

Let people look out of the window

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There is an article [in the FT this morning](#) that asks how workplaces can foster creative people. The unsurprising answer is 'get rid of open plan offices'. Closely followed by 'stop holding useless meetings' and 'brain storming does not work'. Unless, that is, you want groupthink endorsement of mediocre ideas.

I agree.

The whole piece reminds me of the most paradoxical adverts I read. They ask for applicants from 'original and innovative thinkers' who are 'team players'. I am not saying there is no overlap between the Venn diagrams for these two groups. I am saying they are small.

This problem afflicts most sectors. The NGO and campaigning sectors are certainly burdened by it. Process, team play and structure seems to count for much more than the creation of solutions to problems. And I know business is cursed by it. And many aspects of university life too, come to that. And I have always railed against it.

A few years ago I was given an award for effective campaigning. In the minute or two I was given to note my thanks I gave praise to the Jospeh Rowntree Charitable Trust. They had the courage to fund me for five years to, as I put it, look out of the window. Which is what I did, and still do, quite often. Because inspiration comes from watching the world and wondering why it behaves as it does.

Few funders have that courage. Too many want defined projects with defined outcomes. This, bizarrely, is even true of academic research projects, where knowing the answer before you start is a very obvious advantage, I have discovered. No wonder we have remarkably little real innovation.

I now have a track record of innovation, and I hope over the next few days try write about my latest work that might justify this description being attached to it. But all the ideas I have helped create have happened by chance and have relied on my ability to go away and sit quietly to turn an inkling of a notion into something that looks viable.

That sitting quietly - and invariably on my own - is the essential bit. I've always worked co-operatively. And usually at some distance from those I am working with.

It does not make me anti-social. Or a bad team player, per se. I am utterly dependent on colleagues in almost all I do. But it does mean I innovate. And it's time that the world realised that space, time and the chance to just muse are an essential part of this. And sometimes it will look like I am walking the dog. But actually I'm solving a problem. And that needs funding, investment and support as much as the next team meeting.