



“Too much of what is called 'education' is little more than an expensive isolation from reality.” *Thomas Sowell*



Pulling back from the brink

Quick snap poll: Which businesses are doing well under COVID? (Answer: video conferencing, yoghurt, liquor and food delivery are all booming) Which ones are struggling? Spare a thought for [Airbnb](#) whose mission of “making the world your neighbourhood” came to a screeching halt in March, with \$1.5b of bookings evaporating. They wrangled a \$2b credit facility, offered to pay 25% of cancelled bookings to hosts — and then started to pay sharp attention to the world around them.

Founder CEO [Brian Chesky](#) noticed two things. Urban residents were searching for holiday rentals in neighbouring towns and cities, so they didn't have to fly. And people wanted to book entire homes, as travellers shunned hotels and their shared spaces. So the Airbnb algorithm rapidly shifted gears, offering people houses near their homes. So far, this has worked: by July, bookings were back to pre-pandemic rates. By August, more than half of bookings made were for stays within 500kms of the guest's location.

An exhausted Chesky said, “I made 10 years of decisions in 10 weeks” and is about to report a third quarter profit, a seemingly incredible result viewed from six months ago. And, watch out for Airbnb's public listing next month, where its likely valuation (\$30b) may be double what it was six months ago.

Question: What critical insight — especially from your customers — could dramatically turn a flailing initiative around?

Opportunistic public space

I went this evening to exercise with my personal trainer at my local sports ground, Princes Park, and saw something remarkable.

The threat of rain had sent dozens of wannabe athletes under the eaves of the giant stadium and people had applied their ingenuity to using every available part of the building. Rubber straps were attached to barred doorways. People were doing vertical hangs off rafters. Benches were used in ways their designers never imagined.

During lockdown our public spaces have been utilised beyond anything we've seen. There's even [a phenomena called 'burbing'](#), which involves walking or riding every street within one's 5km permissible radius.

Check out Melburnian [Ben Loke's interactive map](#) of his daily rides, by which he established that there are 1400kms of roads and paths in his 5km bubble. He completed every part of it in just 10 weeks of lockdown, using his hourly quote of exercise to walk or ride.

Question: What artificial constraints could you apply that would dramatically boost your detailed knowledge of something?

Radically honest public dialogue

How would you react to hostile criticism of one of your biggest initiatives? And, what if you printed the critique yourself? This is just what The New York Times is doing with one of its landmark initiatives — [The 1619 Project](#).

If you don't know it, the project was launched last year, the 300th anniversary of the first slave ship arriving in North America, and "aims to reframe the country's history by placing the consequences of [slavery](#) and the contributions of black Americans at the very centre of [the United States] national narrative".

Its critics claim this project is wrongly aiming to displace the July 4th 1776 foundation date of the USA, and is therefore 'revisionist history'. An entire school curriculum has been developed around the concept (to which Donald Trump said he'd defund any school that used it). So, you can imagine the vitriol this has inspired.

But, just last week, [Times columnist \(and Pulitzer Prize Winner\), Bret Stephens](#), published [a superb piece critical of his own masthead](#). He argues, “Journalists are, most often, in the business of writing the first rough draft of history, not trying to have the last word on it.

We are best when we try to tell truths with a lowercase t, following evidence in directions unseen, not the capital-T truth of a pre-established narrative in which inconvenient facts get discarded. And we're supposed to report and comment on the political and cultural issues of the day, not become the issue itself”.

Putting the specific issue aside here, this is a great example of public self-examination that would be a worthy model of any government, or organisation, wanting to better itself through honest and frank dialogue.

Question: How readily do you invite — and even publicise — criticism of yourself?

As always, please send me your feedback by email to ww@workwell.com.au. What topics or questions would you like me to write about in the future? Let me know!

Have a wonderful weekend, all.

Andrew



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