

From Consultant to Keynoter

10 Lessons Learned

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In one of my early keynote addresses, I asked my audience to “really, really listen to the whispers in your head—the thoughts that wake you up in the night. That is your soul talking.”

That’s essentially how I got involved with NSA. My soul was talking very loudly, and I knew I better listen up if I was ever going to get any sleep! My nearly 20-year-old leadership and team development consulting business, EquiPro International, was thriving, my home life was wonderful, and I was even managing a decent balance between the two. Still, I wanted something more. On a personal level, I wanted to share my expertise with a broader audience. On a professional level, I wanted to expand my firm’s service offerings.

Encouraged by former fellow ASTD board members, CSP, CMP Ed Scannell and Joanne Sujansky, PhD, CSP, I attended my first NSA Convention in 2000. I thought I was outgoing, but NSA members brought new definition to the word! And, as I watched interesting and eloquent NSA keynoters over a four-day period, I began to question my goal: Did I have a life and set of capabilities worth sharing on the platform? Still, those whispers in the night kept nagging. I had to go for it.

It’s striking how similar NSA’s Professional Competencies (www.nsaspeaker.org/competencies/competencies.shtml) are to those needed to be an accomplished consultant, yet the all-important differences are equally crucial to grasp. I’ve learned something about each on my path to the platform.

Examine your motivations. Our consulting work at EquiPro always begins with some form of the question: “What

results are you trying to achieve?” As a consultant wanna-be speaker, ask yourself the same. Since you are already running a business, a fundamental issue is whether you are aiming to get more consulting assignments or more speaking engagements—or both. Any business plan you develop (and you will need a business plan!) will rely on your answer to that question.

Use your built-in advantages. Successful consultants typically possess particular expertise that can benefit others, along with effective people and presentation skills. Though all are traits conducive to being a fine keynote speaker, there’s not necessarily a direct transfer. Even simple things, like hand gestures and eye contact, can greatly affect how you and your message come across, and thus how much value you bring to your audiences. You’ll need to adapt your talents and skills to a new realm. As an example, one of my competencies is an ability to facilitate groups or teams, small or large. Playing to that strength, one of my first speaking coaches suggested that I integrate interactive elements into my speeches, aiming for more of a creative dynamic between the audience and myself. That put me closer to my comfort zone and has helped me to better engage my audiences.

Determine your audience. Part of pinpointing the results you want to achieve is to identify the people you want to reach. You may have a highly



specific focus on a certain industry, trade or topic, or a message that's pertinent to various groups or individuals. You also need to think about how far you want your message to travel: regional, national or international? Set both immediate and stretch goals. Then, tie those goals into the keynotes you compose. Some speakers generate one "work of art" presentation germane to diverse audiences. Being a consultant, my early inclination was to customize every speech I made, just as I tailor my consulting work to each client's needs. I quickly discovered the overload of that scenario. My solution was to create three to four core speeches, covering different areas of my expertise, which can be delivered "as is" or tweaked, as needed.

Seek help—and go pro! We get by with a little help from our friends—and from professionals. Accept that you've entered a brave new world, and don't try to maneuver the terrain by yourself. You must invest in your vision. Get the right people and systems in place. Whether you sign on with a speaker's bureau or hire a savvy PR person to your staff, you need experienced and dedicated help—especially when you're trying to run a consulting business at the same time. One of the best decisions I made was to partner with a speaker-focused marketing consultant/publisher (and her full-service firm) to help me build my Web site, get my name and message out, and of course, book me! Also a must is a first-rate videographer. I learned from experience that recruiting a relative with a shaky camera hand won't advance your cause! Finally, find yourself some good keynote coaches. I've worked with three coaches thus far—one who helped me mine the stories of my life that have relevancy to the expertise I want to share; another who helped me craft my first three keynotes; and now one who is helping me move to the next level of "edu-tainment" through storytelling.

Build from your business. Every consulting assignment you have provides fodder for the content and thrust of your keynote activities. Pay close attention to what the people you encounter in your work are hobnobbing about,



concerned about, grumbling about—and excited about. Use personal feedback from your clients to discern areas where you have the most impact and to identify distinctive strengths and skills. The work you're doing as a consultant offers some of the best sources and resources to identify "hot topics" and stay on top of your game. Also, think separate but equal when it comes to marketing yourself. Let your clients know (subtly, not glaringly) about your new venture through usual channels—your company Web site, newsletter, brochures, etc.—but develop another Web site and marketing materials specific to your keynoting activities. Your "two careers" can be linked, compatible and mutually supportive.

And don't forget about your business!

For me, abandoning my consulting practice to pursue the speaking circuit is neither an option, nor a preference. But even if your goal is to segue from one to the other, your mainstay business (and reputation) must not suffer as a result of your new endeavors. You still need to tend to the basics—client relations, business and product development, etc.—and it's a definite balancing act. Especially early on, the tendency may be to take any and all speaking opportunities you are offered in order to gain experience and those valuable word-of-mouth referrals. Instead, take the time to step back and: (a) think strategically about which opportunities offer the best exposure, as measured against your goals; and (b)

make certain you have the staff in place to keep your consulting clients happy while you're out on the podium.

Get involved and get noticed. When making the shift to keynote speaker, you need to project your "new identity" into every viable venue possible. The good news is, as a consultant, you're already familiar with the ways and means (and importance) of marketing, branding, media placement and the like. So, you know the drill. Participate in professional associations—taking a backstage role if necessary, networking being key. Be visible and active in your community. Get quotes in business journals and time on radio shows. Snag an appearance on CNN or Oprah, i.e., whatever market your market views. And go with the academic tenet of "publish or perish." If making time to author articles and books is a problem, or if writing isn't your forte, then work with personal editors to polish your drafts or ghostwriters to speak on your behalf. Here again, whatever venues you choose, it's vital to connect with the right people to make it happen.

Avoid a hard-sell cross-sell. Every audience you greet will expect you to motivate, inform, enlighten—and, of course, entertain. But not every audience wants a sales pitch. While there's nothing wrong with trying to reap interest in your company's products and services through your keynotes, it's important to consider the context of any given speech and avoid delivering an infomercial. If an event is set up with the specific purpose of selling your latest seminar or plugging your latest book, go for it. Otherwise, hawking your wares at every other breath risks overkill and a real turnoff. The best approach, in most cases, is to advertise your expertise. Convince people that you know whereof you speak. Give people a valuable takeaway of the intellectual and emotional kind. That's when they'll take the time to follow up and learn more about what you and your company have to offer.

Remember your roots. Chances are, many of the steps you took to grow your consulting business, and much of the education or training you impart to clients in your everyday work, are

exactly what's needed to cultivate your keynote career. At EquiPro, for example, we developed a model for "World Class Results" that we use in our team-building and leadership development projects. Among the strategies and principles this model encompasses: clarify your goals; identify your challenges; elicit performance feedback; work in partnership; measure your results; and keep changing and stay current. The point being: If this is what I'm telling my clients to do to achieve high-performance objectives, shouldn't I be heeding my own advice?

Go the distance. As the familiar Chinese proverb tells us, a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. Apt wisdom for two reasons: You must take that first step; and you should think journey, not destination. Stay focused on the vision you identified for yourself and define achievable goals and milestones along the way (revising as necessary). Setting your sights on becoming "not only" a consultant but also a top-notch keynote speaker requires learning new competencies, expanding your skill set, forming different kinds of relationships and creating a new and/or adjunct business. That takes conviction, perseverance and just plain hard work. It won't happen overnight. But know that the more you give toward the task, the more your audiences will respond. That's the payoff.

It's been more than five years since I began this journey, and the support and inspiration I've gotten through my NSA colleagues and experiences have kept me going. I'm glad that I listened to those noisy nighttime whispers, urging me toward an essential part of my life's work.

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