“An organization mired in complicated processes and short-term results is simply not in a position to encourage innovation, no matter how many new programs its leaders talk about or implement, or how often they demand innovation from their employees.”

“As the speed of change increases and demand for results continues to grow, critical thinking in all its forms — questioning, creating, inventing, exploring — too often takes a backseat to efficiency, output and short-term ROI.”

“An organization that empowers its people to think critically, question relentlessly and act boldly is by default an innovative organization, the kind that will own the future.”

“Too many CEOs and executives ... insist that employees try to build on bad things rather than allowing them to tear down the bad and do something new ... [Employees] eventually become complacent zombie workers, repeating the same thing day after day, lacking any incentive to be innovative.”
These are insights from someone who makes innovation her life’s work. As founder and chief executive officer of innovation research and training firm futurethink, Lisa Bodell helps companies and organizations worldwide harness their power of innovation by breaking out of their comfort zones and embracing the “what ifs.” She’s all about rocking the boat, breaking the mold and empowering organizations and their people to question the status quo, experiment with new ways of doing business and embrace change. Ahead of the CUPA-HR annual conference this fall, where we’re pleased to welcome Bodell as a keynote speaker, we sat down with her to talk about innovation and change — and how easily we can help shape the future of our organizations if we’re simply open to shaking things up a bit.

Q: What exactly does innovation mean and how is it different from creativity?
A: Creativity thinks up new things but innovation does them. Creativity is about the idea and innovation is about the execution. Most people have ideas, but far less see them through. Frankly, coming up with ideas is the easy part; building them into valuable concepts — that make money or change lives or improve situations or however you define “value” — is much harder. Creativity involves strategic thinking, curiosity, imagination — all of which are important. But an innovator goes above and beyond that. Among an innovator’s inherent traits are agility, resilience (to see an idea through even when they incur setbacks), and the ability to execute the idea. In short, innovation is more than just creativity.

Q: Can innovative thinking be taught or developed in an organization? What are some simple ways to foster innovation in the workplace?
A: We all have the innate ability to be innovative, we just have to know how to tap into that part of our brains. To help employees explore their innovative sides, organizational leaders must give them the freedom to think big, reinforce the notion that no idea is too “out there,” and make sure every idea is acknowledged and considered. Leaders must create opportunities for collaboration, showcase and applaud change agents in the organization, and lead by example. Even something as simple as killing rules, updating or eliminating antiquated processes, or getting rid of things that don’t work well can spur innovation and open the door for long-lasting change.

Q: You say that innovation is tied to optimism. How so?
A: People can’t be innovative if they’re always skeptical, and in many organizations, there are lots of what I call “professional skeptics,” whose first reaction to a new way of doing something or a new way of thinking about something is not to be open and objective but instead to rattle off all the reasons that idea won’t work. When that kind of pessimistic or negative behavior is prevalent in an organization, ideas don’t get a fair chance. We have to choose to be open to change, and when we are, we’ll be able to see more scenarios and more possibilities. If we’re not optimistic, there’s no way we’ll see the potential of innovative change.

Q: What characteristics are common in organizations that have developed a culture of continuous and widespread innovation?
A: Innovative organizations boast strategic imagination, resilience and agility. They know what innovation will do for them and where it will take them. Organizations that are NOT innovative are the ones that are too complex; the ones that are content with doing things the way they’ve always been done; the ones that are mired in meetings and processes — and because of this, people aren’t inspired … in fact, they’re actually demotivated. In addition to the “negative” mindsets that exist in organizations, there seem to be two types of mindsets in the work world that people view as more positive and therefore more innovative — “let’s be agreeable” and “let’s be different.”

The mistake is: agreeable is not innovative. Sure, these organizational cultures are polite, and they get ideas to market, but they tend not to be more than incremental ideas — new colors, new features, new improvements. Whereas really innovative organizations know that having contrast — even conflict — can be a good thing and lead to better and bigger innovations that upend the playing field.

Q: You talk a lot about change agents in relation to innovation. What are some characteristics of a change agent?
A: A change agent stands out in the crowd. By nature, a change agent goes against the status quo, but in a good way. A change agent has strategic imagination — he or she is not just a dreamer, but a dreamer with purpose … someone who dares to be curious. A change agent is open to change — someone who actually listens to and thinks
through new ideas and new ways of doing things. A change agent is agile — able to pivot, able to change course when he or she is met with changes in plans. A change agent is resilient when met with adversity and resistance and sees things through and doesn’t give up on the vision. A change agent is provocative and knows how to ask questions to shake up thinking and challenge the status quo.

Q: How can an individual develop into an effective change agent within his or her organization?
A: Everyone is capable of creating change, and the best way to start is through “little bigs” — simple changes that can make a big difference inside an organization. I encourage leaders to start small and do things to encourage innovation within themselves and others — gain critical trust and credibility, then go from there. Examples of “little bigs” could be things like killing rules or unnecessary meetings, asking provocative but productive questions, getting people out of the office to see new things, encouraging people to network with others within the organization to learn new things, inviting “outsiders” to your brainstorms. Just start small, and see where that takes you.

Q: How can change agents be successful in an environment that is resistant to change?
A: In a conservative environment like academia, it’s better to take small steps than to go all out — people will be more comfortable moving toward change than being thrown into the middle of it. Let them experience it in small ways. Get some small, piloted things in place so people will know that organizational leadership is on board with change and that it really can happen. Show, don’t tell. Sometimes it’s easier to ask forgiveness than to seek permission! Pilot things — somebody has to start somewhere, so why not you? But don’t make people feel as if they have to change overnight; simply help them stretch.

Q: What would you say are the biggest contributing factors to success when it comes to change and innovation in an organization?
A: First, the purpose of innovation must be defined in a visionary, inspiring way (not just in terms of ROI). This is what gets people motivated to participate in innovation in the first place. For example, you don’t want to be the learning institution that “innovates to make the most money in the world, bar none,” you want to be “the most innovative learning institution that helps people reach their personal potential and transform their lives” — see? There is a big difference.

Second, the change must be leader-supported. We often teach senior managers that they need to lead by example when it comes to innovation — to provoke, to ask questions, to take smart risks, to encourage experimentation. And finally, people must be empowered to carry out the change and be innovative in doing so. If you tell them to be innovative and then never execute an idea, don’t provide sufficient funding, or don’t let people contribute, the initiative will simply die. Unless these key tenets of change happen, innovation is nothing more than lip service.

To hear more from Lisa Bodell, plan to join us September 28-30 in San Antonio, Texas, for the CUPA-HR Annual Conference and Expo 2014 (see www.cupahr.org/conference2014 for details). Make sure to also check out her new book, Kill the Company: End the Status Quo, Start an Innovation Revolution.