

How NOT to collaboratively innovate in the water industry



How we can be outstandingly successful,
in fact world class, at **preventing** innovation

“This insight into innovation is one of the best I have ever read”

“A real must read for everyone”

(reader feedback)

Professor Tony Conway
with Professor Kamal Birdi
University of Sheffield

A short pamphlet
with **BIG** ideas
(a 10-minute read)

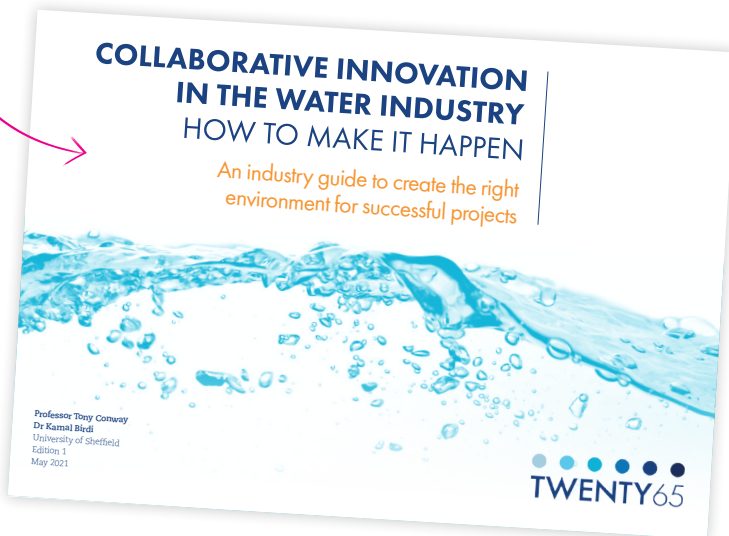
Sometimes we can learn from thinking about how NOT to do things

In May 2021 the Twenty65 Water Research Programme published an industry guide on how to create the right environment for collaborative innovation in the water sector.

Co-authored by Professors Tony Conway and Kamal Birdi from the University of Sheffield, it was called *Collaborative Innovation in the Water Industry – How To Make It Happen*.

Based on five years of research, the guide describes best practice by identifying key factors which enable successful collaborative innovation.¹

Of course, learning by understanding the best way of doing things is crucial. However, sometimes we can also learn by thinking about how not to do things.



Note 1: Download *Collaborative Innovation in the Water Industry – How To Make It Happen* using the link below https://figshare.shef.ac.uk/articles/report/Collaborative_Innovation_In_the_Water_Industry_How_to_Make_it_Happen/14635551

Note 2: Pamphlet *How NOT to collaboratively innovate in the water industry* published by Create Change Ltd ©Create Change Ltd November 2022

In this modestly irreverent pamphlet, the co-authors of the guide seek to shine a light on collaborative innovation by looking through the alternative lens of how to be “world class” at preventing collaborative innovation. This tongue-in-cheek approach has been warmly received, and feedback comments have included:

“Loved the way the requirements for innovation were turned on their head to make you think.”

“The humorous way of delivery sunk in more than if it was just presented as *this is how you should do it.*”

“Very well done, instead of instructing delegates Tony Conway gave them enjoyable comedic insight on what should not be done.”

“Great to inject some humour which helped draw attention on how to develop solutions that the sector are striving to create.”

We hope you find this pamphlet enjoyable to read, and the insight useful.

How to be world class at preventing collaborative innovation


How can we be outstandingly successful, in fact, world class, at preventing collaboration innovation, blocking change, stifling creativity and, if any new thinking survives, making absolutely sure that it isn't implemented, and doesn't make a difference?

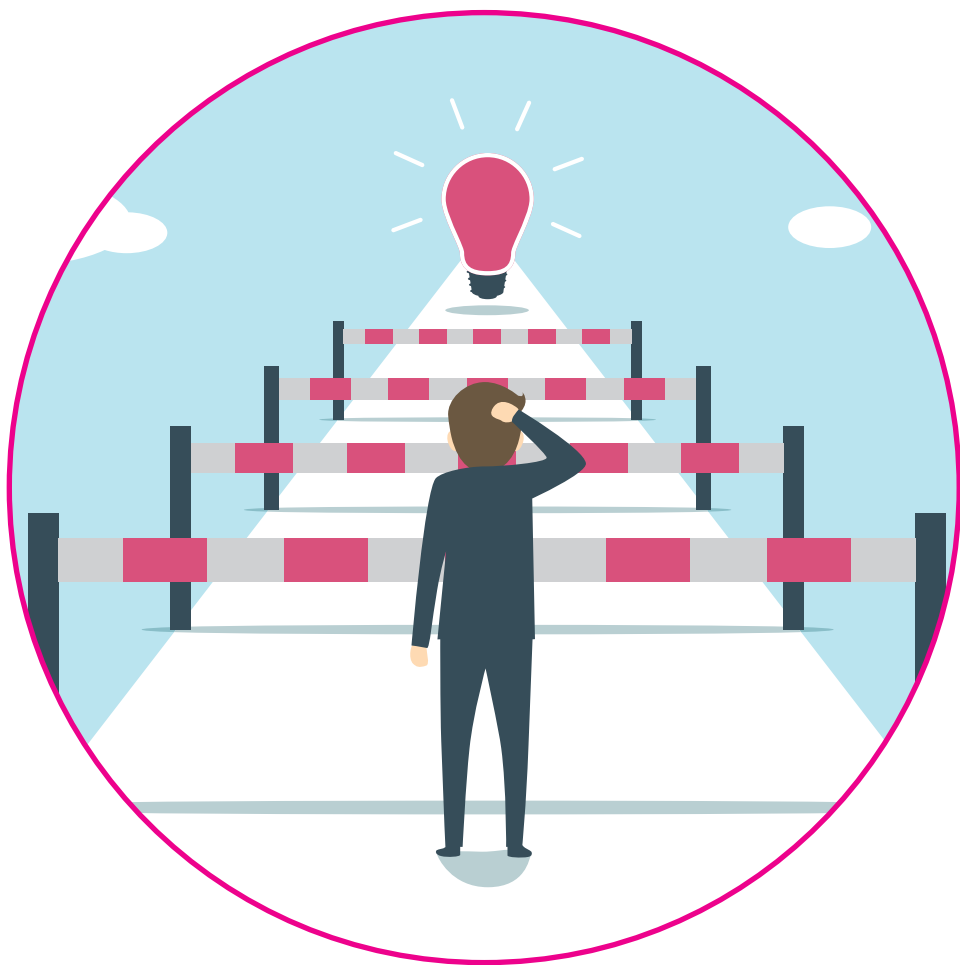
Dear reader, you may have already come across gifted individuals who possess the innate ability to thwart ambition, cage creativity, demotivate and discourage people and stop collaborative innovation in its tracks. These individuals paint a picture of role model capability.

If these skills don't come to you naturally, there is no need to fret, as help is at hand. In this pamphlet there are

**fifteen
tried and tested
Top Tips**

which will place weighty and extensive obstacles in the path of collaborative innovation, preventing any new idea from moving forward.





Remember — work the top tips, and the top tips will work for you

Top Tip
#1

Clarity of purpose

Be consistently unclear on why the innovation project is being pursued.



- Start the way you mean to go on, sowing confusion by being consistently ambiguous.
- Don't be clear about the problem to be solved or opportunity to be pursued.
- Similarly, always make sure that objectives and outcomes remain blurred and ill defined.
- After all, if folks don't know where the destination is, then how will they get there?
- Use generalisations – keep people guessing.
- Certainly, don't mention benefits, this will only give people a target to aim for.
- Never bring everybody together in a room and create a shared vision. This will only lead to people working in a joined-up way with a common purpose.
- That's something to be avoided at all costs.

Top Tip #2

Engaging people in the organisation

Raise peoples' expectations about their
ability to contribute to innovation –
and make sure they're not met.



- Don't forget, it's vital to raise expectations, and not meet them.
- A really good example here are ideas schemes.
- Announce the scheme with a big launch.
- Promise quick feedback on submitted ideas, with regular updates.
- Then make sure that the necessary infrastructure and resources are not provided to deliver feedback on ideas or updates.
- You'll soon be rewarded when the initial flush of enthusiasm is dashed.
- Let the ideas scheme collapse under its own weight.
- People will eventually think: "why am I bothering to put my ideas forward when I'm getting nothing back."
- Ideas will stop being submitted, and everybody will be left feeling demotivated. This is a great approach to hamper innovation and engagement in the long term.

Top Tip
#3



Integrated activity

Determinedly adopt a silo mentality towards innovation.



- **Most innovations need different parts of the business to work together, one way or another.**
- **But silos within organisations are not unknown – so make sure you use them to your advantage. Silos are our friends!**
- **From the outset, don't tell colleagues what you are doing. Keep it a secret for as long as possible.**
- **When other parts of the business eventually find out, its likely to be problematic!**
- **Perhaps your initiative is out of alignment with existing initiatives in other business areas. It may even be in direct opposition.**
- **If you tell them late enough, you may find they are over committed, and you can't obtain the support you need.**
- **With a bit luck, the whole innovation project will grind to a halt.**

Top Tip
#4

Building the team

Build a team that is more focussed on the present than the future, that think similarly, and have not bought into the concept of collaboration.



- **Let's be crystal clear – the aim here is to put a straitjacket on creativity.**
- **If you look hard enough, you will find people who are more interested in maintaining the present rather than exploring the future. These are just the people who are needed!**
- **They like talking about why things can't be done. If they have a vested interest in nothing changing, that's perfect, sign them up.**
- **Try to create a team who all think the same way, after all diversity of thought can only lead to new ideas and therefore progress.**
- **Always try to select the kind of people, who see the preoccupation and constant chatter about collaboration as a passing fad.**

Top Tip
#5



Leadership

Adopt a leadership style which leaves team members feeling uncomfortable to voice their opinion, and vulnerable or embarrassed to raise difficult issues.



- **The right type of leadership can play a massive part in preventing innovation.**
- **If you are naturally overbearing, domineering, lack any capacity to listen and are not troubled by the burden of possessing any emotional intelligence, you're off to a great start!**
- **Don't worry if you don't have these skills, as they can be learned.**
- **Remember to cultivate favourites in the team, and make sure everybody else feels left out.**

Top Tip
#6



Mutual trust

Take every opportunity to diminish trust between team members.

Constrain the opportunity for informal conversations to happen and relationships to develop.



- **Take every opportunity to prevent trust from taking root – weed it out!**
- **Instead, create a place in which it feels psychologically unsafe to say what you think.**
- **Remember that building trust means people have got to get to know each other.**
- **We all know this is best done informally, and some of the best ideas emerge through informal conversation.**
- **So, be sure that all communication is kept stiff, cold and formal, with all avenues for informal dialogue closed off.**
- **Also never forget the classic approach of destroying trust by consistently saying one thing and then doing another.**

Top Tip
7

Team organisation

Ensure that who is doing what across the team, and their mutual dependencies, are kept unclear, and remain confused at all times.



- **You have to keep people confused about how the team operates, otherwise they might make some progress.**
- **We have all seen teams who make being dysfunctional appear effortless! This is something to aspire to.**
- **If people do start cottoning on, announce a reshaping of the team, or introduce some new processes or procedures – that should throw them off the scent of making progress!**

Top Tip #8

Decision making



Ensure decision making processes are opaque, that decision making criteria remain undefined, and clarity on who the decision makers are is absent.

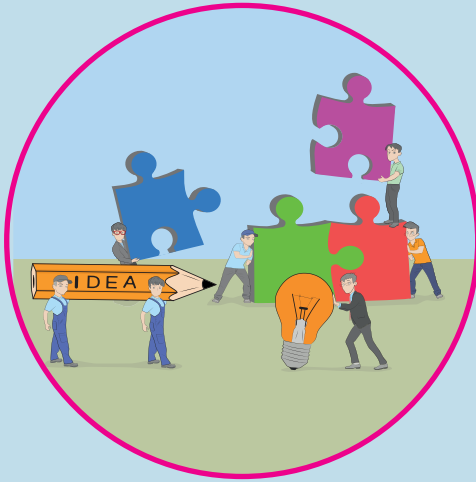


If a decision request sneaks through, keep on asking for more analysis, backed up by more data.

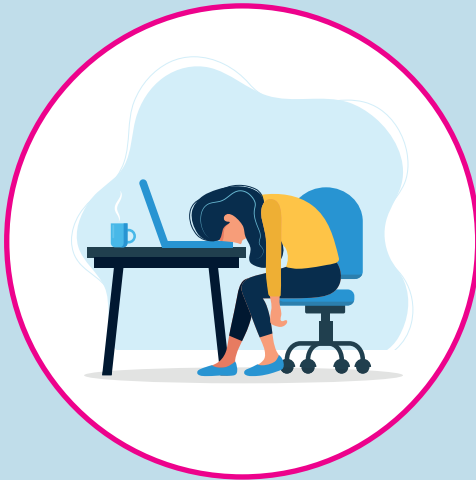
- **Making decisions is key to making progress. Clearly then, ways need to be found of preventing decisions being made.**
- **The easiest way to achieve our goal is to make everything associated with decision making as foggy as possible from the start.**
- **You may get the odd decision request sneaking through, but there is a solution. Just keep sending people away by requiring more research and analysis to be carried out, and more data to be collected.**
- **That should keep them at bay! Eventually they are likely to become so frustrated they give up.**

Top Tip #9

Resources



Deploy insufficient resources to enable innovation to move forward.



If you can't avoid releasing resources, make sure that the people involved don't have enough time to fulfil their role.

- **If you assign sufficient people to innovation initiatives, there is a real danger that the project may start making progress.**
- **So, make sure there aren't enough people in place to do what's required.**
- **And if too many people start getting involved, ensure that everyone with a piece of the puzzle never have sight of the big picture.**
- **If deploying resources is unavoidable, make sure that those involved don't have enough time available.**
- **Choose people already doing three jobs and ask them to look after the innovation initiative as a "side of the desk" activity.**

Top Tip
#10

Risks



Create comprehensive risk registers, and then never take any actions that actually manage and control them.



- **Turn risk management into a cottage industry, far bigger than it needs to be, with an abundance of forms to fill in.**
- **Put together comprehensive risk registers that soak up an enormous amount of people's time, keeping them away from moving the project forward.**
- **Remember, a thick risk register will get you through an audit, irrespective of whether the innovation initiative succeeds or fails.**
- **Most importantly, once the risk registers have been compiled, never look at them, and never take action to manage and control risk.**
- **Keep your head buried in the sand!**
- **By the way, never under any circumstances introduce a systematic stage gate review process. This might actually help the project make progress and is therefore to be avoided.**

Top Tip
#11

Communication and information flows

Establish team communication and information flows which are never timely, are convoluted and universally regarded as being of little, if any, value.



- **Effective communication is key to innovation, as one idea builds on another, with the work of one team member contributing to the work of another.**
- **So, having a timely, shared understanding of the direction of travel, current progress and what needs to happen next, is so important.**
- **This is a dangerous state of affairs and could snatch victory from the jaws of defeat.**
- **So, it's critical to ensure that communication is consistently ineffective.**
- **Focus on making sure that updates are never timely, only contain information that everybody already knows, and lack any clarity on what needs to happen next, and what key priorities are.**

Top Tip #12

Governance and project management processes

Create governance and project management processes which are far more burdensome than they need to be.

Value adherence to these processes, more than achieving the innovation outcome.



- **Ensure that processes lack any flexibility or acknowledge that innovation isn't a predictable straight-line activity.**
- **Create a team mindset where focusing on adherence to the processes is seen as more highly valued than achieving the innovation outcome.**
- **In other words, from the outset create a culture which acts as a straitjacket, tying as many people as possible down in process and management tasks.**

Top Tip #13

Operational end user involvement

Don't involve the operational end user for
as long as you can get away with it!

Make sure that the innovation
initiative is a total surprise.



- Of course, it's the operational end user who is going to use the innovation.
- So, the longer you can keep them out of the loop, the more likely the innovation is going to be unfit for purpose.
- In an ideal world you may eventually find that the users of the innovation never wanted or saw value in it in the first place. Perfect! So, when the innovation is delivered, it's never used.
- Timing is everything. Always remember to manage relationships with operational users by adopting a "surprises" rather than a "no-surprises" approach.

Top Tip
#14



Failure, fear and blame

Focus on developing a blame culture which creates a sense of fear, in particular on a personal level.



- **Always talk about how the organisation has a blame free culture. Describe how valuable lessons can be learned from failure, and that, from time to time, failure is inevitable, especially if you are being sufficiently ambitious.**
- **In reality, make sure that you do entirely the opposite. Blame people when things go wrong and aim to make that blame personal.**
- **If you get this right, like ripples in a pond, waves of unspoken fear will spread out across the organisation.**
- **People will steer clear of getting involved in anything to do with innovation. Mission accomplished!**

Top Tip
#15



Culture

Culture isn't one thing, but a combination of things, applied consistently.

Be consistent across all these top tips to quickly create a downward spiral of diminishing innovation opportunity!



We hope you have found these top tips on how not to collaboratively innovate both insightful and useful

If you would like to know more about “How NOT to collaboratively innovate”, or arrange a speaker for your event, contact Tony Conway at tony@ajconway.com.

For renegades who insist on pursuing collaborative innovation...

If you can't be dissuaded from following the path of collaborative innovation, then the industry guide shown on page 2 (and below) illustrates best practice by identifying key factors which enable successful projects.



To find out more about the guide, and upcoming Edition 2, contact:

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Download *Collaborative Innovation in the Water Industry – How To Make It Happen* using the link below:

https://figshare.shef.ac.uk/articles/report/Collaborative_Innovation_In_the_Water_Industry_How_to_Make_it_Happen/14635551



Professor Tony Conway

Tony is a former Executive Director of United Utilities and has led Asset Management, Operations and Engineering functions, as well as business change and transformation programmes. With the informal title of Director of Curiosity, he focused on identifying world leading water utility innovation, engaging with hubs around the globe.

Tony is a Visiting Professor at the University of Sheffield, chaired the Leadership Board of the TWENTY65 Water Research Programme and was part of the Collaboration for Innovation Research Theme. His research activity focuses on the water utility of the future, systems thinking, and leadership of transformational change.

He is a Fellow of the Institution of Civil Engineers, a Director of British Water and Chair of the Water Industry Forum. Tony provides strategic consultancy working across the water sector nationally and internationally.



Professor Kamal Birdi

Kamal is a Professor in Occupational Psychology at the University of Sheffield Management School. Following a BSc (Hons) in Psychology and an MSc in Occupational Psychology, he gained a PhD in Psychology from The University of Sheffield. He is also a practising Chartered Occupational Psychologist registered with the British Psychological Society (BPS) and the Health and Care Professions Council.

Kamal has researched and advised extensively for over 25 years on developing employee creativity, enhancing organisational innovation and improving the impact of employee training. In 2010, he was given the BPS Division of Occupational Psychology Academic Contribution to Practice Award for his work on using his research to improve organisational performance.