

The Startup Survival Podcast by Peter Harrington

Series 2 Getting Better, Going Further

Transcript: *Episode 2 – Think Creatively and Generate Ideas*



January 2021

Speaker 1 ([00:11](#)):

Well, hello again and welcome back to the Startup Survival Podcast with me, Peter Harrington. If you enjoyed the neurological adventure with Professor Andy Penaluna in episode one, I think you are going to love this next journey into the world of ideas and creativity.

Speaker 1 ([00:34](#)):

This second series is all about getting better and going further, so you develop critical skills and understanding that will allow your startup to survive and preferably thrive. And if ever you wanted an inspirational companion to join and help lead you on your travels, then it's this episode's guest Professor Alistair Fee. I first came across Alistair at a conference and exhibition in Edinburgh back in 2010. I was in the Scottish Capital with the SimVenture exhibition team. One morning when delegates were all in conference, curiosity got the better of me and I decided to go and see who was speaking. It didn't take long to find Alistair. Standing room only is the best way to describe the room where he was presenting. I just about managed to squeeze through the door and find space at the back. And just like busy commuter trains people were all rubbing shoulders. But unlike bored commuters, fellow audience members were entranced as they only had eyes on the man in the middle, our man Professor Alistair Fee.

Speaker 1 ([01:38](#)):

Now thoughts of Professors may be conjuring up images in your mind of dark gowns, pomp and suits. Yet this presenter who clearly had the gathering of 200 plus people in the palm of his hand was dressed in white. Nothing sinister. In fact, Alistair was dressed as a chef and talking with contagious enthusiasm about cooking. Well, he was for about eight minutes and then with speed and seamless dexterity, the whites were gone and he had moved on to the subject of German pencils. I could say more about the magic of his original and inventive delivery, but you need to hear it from Alistair.

Speaker 1 ([02:20](#)):

Before we crank up the creativity with Professor Fee, I must first acknowledge a moment of Monty Python from my teenage years. Aged 14, I went with school friends one autumnal afternoon to see Life of Brian at the Odeon cinema in Nottingham. For me, this outing was one of those moments in my young life. The whole production opened my eyes to the immense possibility of life and ideas outside the mainstream. For the first time ever, I started to realise the value of different perspectives. A subject we discussed in episode

one. Conformity has merit, but it doesn't help entrepreneurs to stand out. Likewise, if you are going to be creative and stand out, don't wait for others to give you permission. Ideas and creativity have to be fueled by you. And without this important way of thinking, it's very difficult, if not impossible for entrepreneurs to generate value and distinguish their new products and services from the competition, I'll be getting back to Monty Python, well, actually John Cleese later, but for now, let's meet through the online airwaves, my special guest Professor Alistair Fee. Based in Belfast, Northern Ireland, Alistair is an experienced industrial trade, strategist and educator. Business planning, innovation management and entrepreneurship are all part of his skillset and being globally networked he's recognized as having one of the most creative of minds. Alistair. Welcome to the Startup Survival Podcast.

Speaker 2 ([03:53](#)):

Peter. Hi, listen, thanks very much. Just lovely to be here.

Speaker 1 ([03:56](#)):

I want to dive straight in and ask a fundamental question. Alistair, what is creativity?

Speaker 2 ([04:03](#)):

I suppose it's a process of identifying, developing and expressing new ideas that might be useful. It's the ability to make things better, whatever that means. Making a better mobile phone, a better television or laptop is possibly creative, but even adding a new feature or a new technology to usability could be creative. Even making packaging better is creative. So I think we have to define what we mean by better as well. When we talk about how creative, something is.

Speaker 1 ([04:43](#)):

And as human beings, do we all have the capacity to be creative?

Speaker 2 ([04:48](#)):

The answer is yes, we do. We are born creative as babies, we learn to roll and hold on and stand up and investigate and break into cupboards and go, wow, what is this? And what can I do with it? And oops, I broken it. Can we fix it? And when we're young, we are seriously creative. We play outside and then we go to school and then we get into a system of being shaped under the molded, which is necessary and all terribly good stuff. And we do art and drama and all of that stuff. And we read widely.

Speaker 1 ([05:30](#)):

So you are saying education, squeezes, creativity out of us,

Speaker 2 ([05:35](#)):

Absolutely completely. It kills creativity. And if you look at the graph of how creative we are, when we're five and six years of age, when 95% of us would say yes, miss I am creative. And by the time we get to upper sixth and are asked how creative are we? That number has gone down to probably 4 or 5% because we've been extruded. We've been extruded to follow the rules, to get an 'A', and being unusual, nerdy on the edge of thinking is frowned upon.

Speaker 1 ([06:11](#)):

So is it possible Alistair that people may be very creative, but they just don't realize it?

Speaker 2 ([06:17](#)):

They don't know that that has gone away because, well, they don't realize that the creativity has been buried. It's still there. We need to release it. They don't know that it's still there because it's never been demanded from them. No one has asked, let's see how creative you are. What is being asked is let's see how well you can answer these questions to get an 'A' and so inside everybody, there is a creative beast that we need to release. And some people can do that. Some choose to do it. And others of course decide how to get on the career conveyor belt and follow the traditional route nine to five or eight to six or whatever time it is. I don't need to be too creative. Interestingly, Peter I invited a friend of mine to an innovation event I was running. It was a James Bond themed think tank.

Speaker 1 ([07:13](#)):

A James Bond themed think tank well, you've caught my attention!

Speaker 2 ([07:17](#)):

Well, I'll tell you about it in a second because he said to me, Alistair. I'm not coming. I don't have an innovative neuron in my body. I work for a large organization. I go in and I do my work well, but I'm not expected to be creative and I don't need to come up with breakthrough ideas. And I said, I'd run this James Bond, think tank without you. And let me tell you a little bit about that. For 20 years and more, I've been involved with the Master's of Engineering students and as you know, we have to, we have to teach the maths, we have to teach the physics. I teach entrepreneurship, negotiation, innovation, thinking, being curious about the world and within the confines of the curriculum, I felt we needed to do more.

Speaker 2 ([08:13](#)):

So a James Bond evening. What does that mean? Well, we'd all dress up as a character from James Bond. James Bond of course is always victorious, eventually. He's never defeated. He always comes up with ideas that will get rid of the bad guy. And of course the journey on the way is tricky, fueled with danger, fraught with risk, hurdles, minefields mental mine fields. In a James Bond evening, where we blend Professors, researchers, PhD, students, industry, and selected undergraduates, because there just isn't room for everyone. In the evening we have blended groups, which are multicultural, have different points of view, different experience. And by challenging them in a space where we are expected to be outrageous and unusual, great ideas are formed. And can I say that those are real ideas that are good for industry?

Speaker 1 ([09:23](#)):

I love it. This James Bond idea. Do you find the theme gives people permission and galvanizes creative thinking?

Speaker 2 ([09:30](#)):

It's a playground. It's a place to be creative because it's not being assessed. It doesn't matter. You don't have to conform to any pattern. And if I can go on to explain that I invited a company to bring a product, I won't tell you what it was particularly. I will send you what it was. It was a caravan, a large caravan company designing, not just a caravan, but one that maybe had automatic, automatic reversing for people like me. You can't just take the caravan off, put an electric motor on that we use on it. You can steer it to a

level with your smartphone into the, into the parking place. The company brought the caravan and we brought in 30 design students and engineering students along with the blended audience. And we said, okay, tonight, we're going to redesign a caravan. Well, I've never seen such a look of despondency in my life.

Speaker 2 ([10:36](#)):

That's for old people, geezers like you Alistair. How, very dull. However, they had all come dressed up in James Bond style, and this was not going to be a caravan. It was going to be a command, a mobile command centre for James Bond. Oh, said students. You mean we can do anything to this? Exactly. Well, they went off in all directions. We had magnetic levitation. We had inflatable hover-boards. We had all sorts of things. No, that's the whole joy of creativity. When we sit in a gray cuboid board-room, and the boss says, now, gentlemen, now ladies and gentlemen, now everybody. When we sit in a gray cuboid, I'd say, right team, let's be innovative for 45 minutes. That kills it absolutely kills it. And you end up... Harvard business school have written papers that after three years you basically become a nodding dog.

And you just say whatever the CEO wants to hear. Whereas in this space, which had a little bit of truth serum and some lovely food, students, Professors and members of the company were able to say whatever they liked in mixed groups. Because it was all captured on a flip chart and all their names anonymized. At the end of the evening, the sales director said to me, what an evening, 146 ideas and 140 of those are completely useless. Exactly. That's exactly what you do. When you create a menu, a panorama or palette of ideas, they're not all going to be fantastic. But each one leads to connects with collaborates with crosses over all the others and you get great outcomes.

Speaker 1 ([12:52](#)):

When Alistair touched on the subject of caravans my mind went straight back to my very first business idea. It was a disaster. In 1989 and based on research with two members of my family, I published a book called wait for it. The Caravan Planner. I had started out in business with a thousand pound loan. And in my ultimate wisdom, I decided to give all that money to a design and print company in return for a thousand books. And I believed I'd sell them for a fiver each. But what happened? For months boxes of unsold books stared at me from the back of my office. Lack of perspective, creativity, ideas, and research were all part of that project's downfall and decisions about price, sales and distribution were all based on guesswork and ignorance. In the end, I sold 56 copies and the rest, well, 943 copies were, were, were pulped. I still have one copy for posterity. I laugh now, but the painful embarrassment and costly mistake was only made palatable because I knew I had learned a hard lesson. Experience lends perspective. And that's why I always encourage young entrepreneurs, especially to get out and act rather than wait for the world to come to them. Based on previous conversations, I was aware Alistair used novel approaches when developing perspective and helping people to look for creative ideas. Dismissing the classroom, Alistair enjoys, heading out to the highest rooftops in Belfast. So what's he up to?

Speaker 2 ([14:34](#)):

It all comes down to, of course, to the grey cuboid. Creativity doesn't occur inside the lecture room. If we're sitting in the same seat that we've been sitting in for months, and we need to take time to observe. So I take students of all sorts on a random walk. First of all, from time to time, we go into the city center in pairs groups of two, and we walk around with notebooks and observe the world, but I'm really, really good friends with a design company on a tall building. They have a lovely cafe up on the roof and they give us the freedom to set up observation teams on the rooftop cafe. And there, instead of walking around, we stand with binoculars and notebooks like birdwatchers watching the world go by.

Speaker 1 ([15:24](#)):

So what's the takeaway here for startups.

Speaker 2 ([15:28](#)):

If we're going to be a startup, we have to make meaning and make value. Where do we get ideas? Yes, we might get them in the laboratory, but I believe that when we go out and watch the world, we see things that we don't normally see. We wouldn't see them any and any other way,

Speaker 1 ([15:47](#)):

And you get different perspectives?

Speaker 2 ([15:50](#)):

You absolutely get different perspectives because we see the crowds moving from a totally different angle. We see traffic lights, buses, taxis, the wind, umbrellas, water, ATM machines, zebra crossings. And we look from our observation airy from, from our birdwatching point of view are looking for opportunity on a windy day, for instance, where it's raining, umbrellas are blowing. People are carrying heavy bags of, of plastic bags, which are crushing into their fingers, trying to push a baby stroller, trying to use an ATM machine with one hand while they hold onto other stuff. The whole point of that exercise of course, is for the observer to be aware that people have needs, are in trouble. They struggle with life. And so we physically watch people struggling. And then when we go back to our engineering and science, whatever we're studying, we can say, huh, how does my study help the struggle? And it encourages them to look at it from a different point of view. And I believe that that helps us to create unusual connections and to bring ideas together in a little collider.

Speaker 1 ([17:14](#)):

Alistair. There will be people listening to this podcast who are inspired to go out and observe life, obtain different perspectives and get ideas. There will also be people who recognize they can spot problems and needs and turn them into ideas, but they haven't got the wherewithal to make something to solve that problem. And then there are the enterprising people who observe, identify problems and generate ideas, and then work out how to fix something. Typically by teaming up with others to create a solution.

Speaker 2 ([17:45](#)):

Well, you've really described T-shaped people. And I came to this T-shaped approach at Stanford when I was visiting the Design school. And I'd been there many times. It's a wonderful space, which is not a laboratory. T-shaped People must be deep. They must understand their topic inside out, whatever that is. But the top of the T asks us to spread our ideas, our Panorama out further to look around the topic and look way beyond the topic and bring our discoveries back to the deep. And so, you know, if we take a deep dive into the essence, the granular detail of our topic, but also explore the edges, the far horizon, the purple mountain, emerging technologies elsewhere, and combine that we get a better outcome. And if I could refer you to a Tom Kelly's book, the 10 faces of innovation or any of his other works, he talks about the importance of collaboration, cross-pollination, hurdles, storytelling, discovery, and all of those topics, 10 of them, at least. And it's important that start ups and small creative teams explore those. Because as we look at each of those sectors in the 10 faces of innovation, we add to our ability to be T-shaped and that helps us create a better business outcome.

Speaker 1 ([19:22](#)):

Alistair this is great. So let's move on to the practical world of starting up. I learned the hard way with my caravan planner, but coming up with an idea and rushing to a solution, typically leads to failure. When we have creative ideas, detail really matters, I guess.

Speaker 2 ([19:39](#)):

Absolutely. It is what we do at the beginning. That makes the difference. We can't take time for 10 years, but we need to dig down into the detail. When we do that, when we dig a little deeper, a little wider than everybody else, we will find magic. We will find something that no one else has discovered that gives us a market edge. That gives us a scientific edge, that gives our idea a little bit extra flavour. And if I was to say the one thing that prevents startups being totally successful from the get go is they rush in with the great idea that everybody wants when they should have sat back for a little while and just looked around and observed a little bit more to give their idea something extra.

Speaker 1 ([20:49](#)):

Do you ever get people who say, but if I ask people questions and share what I am doing, someone's going to steal my idea?

Speaker 2 ([20:56](#)):

All the time. I'm not going to tell anybody anything until it's ready. It's such a good idea. Everyone will want one. There are billions of people in the world and 10% of the market will make me wealthy. We've heard this so often.

Speaker 1 ([21:13](#)):

Can we say it is nonsense to think like this?

Speaker 2 ([21:19](#)):

Absolute nonsense. No matter who has the idea, you've got to go out and talk to others. Whether I've got an idea for a new cup or a new fountain pen. Great. You're not telling them you're not giving them the engineering plans. You're not telling them what your secret source is. Your secret magic ingredient. You're saying, if I did this and it performed in the following way, would you be interested? And you know, market research is absolutely necessary. What do I think that really means? Ask a hundred people, not your granny or your best friend, cause they'll just say well done. What a terrific idea. You need to go out and find people who disagree with you. People who will reject you, and when you ask them why they give you reasons and that helps you to augment and improve your original idea.

Speaker 1 ([22:17](#)):

Alistair, in preparation for this interview, you mentioned a business near you that went from idea to successful reality, all because the owner applied thinking to their creative idea. It sounds like a cracking story and all the better, because it's true. Can you share the details?

Speaker 2 ([22:34](#)):

But you're absolutely right. I've worked with hundreds of companies and there are two that spring to mind, but I'd like to tell you about one here. I believe it is a really fine example of creativity. Susan, I've changed

her name. She lives in a small town that has seven cafes and they're all sub optimum. Very average, not terribly interesting cafes. It's a small town. So she said to her husband, I want to open a cafe. He said, well, there are already seven cafes here. Why would we do that? And Susan said, you're right. And I've been in all of them. And I've made a list of all the things that are not good enough. I've been drinking coffee. And all of them said, Susan, I've carried out a lot of market research. I've observed that the cups are too heavy. The handles too small. And the creamer on the coffee is thin and inadequate.

Speaker 2 ([23:33](#)):

The coffee is bland, lacks flavour. The tables and chairs are too metallic and creaky. And there were all sorts of other things, including the way the staff related to, Susan said, I'm going to change everything and improve it by 10 or 20%. Her cafe is a wonderful hipster, gray and tan, granular word. The ceramics, the plates, the cups were all carefully chosen from an international hotel exhibition. The coffee is high grade. The machine that she prepares the coffee in is also high-grade. It has two boilers, one to pressurize the coffee through, one to pressurize the milk into the creamer. So you got a beautifully, concise level, perfectly bubbled air rated creamer. The cups have been carefully chosen to be the right size. The handles are a dream. I should let the listeners know, but I have one of the largest collections of coffee and espresso cups in the country because I'm a nut about handles.

Speaker 2 ([24:42](#)):

Everything is homemade. The aroma of chocolate on her Florentines wafts down through the cafe. She's a prize winner. She's had the best scones in Belfast. The scones that she serves in the morning are filled with homemade lemon, curd and cream. But here's the thing. Her scrambled egg is legendary. Scrambled egg. I would argue is a pretty simple thing to make, but the way Susan does it is sensational. She serves it on brown toast. There is no ketchup. She puts it on a layer of tomato chutney that has little lumps of black pepper corns and they crunch between your teeth, shooting flavour. She told me that she bought 16 different types of tomato chutney before she chose the one that had the best flavour. And then she puts a secret ingredient, into her scrambled eggs. She had opened up about two weeks when I first went there. I had scrambled eggs for breakfast and the first forkful was sensational.

Speaker 2 ([25:50](#)):

Oddly, the lady beside me at a different table said, Susan, well, what have you done? Have you put cream in the scrambled egg? And Susan said, no, I've added a teaspoon full of mustard. And that has made all the difference, which is a line from a poem by Robert Frost. I took the road less traveled by that made all the difference. What Susan has done in her cafe is that she has tried to make a difference in every single part of the experience from the moment we walk in, sit down, listen to the clink and enjoy the meal, go away sated by something that was better than we expected. And that has made all the difference. And then science and engineering. If we can get people to go, wow, that is significantly different and better a business has more chance of success.

Speaker 1 ([26:57](#)):

As someone who has lived in and around the historic city of York since 1985, I've seen many cafes come and go. And the reason so many cafes fail is because they simply copy competitors offer no real added value and camouflage themselves. Sooner or later, they have too few customers. And the business folds. A cafe is not a complex business. A cafe doesn't require investors and scale-up funding. But the secrets to any startup success formula all lie within Alistair's story. The entrepreneurs deep interest in an idea, extensive and creative curiosity and research to create meaningful difference. And of course, energy and passion to

make something happen are all key elements. And of course all these elements must be successfully fused together.

I am hugely grateful to Alistair for his insight and wisdom, his encyclopedic knowledge and stories about startups. And off-air once we had finished the interview, he went on to share in considerable detail, the huge success of another company in Northern Ireland called Seesense. If you want to learn how Phillip and Irene McAleese are revolutionizing the bicycle light industry with stunning innovation and creativity visit Seesense. That's SEESENSE.cc by improving simple things like cafes and bicycle lights, we give ourselves opportunities to turn ideas into thriving businesses. Just imagine what you could do better and take further.

Speaker 1 ([28:44](#)):

Well before we draw this episode to a close, I must once again, recommend a book to read, well, actually, I'm going to break my own rules again, and I'm going to recommend two texts. But I'm certainly not going to suggest the Caravan Planner, not least because it's out of print. In 1989 that publishing debacle gave me time, which I used to reflect, read, and learn. And I read about Anita Roddick. While she passed far too young in 2007, Anita Roddick was the inspiration and founder of Body Shop. Her autobiography shares how her desire to travel and explore the world, led her to find by accident really, natural health products, which she brought back to the UK. That research once combined with an idea, some creativity and a huge dose of determined energy generated a phenomenally successful global company.

My first book recommendation for this episode therefore is Body and Soul by Anita Roddick. And earlier in this episode, when I mentioned Monty Python, it was in part because I had just finished reading John Cleese' short and cheerful guide to Creativity. Read this book because it fuses creative thinking, how the mind works and the subconscious.

Speaker 1 ([30:05](#)):

Well that's just about it for this episode. But before we close, let's hear it for my special guest Professor Alistair Fee. Thank you so much Alistair for your time, expertise and enthusiasm. And big thanks to the team here. To my producer, Duncan Bennetts, researcher, Chris Jackson, and to the sponsors Seajam moths for the music. Finally, thumbs up once again to LSC Generate within the London School of Economics, as well as everyone at SimVenture.

In the next episode, which will be published on Thursday the 11th of February, we move on from Professors and welcome the New York times bestselling author, Diana Kander. In my opinion, her book, All in Startup is essential reading for all entrepreneurs. I can't wait to talk with Diana as we will be building on everything in episodes one and two, and discovering how startups can use research to turn ideas into reality. Meanwhile, your podcast feedback is not just welcomed, it's needed. Share what you really like and let me know what needs to be improved. I'd love to hear from you, but until next time, my name's Peter Harrington and this has been your startup survival podcast.

Go well, stay safe and Thank you.