

■ You're a long-time advocate of design thinking. Can it be learnt?
 A: Yes, because human beings are naturally curious. You just need to awaken the curiosity to think about the other person: What does he know, what does he think about, what does he like that I do not know and which I can think about deeply?
 People do have that natural curiosity although organisations – because of fear of failure or the desire to exploit to the fullest what they are doing now – have the effect of stifling it or driving it out.
 ■ Can you give an example of how design thinking has made a company successful?
 A: Four Seasons gets to charge this huge price premium over all its competitors because it had an insight: It noticed that most people living in luxury hotels were not really happy with the experience. It realised that most people in luxury hotels –

Q&A: Sense of value a great motivator

except for those in holiday resorts – are there on business and have stayed in one luxury hotel too many. They long either to be at home – which is their nest and where their family or loved ones are – or at the office because that's where they have higher productivity, a personal assistant and their files.
 So while its competitors kept trying to have grander decor and ambience and obsequious service which made people even feel less at home, Four Seasons was the first to put shampoo in the shower, 24-hour room service because you raid the fridge at 2am when you have the munchies at home, a big working desk in the room, and secretarial service.

They decided they would make their guests feel like they're at home or at the office. It's all about understanding their customers in a different way and providing a unique and different service.
 ■ Research has shown that money does not necessarily motivate people at work. What does?
 A: Three factors. When they are valued as members of a community and it's a community that they value, and when they're valued by people outside their community.
 So if you're a valued member of the community of reporters in your newspaper, and you think it's a really good newspaper with a lot of good reporters too, and other people outside say, "Maybe that's

Asia's best English Language newspaper", then you'll be happy.
 But if everybody says you're a good reporter but you think all your colleagues are morons, or if nobody on the outside thinks anything of them, you will be less happy.
 ■ What is the value of a public apology by a leader if an organisation has made a mistake?
 A: A lot depends on the exact form of the apology. If you just said, "I wish I hadn't done that", I don't think it would carry much weight.
 But if it's: "I wish I hadn't done that and here's what I am going to do", then it would have some redemptive value.
 If I kicked you and said "sorry" but had my foot in the same position as I did before, you'll probably think to yourself: "He didn't move over a bit; he's just going to kick me again."

THE ST INTERVIEW

Design thinking offers firms an edge



Prof Martin believes design thinking, which bridges the gap between analytical and intuitive thinking, can be learnt as humans are naturally curious. ST PHOTO: ALPHONSUS CHERN

Influential management thinker and prolific writer

PROFESSOR Roger Martin, 55, is the dean of the Rotman School of Management at the University of Toronto.
 He received his bachelor's degree in economics from Harvard University in 1979 and his master of business administration (MBA) from Harvard Business School in 1981.
 In 2007, BusinessWeek magazine named him one of the 10 most influential business professors in the world. And in 2009, The Times of London newspaper listed him as one of the world's top 50 management thinkers.
 A strategy adviser to the chief executives of major corporations, he also sits on the boards of Thomson Reuters and Research In Motion.
 Besides writing extensively for newspapers and publications such as Harvard Business Review, BusinessWeek and The Washington Post, the Canadian has also published and authored several books including: The Design Of Business: Why Design Thinking Is The Next Competitive Advantage (2009) and The Opposable Mind: How Successful Leaders Win Through Integrative Thinking (2007). His latest book is Fixing The Game: Bubbles, Crashes, And What Capitalism Can Learn From The NFL (National Football League).
 He is a driving force in the push for design thinking, a creative form of user-centric thinking which bridges the gulf between analytical thinking and intuitive thinking. Analytical thinking emphasises quantitative facts and data; intuitive thinking embraces validity or leap of faith ideas.
 He was in town recently to give a series of talks organised by Singapore Polytechnic. The institution has set up a design-based education and innovation centre in collaboration with Rotman DesignWorks.
 He is married, with three children.

Vital to embrace change and try the untested, says management guru



By WONG KIM HOH
 SENIOR WRITER

OPEN your mind to design thinking if you do not want your company to have a limited life cycle or to lag behind.
 That is Professor Roger Martin's advice to corporate leaders and head honchos running businesses.
 The dean of the Rotman School of Management at the University of Toronto says: "If you don't do design thinking or something similar, you will drive yourself towards exploiting what you currently know how to do and not exploring new ways to do what you are doing better."
 Design thinking bridges the gap between analytical thinking, which demands hard data and quantitative research, and intuitive thinking – which embraces leap of faith ideas.
 It is a form of thinking which is geared towards delighting the user or customer, says the 55-year-old Canadian, who was

in town recently for a series of talks organised by Singapore Polytechnic.
 "It's focused on how you actually cultivate in an organisation the practice of thinking in ways that enable you to serve customer and user needs in new and better ways. And to keep on staying ahead by being able to meet those needs better than competitors, and making the changes that enable you to do that," says the author of The Design Of Business and other best-selling management books.
 Design thinking can be learnt because human beings, he says, are naturally curious.
 However, he says many organisations have the effect of stifling this curiosity or even driving it out of their employees.
 He blames this on an unwillingness to try out new ideas by people at the top.
 "Some are inclined to tell people in their organisation: 'Don't try to do new things but try to do the very most we can with what we are doing now.' If you get told that often enough, you would get stifled."
 It also does not help that many corporate leaders are petrified by the fear of failure.
 "The CEO who says I got to make the quarter better than the last is stifling himself. He'll blame it on the capital markets or the shareholders who would be so upset if he turned in a down quarter," says Prof Martin, who was hailed by BusinessWeek magazine in 2007 as one of the world's 10 most influential business pro-

fessors and by The Times of London newspaper in 2009 as one of the world's top 50 management thinkers.
 "But if he had gone to the shareholders and said: 'How would you feel if you had a couple of down quarters in preparation for a doubling in size?', I think the shareholders would say: 'Oh, that's fine.'"
 "But," he continues, "the CEO doesn't want to go through the hassle of the price going down and everybody watching whether it's true it's going to double in three years."
 Designers, on the other hand, understand that failure is part of the process in becoming great, he says.
 "Frank Gehry gets a lot of rejections but does it stop him from developing interesting buildings?" he asks, referring to the award-winning architect whose works include the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, the Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles and the Dancing House in Prague.
 "When presented with options, designers are inclined to look at multiple angles and consider different rationales. Business guys will look only at the net present value or the internal rate of return."
 But in a world which is constantly changing, the willingness to embrace change and try the untested is crucial.
 "It's a far-fetched hope that things would stay stable and so much the same that you don't have to explore new ways of doing things," he says.
 Breaking into a smile, he says: "After

being in business for over 35 years, I think one of the more fascinating things is the frequency of some kid in some garage taking on some enormous company – like an IBM or a Hewlett-Packard which has billions of dollars and resources – and beating them."
 There is a simple reason why this happens, he says.
 "Through the course of warfare, it has always been easiest to fire at a constant target. But if it's moving, it's harder to hit."
 "But if it's stable and you know that it's going to be completely stable for a long time, you can aim for it and say I can trump that. And there are just so many organisations and people who stop and just get surpassed."
 He believes Microsoft is one such company.
 "I see it as being walked around. Yes, they have a virtual monopoly on PC operating systems but what's happening now is, everyone's engineering around them."
 "No, they are not beaten by another PC operating system but people are saying: 'You know what, why do we need PCs the way PCs are currently configured. We'll go and get an iPad or an iPhone...'"
 A great designer, however, does not just listen to what the end users say.
 "There are people who think you should do market research to find out from customers what to give them. It's a real mistake to do that."

"What market research is for is to give you insights that help you create something that they would like. A creative interpretive process is the answer, not a direct translational 'I interviewed a bunch of people, I got these deep insights and out pops the answer.'"
 In governing, he thinks politicians, just like business corporations, would do well to engage in a spot of design thinking.
 He notes governments are often monopolists who tend to stultify and eventually destroy themselves.
 "The hardest thing is to be a vibrant successful monopolist. Monopolists have the capacity to not listen to or care about what users need, and that is one reason why governments or government agencies get into such trouble."
 He continues: "They may be inclined to say: 'The people elected us to rule so we shouldn't go back to them on every single issue.'"
 That sort of thinking can have disastrous consequences, he warns.
 "They did elect you to provide a service to them – 'Make this a great country in as many ways as you can'. This doesn't mean additional maths but enough to understand what's on their minds, what they care about, what they're thinking so that you can go away and think hard and visualise what you can do for them, try it, prototype it, and improve it."
 "If you don't, you are not delighting the customer."
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