



# Detonate

## Why — and How — Corporations Must Blow Up Best Practices (and Bring a Beginner's Mind) to Survive

### THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

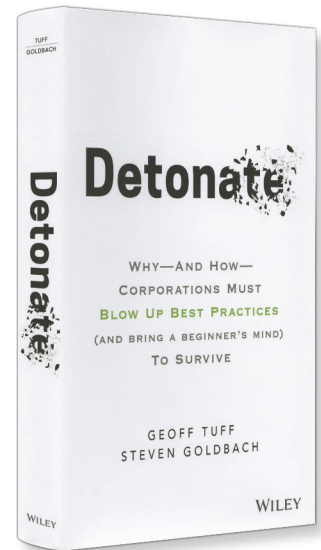
Without meaning to, and often with the best of intentions, most organizations continually waste precious time and money on processes and activities that don't create value and no longer make sense in today's business environment. Until now, the relatively slow speed of marketplace evolution has allowed wasteful habits to continue without consequence. This reality is ending.

*Detonate* explains how organizations build up bad habits, identifies which ones masquerade as “best practices” and suggests alternatives that can contribute to winning in the marketplace. With a focus on optimism and empowerment, it presents an approach and mindset that are critical to successfully compete in an era characterized by profound technological advances and uncertainty.

If you want to compete differently in today's marketplace and to challenge the things your company does that you have a nagging feeling are actually just a waste of time — and maybe value-destroying — *Detonate* gives you what you need to ignite change.

### IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- How “best practices” create a vicious cycle of organizational behavior.
- Seven conventional playbooks to target for demolition.
- Four key principles that underlie new, better practices.
- How leaders can accelerate progress by asking better questions.



by Geoff Tuff and  
Steven Goldbach

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# THE COMPLETE SUMMARY: DETONATE

by Geoff Tuff and Steven Goldbach

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## PART I: LIGHT THE FUSE

### Tinderbox

#### Hazardous Unwritten Rules

When you hear someone say, "This is what we've always done," you know that you're dealing with conventional wisdom — the thinking that governs a habitual decision or choice. People fail to question the logic for this behavior. It simply is the automatic choice — the safe choice.

But the problem with actions that take on conventional wisdom arises as you become further and further removed from the original reason for the action. The people who make the decision stop treating that action as a choice and instead treat it as a rule.

Rules are the governing body for how you pursue your objective. In many industries, regulations and laws broadly define what you can and cannot do, but for the most part businesses have a relatively broad mandate. Still, conventional wisdom gets in the way of creativity. Conventional wisdom is what we see as the right thing to do, often without deeply thinking about why we do it.

Organizations spend countless hours debating how (not whether) they should implement best practices, and they then convince themselves that they can somehow win with their customers because they will have implemented all of them.

Actually, the entire concept of best practices, by definition, means that you're doing the same thing as your competition.

There are some best practices that were smart given the context, but when context changes (as it is now for many businesses), we need to abandon the practices because they've turned into a waste of time and money. We need to move from a world where best practices are the rule to one where best practices are one of several possible tools for solving a problem.

As consumers of others' goods and services, we naturally wonder why things are the way they are. Why do grocery stores force shoppers with the largest baskets — and therefore of the most value — to stand in the longest lines? Why do hotels force tired business travelers to wait until the middle of their workday to check in? Some of these experiences likely have a reasonable root cause, but not all do.

Every time you identify a particular orthodoxy, you should research its existence. Ask why you do things this way, and try to dig into where each practice might have started. Imagine life without this orthodoxy; what would be the impact on your company's activities and/or success model?

You'll need to do more, however, to create the confidence to go and do something about this orthodoxy at scale. The key is to get out and try — at a "minimally viable" scale — to challenge the orthodoxy. ●

### Spark

#### Acceleration of the Vicious Cycle

Let's consider why unknowingly pursuing conventional wisdom has become a path to almost assured failure. For the vast majority of business history, companies have



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simply needed to “evolve” to compete effectively. The pace of change has been such that we have only needed gradual adaptation in order to survive; we haven’t *really* needed to consider existential threat.

The advancement of technology is making possible the breaking down of long-standing barriers or allowing companies to replicate customer value propositions at fractions of the costs, or creating goods or services that couldn’t have existed not so long ago, and the clock speed of this transition is happening fast because of computing power.

Consider the case of a typical retail business. A prototypical business model was to try to create substantial presence within a given footprint to create the likelihood that customers would notice and ultimately visit and purchase from your store.

However, advances in technology and forward thinking have given the consumer what they appear to really want — the ability to have nearly endless selection, the convenience of not leaving their house and good-enough delivery times. What was once an advantage has been turned into an Achilles’ heel — too much cost deployed against something the consumer no longer values.

It’s not a question of *if* something is going to happen. It’s a question of *when*. To put it even more bluntly: Uber ate the global taxi industry. And you’re hoping it won’t happen to your business. But it will, and soon.

### Urgency and the Vicious Cycle

Yet there’s more to it than just “technological disruption is coming for you.” In today’s world, best practices create a vicious cycle of behavior that can prove deadly in a rapidly changing environment.

It goes something like this: You plan for a long career, embrace orthodoxy, follow the playbooks, make the safe bets on marginal calls and enjoy a long career. The vicious cycle happens when organizational and individual instinct kick in to try to protect the old model in the face of undeniable digital change.

Now it goes something like this: You plan for a long career, embrace orthodoxy, follow the playbooks and make the safe bets on marginal calls. But a new digital reality (new competitors and business models) throws off results from “safe bets,” and they turn out to be bad calls. Bad outcomes result, leading to the need for increased burden of proof, so you rely on playbooks and orthodoxy and get more bad outcomes.

Corporations have become devastatingly inward-focused, structuring and optimizing for process adherence and execution rather than for making good choices.

This vicious cycle is now accelerating given the increasing clock speed of technological advances that ripple through business systems and the nature of opportunity that they create. ●

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## Coordinates

### Targeting the Blast

Our psyches typically relate explosions with a bad event: a bomb being dropped during wartime, a terrorist deploying a suicide vest, an accident at a plant. But detonations have also played a critical role in enabling progress. When history and memory are anchors to progress, we may need to tear down monuments to allow the collective to move forward. How we do this to avoid collateral damage is critically important and requires deep expertise.

Four principles create the basis for transformation. Anchored in philosophy and work approach rather than processes and playbooks, these core principles to compete effectively in a time of accelerating change are

**1. Focus your activities on understanding and driving human behavior.** Most companies have lost sight of the fundamental subatomic element of business — changing human behavior. If the objective is to grow revenue or profit, or create new capabilities to transform an organization, then as you peel back the layers of what that will take, you always find yourself requiring a human being to *do something different than what they’re doing today*.

**2. Bring a “beginner’s mind” to all that you do.** The people best at spotting orthodoxy are often those newest to a company or industry and those most often found asking, “Huh! I wonder why they do it that way?”

**3. Embrace impermanence.** We have to be prepared to create structures, processes and systems that aren’t expected to last forever.

**4. Build minimally viable moves to test and learn.** The single best way to avoid failure is to make sure that every time you make a move in a space governed by uncertainty, that move is open to course correction immediately if it turns out to be a bad one. Ideally, you will learn just a little every time you make a move so that not only do you avoid failing outright, but you begin to build a base of knowledge that allows you to operate even more effectively in analogous situations in the future.

Let’s now discuss seven different kinds of playbooks and how you can target them for demolition. The four principles will be used to show you how to do it. ●

### PART II: BLOW UP YOUR PLAYBOOKS

## Dismantle Your P&L

### Why Revenue Should Be the Last Thing You Worry About

When organizations ask what they think they'll earn next year in terms of revenue, it's usually some function of looking at what they've done in the past, comparing it to "expert forecasts" of what the industry will do next year, thinking about how they'll increase their share and then landing on a revenue goal. Once they have that revenue goal set pretty much in stone, they ask what profit they want to make.

The typical financial forecast process is predicated on several faulty bits of conventional wisdom. The core assumption is that the future will be the same as the past. It assumes that companies have an inalienable right to have revenue continue in a predictable fashion into the future. The fact that most forecasts *start* with revenue effectively makes the assumption that *our customers will keep coming back if we just keep it up*.

By not asking "why" revenue ought to behave consistent with the past, you're missing the underlying cause of your revenue — your customers' behavior. Also, if you tend to presume that the past trend line will continue, you minimize opportunities to do more with less.

There is a better way to plan that would give organizations much greater insight into what really matters, one that helps create something both valid and reliable while learning about their customers. The core principle that we want to apply is to focus on the subatomic element of business — behavior.

Develop business plans around the customer behavior that you want to cause, and have financial plans inexorably linked. In other words, financials become — as they are in the real world — the outcome of customer behavior. A simple way to put this in practice is to ask the question, "What broad customer behavior objective would most help me achieve the business results I want to achieve?"

For example, broad behavior objectives for existing customers might include "keep buying my product or service in the same way you are buying it today and potentially pay more for it," "buy more of my product or service for the same reason you are purchasing it today" or "buy more of my product or service for a different reason than you are purchasing it today."

Once you set a behavior objective, you then need to further specify the series of customer behaviors that will lead to the behavior objective. An effective tool to aid businesses in focusing on behavioral outcomes is having a customer journey map. This is the story of how the customer arrives at performing the behavior that is advantageous to your business.

By having a clear picture of the different ways customers can arrive at the advantaged behavior, businesses can decide on tactics they can use to influence behavior (and determine how much they cost), which would have the end result of achieving revenue. In this way, businesses can ground their financials in real-world customer behavior. ●

## Trash the Calendar

### A Strategic Planning Schedule Is Largely a Waste of Time

Most organizations do strategic planning in the following way: There is a season for planning. There are typically templates and/or a set process. Strategic planning is deeply oriented around meeting a financial objective, or the outcome is a financial objective that is not usually accompanied by a logic for why the objective makes sense or under what conditions it might change. There is a predetermined time orientation to the plan — be it an annual plan, a three-year plan or a five-year plan.

The core Detonate principle to apply here is looking at the subatomic element of behavior. You should plan around behavior change, not the calendar. Let's examine it in two buckets: customer behavior and employee behavior.

For customer behavior, your planning period should reflect the minimum amount of time you need to test whether your actions are having the desired impact. If you're a chain of gyms targeted at women 40 years and older, and the behavior you want to drive is for women who aren't exercising regularly at any gym to join your facility because you offer an entirely different regimen, then your planning periods should be flexible enough to test several variables. You might want one longer planning period to determine whether undertaking this is viable overall, and a few shorter planning periods to refine various ways to change the behavior.

Like customer behavior, changing employee behavior can take considerable time (especially in the context of a broad-scale transformation); therefore, companies might think about evaluating over a longer period of time the ability to actually create the capabilities and management

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systems for which the strategy calls. In shorter periods, they might evaluate the ability to make progress against milestones toward the development of those capabilities.

The planning cycle is really never-ending; once you finish, you have to cycle back to the beginning and re-evaluate your assumptions. This is another way to start testing other behaviors that can help you grow. Your planning horizon should center on the time it will take to understand whether you can do the things necessary to change customer and employee behavior to achieve your goals in the marketplace.

Businesses must treat their planning processes as a thinking exercise, not a template exercise. The pace of change is increasing, and this should only increase the importance of not falling prey to conventional ways of undertaking planning. ●

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### Defy Expertise

#### Syndicated Data Create Zero Advantage

Companies still largely behave the way they did 20 years ago, using external information as the most important factor when making important business choices.

Syndicated data are a typical best practice with a double-edged sword. On one hand, you can't ignore information that could have potential value in understanding the world. On the other, it is dangerous to rely on syndicated data as your only weapon against the competition.

Companies repeatedly look at syndicated data and don't probe for deeper insights or see choice in what the data reveal. Why is that so bad? Your competition has all of these data and insights, too. So, you and your competitors all figure out that a customer segment is really attractive, and you all focus your resources on doing pretty much exactly the same thing.

Because all of your competition offers the same thing, customers shop around for where they can get the best price. The fastest-growing, most profitable segment quickly becomes the most heavily competed, and profits come down. The best thing you can say about this is that the customer wins.

Knowing that your competition has the data, too, should frame how you use it. The Detonate principle that applies here is the beginner's mind. A beginner might say something as simple as, "We should measure what you're trying to do" — and not necessarily measure what is easily available.

Instead of using only syndicated data and risk falling into lazy thinking, companies should seek ways to create proprietary data and insights. Done properly, this allows you to make moves your competition can't see or wouldn't have made based on the data they have.

Have proprietary data be an outcome of your business model. Customers come into a store — that's data. They visit and browse a website — that's data. Do you know who those customers are? Which customers came to a website, and who browsed what? How long did they visit? What did they buy, if anything? From where did they do this? What device? What location? What promotional material did they see in advance?

By definition, your business must do something that others cannot — and that applies to your data strategies as much as it does to any other part of your business. ●

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### Upend Insight

#### Customers Can't Tell You What They Believe

If we trust customers to tell us what they want, they will — invariably and unknowingly — lie to us. It's not their fault. They don't really know themselves. Yet, most businesses act as though they can.

It's not that customers aren't well intentioned; they are. But social scientists have shown time and time again the size of the gap between expressed preferences (what customers say) and revealed preferences (what they actually do).

It's not that taking data from the market as a source of inspiration is a bad idea. It's that companies should stop investing in certain types of market research. Specifically, companies should stop trusting insights generated from quantitative surveys that broadly ask the customer to answer the question "What do you want?"; qualitative focus groups and group interviews; and a miscellaneous bucket called "Sales said so" (information from sales reports and anecdotes from sales visits).

Instead, companies should stop asking and start observing, simulating and inferring. And we can do that by going to the principle of focusing on behavior.

Start observing and inferring is the domain of cultural anthropology, and it holds the key to how companies must interact with and understand the markets they serve if they are going to thrive in an era of constant change and "unknowable" opportunities. At its heart is the ability to get as unfiltered a view on what humans are trying to accomplish in their lives as possible and to use expert

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insight — or observers — to understand what is actually happening in any given circumstance.

Anthropology and observing processes to generate insights entered the corporate world several decades ago. In 1979, Xerox hired Lucy Suchman, for instance, to observe everyday life with Xerox's products such as copy machine usage in the workplace. Her findings helped drive understandings regarding human-machine interaction that informed product design.

These methods give us a leg up in bringing a beginner's mind to the question of exploring what customers are trying to achieve. Because they're not filtering data through the assumptions of research designers or statisticians, they're as close as we can get to being "inside" the motivations of the people for whom we are trying to create value.

This starting place of blissful ignorance will ideally allow companies to work from first principles as they imagine how to build that value and how to take it in minimally viable increments to the market. ●

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### Lose Control

#### Discard Opportunity Management Systems

The economist Frank Knight first popularized the differentiation between risk and uncertainty almost a century ago. You can measure risk, but not uncertainty. In that sense, risk can be "managed" by taking steps to mitigate the impact of the variability while still meeting your objective. Uncertainty can also be managed, but usually the cost to effectively manage uncertainty is considerably higher relative to the objective.

We need to manage risks and uncertainties differently. The behavior to detonate here is a one-size-fits-all approach to risk management.

Stage-Gate is such an approach. It perfectly embodies what happens when a system is mindlessly applied without consideration as to whether the task fits its original intent. Rooted in chemical and engineering labs of nearly 80 years ago, it aims to bring data and reason to investment decisions in the product development process.

Stage-Gate's premise is straightforward and — on the surface — sensible. Instead of committing at the outset to invest heavily in developing a new product, plan to run the project through a series of linear, predictable development stages, each one punctuated by a "gate review." At this meeting, key decision makers review progress against

goals and decide to continue the project if it's hitting predefined hurdle rates on key metrics — and kill it if not.

What's the issue here? By presuming that Stage-Gate will do its job, companies trigger an orthodoxy: All you need for a steady stream of innovations is to feed the beast. Focus on "filling the front end" of the funnel, and Stage-Gate will sort the winners from the losers. Clogging the pipeline with relatively low-quality ideas, however, leads to hours wasted on subsequent evaluation.

Even if Stage-Gate takes all the waste out of the system and optimizes the burden of proof brought to the table, it still only works for problems that are knowable. When you run truly new challenges and opportunities — things that are unknowable unless you try them — through a process that rewards "knowability," you can easily kill great ideas.

The core principle to apply here is — once again — bringing a beginner's mind. By asking "why" they are undertaking certain kinds of evaluation, companies can better match the work done to mitigate risk and manage uncertainty to the kind of problem they face. ●

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### Stomp Out Platitudes

#### Celebrating Failure Is an Excuse for Mediocrity

More and more these days, it seems as if business leaders are celebrating their spectacular failures and suggesting that failure is the only path to organizational learning. Inspirational posters adorn some corporate walls touting close cousins of the idea: "Embrace Failure!" "Failure Is Just the Opportunity to Begin Again!" "No Idea Is a Bad Idea!"

Let's please stop the madness.

Thomas Watson, Sr., one of IBM's founding fathers, famously said that "the fastest way to succeed is to double your failure rate." Watson's quote embodies an important truth that creating business innovations requires an element of risk taking and learning from potential (if not inevitable) mistakes.

But of late, companies seem to have taken this to an extreme. The idea has been applied so sloppily and with such abandon over time that it must be held responsible for a whole lot of wasted time and some truly awful ideas introduced into what is meant to be serious consideration of business opportunity.

An absence of success actually can hurt when there is real economic or reputational exposure: Stock prices take a hit, and boards tighten the screws on management to improve short-term performance.

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A better system could be built entirely on the concept of Minimally Viable Moves. Organizations in the future will increasingly succeed or fail based on their ability to learn. But you can't learn if you aren't clear on your hypotheses regarding cause and effect in the world (i.e., if we make this move, we will cause this outcome).

In addition, you won't learn if you don't test your hypotheses in ways that don't consistently bet the company. And you need to make sure that the organization complies with this mode, so you need to punish those who don't behave consistently with the direction. Therefore, the key components of such a playbook would be,

- **Demand transparency and open logic from your organization.** The organization demands, assesses and rewards the logic behind all decisions rather than simply the result itself. The dynamic at play here is one of openness: If you are able to make your logic clear and open to challenge at every step along the way, then the collective system should be able to prevent failure by catching flawed logic.
- **Create a never-ending series of experiments.** Nothing really beats real-world tests for the ability to predict success in the real world. Yes, some things can be analyzed well, but in a world that is moving and changing quickly, increasingly the past doesn't predict the future. So the only way to know is to move.
- **Punish failure to comply.** In this world, failure will still exist, but big, unthinking failures will ideally not be tolerated except in very small doses and very occasionally. If we have created an ability to operate effectively with a system in which failure has been designed away, then it should in fact be punished when it occurs.

The good news is that increasingly — even exponentially — we will have tools at our disposal to monitor behavioral outcomes and to speed up the cycle time for course correction. ●

### Embrace Impermanence

#### Org Charts and Career Paths Are Past Their Sell-By Date

The general pattern of organizational silos dictating work that gets done is not new, nor is it a secret. The problem is the presumption of permanence in organizations. If we create a role, we presume it will exist forever. Because the people in those roles benefit in some way from being in it, their natural inclination is to protect such

roles. We may need a massively invasive restructuring to take groups of people out of roles that don't make sense anymore, which has the potential to be helpful but also creates new silos over time.

There's a better way. Organizations must embrace impermanence in how they design their organizations and undertake work. Focus on prevention rather than on a cure. Here are several ways to embrace impermanence:

**Periodically shake up your organization.** This could mean moving people around in leadership roles, creating new roles or undertaking a wholesale restructuring. With frequent organizational shake-ups, no silo ever takes hold, so the underlying problem in the marketplace easily rises to the surface.

**Resist career paths.** Today, career paths are at best a false sense of security. Reorient your people around the concept that "great work is rewarded" with more responsibility. "And we don't know precisely what you'll be doing in 5 to 10 years, but if we're successful in delighting our customers, and you are successful in delighting your organizational customers, you'll have ample opportunity to be doing really cool stuff down the road."

**Limit the size and scope of your internal organization.** No organization is best at everything. Therefore, there is a limit to what you can ask of your organization without it becoming increasingly unwieldy with size. Think carefully about not letting yourself get too large. Undertake only those actions that are central to delighting your end customers. Assign adjacent actions to someone else outside the organization. This will allow your business to run efficiently and enable you to focus your precious team time on the things that matter. ●

## PART III: BUILD SOMETHING BETTER

### Where to Start

#### Pick Your Site to Apply the Detonate Mindset

We need to start blowing up some of our most sacred playbooks — but we don't need to challenge orthodoxy from corporate rooftops, declaring to all who will listen that the company is in dire danger. Such Chicken Little behavior, even when warranted, rarely gets the attention it deserves and often just breeds resentment that someone is disturbing the peace.

Instead, focus on a minimally viable move to get going, trusting that something good will come of it even though

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you may not have the end game in mind. The questions are what, where and with whom.

**Where: Focus on the core.** Detonate is all about directly shifting the core from the inside; you can't blow up playbooks effectively and permanently from the periphery. Focus on a limited set of fundamental principles that — as demonstrated via small successes — gradually attract more adherents. Eventually, there will be enough momentum behind the movement to make it unstoppable.

**What: Start with behavior.** The most direct way to catalyze the Detonate journey is to start thinking about, talking about, planning around and taking action on human behavior in everything you do as an organization. Examples abound of companies that applied behavioral economics in the course of driving growth and change. Amazon Prime is perhaps one of the best known: A suite of features, from one-click ordering to guaranteed delivery and free media, radically reduced barriers to action and led to impressive results. The proportion of first-year Prime members who spend over \$800 annually on Amazon is currently double those who are not subscribed.

**With whom: It depends.** The most important characteristic is someone who is willing to embrace change and is curious. This person might be young or old, a digital native or immigrant, but as long as they are willing to learn, they can be effective. ●

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## Implications for Leadership

### Accelerate By Asking Better Questions

Jonathan Goodman, the Global Managing Partner of Monitor Deloitte, is fond of saying, “The most powerful tool executives have to drive change is their questions.” Change the question, change the outcome.

Consider these especially egregious questions and how you can ask them better or ask different questions altogether.

**What's the ROI on this?** When people hear this question, their immediate stance becomes one of defending the investment rather than considering it. Hear this question enough, and you'll learn to come in armed with all the facts and data you can imagine to prove your position. A better way to capture the imprecision of forecasts and inherent volatility of possible outcomes is to ask, “What's a reasonable range of outcomes of our investment?” This explicitly acknowledges the fact that you can't know the precise outcome and gives the space for the responder to share detail that drives the investment.

### Has anyone else in our industry done this before?

This question is really asking, “Am I going to look crazy for doing this?” or “How hard is this going to be to get through the organization?” Those are legitimate concerns that the organization can address through company dynamics and culture, not through asking this question, which creates unnecessary and wasteful work. A better way to ask the question is, “Has this type of problem been solved anywhere else in the world?” You can create value in your industry by taking something that has been meaningfully proved elsewhere and figuring out a way to apply it to your problem.

**How can we prove this will work?** When you ask this question, your team invariably scrambles to create the illusion of proof, so you end up with mountains of slides filled with analysis, none of which really offer definitive proof. If you're looking for more information, simply ask, “How could we learn more about this?” This clarifies that you, too, are in exploratory mode, and it positions you as part of that journey. You're not throwing responsibility on team members to figure everything out.

You also acknowledge uncertainty and are placing the value on the information that informs the decision, not the decision just yet.

See beyond the constraints of best practices and start a conversation in your organization. If you're not the executive in charge, consider asking some probing questions of your executives.

If you are an executive, look around your organization for all the signs of ossification. And when you hear answers that sound like “this is the way we've always done it,” zero in on those issues and demand better from your organization.

Let's light the fuse. ●

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