

Lisa Bodell

BigSpeak Podcast Interview

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Hey welcome back to the show everybody, I am thrilled. We are talking to New York City today, we're talking to Lisa Bodell. Lisa, welcome to the show.

Lisa Bodell: Thanks for having me.

Host: You know, I love your title on the Big Speak's site. It says Globally Recognized Futurist and Expert on Innovation and Leading Change and I wonder, how well do you fit into the futurist shoes? Tell me about that.

Lisa Bodell: Well first of all, what a mouthful I didn't realize that was what was up there! I've gotta go get my editor there. So, how well do I fit into the Futurist shoes?

Host: Yeah.

Lisa Bodell: Well I think pretty well. I love saying I'm a Futurist because everyone's eyes light up and then they wonder, "What does that mean?"

Host: Exactly, well there you go. Me too.

Lisa Bodell: Yeah! What does that mean? It's not like I have a crystal ball to predict the future of the companies we go into, but what it really means is how do you help people anticipate and activate change? So it's not just giving them all these sizzly trends that everyone talks about all the time, like AI and Block Chain. We talk about that but it's more about sort of where [inaudible 00:01:42]. That's why I think of myself as a Practical Futurist where we're going to stretch their minds around what's going on with trends, but more importantly we're going to teach them about the applications they didn't expect and how they need to think about it as it relates to their business. What they want is they want transformation, but they want it in a way that is like practical and not intimidating. That's what I [inaudible 00:02:07].

Host: How much does being buzzword compliant fit into being a Futurist?

Lisa Bodell: For 99% of the Futurists it fits in there very well. I think that's a big part of the shtick so to speak. I have to say that's why I like to position myself as a Practical Futurist because the idea is not to make people feel intimidated or uncomfortable or talked down to them like they don't know something. The

idea is to stretch their thinking around what's possible and then give them scenarios for how they can get there. So to me that's really the sign of a good Futurist, they stretch [inaudible 00:02:43] in terms of here's what's happening in terms of change, here's what's possible, and here's some ways it really applies to you. Cause that's what people want to know, what's in it for me.

Host: Well that's what we all want, right? I call it painting a picture of possibilities.

Lisa Bodell: I love it, and that's what it is, scenarios for the future.

Host: We had a ... we produce a TEDx and we had a magician in our last one and his trick is to precede the sentence with imagine. And if you say the word imagine in front of the sentence, they're automatically drawing a picture in their own mind of what you're going to say. Tell me what is the, when you're talking to people and you have all different kinds of audiences, what's with the ideal audience size for you? What kind of group do you feel like, this is perfect?

Lisa Bodell: If I could be ... I'm in New York, so my vision, my dream, my wish is that every day I'm in Madison Square Garden to a sold out crowd of 10's of thousands of people lighting it on fire. I love a big crowd.

Host: Nice.

Lisa Bodell: I get energized by it. The intimate conversations are great too, but I have to say I really like to get people inspired and help them reach their potential and to do that I like having big crowds. It's interesting you can really [inaudible 00:04:08] people engaged and make even a group of 10, 20 thousand people, but like [inaudible 00:04:14] small group if you're a good speaker.

Host: What's the trick to that? There's a trick.

Lisa Bodell: There is a trick, I think that most speakers like to get up and they're like that sage on the stage death by PowerPoint and I think it's the [inaudible 00:04:25] things. You can create intimacy by doing things [inaudible 00:04:29] in the room, yet I'm standing up, yet I'm participating. Doing small exercises that they can replicate on their own. Make your [inaudible 00:04:36] approachable and easy to them. It's [inaudible 00:04:38]. It's telling stories because that creates intimacy and connection with people right away. It's that kind of interactivity and storytelling that I think really makes a big room seem small and that I'm talking to them directly.

Host: We have a saying around here, we say start with story. Do you start with a story?

Lisa Bodell: I start with a story and I actually tell people, I tell them the story about what I want to accomplish. I always end that story with telling them my two goals. My two goals when I get up and I speak to people are, first is to inspire them,

around how change and actually simplification can become a habit and that there's simple ways to do it. The second more important thing I tell them I want to do is that I want to make them slightly uncomfortable. That's when people's eyes really light up because they expect you to say inspiring but they don't expect you to say uncomfortable and they want you to do it. The reason I want to make people slightly uncomfortable is because my job is to teach change and transformation and that doesn't happen when we're comfortable. It happens when we're slightly uncomfortable in a way that I call Productive Agitation.

Host: Oh man, I love that.

Lisa Bodell: Yeah, it's again, I'm a Midwesterner so I really like the productive practical aspect of stuff but people think change has to be abrupt and scary and it involves conflict and it doesn't. It involves contrast, it's about awareness, it's this Productive Agitation that brings up different ideas so people feel that they've tested their thinking, they've questioned their assumption and maybe they stick with their assumptions, but at least they've kinda gone through this gauntlet or thinking so that they can move forward in a way that makes them comfortable and willing to take a risk.

Host: You started by saying, you talk about complexity and killing complexity. I've been doing software forever and it's taking something that's really complicated but then abstracting it to a point where someone just simply swipes left or swipes right and a whole bunch of other things happen. We take hard things and make them very simple. How do you walk into a big company and get that across, because they're all about process and complexity?

Lisa Bodell: They sure are and what's interesting is I just wrote this book last year, it's called "Why Simple Wins" and the reason I did it was because what we're trying to do, my company we usually [inaudible 00:07:09] around change and innovation and we realized that it wasn't that people didn't want to change or innovate it's that they didn't have time to do it. They were literally drowning, right? They're drowning ... I mean people are smart. They're hired to be smart, they want to make change [inaudible 00:07:23] stuck in this complacency because they're fighting the battle of meetings and emails today. That's really what's happening, is people are drowning in mundane work and they can't get to the work that matters. My job when I go into a company is I ask them what do they spend their day doing? You would ... when people finally sit down and think about it, 9 times out of 10 the first answers are meetings and emails and they realize, holy cow I'm spending almost all my time [inaudible 00:07:51] really is ridiculous.

So we have them start to think about what complexity can they literally kill, because people really don't think about doing less as a good thing. We have to get them into the habit of how can we locate the stuff that's not working so you create more space for bigger thinking? And then, how do you actually get them to define what meaningful work is, because what's been [inaudible 00:08:14] is they'll talk about wanting to do bigger things, but then when people have the time to do it, they don't know what that means. Part of this exercise is giving

them permission, teaching them how to just kill stupid rules, kill stupid meetings, like kill stuff and then define now that you have the space because you're going to get it, where do you want to go? That is really meaningful to people because that's what innovation is. Focusing on meaningful stuff and once you get them to define what that means, suddenly you've got that [inaudible 00:08:45] suddenly that inner Futurist comes out and they know what they want to do.

Host: I like that. Your inner Futurist.

Lisa Bodell: Yeah, it's funny because first what we do is we tell them that they need to become their own Chief Simplification Officer. They need to embrace this, hey look at the list and eliminate stuff, right? If you can ... if you had to accomplish the same amount of work in half the time, what would you do? If you had to kill half of your meetings, which ones would you get rid of? The problem with so much of this is we just fall into these habits, we don't know the difference between being in a groove and being in a rut and we have to create this awareness for them around, hey guys, look you had the best of intensions, but maybe it's time to weed the garden. Let's get rid of stuff. Then teaching them to embrace their inner futurist of, now where do you want to go? This is what you were meant ... you know, put on this earth to do. This is the potential you are suppose to reach, now what is that potential? What is that [inaudible 00:09:41]? That alone is like therapy, it really is cool because people never are given the permission or the time to think about that stuff. Whether you're a leader or frankly whether you're with your own team, it's so productive to think about, God, what is the meaningful work we want to do? And people get jazzed about it.

Host: Are you an organizational psychologist?

Lisa Bodell: That's what people say. I see, my first book was around, I wrote this first book called "Kill the Company" and it was about how do you actually, you know put yourself out of business before somebody else does. So you realize what your weaknesses are and people really like that and they thought it was interesting and it was a different spin on innovation, but then I wrote the next book about killing complexity and when I get off stage now, I swear to God they hug me like a [therapist 00:10:26]. It's almost like, I'm saying the things that everybody knows, I'm attacking the stuff that drives them crazy every day like meetings and emails and reports and unnecessary regulations and all this crap that just fills their to do list and it literally is like being a [therapist 00:10:45] because they don't even, all you have to do is say "I'll help you kill complexity." And they're just like I don't even know what that means but just come over tomorrow.

Host: Please come do that.

Lisa Bodell: Come do that. Because people inherently know, they know what complexity is but they want someone to help them just tackle it right away with simple techniques.

Host: You'll love this then. Our slogan at home is, what if it were simple? So when there's a problem we're going to solve, there's a something, where we don't ... it's typically we don't know the answer. I'll tend, as a systems thinker to overbuild for the neighborhood, I kinda will, I'll do that. It'll be too complex, I'm a mind mapper I do all that and she'll just look at it and she'll say, "What if it were simple?" And it's like, great.

Lisa Bodell: I love that. We have a theme at our company which is, at the top of our status meeting every week, which is 30 minutes in big, blue, bold letters it says, how can we make this simpler? Because I think it's ... you have to put that out there as your mindset of you're going to approach everything but how to make it as deductive as possible. So how can I make it as minimal as possible, understandable as possible, repeatable as possible, accessible as possible, and then people start to realize, wow there's lots of different ways to simplifying, it's my job to get rid of stuff that doesn't matter.

And once people are given the permission, man they love it! I've yet to meet someone that's like, no I really don't want to simplify, I want to keep it complex. That person doesn't exist or they should be fired so that's the good news. It's very easy to get people on board.

Host: Who is the Japanese woman who is leading the simplification of the closet and the drawer?

Lisa Bodell: Yeah, I feel like I'm the business Marie Kondo.

Host: I love that!

Lisa Bodell: I don't want to clean your closet but I want to clean your desk and your processes and your to do lists, that's what I want.

Host: Oh, I even love that even more. I'm curious when you come into an organization it feels like if you don't start at the top you're going to have a hard time really making a difference. What's your rate on that?

Lisa Bodell: Yes, and ...

Host: Thank you.

Lisa Bodell: I think, yeah I have to say. Yes I think with most things in companies if you want to get the resources and the budget and the time and the permission it has to come from the top in terms of the strategy and the permission. Where most things really happen are from the middle out, it's the managers that lead the teams and they're stuck with crap every day. Individual efforts, that's a great thing about killing complexity. Individual tactical thing that really changes the behavior every day. The companies that fail on simplification are the ones that

go, you know what we've got to change, the organizational IT system, when they tackle things that are too big and out of their sphere of control.

The places that really win are the ones that start individually within their own sphere of control and then push it out to a bigger sphere of influence. Teams shouldn't need permission from the CEO to kill meetings. But that makes a heck of a big difference.

Host: One of the things that's interesting is when you're doing your talks, by the way how long is your average talk? An hour? Less?

Lisa Bodell: About 45 minutes.

Host: 45 minutes, so you're bringing it home, you're coming to the end. Do you have kind of like a signature close? A way of thinking about closing?

Lisa Bodell: I like to share with people really the impact of what could happen if they actually do the things I talked about around killing complexity. I end it with a statement like you said earlier around imagine. What I like to say to them is, you know, imagine if you actually got rid of two meetings a week or two reports a week and didn't have to do it anymore. How much time would you get back? Or, imagine if you ended meetings at 45 minutes rather than on the hour? How much stress would that take out of your day? Or, imagine if you actually were able to get rid of distractions so you could focus on meaningful work. People start to head nod, like you're right. There are really simple things I have control over that I can do right away to actually make things simpler, in not just work but frankly in my life. And people really start to see the impact right away, to be frank I know it's successful if I get emails from people right after my talk saying, hey I just want to share with you the two rules my team just killed at our status meeting last week.

Host: Oh nice.

Lisa Bodell: And they're pumped, they're like hey, can I just, thank you so much because of your talk I was able to go to my boss and kill that stupid report he has us do all the time that no one even looks at. So it's a really empowering message and I love it when people write us and tell us right away the difference we made because it's about getting your time back and that's the one thing that you'll never get it back once it's wasted, so helping people get that time back is a very personal, impactful thing.

Host: I would imagine, because you want to make a difference in people's lives, that's why you do what you do, you want to make a difference that when they write you, that's just like the best part of the day, one of those emails.

Lisa Bodell: You know people say, "How do you measure success?" You know people get into that business language, what's the ROI and this and I say, the ROI to me is,

we can show you quotes and rankings and all those things, but the ROI to me is when I get that email from the person in the audience that says, "Hey I just want to tell you the difference you made in my life." I mean, what's better than that?

Host: Nothing.

Lisa Bodell: It's really cool and it's not just how you changed my business it's frankly how much time I gave them back so that they could go to that soccer game, or go to that concert that they didn't get to go to before and enjoy something versus fixing a PowerPoint slide.

Host: Oh boy. Could we finish early so I could fix my PowerPoint?

Lisa Bodell: Yes, please!

Host: I want to go back to Productive Agitation because there's this one thought that goes in my head around the contrarian that's in every crowd. Right? There's always that person and Di Vinci tells us we should have at least one contrarian with us just to keep us sharp. I look at the positive of that saying, okay, that's that productive agitator. Would you agree with that?

Lisa Bodell: I would. I think there's a role for, I like to say professional skeptics.

Host: Okay.

Lisa Bodell: In our lives, it's okay to question things, it can't be the only thing that you do. That's the reason most people hate the contrarian because, they're the Debby Downer in every conversation and after a while you're like ... you have to show that you're at least open to new ideas. These skeptics, the reason they play an important role is because they help us question our assumptions. We all have biases, we all have assumptions and if you just have someone that constantly questions them, that doesn't mean that you're wrong, but it does mean, that it gives you a pause, you take a beat and you reflect and you can actually judge, hey is this something I should do differently or does it give you some confirmation that it's okay, that I am going to proceed as I wanted to. So that's good, it's kinda like the CEO, you shouldn't surround yourself with Yes Men all the time because that's ultimately going to be your downfall.

Host: Exactly. Tell me, you know one of the things as a speaker that I enjoy is the connection that I have with the audience and I play this game where I like to see how far back in the audience I can get people to be shaking their head up and down. So it's just a game I play.

Lisa Bodell: That's great!

Host: I can get about 25 rows back. How do you, what tricks do you have in that connecting with the audience and you said earlier stories help, but what else do you do?

Lisa Bodell: I think the best thing, if you're trying to prove a point isn't to tell them but to show them. Because for an example in the topic I tend to talk about which is around change and killing complexity, the issue with that is no one thinks they're the problem, they think that everyone else creates complexity. My point is that when I get on stage is a lot of the things that we create and contribute to complexity is self imposed and unnecessary.

I will get them up and say, let me do a quick exercise with you, and this is just an example to kind of show you how I interact. I get everyone to stand up and I'll say, let's do something that's simple, I want you to pat your head, rub your stomach and click your heels. Everyone stands up and after that awkwardness of trying to do it, they eventually start doing all three at once, then I pause them and I'll say, how many of you were able to do it? All three at once? And everyone proudly raises their hand even in the back of the audience and I'll say, that's too bad, that's not what I asked you to do. I asked you to pat your head, to rub your stomach and to click your heels, but I didn't say to do them all at once. That's a great example of how we create self imposed and unnecessary complexity. I go on to explain what the science is behind that and so, the reason that's so powerful is they just went through something so simple, but it illustrates a key point of how we operate business.

I do the same thing around change, I do the same thing with ... we'll also do some fun diagnostics. I put some statements up on the screen and I ask them to answer yes or no to them and what's cool about that is people like to diagnose themselves.

Host: Oh do they?

Lisa Bodell: Oh they do. They love it! Everyone loves a good quiz that's why all those stupid quizzes on Facebook and online are so popular.

Host: Oh, click bait quizzes, yes.

Lisa Bodell: Total click bait, so this is my click bait and I ask them, how good are you with change and of course everyone raises their hand. And I'll say, oh really?

Host: Oh, I'm excellent.

Lisa Bodell: Yeah, everyone thinks that they're fantastic, everyone else is the problem. We give them these statements and they have to answer yes or no to them and ultimately they realize, huh, I didn't do as well as I thought but then we reveal what the answers are behind them and why that's just human. The idea is to kind of show not tell and involve them either as a group, which kind of gets the

energy up or individually so they can diagnose themselves and start saying, huh, here's some places for change. I like that better than just talking at people and showing them PowerPoint.

Host: Yeah, I appreciate that. I'm curious with stories because we talked about stories in the very, very beginning. Do you keep a story journal and are you kind of always mining for stories?

Lisa Bodell: Yes! I'm constantly mining for stories and the reason I do that, I do journal because I think it's important to remember personal anecdotes and the reason why as I think you probably know this too if you're a presenter, you never know when a story is going to apply to something.

Host: Right.

Lisa Bodell: You know, you never know that and often times you write down a story and you think, eh, that's stupid, oh no one would think that's good but then times change, context changes and you've got a good anecdote to go back to. So I do do that and I also go back and I look online for case studies and stories of others that I can apply. Sometimes they're just, old anecdotes that you hear from tales way back when, there are even children's stories that I think are really fun. I think, to me pulling stories from unexpected places is what makes a difference. Let me give you an example.

One of the things that I was doing when I was writing my book on complexity is talking about, how do you get people to change their habits? Most people think you're going to talk to a psychologist or you're going to talk to a behaviorist or you're going to talk to an economist. I talked to a marriage counselor and I talked to a hostage negotiator. The reason I thought that was cool, is, yeah you've gotta take a different angle on a situation. A marriage counselor can teach you how to change habits with a friendly boss, and a hostage negotiator can teach you how to change habits with a difficult one. I like to kinda take things from a different angle because those are the stories that people listen to, it's not what they expect it's the unusual suspects stories that I want to present to them.

Host: I'm living the year of #unexpected and I love how you took that, cause when you talked about changing habits I'm thinking about that all the time because we're trying to help people change and they're ingrained as you said, am I in a ditch or a rut. You said it better.

Lisa Bodell: A groove or a rut.

Host: A groove or a rut, that was it. A groove or a rut and there's a professor at Columbia who teaches Behavioral Economics.

Lisa Bodell: Yes of course, I love those guys.

Host: Right? Which is, you said you can talk to a behavior guy, or you can talk to an economics guy and I said, how about a Behavioral Economics guy? It's just interesting that you made me think about it completely different and I'm guessing you get people to think different, which is why you are as successful as you are, which leads me to the question. Tell me about the first time you walked in front of a group and talked and what was that about? What was that like? And can you remember the first one?

Lisa Bodell: I can. It was when I was back in business school, I was at Michigan, I'm from Michigan and I went to the University of Michigan. I was in the business school and of course there's all these obscure classes that they have you start taking, which by the way aren't obscure anymore and they should be mainstream, like Psychology, and one of them was Speech, and you know presenting. I didn't know that I was good at it but I thought, well I'm going to have fun with it. I started speaking in front of the room, you know we had to present like a three minutes on something, some business topic because of course it always had to tie back to a business case study. I got up in front of them and I started acting really nervous like, thank you so much for having me here today, I'm a little nervous I just want to present to you, and I stopped and I said I'm actually not nervous, but I wanted to get your attention because part of actually selling a business is actually getting people's attention and drawing them in. And people were like, oh my god!

Host: Sweet, nailed it!

Lisa Bodell: Well, yeah so I took a risk number one, I did something different in terms of appealing to, you know everyone roots for the person who's nervous and I was appealing to their inner behavior. I don't know, it just flowed naturally for me, I just remember that was the thing that made me actually turn into a speaker was that presentation.

Host: The audience wants you to be successful, the audience is your pal.

Lisa Bodell: They are! They're rooting for you and that's what's so funny. You know when you've seen someone nervous up on stage you're like ... cause you've been there, everyone's been there, they're cringing, they're hoping for them, they want to applaud them overcoming it. I think that's cool because when you go into a room, everyone wants you to succeed and everyone wants to relate to you. That's why I think the best speakers to your point, they tell stories and frankly I think humor works in your favor. If you've got some self deprecating humor or funny stories you know, you did the same thing they're doing in the room. I'm in this with you too, I tell stories of how I create complexity and it's hard. People root for you because you're a part of them not this expert that's come in to preach to them. I think that's an important thing for speakers to remember.

Host: It's a hugely important because you walk on the stage and you want to get them to trust you and to identify with you and as specific and as personal as you are

comfortable with being actually ends up having universal appeal and I think that's why you are so good in front of 20,000 people.

Lisa Bodell: I haven't done 20, I've done 10, I haven't done 20 yet.

Host: OK, well as a result of this podcast, someone's listening going, you know, I've got 20,000 people, I want her to come speak.

Lisa Bodell: I'm all in. Bring it. I'm ready.

Host: So as we come to the end of this, it's been a great conversation, I'm interested how long have you been working with Big Speak?

Lisa Bodell: For a couple of years now.

Host: How's that going?

Lisa Bodell: Really great group. Great! I have to say, what I like about working with them is, we work with a lot of different groups, they are ... they always use the word partner and they really look out for your best interest, which I like. Some people just want to sell speakers as a commodity kind of thing and they really want to know what you do, how you're different and what can you bring to the table because, you said something really great earlier when we were talking offline, it's about bringing transformation no matter what your message is and they want to make sure they understand how you will bring transformation so the client feels really good about having you there, not just what you say but how you're going to make that audience feel and that to me is the big differentiator and they work hard to understand what that feeling is going to be.

Host: It was Maya Angelou who said, they won't remember what you said, but they'll remember how they felt when you said it.

Lisa Bodell: That's exactly right.

Host: I love that. Thanks for being on the Big Speak Podcast. We really enjoyed it, I loved getting to share some of your energy with you [inaudible 00:27:23] I've got, I have several t-shirts I'm going to make as a result of this show. Why Simple Wins, I like that. Unleash Your Inner Futurist, I like that one. Kill the Company, that was great. Productive Agitation, I'm just ... I could write, there's a book right there.

Lisa Bodell: There's a book.

Host: The other one you said The Chief Simplification Officer.

Lisa Bodell: Yes.

Host: I love that. Lisa, thank you so much.

Lisa Bodell: Oh, thank you.

Host: Bye bye.

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