Using Quotations to Enliven Your Safety Training Presentations

“He uses statistics as a drunken man uses lampposts, for support rather than illumination.”

This observation from English scholar Andrew Lang works equally well for quotations. The device of quoting some famous person is typically used to introduce or support a premise made in a presentation, sales pitch, or advertisement—the way I just did in introducing this article. But if you’re using them solely in that context, you could be overlooking an illuminating aid. Quotations are indispensable tools in crafting presentations, both at the brainstorming stage and in authoring. Here’s an example of how to use them for preparing and delivering safety training.

From Quote to Topic

A few years ago, I was asked to make a short presentation at a three-day regional conference where the theme was “Success in the 2020s.”

To get the creative juices flowing, I pulled out a copy of my favorite book of quotations and searched the section on success quotes. I came across these words of wisdom by John Charles Salak: “Failures are divided into two classes: those who thought and never did, and those who did and never thought.”

I chose a more novel approach to set my presentation apart from the other presenters. Starting with the quote’s single germ of an idea, I developed a presentation called, “Three Guaranteed Ways to FAIL in the ‘20s or any Other Decade.”

Building on the Idea

From there, ideas flowed. Using Salak’s quote as a starting point, I came up with three—rather than two—types of failures and addressed each of them in the form of a “sleep” metaphor:

Dreamers: These are the ones who think but never do. Dreamers are the Walter Mittys who have all kinds of grandiose ideas and brainstorms, but never follow through due to procrastination, lack of self-confidence, etc.

Sleepwalkers: At the other end of the spectrum are the people who do but never think. These are the Ralph Kramdens of the world who run with an idea without thinking it through or putting in the necessary planning and preparation.

Zombies: These are the ones who neither think nor do. I can’t prove it, but I suspect a demographic survey would reveal that this segment of the population consists

largely of people who watch too many TV infomercials. Zombies simply wander through life without any specific goals, aim or purpose.

Simply Unique

I then found other quotations on the subjects of procrastination, planning, goal-setting, and so forth. So, in my own way, I addressed many of the same issues the other speakers did, but from a different frame of reference. And it was this approach, initially fueled by one solitary quotation, that ultimately made my presentation unique.

Best of all, though, my presentation almost wrote itself. What would probably have taken many hours if not days, took only a few hours. And my presentation, I'm certain, was infinitely better because of it.

In fact, this program turned out to be the best-attended and highest-rated of the conference and I give much of the credit to Mr. Salak. His noteworthy and succinct observation saved me immeasurable hours of development time.

Conclusion

I'll close with this advice from English clergyman and writer Charles Caleb Colton, "When in reading we meet with any maxim that may be of use, we should take it for our own, and make an immediate application of it, as we would of the advice of a friend whom we have purposely consulted." Look at quotations in a new light. You'll find that Samuel Johnson was right, "Classical quotation is the parole of literary men all over the world."

By Mark D. Hansen, CPE, CSP, PE, CPEA