

Motivational speakers: great investment or a waste of money?

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How often have you sat through a 'motivational' speaker's address that has left you feeling anything but? The trick, says Jim Lawless, is to ensure the speaker is properly briefed.

Companies spend a lot of money on motivational speakers to inspire their people and make them feel passionate about their work. But is it a worthwhile investment? If the speaker fails to effect a change in your people and hence in your business, you may well feel that you have wasted your money. It has been argued that they often act as no more than a short-term booster with few long-term benefits. So how can you ensure that your experience with a speaker is worthwhile?

If you go for a speaker who is professional and understands business (as opposed to one of the fire-walking conjurers or c-list celebrities currently plying their trade), it can be a valuable investment – so long as you are clear on what part a motivational speaker should fulfil and what part the business has to play. A motivational speaker cannot and should not tell your people about the market conditions, make projections or talk about targets.

Destroying credibility

Equally, an outside speaker can't reinforce your company's vision or strategy or give the impression of reading from the managing director's script as that will destroy their credibility. What a professional speaker can do is inspire an audience to believe that they can achieve things they never thought possible – and inspire them to want to give it a shot.

But if the organisation has given them nothing to believe in, the emotion created is lost, or used elsewhere, and staff can actually become disappointed and demotivated following the presentation. It's up to the leaders in your business to provide the audience with the vision and the roadmap – the intellectual foundations that the speaker can create emotion around.

When hiring an inspirational speaker or trainer to inspire your staff there are practical things that you can do. This should start before the training event or conference.

Always brief the speaker thoroughly so that they understand the company and what they need to achieve – feel free to ask for the speaker's ideas on what you should do to capitalise on their visit.

I gave more than 100 conference addresses last year alone. I have never been asked on the pre-event briefing call what the client needs to do to ensure that they are ready to capitalise on the motivation they are asking me to generate. In a few cases this is because the company already understands what the impact will be and is prepared for it. But more often than not they just haven't thought about it.

Investment rewarded

If your investment is rewarded and your people emerge fired up and full of ideas, will you be ready for the impact on the day job? Are there processes in place to harness all the new ideas and show that they are being listened to?

If your line managers aren't prepared and meet new ideas with indifference, the inspiration will be lost. Reward and celebrate people's new-found enthusiasm and make sure they know it hasn't gone unnoticed. Say what your senior team will do to contribute to the new order and perhaps have them make a presentation to staff outlining their commitment at the event itself.

If all you want to achieve with a speaker is to make your people laugh in the graveyard slot, book a comedian. If you want to achieve genuine change for and through your people, make sure you've done the preparation necessary to achieve that result, or you will, indeed, be wasting your money.

Jim Lawless is a motivational speaker and runs Zoobites, a soft skills training company.