

The Emperor's Motivational Speaker

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On the appointed day a festival was declared. All the people in the land gathered together in eager anticipation of the Emperor's appearance. For months, the finest tailors in the world had labored to fashion for the Emperor the finest suit of clothes ever made. It was said that the fabric they used was so fine and so rare that the unrefined could not even see it. Only the Emperor and his top advisors had actually seen the fabulous fabric, and the rumors of their amazement were the talk of the crowd. When the trumpets announced the approach of the Emperor, an anxious silence fell.

First came the clergy, with their incense and bells. Then came the ministers, holding their scepters of office high aloft. Then came the tailors, displaying the miraculous material they had used, and indeed, it was so diaphanous that it truly *was* difficult to know *exactly* what one were seeing. Then came the Emperor. He had never looked more regal. He wore a look of supreme self-satisfaction, the look of one who possessed something possessed by no other. Everyone turned to his neighbor and commented on how marvelous the King's new suit looked, everyone but one little boy.

Said the boy, "The Emperor has no clothes on!" And at that moment, everyone in the crowd became painfully aware that...that boy was definitely *not* management material.

Not long ago, I attended a meeting that featured a motivational speaker. That, in itself, was nothing new. I had attended many meetings that featured motivational speakers. But this time I attended as a member of the audience rather than the production staff and, for me, that was a first. The speaker opened her presentation with, "Don't you just hate it when people try to intimidate you?" That's a different gambit, I thought; this should be interesting. Little did I know.

Before you could say Positive Attitude, this woman was telling this audience of complete strangers that the way to keep from being intimidated was to stand up and hug one another. The tension in the air was instantly palpable. Three hundred people visibly squirmed almost in unison. She was insistent. She

insinuated that failure to perform this completely unnatural act was an admission of timidity, social ineptitude and psychological maladjustment. And on the faces of three hundred people, you could read the grim determination *not* to be perceived as "that sort of person" no matter *how* they *really* felt.

But I don't blame the audience for the mass breach of personal integrity which followed, shameful as it was, because they were all there on business. Half the audience was there to sell something to the other half. The sellers could hardly afford to be perceived as cold and prickly by potential buyers because nobody wants to buy something from a sourpuss, and buyers could hardly allow themselves to be intimidated by sellers because, after all, what kind of negotiating position would that be? And who wants to be perceived as maladjusted, introverted or non self-actualized anyway? So in a great awkward show of role playing and affectation, 299 complete strangers embraced each other as obediently as trained seals.

I sat there dumbfounded, trying to sort things out. I had never seen a motivational speaker from this perspective before. This woman, who was being paid to bring something of value to this audience, under the guise of intimidation-resistance training, had just intimidated this entire audience into believing that if they *resisted* her intimidation it would mean that they *were* intimidated. This was a major piece of doublethink, and I was impressed.

But as I thought about it, it became more and more incredulous to believe that I was the only person in the audience who felt that way. Later, I realized that I was *not* the only person to see that the Emperor had no clothes on, I was just the only one who didn't realize the risks of saying so. When I saw how...underimpressed...my boss was with my courageous display of personal integrity and unintimidateability, I began to understand.

Since then I have seen motivational speakers in a different light. It's not that I see them without clothes on, you understand, it's just that I pay more attention to the faces of the audience now. And what I see there is role playing run rampant. Just like the people watching the Emperor's procession.

At another meeting I attended even more recently, there was again a motivational speaker. This one was a speed-talker from the baffle-'em-with-bullchips school who was also something of an intimidationist. Her audience was all middle management types, the easiest marks of all. Middle managers would practically *pay* for opportunities to demonstrate their positive attitudes and cooperative team spirits. As part of her act, she called several people up out of the audience to participate in some sort of demonstration. Though they were visibly uncomfortable, none resisted. Nothing but Good Sports and Solid Management Material here, boss!

Then she threw them a football, told them to organize a team and run a play. Then, without giving them so much as a nanosecond in which to carry out her instructions, she started yelling, "Go! Go! Go! Go!" like some demented drill-sergeant-turned-cheerleader. She was trying to make some lame point about teamwork and communication, but when the people just formed a line, hiked the ball and completed a pass as though they did it every week-end, it sort of took the wind out of her sails. But like a true pro, she just pouted a little and went on to her next schtick with a baffling flurry of words and arm-waving. The group didn't know whether they had done as they were supposed to or not, so they weren't sure how to feel about it. You could see the confusion on their faces. But, at least they had shown their good-natured willingness to be embarrassed for the good of the company. That had to count for something.

Watching the audience while all this was going on, I began to formulate a sort of Murphy's Law of Motivational Speakers. It goes like this: In a corporate setting, one responds to a motivational speaker as one feels one's employer wants one to respond. And one's employer wants one to respond to a motivational speaker, who has just cost the company several thousand dollars, in a way which justifies the expense.

In an environment like that, in which everyone's top priority is trying to fulfill their idea of everyone else's expectations, questions of the speaker's real effectiveness become sort of meaningless. I mean, how would you measure it? Certainly not by overt behavior; nobody's going to give themselves away that easily. And not by one-on-one interviews or questionnaires either; those things can be traced! How about by the amount the speaker charges? I mean the more they cost, the more effective they *ought* to be, yes?

If you want to gage the effectiveness of a motivational speaker, watch the audience, not the speaker. Watch the expressions on their faces. Are they genuine or affected? Watch their body language. Is it relaxed or uncomfortable? Watch the way they applaud. Is it spontaneous or purposeful? If the speaker makes people participate in embarrassing demonstrations, do they really enjoy it or just put up with it?

The moral to the story is: If you are contemplating hiring a motivational speaker, don't be intimidated. Don't forget who is working for whom. Insist on seeing them at work, either on tape or in person. Trust your gut feelings and never assume that other people are going to react differently than you do. And above all, no matter how many Fortune 500 companies have used him or her, no matter how highly recommended he or she comes, trust your perceptions and never, but never, hire a naked Emperor!