay late, which negatively affects their cash flow. If businesses struggle to break even, they might freeze non-essential business investments – which often includes those related to fostering creativity.

On the other hand, a healthy cash flow provides a financial cushion that allows businesses to invest and experiment. Luckily, entrepreneurs can increasingly turn to technology to help stay on top of cash flow, with features such as invoice reminders and online payment options working to reduce payment times for small businesses.

I welcome the current debate around creativity in Singapore – but let us extend it beyond education to other elements of our nation.

Admittedly, igniting a creative spark is no small feat, but in our ever-changing economy, businesses depend on it. ■

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