How to Make Change Stick: Kill the Company

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A decade into the 21st century, one thing has become clear: change is the new normal.

In business, we call it innovation, and it's a strategic pillar in nearly every organization. Thanks to a growing body of research and thought leadership in recent years, we're learning a great deal about the individual skill sets behind innovation, and the organizational strategies that create disruptive growth. Yet in companies around the world, well-intentioned innovation initiatives crash and burn, despite a wealth of great ideas, copious research, and well-designed strategies.

Why? Innovation is not just about data analysis, plans and processes, and thinking outside the box. More than anything else, innovation is about change. And the truth is that as much as we'd like to think otherwise, we are all hardwired to resist it.

Your "innovation initiatives" are no exception to this rule. People are tired of being asked to change and innovate. It's become a dirty word inside organizations, because it usually heralds one more complicated system to learn, or more things to add 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.

They know that next year more changes will be implemented, because the last change initiative didn't change a damn thing for the better, or the execs that start the initiative won't be there in a year, and the next leadership team will roll out yet another initiative.

That cycle stops here. Because despite the grumbling, eye-rolling, and resistance, change is an absolute imperative for businesses today. Innovation is not only about finding new growth opportunities and improving the bottom line. It's about developing services, solutions, and ideas that improve people's lives, and the world in which we live. This is what the greatest businesses—and individuals—strive to achieve.

So, what can we do to make change stick?

My work is based on the belief that anyone can be innovative, and everyone can become an agent for change. My company, future**think**, helps organizations—from Fortune 500 companies to boutique firms—create environments where innovation and change thrive naturally. Working with these companies has given us a chance to experiment with ideas about what it takes to build innovation capabilities in organizations, and then test-drive specific tools and exercises to make it happen. Along the way, I've learned that when it comes to change, a company's biggest enemy is itself.

For any company to overcome their internal obstacles to change, they must understand and embrace the four central tenets that make change stick:

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

Everyone Is a Change Agent

Vision should not be the sole responsibility of leadership, nor should change. People want to be in control of their own destiny. When they are encouraged to be visionaries and shape change, they feel truly empowered and are more excited about participating in your efforts. Leaders can, and should, set the direction and place big bets. But we need to think differently about what people inside organizations can accomplish and how they can be visionaries in their own right. Significant change doesn't have to start at the top; it can be created at the middle of the organization and subsequently ripple throughout the firm. This empowers everyone to be a change agent, not just the C-suite or the HR department.

We need to start giving our teams the ability to contribute and shape their future, and also empower them to enact change on more levels to make it truly take hold. Innovation thrives at companies where leaders lead, managers have the freedom to think and experiment, and everyone is expected to be a visionary.

❝ *The innovation revolution should be led by employees, not created for them.*

Created by the Employees, for the Employees

Cookie-cutter programs don't work. You need to let people develop solutions to their own problems rather than forcing pre-developed solutions upon them. Every employee is an expert in his own area of the organization and it's critical to mine his deep knowledge of the way things work when trying to create change. The innovation revolution should be *led* by employees, not created for them.

Another part of this tenet is that change needs to be intentional. It's not about shaking things up for the sake of variety. It's about analyzing where change is most needed and letting employees take the lead. I call this intentional change or change with a little c, not a big C.

The point is that change shouldn't be too broad. Most innovation programs fail because they're unrealistic; they try to do too much, and they're unclear about what they're really trying to create. It means nothing when execs say they want you to help them "create a world-class organization." Based on what skills? To achieve what? You must be specific about what you want to change about your culture and what behaviors you want to see flourish. Focus on and tackle three to four critical skills or behaviors instead of a laundry list of them. If you let employees lead, this will happen far more organically.

Little Changes, Big Impact

If you've already tried other top-down innovation programs, announcing another set of big changes will be met with resistance and frustration, as people immediately anticipate the additional work these programs always seem to entail. The grandiose overhauls that so many traditional innovation-enhancing programs insist upon just scare people and make them feel overwhelmed.

With this approach, you won't make a grand announcement about your plans to innovate or overwhelm your organization with a massive overhaul. You're just going to start innovating right away, in small ways that will generate small but quick wins. And in the aggregate, your small changes will have a massive impact. It's often little everyday things that most annoy people in the course of their daily work, so these make the perfect starting point when tackling change.

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I call these Little Bigs—little changes, big impacts. We've found that a quiet, almost stealthy approach is often most effective. Change should be experienced—not just announced. Charging a group to simply start shaking things up and then modeling behaviors yourself is a more powerful way to get people to accept that change is possible than hanging a poster in the cafeteria. As employees at all levels are encouraged to provoke change, they will subtly influence their peers in ways that create a powerful groundswell. It all starts with Little Bigs.

Evolve and Iterate

Finally, change means different things to different people and different organizations can accept varying amounts of change at varying paces. This is another reason why one-size-fits-all doesn't work. As you roll out these tools and exercises, you'll learn things about your organization, your fellow employees, and yourself. You'll need to incorporate that new knowledge and continually evolve in your approach. Employees must be empowered to use a flexible toolkit of exercises,

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tips, tricks, prompts, etc., that enable them to start activating change in the context of their own organization. Trial and error are imperative to determining what works, along with seeking out the expertise and feedback of your teams, clients, and partners. That may mean hearing things you would rather not. But even if you find you've made a misstep, it will be easy to correct because you won't be grappling with massive programs. You'll have started small, so you can quickly observe what's working well and then adjust as you move forward.

This is what I've learned about what it takes to make change stick and ensure your hopes for innovation materialize. But before you jump in and start trying to shake things up, it's helpful to gauge how open to change you—your company, your team, or you as an individual—are today. Is your culture as a whole stifling innovation, or will just a small tweak here and there get your cylinders firing wildly again? Does your organization possess the right skills to take on tomorrow? Does it embrace the business behaviors necessary to create a culture that incubates innovation and generates growth over the long term? What skills and behaviors do you already possess and where can you improve? You can take stock of your innovation situation by taking the future**think** Innovation Capabilities Diagnostic.

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future**think** Innovation Capabilities Diagnostic

How many of the sixteen statements below can you answer *yes* to?
Your score will determine just how far you'll have to go to begin to ignite change.

1. People in our organization actively think about how to push the boundaries
   of what is seemingly possible, and they imagine how to apply critical trends
   to our business to ensure that we stay ahead.   Y/N

2. Our employees are comfortable asking provocative and sometimes unsettling
   questions to stretch the organization's thinking.   Y/N

3. Our employees approach problems from various angles and apply best practices
   from offbeat sources in search of the optimal solution.   Y/N

4. Our people can think on their feet and, when faced with unforeseen challenges,
   can nimbly change direction.   Y/N

5. Our employees do not easily give up on their beliefs and ideas when
   encountering adversity or disbelief, and generally see them through.   Y/N

6. Our organization is constantly looking forward to the next five to ten
   years, and actively seeks solutions on how to stay ahead of the curve.   Y/N

7. My team knows where to go to learn about innovation and trends.   Y/N

8. We constantly seek to do things better than what's been done before.
   We push for continual improvement, even if what we're offering is
   an established industry leader or is already successful.   Y/N

9. Competitors envy our ability to shape the industry and generate
   unorthodox solutions for our customers.   Y/N

10. People in our organization are encouraged to take risks within certain
    boundaries, and they/we know what those boundaries are.

11. Failure and smart risk taking are celebrated within our organization
    and by our leadership. Efforts do not have to be "successful" to be recognized.   Y/N

12. There is an active culture of dialogue between roles, departments,
    functions, and levels within the organization.   Y/N

13. We understand that we do not have all the expertise we could ever
    need in-house, and thus try to partner with people and firms
    outside the company to develop new ideas.   Y/N

14. We purposefully hire people with diverse backgrounds and strive
    to create project teams comprised of a variety of disciplines to
    ensure a complete perspective.   Y/N

15. We often look at what other companies and industries adjacent or
    even unrelated to ours are doing. We strive to learn from them and
    apply their best practices to our own work.   Y/N

16. We provide training and support so people at all levels of the organization
    have the knowledge and tools to generate solutions.   Y/N

How did you do? Take a look at the charts on the next three pages for your results.

Number of Questions Answered *Yes*	You Are	Explanation	Characteristics
1 to 6	Status Quo	**While there may be some intent to change, it has not yet been realized.** Your organization is likely experiencing the common pitfalls of Zombies Inc.: being too insular, siloed, or process-obsessed. Teams show an aversion to risk and could be succumbing to complacency. Most critically, your organization may not possess enough of the necessary skills and behaviors to keep up with others in your industry in the long run. Your organization urgently needs to break down barriers to innovation and ignite a culture of thinking, problem solving, and smart risk taking.	→ Risk averse → Low tolerance for experimentation or failure → Small pockets of change exist → Change tends to be incremental → Insular focus → Motivated by fear and complacency → Keywords: protective, cautious

Number of Questions Answered *Yes*	You Are	Explanation	Characteristics
7 to 12	Risk Taker	**There is an active effort to embrace and drive growth.** Your organization exhibits some of the important skills and behaviors of a thinking, risk-taking culture. Teams are pushed to challenge their assumptions, think differently, and create new solutions. However, people are still somewhat held back from larger efforts because of existing structure or time constraints, as well as varying levels of risk tolerance across executive leadership. As a result, there is still much work to be done. You'll need to firmly address areas of weakness as soon as possible. Spur your organization ahead by smartly selecting tools to build skills and behaviors that are still missing.	→ Managed risk is considered (somewhat) acceptable, but risk-taking or innovation efforts tend to be siloed within more progressive, "artistic" business units or functions. → Innovation is a mix of incremental and some high-risk efforts → Leadership pushes for and encourages innovation → Motivated by need to grow and be competitively viable → Keywords: optimistic, competitive

Number of Questions Answered *Yes*	You Are	Explanation	Characteristics
12 to 16	Change Maker	**You embrace change and strive to create the future, not respond to it.** Congratulations! Your organization is well on its way to becoming Think Inc. You've developed strong skills and behaviors that are successfully fostering a culture of innovation. Everyone from the top brass to the frontline worker recognizes that staying ahead of the competition means constantly challenging the status quo and questioning best practices, even the ones you've created. Focus on constantly expanding your teams' knowledge and reinforcing the organization's commitment to innovation.	→ Change is who you are/what you do → Experimentation is expected and part of your DNA → Innovation is coordinated and communicated → Failure is sometimes celebrated (and always learned from) → Leadership pushes the boundaries of what can/can't be done → Motivated by success, disruption, winning → Keywords: visionary, market maker

Is your organization stuck in the status quo, or have you found that you are risk takers or even change makers? This Innovation Diagnostic will help you get a feel for how fertile the ground is for innovation in your organization. With these four tenets in place and a general idea of where your organization could improve, **you're well on your way to examining the many ways you can begin to inspire innovation at your company, and ensure that—this time—the changes will stick.** ⬚

Info

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR | Lisa Bodell is the author of *Kill the Company: End the Status Quo, Start an Innovation Revolution* (Bibliomotion; hardcover; May 15, 2012). As founder and CEO of future**think**, an internationally recognized innovation research and training firm, Bodell believes that everyone has the power to innovate; they just need to know how. As a leading innovator and trainer, she has devised training programs for companies such as 3M, GE, and Johnson & Johnson. Learn more and keep up with her online at www.KillTheCompany.com.

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