

Lisa Bodell

How to kill stupid rules which prevent you having the time to innovate

Speakers:

Nick Skillicorn – Innovation and Creativity Expert and Host of Innovation & Creativity Summit

Lisa Bodell

Expert Interview transcript:

Nick Skillicorn: Hello everyone and welcome to another expert interview at this year's innovation and creativity summit. I am very happy to have Lisa Bodell with us today, she is the founder of future think and the author of multiple books on innovation including kill the company and the newest one why simple wins, Lisa its wonderful having you here with us today

Lisa Bodell: It's a pleasure, thanks for having me.

Nick Skillicorn: No problem. So for people who don't know you, can you give us a brief background as to what you do and how you got started in innovation?

Lisa Bodell: Sure, my background is I am a futurist which is a real title, you can get your masters on four sights, I actually in my certificate in it, and my back ground was in marketing but I found out that I was really good with business and trends so I really got to know the world of futuring and how that relates to innovation and change and about twenty years ago I started my company future think, which has a team of people that teach futuring or fore sight and innovation. So people can go out and do it on their own so that they can be more innovative in their personal work as well as their companies and as leaders. So my background is now futuring and speaking and talking as a keynoter but I started in a world of advertising and I will tell you how I got to where I am now. It's what I call strategic work. One thing just led to another and that led to another and here we are teaching and giving talks for change and innovation that are really provocative and different. I don't think you would have said that to a teacher thirty years ago saying I am going to grow up to be a futurist, but that is just how it happened and here I am.

Nick Skillicorn: What I want to talk about today is the contents of your two books because they are quite provocative in what they say, kill the company and why simple wins, seems to go very much against what people think is required for innovation where they think it's all about more ideas, more sort of companies structures, innovations like business units and everything can you tell us what you mean first of all by kill the company

Lisa Bodell: Sure it's funny because I had to really fight my publisher to get that title. It's very scaring to them when I said yes but provocative things sell books so they went along with it. Kill the company, I think people need to be a little bit more provocative and give themselves permission to identify what is not working. The idea of kill the company was not kill your company but to practice

what I call proactive obsolescence as a strategic platform and what I mean by that is the exercise of kill the company is pretend that you are your number one competitor and wearing that hat or perspective, put yourself out of business and what that does is it allows people to have permission, to have out of company experience. They are not just entitled but mandated to quit out what is not working so that they can fix it and turns those weaknesses to strength against their own competition. and I think it is an easy thing to do, it's a small and provocative exercise that is better than just idea brain storming and it's a better way to approach strategic planning because each year strategic planning, everyone starts out by frankly pulling out last year power points and changing the dates, that's how strategic planning begins. They focus too much on their strength and their weaknesses and their opportunities and threats and they fall into this political quagmire and they are trying to defend what they have versus improving what they have. Kill the company started to change people's thinking around how they should approach things and be more provocative about it and more productive that way.

Nick Skillicorn: It also sounds like its taking into account this disruption idea with the actual disruption innovation how it's meant to be which is not being able to necessarily predict what some new upstarts are going to do to change your industry.

Lisa Bodell: Exactly right, so now very funny you said that Nick, when we go to a company we actually teach, part of what we do is training, we actually teach people kill the company sessions, we go in with leadership teams and business units to help them kill their own company and if you are good at what you do, you are allowing us to come in and say here is your usual competitive set right in the safe stuff the people, everyone knows, here are the people that are adjacent to you, related to you that you might not think about and here are the wild cards, the provocative ones, the start ups like you said those are usually the ones that scare them the most and they avoid. We force people to different tables to take one or two from each of those buckets and so it's a structured way to force people to look at the whole picture versus avoiding the ones that probably scare them the most.

Nick Skillicorn: Have you got any examples of how this might work in practice

Lisa Bodell: Sure, absolutely. I mean we have people that have written us from, we have used it as Accenture, we have used it Sunoco, we have used it at merit pharmaceuticals and so I am giving you examples of some small government municipalities departments within our national government in the states, those are regulated groups, regulated industries that have figured out how to kill the wrong company and I say that because usually people use regulations as an excuse and so for example when we worked with oil and energy company, one of their biggest issues isn't competing with other oil companies but competing with other types of energy or for example, oil companies are also convenient stores when you go in to buy gas so that's also one of their competition. They compete with the Wal-Mart's of the world, the cost goes off the world and they normally don't think of it that way and they normally don't think change their perspective around other industries they needed to look at. Same thing with your consulting firms, you know it's not just consulting firms startups, its crowd funded stuff that they need to think about. So that's the practicality that bring into this exercise brings when people look at killing your company

Nick Skillicorn: When you are actually going through this exercise, there are sorts of questions that you asked to help the mind think about how you might get disrupted and how you can then kill your own company.

Lisa Bodell: Yes one is by bringing a more diverse set of competitors and actually mandating that people look at each of those buckets within adjacent and beyond their industry is how we look at it and then we provoke them with a lot of open ended questions, what if we, how else could we because most people think in terms of close ended questions, yes are they competitors or not. Assume they all are let's look at what happen in the near term, long term, far term, what's the biggest threat that would upset you, what's the biggest risk that is coming out of it, what would be the best thing that the competitor would do that would put you out of business right, one of the things do you envy the most about the competition and wish you could do it in your own company, its asking them provocative questions but they never, it's not like they can't do it but they don't have time to do it at their job

Nick Skillicorn: And the million dollar question is once you have killed your company, how do you innovate the company using those insights?

Lisa Bodell: So what's interesting about kill the company, is it help you really understand where the problem lies, it gives you ways, you know we have categorized them all the concerns and we turn them into actions right in the room. It will be very practical and we get commitment on what are the things that we are going to tackle next right near term, midterm, long term based on the view on their view of the threats and what that also does is interesting, in the process of given to problems, you create an opportunity and often we hear people come up with new ideas for businesses because we have this exercise. That's what is really important, it's not just getting rid of problems, it's actually creating new opportunities that you didn't think you have because we gave you permission to disrupt and that's what people usually don't get as the positions to do it.

Nick Skillicorn: Permission is one thing but I want to touch on something you eluded in the previous thing which is the time to actually get this work done, I think that's the crux of your other book, why simple win isn't it?

Lisa Bodell: It's funny because kill the company was very provocative but I tell this story about even after that book, everyone says they want to be innovative. I can't think of a single company that says no not for us, they say they want to be innovative but what they do is very different, I mean we all know that. So the reason for why simple wins is we were going out and training companies on, we have all kinds of courses, leading innovation and getting people to be more innovative in terms of thinking but when we got to this organization who had hired us to think them innovation, they often don't let us do it when we got there, which made no sense to us, you know they are paying us and it was worth our while and what I found was it wasn't they weren't scared of ideas but they didn't have time to do it. So the reason I wrote why simple wins is because I realized what got in their way with complexity because I ask people what do they spend their day doing, that's really what holds you back from innovation. What are you spending your time on that doesn't allow you to spend time on innovation and when I ask people what they spend their day doing, guess what they said

Nick Skillicorn: Meetings maybe

Lisa Bodell: Emails, no matter who I asked and what country and company, so what holds people back as an idea is time and we are drowning in the mundane and we can't get to the meaningful, because complexity is the enemy of meaningful work and we have got to focus more on the work we do everyday versus the culture and the white boards and the organic food in the cafeteria, all that is great but that's not what an innovative culture is. Innovation is the work you do every day, culture is the work you do every day and why simple wins talk about how you got to focus more on doing the right work. It's not about the thing on your to do list and doing them better, it's about what should be on that to do list in the first place and that's the area where most companies have it all wrong. Why simple wins hope to change that

Nick Skillicorn: Is that potentially because there's at least a way I have seen over the last couple of decades, there's been this belief that the busier you are the more respect you should get or the more you should be appreciated or the safer your job is I think there's been some sort I don't know what the right word is but fanaticism around putting in as many hours as possible

Lisa Bodell: I call it that we are addicted to busy and the reason for that is it makes us feel important like the busier you are the more important and the more valuable you are. So we have to change our believe system that we value more not less. No one is going to be empowered to simplify if what we are valued for is to do more projects, manage more businesses, manage more people, and manage more things. People don't feel that they are allowed, empowered or will be rewarded for it, they think about efficiency and that's not being simplified, being efficient means you are just doing more stuff even if that stuff is not valuable. So we kind of change that mentality for people so they are focused on the work that really matters and that's got to be a management shift and change of mindset

Nick Skillicorn: And how do you get that shift to happen

Lisa Bodell: Well there is a few things that we do, first of all is defining what simplicity is in your organization because people can tell me complexity is very quickly, they can't tell me what simplification is and we took a lot of time in this book to help them find out. It's not about being minimal, it's about being understandable. So clarity is a big part of it, people will deal with you more and trust you more if you operate with clarity versus jargon. It's about making things repeatable, it's about doing things over and over again, making reforms repeatable, it's easier for customers and making things more accessible so you are not so siloed, so there are some key tenets and simplification that people need to define and make others aware of because that they know what they can do to make something simple and then the second thing is we tell people if they need to take away the barriers that hold them back. So one of the things we do is we have them audit their own work, we have them list on a piece of paper the twenty things they spend their week typically doing and what they find typically as most their work is low value work not high value work and what we thought what that discussion leads to is then how can we change those things to make them more meaningful. And some of the things we do is can you really kill some of these things, can you change the frequency around how often you do this them, are there other people that you can give them to that should be doing them better or are there ways that you can actually automate or simplify that work and we have techniques around how to do that. The last thing I will tell you that we tell people to do is that we have to have them challenge their assumptions on how work has to be done and part of that is teaching them how to kill the rules. So kill a stupid rule is a huge

technique that we do with people that is liberating and immediately creates the space for change and its simple we ask people what rules they think they should kill or eliminate and if you ask your team to do that in thirty minutes, they come up with dozens of rules and I think that is one of the most productive things you can do because to make innovation happen you have to create a space for change to happen, getting rid of rules is one of the things you could do to do that.

Nick Skillicorn: So in my understanding, please correct me if I am wrong, the concept of simplifying a company is removing things that are preventing you having the time to do valuable stuff mostly

Lisa Bodell: Yes I mean what's interesting about simplification is, it's a subtractive process not an addictive process and again that's the mindset shift because what we do is we typically more not less and so we have to get comfortable with the subtractive process and its interesting and I think right now we are reaching a boiling point about where people can't do anymore, it's not that they are not efficient but they have too much on their plate that's not worth it so we need give people permission that it's okay not to do stuff so they feel like they won't get fired.

Nick Skillicorn: And I think that's one of the main pieces of push back that I see when I am talking to companies about spending more time in innovation, a lot of time when people are actually working on innovations, it's quite hard to prove progress and prove the fact that you are moving in the right direction and that's what frustrate people reviewing work and managers, they can't sort of give evidence that good stuff is happening. But if you are simplifying the word, how do you still keep the company happy

Lisa Bodell: That's interesting, in both my first book kill the company as well as in why simple wins on simplification, why I have tool kits on each of those books, I am very practical and I wanted to create action. The tool in each of those books that people really love is around metrics, both personally as well as leaders. So for example we have a whole tool on innovation metrics and I will talk about that, there's a simplification metrics too, the idea is there are soft metrics and hard metrics and particularly when it comes to innovation, there is input metrics, developed metrics and output metrics. The reason I think that leaders are frustrated is because they focus on the output metrics. Now it takes time to focus on the output metrics, so maybe we need to think about how do we develop input metrics, time spent on innovation, amount of resources, developed amount of money contributed, amount of leadership, sponsorship around innovation and then there is the development metrics and that's speed to market, being able to approve more projects and diverse projects in the pipeline, balancing your pipeline those types of things and then there is the output metrics. A good leader has metrics in each of those areas, an educated leader will only be focused on output and they will be impatient because they will be expecting those output far sooner than the ideas have been given time to grow and live.

Nick Skillicorn: Have you got any examples of where companies implemented this and how it affected the way they actually approached innovation and their business as usual shall we say

Lisa Bodell: Sure let me give you an example of HBO which was very interesting because they are wonderful clients and they are very innovative as it is, they are still coming to ask for help with the culture of their innovation and being able to have more time for innovation and we actually started doing kill a stupid rule with them and the reason was they are plenty of time to brainstorm, they have lots of ideas, why wasn't something changing and it was that mundane work with email so we

work with them to kill stupid rules, they killed hundreds of them. They put them up online actually because they wanted to share them with other people so they can also kill them and they started doing kill a stupid rule session with their clients. So if there was a client that they were having issues with, they invited them to come together and have a constructive formalized way that they could both take away the barriers and were beneficial to them and that then helped them create the space and the resources to implement new stuff together. So some of this stuff is an efficiency effort that can help you drive an innovation of it and it's all measurable by the way.

Nick Skillicorn: And taking it back to full circle again, we have gone through a simplification effort, we have now got the time to innovate, going back to what you said, how do we find out the right things to do, is there any insight that you have thereon what actually is bringing the most benefit to the company.

Lisa Bodell: You know what's really interesting is that people say they want to simplify but they have a very hard time articulating what they will do once they have, and so that's where I really stick up for leaders, and it's really interesting. We launched recently our killing complexity course which is people don't even know what it is and they want us to come do it, anything to help them simplify they love but one of the exercises that we found last year when we were piloting this thing was we had to help people identify why complexity is bad because then that shows them how that usually is its individual scrap we put in place and that hold us back and its things we can control, meetings, reports, emails etcetera, but also helping them define what meaningful work is because if you don't define the goal people will fill that space back up with meaningless work again quickly so once we have had people identify their tasks and get rid of many of them, we have them define what their wish was and this gets to meaningful work. If you have all this time now, what do you want to fill it doing. What you find from people's is fascinating because they have to come to that conclusion on their own is meaningless work or complexity is usually low value individual internal, meaningful work where they want to get to usually is external, its customer driven, its value add, its closed and its inspiring work so what that helps people with is not just to find the actual task they want to be doing but the type of work they want to be doing and that's where they can start to have this code of conduct well let's not do this stuff anymore, let's make sure our value is on this stuff and it allows them than to say no to the bad stuff and dyes to the good stuff as a group

Nick Skillicorn: So getting away from busyness and getting down to business.

Lisa Bodell: I am going to use that if you don't mind.

Nick Skillicorn: I am more than happy to, so we are unfortunately coming up to the end of the interview but one thing I like to ask all the experts is if you have got something based on what we have talked about today that people can actually try out quite quickly, a tip or an actionable insight that you can do over the course of an afternoon, what will you recommend they try out

Lisa Bodell: There are a couple of things I really like; if people are having a problem with meetings and emails lets change that. First of all I would like to challenge people to start making sure they do no squirrel emails, so if you have to scroll to read your email, it's too long, so I am helping them to get brevity. If you can even make your email to just a request in the subject line that's great, another thing they can do with their email is stop doing the CC and the FYI thing and on a thing that Merck did that was really interesting, they started doing a thing called NNTR which when people were

sending something out something that is just low not low value but informational and not urgent, they will say NNTR which means no need to respond and that cut that over twenty five percent people replying thanks got it, you know all those meaningless emails. The other thing I will say regarding meetings is make your meetings only about decision making not about information and with another client actually goes to Myers square which is interesting ,if the meeting is meant to be informational, they cancel the meeting and they get the information out in another way. If it's for a decision which now is what the meetings are about, they don't have them until they know who the D is, the decision maker and if no one knows who the D is in the meeting, they don't have the meetings until they can define the D and the reason for that is that if we are going to get together and make a decision, we want to know who's accountable and responsible and it's a better use of our time. Those are small things that they can start to do on their own and their own and their companies.

Nick Skillicorn: Excellent, I know you also mentioned that future thinks got some courses that people can work on, we are going to get links down below this video in the description that people can go and find out everything but where are these links going to take people and what can they find there.

Lisa Bodell: So I would say a couple of things, if they want the book they can go to Amazon or some other places, and those have some good startup points for tool kits and tactics. If you go our website which is futurethink.com, you can get an overview of the courses we have there about innovation and killing complexity as well as our tools which are, we have a whole library of tools that people license and access but in there are tool kits, quick win videos that are 90 seconds or less, the people love, they give you quick techniques to help you start creating the space for change to happen. So those will be the places I would like them to check out if they go there.

Nick Skillicorn: Fantastic, Lisa it's been wonderful having you and I look forward to speaking again with you soon.

Lisa Bodell: Thank you for having me, I appreciate it.