



How Stella Saved the Farm

By Chris Trimble

Reviewed by Deborah Potter

With a name like **How Stella Saved the Farm**, many may find it easy to dismiss this book about innovation. But, that would be a mistake. This pivotal book may have a child-like name, but simplicity is part of its effectiveness, as it avoids pretentious language, industry jargon, and cuts to the chase of why established companies should innovate.

The title denotes its parable format and although seemingly silly at first, this form makes its concepts relatable and straightforward as it tells the story of the only animal-run farm left in agriculture and its struggle to survive the machinations and bulk-buying power of giant human-run mega-farms. The parable simulates real-world problems and negotiations indicative of running a strong, long-lasting company.

There is a startling shift taking place in the animal-run organization. Marcus, the respected, beloved, and traditional CEO in charge for the past few decades, dies. Rather than appoint the operations expert and heir apparent named Bull to be his successor, Marcus leaves his daughter Deirdre in charge. Before passing away, Marcus confides to his daughter his concern that, though the business market for their products is fine for now, it won't remain so much longer. It was clear to him that Bull, a strong proponent of their traditional business lines, is not the person to lead the company through the process of finding new product lines and sources of revenue. This leaves the company searching for something new, rewarding expertise, creativity and innovation while becoming more efficient and better at delivering the products it already provides. Shockwaves are surging through every level of the company while Deirdre and Bull try to professionally and personally navigate the recent changes.

While leadership struggles with the demands of a new reality, Stella, a young upstart sheep with little experience and lots of potential, discovers that there is not only a growing appreciation for Alpaca wool, but an ample supply and easy logistics for getting it. Upon winning a contest Deirdre hosts to decide on a new product line, Stella finds that rumors abound, resentments fester, and competitions begin. Bull says "We cannot afford to try new things" and Deirdre responds, "We cannot afford not to" while the human farmer across the street brings yet another offer to buy the farm, encouraging them to sell out their dedication to animal-run agriculture.



Executives, middle managers, and direct line workers alike will recognize the personalities in this parable, not because they are oversimplified, but because they are real and familiar. They'll also recognize the conflict, headaches, and difficulty growing pains cause for any organization. Luckily, there's also concrete advice for how to navigate it, such as:

- Organizations typically can't abandon the tried and true when they want to or need to innovate. Instead, they need to find a way to do both well at the same time.
- Innovation is an experiment and should be run like an experiment, but new endeavors require a different way of measuring and evaluating success. Experiments are about learning as quickly as possible. So, instead of a pass/fail system, a learning system is appropriate whereby the experiment is broken down into numerous specific hypotheses, which should be measured at meaningful intervals and refined accordingly.
- The same team cannot be used to maintain traditional products at the top AND lead the organization into brand new territory.
- An organization might have to risk what budget it has, because not using it is even riskier for the organization's future than using it.
- The organization's new products cannot receive attention, perks, and benefits not also given to traditional lines. At the same time, traditional line staff must be educated as to what is required to make the new product line successful.

Don't let the basic-sounding title of this book fool you. The use of complex language or jargon does not guarantee that ideas will be insightful or helpful, and this book demonstrates that simplicity can be the best and most impactful, type of brilliance for both our long-time business ventures as well as our newest ones.



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