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At Office Retreats, Tales of Adversity Fire Up the Staff *Tiring of CEOs' Triumphs, Bosses Book Speakers Who Beat Blindness, Paralysis*

'Look, Daddy, You're Flying!'

By GEORGE ANDERS

CORONADO, Calif. -- At their annual retreat last month, 300 finance managers for Cisco Systems Inc. began the week with strategy meetings, followed by team sand-castle building and water-balloon launching. Then came the visit from a blind man.

He was Erik Weihenmayer, a slim, athletic 38-year-old. In an after-lunch speech, he recounted his bitterness as a teenager over losing his sight. He explained how he channeled his anger into rock climbing and dreamed of climbing Mount Everest. "People said I'd kill myself or my team members if I tried," he said. "But they didn't know anything about me."

Employees of the computer-networking company watched in awe as giant video screens showed Mr. Weihenmayer in 2001, picking his way past deep crevasses until he reached the top of Everest. "You don't just deal with adversity," he said. "You use it to propel you forward." Attendees gave him a standing ovation.

Mr. Weihenmayer makes nearly \$1 million each year from such appearances, making him one of the top earners in an unusual business -- inspirational speakers whose accounts of personal struggle and triumph are sweeping through the corporate conference circuit. Companies such as Goldman Sachs & Co. and Wal-Mart Stores Inc. are booking speakers who have survived farm accidents, muggings or other tragedies, often paying \$15,000 or more per engagement.

Years of scandals and strategic zig-zagging have soured business audiences on pep talks from well-paid executives with fancy titles. But the skepticism softens when a speaker with a seeing-eye dog or a wheelchair speaks about

unshakeable persistence, even if the orators aren't business experts. Bosses hope these speakers can cut through a fog of cynicism and complacency, getting people fired up about their jobs.

At Exxon Mobil Corp., procurement chief Jean Baderschneider says she used to book celebrities or management gurus as speakers. No more. They were too glib to connect with her teams, and in some cases she can't even remember their names. Now she invites gritty survivors to tell their stories at major staff events. "You need to build passion," Ms. Baderschneider says. "These speakers get people's juices flowing. They make us realize that our challenges are nothing compared with what they have done."

Corporations, universities and other organizations spend hundreds of millions a year on speakers. Top business and political leaders still command the highest fees, with former president Bill Clinton averaging \$175,000 per speech. But Mr. Weihenmayer and a few similar orators with brave stories -- and a knack for tying their achievements to business themes -- compile enough well-paying dates to earn well into six figures themselves.

Hundreds of others try to make a living as inspirational speakers, with mixed results. Some do passably, collecting \$5,000 or more a speech. Others discover to their dismay that the world isn't eager to hear their woes. Data compiled by the 4,000-member National Speakers Association indicate that the typical member earns \$2,000 to \$5,000 per talk. Many go for weeks without bookings.

When Trisha Meili was assaulted and left for dead in New York City in 1989, few people knew her name. Media accounts identified her only as the Cen-

tral Park jogger. Then in 2003 she published her memoirs and began looking for audiences interested in how she recovered from tragedy.

One of the first people to book her was Roger Saillant, the chief executive officer of Plug Power Inc. His alternative-energy company was a highflier in 2000, with a stock that briefly traded as high as \$150 a share. Three years later, the company's shares had plunged to single-digit levels. Losses were mounting and cash was scarce.

Plug Power spent \$5,000 to bring Ms. Meili for a two-day visit to its headquarters in Latham, N.Y. There, she shared stories about learning to walk again after spending months in a coma. She urged people to "live totally in the present," instead of obsessing about a wonderful past that might be gone for good.

Mr. Saillant says she struck a chord. "We wanted to know how her experience could be a metaphor for what was happening at Plug Power," he says. "She had been in a near-death state but was able to pull herself out of it, thanks to the support of others and her own will not to give in. We constantly needed to raise money to keep going. There were similarities."

Since then, Ms. Meili has tripled her speaking fee, to \$15,000, and expects to earn about \$100,000 this year. She recently addressed managers at DuPont Co., which has been buffeted by restructuring plans the past few years. Ms. Meili remembers one of the chemical company's lawyers coming up to her and saying: "I've got this huge stack of papers on my desk. I've been too nervous about our future to get any work done on it. After hearing you, I'm ready to go back and dive into things right now."

Like many inspirational speakers, Ms. Meili says she tries to take her audi-

ence on an emotional journey. Rapt silence accompanies her opening stories. Partway through she often hears suppressed sobs. And at the end, there's an outburst of applause and even hugs from attendees. If all three parts come together, she says, "I know I've really connected with people."

One of the hardest-working inspirational speakers is Chad Hymas, a Utah real-estate investor and part-time elk rancher. Mr. Hymas nearly died in 2001, when a massive hay bale tumbled off a forklift truck on his ranch and crushed three vertebrae in his neck. The accident left his legs paralyzed and his arms barely mobile. He was despondent. Within a year, though, he was addressing church groups about his family's efforts to help him recover.

One attendee liked his talk so much that he arranged for Mr. Hymas to address a contractors' convention in Las Vegas. That speech went well. Soon Mr. Hymas was getting bookings from the likes of Wells Fargo Corp. Last year, Mr. Hymas delivered 160 speeches, ranging from small-scale local events to big corporate audiences that paid as much as \$10,000 apiece, for total income of more than \$500,000. This year, Mr. Hymas is on track to deliver 190 speeches, his best year ever.

Mr. Hymas says his core material hasn't changed since his first speech. He routinely recounts the early days after his accident, when he was hospitalized and struggling to raise his arms parallel to the floor. His 4-year-old son, Christian, came into the room and said: "Look, Daddy, you're flying!" Mr. Hymas now closes many of his speeches with the line: "Who needs legs when you have wings?"

A decade ago, orators such as Mr. Hymas might have been confined to low-paying church, school and hospital engagements. Big companies didn't want to traffic in pathos. Then Oprah Winfrey, the Lifetime Channel and Hollywood kept making heroes out of people who had been hammered by life's bad breaks and bounced back.

As these stories found mass audiences, scandals such as Enron Corp. left the public far more cynical about big business and reluctant to take advice from captains of industry. An annual Gallup Poll shows that business executives currently win favorable ratings from just 16% of the public, the lowest level since the savings-and-loan scandals of the 1980s.

Speakers' bureaus took note and started booking a new breed of lectur-

ers. Leading Authorities Inc. of Washington, D.C., now lists 234 "inspirational and motivational speakers" on its Web site, its largest category. Many are traditional experts on leadership or politics who want to be cross-listed in a popular category, says Mark French, Leading Authorities' president. His inspirational roster also includes a survivor of 30 cancer surgeries and man who recovered after he was hit by a New York City bus.

"Companies want someone fresh who has beaten the odds," says Marc Reede, president of Nationwide Speakers Bureau, a lecture agency in Beverly Hills, Calif. Lots of speakers may enjoy only a year or two on the circuit before their appeal wanes. "But that's not a problem for us," he says. "We'll find the next ones."

At times, it takes only a hint of a business analogy to succeed with corporate audiences. Adventurer John Amatt survived a climb 20 years ago in which an avalanche killed three of his teammates. He made it to the top only by radically changing his route and tactics. Businesses love that story, he says, and they apply it in ways he never expected. In the medical-equipment industry, for example, Kinetic Concepts Inc., hired Mr. Amatt earlier this year to address its 1,500-person sales force, which was dispirited by Medicare cuts.

"We couldn't conceive of another way to do things," says Cyndi Erb, a KCI executive. "He told us how sometimes you have to rethink your path. We thought he would have to customize his talk for us, but actually we found out that wasn't necessary. Our salespeople took what he said and applied it to their everyday life."

The market for sports speakers also is being realigned. Speakers' bureaus aren't just competing to offer in-person appearances by superstars. Some are doing brisk business as well in promoting disabled athletes or the brave benchwarmer with a plucky story of how he or she made it to the big time. Sports speakers who have gained visibility in the past few years include one-armed basketball player Ron Gustafson; baseball pitcher Jim Morris, who didn't make the majors until age 35; and wrestler Kyle Maynard, who was born with stunted arms.

A favorite this year is Vince Papale, who won a walk-on spot with the Philadelphia Eagles in the 1970s, at age 30, despite never having played college football. He caught just one pass during his three-year pro career but made some

thrilling tackles on the kick-return unit. Mr. Papale had been doing small-scale talks in the Philadelphia area since his playing days. In 2005, speakers' bureaus started positioning him as a much bigger draw.

It helped that a movie about Mr. Papale's life, "Invincible" was due out this year. But the speakers' bureaus figured his can-do attitude would rub off on sales forces. They guessed right. American International Group Inc. tried him with a group of annuity salesmen and liked the results so much that it booked him for five more talks, at \$10,000 apiece.

"We had a tough year in 2005," recalls Michael Loftus, an annuity sales chief for AIG. "We really liked his lust for achievement. His message was that any dream can come true with hard work."

"Invincible" was a surprise hit this summer, so Mr. Papale has boosted his speaking fee to \$20,000 to \$30,000. Speaking agents are encouraging him to make the most of the opportunity. "He is looking at a two-year window," says Andy Roth, head of Roth Talent Associates, Encino, Calif. "It makes sense for him to maximize his speaking efforts during that time."

Mr. Weihenmayer, the blind mountain climber, is trying to make public speaking into a lifelong career. He taught fifth grade earlier in his life and enjoyed it, but he found the pay dispiriting. Now he delivers 50 addresses a year, collecting up to \$40,000 for his international corporate bookings. "It amazes me to earn more with one speech than I did in a year of teaching," he says.

Mr. Weihenmayer says he has benefited from lots of coaching from his father, Ed, now retired, who had a long career at Pfizer Inc. and Salomon Brothers Inc. The older man has nudged his son to get business audiences laughing at the beginning -- and then, as the speech hits its stride, to bring in corporate values such as teamwork and planning.

During his Cisco talk, Mr. Weihenmayer told a story about climbing Mount McKinley in 1995 and trying to wave to his father, who was flying overhead in a helicopter. "I asked one of my teammates: 'Do you think Dad will know I made it?'" Mr. Weihenmayer recalled. "The answer came back: 'Sure he will. You're the one person waving your ski pole in totally the wrong direction.'"

The address soon turned serious. He

talked about visiting Tibet recently and helping blind teens climb to Everest base camp. "People there think blind children are possessed with evil spirits," he said. "They lock them in homes or sell them into slavery. I wanted to show them something better."

At the end of his talk, he tied his life back to the business challenges facing Cisco. "With all the chaos of the past five years, it's as if we've all been climbing blind," he said. But that's no reason to be timid. "Be pioneers. Climb high."

After the speech, Cisco managers rushed up to shake his hand and to share stories about a son's eye injury or a friend's mountain-climbing adventure. A few asked him to sign a copy of his autobiography, which he slowly did.

Most of the time, Mr. Weihenmayer says, business audiences embrace him and wish him well. But he still remembers a bumpier session with an insurance company a few years ago. After the talk, at the hotel bar, he says, one salesman snapped at him: "So I guess the reason they brought you here was to make me feel bad."

Mr. Weihenmayer gulped. Then he told his heckler. "Maybe. But that's not a bad place to start. If it lights a fire in you, and gets you doing something different with your life, that's OK."

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