

LeaderPerfect Newsletter

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How to “Out-Motivate” Motivational Speakers

by Dr. Mike Armour

No one questions that a primary responsibility of leadership is to motivate. But in practical terms, what does it mean to motivate someone?

I raise this question because I've had several inquiries this month from organizations wanting "a motivational speech." And as I've discussed these opportunities with the event planner, I've been asking myself, "What will the attendees expect when they hear that they are about to hear a 'motivational speaker'?"

Most, I'm rather sure, will expect some rousing presentation that raises their energy level, gets them excited, and fires off a barrage of positive emotions. They probably also expect a significant amount of humor, because the most accomplished motivational speakers are masters of using humor both to make their points and to foster a positive emotional state in the room.

Which leads to an interesting thought. What if the speech should live up to their anticipation? What if, at the end of the presentation, the room is throbbing with energy, people jumping to their feet with excitement? Could I call it a successful motivational speech?

Action Is the Key

My answer is, "Probably not." At least, not in the strictest meaning of "motivation."

The word itself comes from the Latin term *motus*, which means "to move." At the heart of the word "motivation," therefore, is the notion of movement. This then begs the question, "What movement are we looking for when we *motivate* someone?"

To go back to motivational speakers for a moment, what do they move? They move emotions, to be sure. They also seek to move perceptions. That is, they try to impart new or healthier outlooks on life. They try to give their hearers a fresh point of view on their work or on themselves. Worthy outcomes, one and all.

But elevated emotions and new perspectives — however engaging they may be — are not proof of motivation. **Motivation is in play only when people take substantive and appropriate action.**

Sales professionals understand this intuitively. They are always looking for "motivated buyers." To qualify as a motivated buyer, the prospect must obviously feel good about the salesman's product. More importantly, the prospect must also be ready to take action and effect a purchase.

The problem with motivational speeches is that they rarely afford an opportunity, within the setting of the speech itself, for people to take action. The speaker may stir up emotions and resolve. But until people actually do something to implement this new-found resolve, motivation has been stillborn.

And truth be told, as an audience files out of the typical motivational speech, resolve is already fading. And rapidly, at that. In the end, the speech may result in little lasting change in behavior. That's why companies keep cycling motivational speakers through every few months. Whatever impact the previous speaker had, it quickly wore off once the emotional high faded.

So, as leaders what can we learn from motivational speeches and their limited enduring impact? Let me offer these observations.

1. Before you seek to motivate your people, identify the *specific* action (or actions) that you want them to take as result of being motivated. Think of that car salesman again. He knows exactly what he wants to happen before he ever begins his sales spiel.

As a motivator you need that same kind of clarity in your own mind. Without it, your people are unlikely to "intuit" the right call to action from your messaging.

2. Lay out your call to action plainly in your motivational messages. Your people should be left with no doubt as to what you expect them to do with the resolution that you have fired off within them.

3. Avoid needless abstraction in your call to action. Things like "working harder" or "being better team players" are not specific enough as calls to action. There are scores of ways that people could go about "working harder" or "being a better team player," none of which fulfill your expectation. Only when your expectations are precisely understood can your people do what you consider the appropriate thing.

4. Your call to action may not necessarily be about doing something new or different, but rather about maintaining persistence in a direction already taken. After all, teams do grow weary. Distractions and exhaustion do take our eye off of the target. Your desired outcome may therefore be renewed focus on some urgent priority.

5. The power of motivation is less about stirring emotions and more about appealing to values. *Motus*, the Latin word from which we derive "motivation", also gives us the words "motive" and "motion." *Motivation is the art of giving people a motive to put in motion what is desired.*

Now, motives are inseparably linked to values. (Unless something has value to us, we have no motive to pursue it.) The key to effective motivation, therefore, is for leaders to

harness their desired outcome to the values of their people, giving them a motive to commit to the call to action.

In this regard, you as a leader are in an advantageous position compared to the speaker brought in to make a motivational presentation. You know your people. You know their values. You are therefore uniquely positioned to connect your desired outcome with the values of your people in a way that yields lasting motivation.

6. Reinforce your message with purposeful repetition. Studies suggest that only a tiny percentage of your audience "gets the message" the first time they hear it. Thus, when you are motivating people to stretch to new heights, find a variety of ways, occasions, and settings in which to communicate the key thoughts of the message.

7. When people heed your call to action and perform to your expectations, celebrate what they have done and express gratitude for it. People do not take motivational messages at face value. They look for clues that will tell them whether the leader is genuinely serious about it. If there are any doubts along these lines, you erase them when you celebrate performance that embodies the call to action. And in the process you strengthen the resolve of others to follow through on what you have called on them to do.

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