AN EXECUTIVE BRIEFING · FOR CIRCULATION TO BOARDS & LEADERSHIP TEAMS

Throw Away the Box

Somebody is rebuilding your industry from scratch right now. Here is why they usually win — and the one move made by every company that has ever beaten them.

Terry L. Fossum · #1 *Wall Street Journal* bestselling author · #2 New TEDx Talk in the World · former U.S. Air Force Captain & Executive Officer, nuclear B-52 operations · built on original interviews with the leaders behind NASA, Tesla, The North Face, E! Entertainment, and FANUC robotics — and the commander of the International Space Station

In 1958, a company that made the S&P 500 could expect to stay on that list for 61 years. By 1980, twenty-five. Today, about 15.

And of the original Fortune 500 — the class of 1955 — roughly 90% are gone from the list. Merged, acquired, bankrupt, or displaced by somebody they had never heard of. Every number above is verified, and every company on that casualty list was run by smart, hard-working people.

THE PATTERN IS ALWAYS THE SAME

It runs in four beats. A company at its peak, successful enough to smirk. Somewhere out of sight, somebody with nothing — no processes, no legacy, no "way we've always done it" — asking one question about that company's industry: *if I had to build this from scratch today, what would I build?* Then the crossover. Then the gravestone.

You know the names, but you may not know the real stories — and the real stories are worse. Kodak did not miss digital photography. A 24-year-old Kodak engineer named Steve Sasson *invented* the digital camera in December 1975, and management's reaction, as Sasson later recalled it, was "that's cute — but don't tell anyone about it." Film margins ran near 70%. Kodak saw the whole future and could not walk away from the present. Sears — the company that invented remote retail with the catalog — shut that catalog down in January 1993, eighteen months before Jeff Bezos founded a company to sell things remotely, without stores, to anyone. And in 2000, the CEO of Blockbuster sat across a table from the founders of Netflix, who had flown in overnight to offer their company for $50 million, and by their own account he struggled not to laugh. Here is the frightening part: given Netflix's losses that year, saying no looked *rational*. That is what success does. It doesn't make you stupid. It makes the wrong answer look responsible.

> *The box is not built from your failures. It is built from your victories — and that is exactly why nobody inside can question it. The gravitational pull of "how we've always done it" is not strongest at failing companies. It pulls hardest on the winners.*

IT IS NOW HAPPENING AT AI SPEED

Chegg was a healthy education company worth nearly $15 billion. On May 2, 2023, its own CEO admitted on an earnings call that ChatGPT was eating new-customer growth; the stock fell 48% *the next day*, and has since lost roughly 99% from its peak. ChatGPT was five months old when the damage started. Kodak got fifteen years of warning. Chegg got a semester.

In early 2024, Klarna reported that its AI assistant did the work of 700 customer-service agents in its first month. The next trading day, Teleperformance — the world's largest call-center company — fell 29% in a single session. An AI coding startup called Cursor went from a reported $100 million in annual revenue to $4 billion in eighteen months, and in June 2026 SpaceX agreed to acquire it for $60 billion — a company that did not meaningfully exist three years ago. Legal work, accounting, customer service: in each one, an attacker with no box is already inside the walls, and the incumbents' response has mostly been to buy tickets to their own disruption.

THE MOVE THE SURVIVORS MAKE

The companies that live through this are not luckier. Across every major survival story of the last fifty years, the same specific move appears: **while the old business could still pay for it, they hired their own attacker** — a real person, inside the company, with an explicit mandate to beat the flagship. And when the attacker and the flagship collided, leadership let the attacker win.

In 2004, Jeff Bezos pulled Steve Kessel out of running Amazon's successful physical-books business and re-tasked him with these words: "Your job is to kill your own business." The result was the Kindle. Steve Jobs put a secret team on the iPhone while the iPod was roughly 40% of Apple's revenue — and still growing. Corning sold Pyrex — its own name — to fund optical fiber. Satya Nadella's first product announcement as CEO, seven weeks in, was Office on the iPad: the crown jewels, shipped to a competitor's device. And Netflix — the garage attacker from the Blockbuster story — launched streaming while its DVD business was the profitable core, then paid $100 million for *House of Cards*, no pilot, to attack its own licensing model before its suppliers could. The difference between Blockbuster and Netflix was never technology. Netflix attacked Netflix first.

Every dead company on the first list had an innovation lab. Labs are easy. *Permission to win* is what they never gave. And the timing sets the price: the companies that made this move early — Apple, Amazon, Netflix, Corning, Microsoft — paid in discomfort. The ones that made it late — IBM in 1993, Fujifilm as film collapsed — survived, but paid in blood. The ones that never made it are the gravestones. There is no fourth option.

The part nobody budgets for: people carry every one of those moves, and getting an organization to embrace change is like trying to get a cat to take a bath — it might finally happen, but it's going to get bloody. The survivors built a fire *within* their people, not under them. The keynote is how.

FIND YOUR BOX IN SIXTY SECONDS

The Box Audit. Write the name of the organization you care about at the top of a page. Then finish three sentences — in writing, honestly:

1. "In this organization, nobody really has permission to question…" *(name three things)*

2. "The smartest people here spend their best energy optimizing…" *(name the activity)*

3. "If we started over from scratch today — nothing but the goal — the first thing we would NOT rebuild is…"

Your three answers are the box: its walls, the talent trapped inside it, and the thing you already knew — and hadn't said out loud. Now run the same exercise with your leadership team, slowly, in a room. When somebody defends a wall, nobody has to be wrong. Somebody just says: *that's the box talking*.

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Terry L. Fossum is a #1 *Wall Street Journal* bestselling author whose TEDx talk debuted as the #2 New TEDx Talk in the World. A former U.S. Air Force Captain who served as Executive Officer of a Group of nuclear B-52 bombers during the Cold War, he built the *Throw Away the Box* keynote on original interviews with the leaders behind NASA's Columbia Return-to-Flight, Tesla's production lines, The North Face, E! Entertainment, and FANUC robotics — and the commander of the International Space Station — the people who actually made these moves, telling him how. From factory floors to boardrooms, the review repeats: *"the best speaker we've ever had."*

Bring this briefing to your stage or boardroom: the *Throw Away the Box* keynote (45–60 min) delivers the full pattern, the survivor's move, and the Box Audit live — and every leader walks out with the tool in hand. · **terrylfossum.com**

Every statistic and quotation in this briefing is verified against primary sources; source list available on request. Statistics current as of mid-2026.