



## LEADERSHIP CONVERSATIONS

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### SPRING HAS SPRUNG AND THE CONFERENCE SPEECH IS GETTING READY TO SING

Up and down the land Personal Assistants are scanning U-tube and Google Images, seeking video clips and photographs that can help them with the latest challenge dropped on them by their boss. 'Post-It' notes stuck to slide decks have written on them something along the lines of *'See if you can find a way to bring these slides to life for me please?'*

Yes, it's that time of year again: the *'Spring Conference Season'* is looming large on the horizon! You can barely hear yourself think for the clatter of keyboards as senior leaders and their assistants scramble to make this year's conference speech their 'best yet' - or, at the very least, better than last year's! PowerPoint applications are creaking with the weight of text, images, video links and music being squeezed onto every available page and servers are dimming the lights of small towns as terabytes of data are passed around the ether. Never have so many electrons been so inconvenienced...

I have participated in many of these bi-annual conference 'rituals' with my clients over the years, either as a key note speaker, or conference facilitator (or both) and, on the usually-long-trip home, I have to admit some have left me wondering if the considerable time and money deployed could have been better spent.

At least the recession has removed most of the excesses that were all too common a few years ago or, *"in the good old days"*, as I read someone lamenting recently in the press. The days of taking the top 100 executives to Victoria Falls in Zambia – this apparently being *'a critically important and integral part of getting this year's strategy effectively communicated'*

– are thankfully at an end!

This personal experience has left me with a lot of empathy with the comments of Peter F Drucker, writer, management guru and 'social ecologist', who said: ***"I like company conferences; they are great habitual events where the really important things are said over cocktails and are never done"***.

So how can we make the bi-annual conference better value for both time and money? We always advise you to start with the 'purpose' and work out how to clearly link this to the current strategic challenges faced by your organisation. However, when we ask: ***'Why are we doing this?'***, I am sad to say the usual answers I hear are along the lines of: *'It's the Spring Conference. We always do a conference at this time of year!'* This is quickly followed by comments like: *'It's vital to give the same message at the same time; we need everyone 'on the same page'; we need to build 'commitment' to the way forward; we have to inject energy for the challenges that lie ahead; we need to reward and celebrate our achievements last year; and so on...'*

All are laudable aims and I agree with the general sentiment that, in an increasingly virtual world, any event where people come together to get real and much needed 'face time' has to be welcome. We are, after all, social animals and we need to stop worshipping the 'God email' to get a regular 'face time fix' if we are to stay sane!

The challenge leaders face when crafting a conference design is to ensure that the agenda does not degenerate into a packed list made up of: 'Tell' and/or 'Sell' sessions from the top leaders, with a seemingly



obligatory 'team building' event stuck somewhere in the design (as if it alone will tick the 'team engagement' and 'fun' box);

or the odd 'syndicate session' to give a further nod towards engagement; not forgetting, of course, the almost obligatory 'conference dinner' where the real networking and socialising gets done.

## We need more imagination than this!

In my experience participants are often intrigued by the quiriness of the venue and usually enjoy the entertainment and insight given by the keynote speaker. However, what they really appreciate and value is the chance to participate in authentic conversations with their leaders and their colleagues.



Sensei is an international consulting firm that helps their clients deliver business results by improving human performance and optimising the value of team and leadership interactions.

We focus on areas where companies can raise the bar on performance, productivity and profit. We ensure that any work we do has clear line of sight to specific business outcomes of value to the organisation, so that a solid return on time, energy and investment is realised.

We are experts in the process of unlocking potential and focusing this in the right ways on the right aims; and we excel at emotionally engaging leaders and teams to own the change, take accountability for it and deliver it. In short ... **'We do the really hard part of the soft stuff.'**

This quality interaction is often missing from many conference designs and, as often as not, is usually replaced by information-heavy presentations which create little or no opportunity to actually engage and listen to participants' views.

I still remember the day I declared to a slightly panic-stricken client: **'This conference will not contain a single PP slide!'** which to them seemed revolutionary! This particular conference turned out to be one of the most highly rated and genuinely valuable conferences they had ever run because it actually delivered insights of real strategic value and built lasting relationships.

In the public conference arena traditional conferences, packed to the hilt with back to back speakers, are also struggling to attract the numbers of attendees they once did. Certainly some of this is due to the current budget constraints that restrict attendance at such events, but many people I have spoken to say these traditional conferences are beginning to miss the mark. Simply transmitting information via a speaker (no matter how eminent, competent or indeed entertaining) is not what people really want anymore. In today's information economy people are overwhelmed with information and, if they are short of some vital insight, then they know they are but a few clicks away...

I fear that traditional conferences as we have known them in the past are, to use a strategic term, 'entering their endgame'. The time for fresh thinking is upon us and those who grasp the challenge are finding that money, time, energy and effort can be much better spent in ways that genuinely engage their people and unleash the passion required to fuel the journey ahead.

If you would like to know more about how Sensei is developing innovative ways to solve the problems traditional conferences create, please take a look at <http://www.senseiuke.com/our-take-market-solutions>. Our 'Value For Time' conference design and 'Conference On The Move' services will ensure your people, your leaders and your organisation get much more value from the investment these bi-annual events consume.

**Malcolm Follos, February 2010**