Be different — you can create an explosion

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There is nothing ordinary about the company I visited last month. At Google’s East Coast headquarters in New York City, I felt an air of fearlessness.

I was there for a networking session over a couple of days and was left completely in awe.

Behind the huge reception was a screen that displayed Google Earth. It was automatically configured to “fly” from the close-up of one landmark to another across the globe, including Google’s offices.

Then, as I walked down the corridors, there were whiteboards that had random ideas written and drawn on them — ideas people had put down as they passed by.

This is how it works: Someone puts down an idea first and people add to it. Once there is enough feedback, the originator has the choice to convene a meeting of all collaborators and take it further.

What an amazing way to brainstorm!

Some of the meeting rooms had no chairs or whiteboards but beanbags in the Google colours of blue, red, yellow and green spread around a low Japanese-style glass table.

Google thrives on a culture of non-conformity, and it is this culture that is touted by many as the reason behind its success. Google’s net worth is US$14 billion ($21.5b).

Maybe at a deeper level, the culture encourages people to be so different that even a nerd can flower into someone hip.

I recently read a column by Steve Robbins — a former columnist of Harvard Business Review — which emphasised the importance of this non-conformist culture.

He gave the example of a young man he had seen on a train who used to sport a goatee, wear cargo pants and several metal bracelets and necklaces. He used to carry a knapsack that proclaimed in handwritten magic marker: “Life is a verb, not a noun.”

Within a few weeks of his starting work, his goatee had gone on the recommendation of the well-meaning receptionist, his bracelets and necklaces were abandoned when a colleague commented on them and he started carrying a brown leather bag.

Life was turning into a noun for him.

The problem with conforming is that we love it. We like people who look like us, who dress like us, who care about the same things we do and who lead similar lives.

It is just like chemistry, where two molecules need to have attractive attributes to form bonds. But those with a different set of properties cause explosions.

Similarly, people who make the greatest impact in our world are those who take the road that is different.

Singapore, for example, has managed to be successful because it’s different from its neighbouring countries.

From the point of view of a student who has gained from the education system, I would say it is one of the big contributing factors to its success.

We dared to try things in a different way and took calculated risks. And we are still doing it now as an education hub.

Not only did we subsidise foreign students heavily, we managed to attract a variety of world-class institutions, such as the University of Chicago GSB, French business school Insead, to name a few. The latest arrival is New York University’s Tisch School of the Arts.

We find new ideas by interacting with people who think differently.

But being innovative is not just about standing out from the rest. To keep the brightness going, we have to cultivate the differences and then bring them together in ways that spark greater creativity.

Just like Google.

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