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**KILL THE COMPANY:  
End the Status Quo, Start an Innovation Revolution**

By Lisa Bodell

In today's economy, innovation is the lifeblood of success. Companies know they have to "think big," "get inspired," and encourage their teams to nimbly embrace change. Some have made significant progress in the past several years. But most innovation initiatives fall flat. Why? Because the only thing more naturally resistant to change than a human being is a company. Despite their best intentions to innovate, so many companies breed cultures that actually *discourage* creative thinking and innovative behaviors. The very processes and procedures companies have put in place to become *efficient and productive* have discouraged the very act of thinking itself, the result of which is business as usual (status quo). Lisa Bodell says, "no more."

In her new book, Lisa Bodell makes the bold claim that the most innovative thing a leader can do is stop making sweeping statements about innovation, and instead, take a good hard look at what's really going on inside his or her own organization. In **KILL THE COMPANY: End the Status Quo, Start an Innovation Revolution** (Bibliomotion; hardcover; May 15, 2012), Bodell argues that in most cases, a company's number-one enemy is itself. Organizational structures have become dominated by complexity, and worse, complacency—two evils that cripple our abilities to realize our potential, smothering any hint of innovation from the outset. If you want to change your trajectory—that is, if you want to drive growth, learn new skills, and put yourself in a better position for the future—you must first root out the entrenched behaviors, cultures, and processes that deflate the innovative spirit. If you want to innovate, then "innovation" can't be your starting point—you must begin by killing the things that hold you back in the first place.

"Kill the Company" is an exercise that prompts people to consider the standard question—"How can we beat the competition?"—and instead ask, "How can the competition beat us?" It's one of many tools Bodell and her team at **futurethink** use to inspire change and lay the groundwork for innovation in organizations. As founder and CEO of a global innovation and foresight firm that specializes in training, Bodell has decades of experience helping organizations gain the skills and knowledge needed to accelerate change, drive growth, and solve the big problems better. She has extensive experience leading companies of all sizes—from Fortune 500s to boutique firms—in their pursuit of innovative ideas, and

her insights have been sought by *The New York Times*, *Bloomberg Businessweek*, Fox Business News, and others.

In **KILL THE COMPANY**, Bodell draws on this experience to offer a call to arms: a revolution in the way we think and work. Revolutions aren't easy, and Bodell is the first to acknowledge how difficult change is for most people. She has seen the resistance firsthand in organizations around the world. But after years of working in the trenches, she has also seen how, with the right approach, people can transform from what she calls "professional skeptics," clinging to the status quo, to bona fide change agents, ready to tackle every obstacle in their way. In **KILL THE COMPANY**, Bodell shares the tools that have facilitated thousands of these transformations in companies ranging from Procter & Gamble and Citigroup to the United States Coast Guard. Bodell's clients have used these tools to overthrow the status quo, rebuild their culture, and train their people to embrace behaviors that set the stage for serious innovation.

Bodell believes that if you want to change people's approach to change, you have to change your approach. But how? **KILL THE COMPANY** offers readers access to the futurethink Killer Innovation Toolkit, the cornerstone of Bodell's simple and elegant approach to facilitating change in organizations. Most innovation initiatives start by forcing managers and their teams to adopt additional rules, processes, and guidelines. These rituals of change simply consume time and energy, and actually drive people *further away* from innovating. In the book, Bodell offers an antidote to these counterproductive initiatives: a flexible guide that first subtracts, simplifies, and streamlines, and then begins to induce change incrementally.

First, **KILL THE COMPANY** shows readers how to break down the status quo—negativity, fear, complacency, process addiction, and an obsession with output that puts creativity and innovation on the backburner. With these obstacles to innovation out of the way, the book guides readers through the process of rebuilding something great to take their place. Bodell reveals how to hone the right skills and behaviors to foster innovation at all levels, and demonstrates how small wins—facilitated by the exercises in the toolkit—can yield transformative and long-lasting changes.

Through case studies of companies ranging from IBM and Pfizer to Dylan's Candy Bar and Herman Miller, **KILL THE COMPANY** attacks the business-as-usual mindset and offers a glimpse of what's possible instead: an innovative, thought-provoking, and harmonious culture in which people are comfortable with change and collaboration, unfazed by challenges, and continually inspired to generate groundbreaking solutions. **KILL THE COMPANY** arms readers with the tools they need to stop stagnating and start building a better future for all of the ideas, people, and possibilities eagerly awaiting the revolution.

**KILL THE COMPANY:**  
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## **ABOUT LISA BODELL**

**Lisa Bodell** is the founder and CEO of **futurethink**, an internationally recognized innovation research and training firm that helps businesses embrace change and become world-class innovators.

Ms. Bodell founded **futurethink** on the premise that everyone has the power to innovate—they just need the knowledge and tools to know *how*. She has spent years working with hundreds of leading innovators to create the largest catalog of innovation research and tools in the world, and the most in-depth training curricula on innovation anywhere. Clients such as Pfizer, GE, and Johnson & Johnson look to **futurethink** to develop new thinking styles and generate innovative ideas.

Bodell is globally recognized as a leader and pioneer in the field of innovation—creating a unique approach to an otherwise complicated topic. She created the widely adopted SIPC Innovation Framework (STRATEGY, IDEAS, PROCESS, CLIMATE), which has helped people around the world easily embrace innovation, providing a clear method that breaks it down into manageable parts.

She is a seasoned futurist, teacher, and entrepreneur who has built three successful businesses. Bodell began her career at Leo Burnett in Chicago, where she developed an appetite for marrying results-driven ideas with forward-thinking themes. She went on to start her own strategic planning firm, Strategic InSites, and then marketing and branding firm, Harvest Partners, before focusing solely on the innovation space with her latest venture—**futurethink**.

In addition to running **futurethink** and lecturing, Lisa currently serves as an advisor on the boards of the Institute of Direct Marketing in London, The Women’s Congress, the Association of Professional Futurists, and the prestigious Institute for Triple Helix Innovation think tank, the only innovation initiative of its kind within the U.S. government. She serves as a finalist judge at the annual Idea Crossing Innovation Challenge and FIT’s innovation challenge (which **futurethink** co-created). She has taught at American University and Fordham University, and currently serves as a faculty member of the American Management Association.

A respected thought leader on innovation topics, Bodell has appeared on FOX News, and in publications such as *Crain’s*, *Bloomberg Businessweek*, *The New York Times*, *WIRED*, *Investor’s Business Daily*, *Successful Meetings*, *Harvard Business Review*, and *The Futurist*.

Bodell earned her business degree from the University of Michigan, where she concentrated in business administration and marketing.

## **An interview with Lisa Bodell, author of KILL THE COMPANY**

**Q: What inspired you to write this book?**

**A:** My work is based on a belief that everyone can be innovative. And fulfilling your business's—and ultimately your own—potential is more fundamental than a business imperative; it's a personal imperative. Most of us are driven by a need that transcends annual reports, product reviews, or planning meetings. We are fulfilled when we make an impact, or when something makes an impact on us.

I wrote this book to help people find a productive way to address what's holding them or their companies back, and to inspire them to realize that your title doesn't determine your ability to effect change and make a difference. You can start to make an impact right now. "Killing the company" is meant to open us up to new potential. It identifies and attacks the business-as-usual mindset that we are mired in every day, and challenges us to think bigger—which is what all successful businesses, and individuals, do.

**Q: You write that most innovation initiatives are counterproductive. Why?**

**A:** People are tired of being asked to change or innovate. Those have become dirty words inside organizations, because they usually herald one more complicated system to learn, or mean adding more things to the daily to-do list. Call a big meeting to kick off another "change initiative," and just about the whole team will roll their eyes.

These much-loathed initiatives insist that employees try to build upon bad things—rather than allowing them to tear down the bad and do something new. Too many CEOs and executives refuse to see that what has generally been accepted as the undisputed path to success and profits ends up holding their companies back in many ways. So they implement supposedly innovation-enhancing programs that create additional layers of process. Soon, this complexity makes it so difficult just to get things done that people no longer feel that they have control over their work. This leads them to resign any dreams they might have of making a real difference to the company. They become complacent zombie workers, repeating the same thing day after day, devoid of any drive to be innovative. Though an organization may have good intentions, when it comes to making real changes, its number-one enemy is often itself.

**KILL THE COMPANY** is an antidote to the many counterproductive innovation initiatives being forced upon managers and their teams today. It's about reclaiming the power to tear down the status quo, ignite new thinking, propel real change, and grow your business.

**Q: Your approach to innovation focuses heavily on culture. In looking at the companies that are great at innovation, do you see any common cultural threads?**

**A:** The companies that excel at innovation have environments where innovation *naturally* thrives. But it's no accident. They understand that innovation is an ongoing process carried out by people at every level, so they design corporate cultures that inspire and encourage inquiry, curiosity, ownership, creative problem-solving, and independence.

In these workplaces, everyone from the highest-level executive to the entry-level assistant is encouraged to take smart risks and is challenged to perform to her highest potential without fear of repercussion should she fail. Employees are confident in knowing that if they go out on a limb, their teams and leaders have got their backs. People in these places are not afraid to challenge the status quo. They welcome experimentation. Some companies even reward failure, like India-based Tata Group, which presents an annual “Dare to Try” award. General Electric has also granted awards to teams that exhibited great imagination and innovation, even if the result didn’t match the intended outcome. We all admire positive business cultures in which people are permitted to experiment and take chances in pursuit of real progress. We admire them because they’re so rare.

**Q: Change is hard, and it seems that most attempts lose steam after a short period of time. What does it take to make change stick?**

**A:** Leaders can be aware of the behaviors inherent to a culture of innovation and constant change. But knowing is one thing; actually creating real change is quite another. It’s hard to do, and many organizations have tried and failed, often miserably.

Our client-tested work has revealed four essential tenets that make change stick:

- Everyone is a Change Agent
- Created by the Employees, for the Employees
- Little Changes, Big Impact
- Evolve and Iterate

People want to be in control of their own destinies. When they are encouraged to act as visionaries and shape change, they begin to feel truly empowered and are more excited about participating in your efforts. You need to let those people develop solutions to their own problems rather than forcing pre-developed solutions upon them. It’s also imperative to understand that grandiose overhauls will be met with resistance, because they just scare people and make them feel overwhelmed. Instead, start innovating in small ways that will generate quick wins and accumulate over time. Momentum is a powerful thing. Finally, change means different things to different people, and different organizations can accept varying amounts of change at varying paces. As you roll out these small changes, you’ll learn new things about your organization and fellow employees, and you’ll need to incorporate that new knowledge and continually evolve in your approach.

**Q: You mention that humans are hardwired for conformity and the book illustrates this with a fascinating experiment involving monkeys. Can you share?**

**A:** This powerful illustration comes directly from a manager at a large manufacturing company that was struggling with a complacent culture.

A scientist put five monkeys in a cage. On top of the cage, he placed a banana. Of course, the monkeys all started trying to climb to the top of the cage, fighting each other for the banana. One of the monkeys got to the banana, and as he picked it up, the scientist turned a hose on him, spraying him with cold water.

Not only was the “winner” who grabbed the banana soaked, but all of the other monkeys in the cage, too. They were not happy.

Again and again, whenever any monkey went for the banana, all of the monkeys got wet. Soon, if one monkey started climbing, the others started pulling him back, even hitting him. They didn’t want to get soaked again with cold water. After a while, none of the monkeys tried to get the banana. They had learned their lesson.

Then the scientist tried something unexpected. He removed one of the monkeys from the cage and replaced it with a new monkey. This monkey knew nothing about the cold water, so he started climbing. Immediately, all four of the original monkeys jumped on him to prevent him from reaching the banana. He learned that the banana was off-limits. One by one, the scientist replaced the “trained” monkeys who had once felt the cold water with new monkeys. Upon each new monkey’s arrival, the group quickly taught him that there was no way he should go for that banana. He learned that lesson and accepted it, though he never knew why. After five days, none of the original monkeys remained in the cage—they’d all been replaced with the “new” monkeys. Even though the new monkeys had never been sprayed by the cold water, none of them tried to reach the banana, and they were all determined to fight anyone who tried.

What a great parable for the way in which learned behaviors become ingrained and inherited. People just keep enforcing the status quo, even though no one knows why, or for that matter, *if* it’s the best way to do things.

This kind of conformity is the classic symptom of the complacent cultures that stifle and deter innovation. And conformity and complacency don’t just stifle new growth—they can accelerate a company’s downfall. These companies falsely believe they are too big, too powerful, or have too much brand cachet to lose their place as a market leader. But a downfall can happen to the best of companies, even those that invented the industries they currently dominate.

**Q: In your work with companies, it sounds like one of the most popular exercises is Kill a Stupid Rule. Why do people love this exercise so much? What are some of the immediate results you’ve seen?**

**A:** Kill a Stupid Rule is a thought-provoking tool you can use to strip out the unnecessary obstacles that are inhibiting the positive, innovative culture you want to foster. No matter where we go or what organizations we work with, clients everywhere love this exercise because it gives them control and gets results.

It works like this: gather your teams together, and tell them to find a partner. Give them 10 minutes to answer this question: “If you could kill or change all the stupid rules that get in the way of doing your work or better serving our customers, what would they be, and how would you do it?” Watch the sparks fly.

Most of the rules people want to kill are small, daily annoyances that are hugely detrimental to your culture—processes like reports, paperwork, redundant sign-offs, and daily operational how-we-do-business requirements like meetings and emails. This exercise allows you to discover the *by-products* of

*work* that make it impossible for people to get their *real work* done. And when you actually kill these rules—either on the spot or after—you demonstrate to them how serious you are about making real changes.

Kill a Stupid Rule changed the work lives of 130 members of The McGraw-Hill Companies' global human resources team. In the summer of 2011, their management team invited **futurethink** to offer ideas for strengthening their innovation capabilities. After meeting with focus groups for a day, we asked them to pair up and come up with three rules they would like to kill or change right away. We heard complaints about the usual litany of rules, but one item in particular came up again and again: the requisite monthly operating report—known as the MOR. Everyone hated this report. It took a lot of time to prepare, required input from many people, and few believed that it was useful or that it was even read by people at the top. People felt so strongly about eliminating it that the suggestion to kill it actually drew standing ovations. What happened next was truly inspiring—John Berisford, the executive vice president of Human Resources, told the group he would eliminate the MOR for the next several months. If nobody missed it and no ill effects popped up, the change would become permanent. Today, the McGraw-Hill MOR is still dead, and the positive effects from that one small change rippled throughout the organization.

**Q: Change is not only hard—it can be messy. You advise managers to “use guardrails, not handcuffs.” Can you explain?**

**A:** “Use guardrails, not handcuffs” is a phrase that I frequently use with clients regarding how to manage teams, design processes, or cope with change. There's no way to get around the fact that change creates uncertainty, even when it happens in the “right” way. In times of flux, it can be tempting for leaders to grip the reins tightly, but they must resist this urge and do the opposite. They have to remove rules and procedures to create opportunities for people to think critically if they want to crush the conformity-driven, zombie-like mentality and allow an innovation-friendly environment to rise in its place.

“Guardrails, not handcuffs” aligns with the spirit of my entire change method. It suggests that leaders cannot rigidly mandate everything an employee does. People need enough direction to know where the ship is headed, but they also need to have some freedom to interpret and apply directives to their own work. Companies need to let employees apply critical thinking. How do you do this? Create guardrails through tools and behaviors instead of forging handcuffs with rules and procedures.