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Have we become a template nation?

As systems get more complex, can we cope with the many moving parts — or do we fall back on set ways?



EUGENE K B TAN

Last week was not a good week for Singapore's brand of efficiency and reliability. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's announcement on Saturday that a Committee of Inquiry will be established to "get to the bottom of" the MRT service breakdowns, capped a torrid week not just for SMRT but for the country's public transport system.

This followed last Friday's announcement, belatedly, by the Ministry of Transport to appoint an expert panel to thoroughly review Singapore's MRT system, in particular the lines run by SMRT.

Last week alone, there were three disruptions: One on the Circle Line on Wednesday followed by the massive one on Thursday and a seven-hour disruption on Saturday, the latter two on the North-South Line. The most severe since the MRT started operating in 1987, the incidents are a tremendous blow to the Government's efforts to encourage Singaporeans to use the public transport system.

The service breakdowns raise concerns over whether our public transport system is able to cope with the increased commuter load and public expectations. The rail and road infrastructure has grown significantly in the last couple of years. Doubts now fester as to whether the relevant organisations, the people who run them and the systems and policies they have, have kept pace.

Last Thursday's rush-hour breakdown — in particular — raised a huge hue and cry because many passengers were, literally and figuratively, kept in the dark. Based on media reports, mass confusion prevailed on the affected trains, train platforms, ticket concourses and stations. Standard operating procedures (SOPs) did not work and SMRT staff seemed disempowered — awaiting instructions from higher up — to deal with the fluid situation.

To make a deplorable situation worse, SMRT Taxi's call centre sent a message to its cabbies informing them of the "income opportunity" at certain MRT stations due to the train service breakdown. The problem apparently had to do with message templates used by the call centre. But surely one does not need an SOP to tell one not to send such a message, given its blatant lack of sensitivity.

SUSPENDED INITIATIVE?

Have we become a template nation, one so reliant on templates that we suspend our sense of judgement, common sense and initiative?



Last week's MRT service disruptions raised questions on the capacity of the system to cope with the increased commuter load, given the financial and environmental costs our transport infrastructure and policies have already required. PHOTO BY OOI BOON KEONG

Templates are generally patterns or models serving as a guide to what to do in specified scenarios. They help provide for a consistent approach in similar situations. But they are, ultimately, mechanical patterns or models. They do not obviate the need for dynamic thinking and adaptation depending on the situation at hand. As always, context matters.

Given that the MRT system was already showing consistent and increasingly severe service disruptions, why was a system review not done earlier to identify, troubleshoot or even pre-empt problems in order to ensure that the MRT system is sufficiently robust in light of the heavier ridership and complexity?

After at least 27 disruptions this year, enough was enough. Transport Minister Lui Tuck Yew acknowledged on Saturday that there is some "instability" in the system.

This template culture appears fairly widespread. Media reports suggest that affected commuters were reliant on SMRT's bus bridging services. Many seemed at a loss at finding alternative ways of getting to their destinations or were counting on SMRT to do the necessary transfers; some were even desirous of fare refunds amid the congestion and chaos.

One hopes that there was not a "fixed template" operating in the commuters' minds as to how they ought to react to a service disruption. While one would naturally approach SMRT staff, it was evident the latter were overwhelmed and unable to attend to all commuters.

Given that the usual template did not

work, it was necessary to improvise. Failure to do so on the part of many commuters only added to their anger, frustration and disappointment.

WHAT EXPERIENCE TELLS YOU

This tendency of template reliance brings to mind the incident earlier this year when Singapore's drug enforcement agency, the Central Narcotics Bureau (CNB), reported that it had under-reported the number of drug abusers between 2008 and 2010.

The error in the statistical computation of drug abuser arrest statistics had occurred when the CNB moved to a new IT system. The revised figures showed that the number of drug abusers arrested for the period 2008 to 2010 was in fact on an upward, not downward, trend.

The under-reporting was not insignificant: Almost 24 per cent in 2008, 28 per cent in 2009, 37 per cent in 2010. Given the figures, one wonders how CNB officers could not have noticed that the figures generated by their IT system did not gel with the operational realities of more arrests being made and more drug abusers.

Was this another situation where the template of the IT system over-rode the reality experienced by the CNB staff?

INVEST IN WINNING TRUST, INSTEAD

Transport is and will remain a hot-button issue in Singapore. The high cost of car ownership, concerns over the affordability and reliability of public transport, and the increased incidence and severity of congestions on our road network are familiar gripes.

Yet they also raise pertinent questions of whether our land transport infrastructure and policies have extracted disproportionate financial and environmental costs, but have not helped move people as affordably, effectively and efficiently as they should. The MRT breakdowns add to the overall concern and unhappiness, and take away from the larger progress and efforts made to improve the public transport system in the past few years.

In reviewing applications for bus and train fare adjustments, the Public Transport Council is mindful of the competing needs of keeping fares affordable for commuters and ensuring the long-term viability of public transport operators. But the latter need is also intimately tied to the quality of service provided — Singaporeans' trust in the public transport system will depend on the level of service they get.

One hopes that all public transport stakeholders do not get caught up with making important capital investments and relegate to second place the need to invest in the "software" of people and mindsets so vital to a nation with aspirations of a world-class public transport system.

Let us put aside the template and mantra of being world-class — let us just aim to have an affordable, effective and efficient public transport system, one that moves the masses competently, seamlessly and rapidly. Only then can we talk about a world-class transport system. ■

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