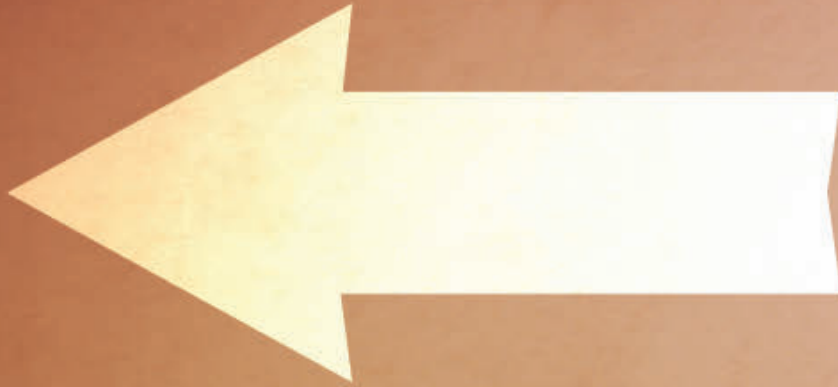


THE KEYNOTE WE



JOE

CALLOWAY'S

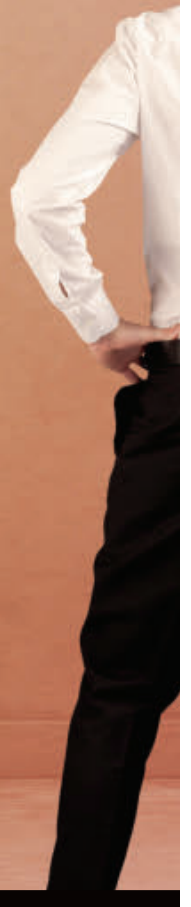
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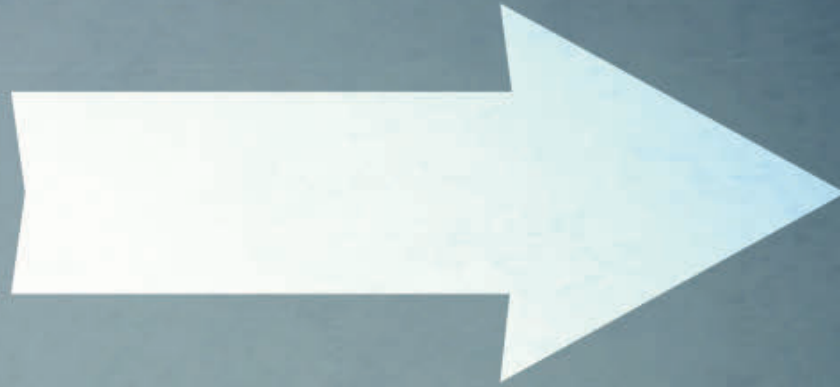
(NSA) WORLD

DO YOU REMEMBER WHERE YOU WERE WHEN YOU FIRST HEARD THE PHRASES “LET IT GO” OR “PICK A LANE”? Perhaps you were in the hallway of an NSA Convention and someone retold the tale of a speech that would be talked about for 14 years after it was delivered. Or perhaps you were talking to another speaker who had just heard a presentation and said, “It was good. It wasn’t ‘Joe Calloway good,’ but it was good.” Or if you were lucky, you were in the audience on July 18, 2004, and you witnessed it for yourself.

During that speech, Joe Calloway, CSP, CPAE, did what every speaker aspires to do. He uttered ideas that, like the catchy phrases on the *Seinfeld* show, have been re-uttered in the halls of NSA as often as “yada, yada, yada.”



CAN'T LET GO



BY RON CULBERSON,
MSW, CSP, CPAE



Calloway encouraged his fellow speakers to FOCUS on a particular area of expertise and to LET GO of the other distractions that were holding them back.

CALLOWAY'S MEMORABLE MESSAGE

For those of you who are newer to the speaking business, haven't attended a convention, or have been living under the proverbial rock, the speech that created so much buzz was the Sunday morning keynote address at the 2004 NSA Convention. In it, Calloway challenged an audience full of hungry speakers to let go of the things that were no longer working, to pick a lane where their focus could be more acute, and to approach their programs differently. It was the kind of presentation that defies logic and analysis but that won't stop this writer from evaluating it once again, many years later.

Calloway stumbled into the speaking business after working as a trainer in the real estate industry. He attended his first NSA Convention in 1989, with his wife, Annette, and determined that NSA was a place he needed to be.

Some of the most memorable presentations Calloway has heard include those given by Bob Murphey, CPAE; Dale Irvin, CSP, CPAE; and George Campbell, CPAE. Calloway says he greatly admires humorists and the skill of being funny on purpose. In fact, he recommends Jerry Seinfeld's movie, *Comedian*, to his clients because the movie focuses not only on the craft of writing, but also on the principle of doing the necessary work to be really good.

As for his famous keynote address in 2004—which many say was one of the best speeches they have ever heard—he still scratches his head when trying to figure out why it resonated with so many people. It seems that it was the “right message for the right audience at the right time.” And to this day, he appreciates hearing from people about the impact it had on them. In fact, he says, “I got a bigger kick out of that speech than almost anything else I've done professionally.”

But going into it, he was uneasy.

“I'm just wired nervous,” he says.

Giving a presentation in front of a thousand of his peers took a toll on his nerves. And he didn't want to deliver the usual “you should do this” type of presentation. He wanted to do new material and use a new approach rather than his standard message and stories. So, that meant he didn't have the safety net of successful, time-tested material.



JOE HAS LEFT THE BUILDING

Calloway worked on the presentation for a year, constantly making changes. Even as he was waiting to go onstage, he noticed that one section of the speech was in the wrong place. So right before he was introduced, he moved it. And this critical last-minute adjustment pulled all of the material together.

He had a couple of goals for the presentation. First, instead of telling people what they *should* do, he flipped the idea and told them to think about what they should *stop* doing. Second, he wanted to alter the format of his keynote. He added some creative videos and planned to leave the conference before his presentation ended. And true to his word, as his closing video played, Calloway had left the building. And it was that kind of unique and totally unexpected ending that amazed his colleagues.

“Earlier in the presentation, I told the audience that I would be leaving before the presentation ended,” he says. “If I had come back to the convention after the presentation or even showed up the next day, the bit wouldn’t have worked. So, I left.”

LASTING IMPACT

From a content perspective, the two concepts that became a part of NSA lore were “pick a lane” and “let it go.” Calloway encouraged his fellow speakers to focus on a particular area of expertise and to let go of the other distractions that were holding them back. It made many speakers rethink the way they were managing their businesses.

It’s clear more than a decade later that this speech had an impact on the NSA members who heard it, but what impact did it have on Calloway?

For one, it validated a concept he had embraced about writing material specifically for a particular audience. He had discovered this when he used interaction in his programs. He found that the relevance of the discussion led to the audience becoming more engaged and enjoying the experience more. As a result, Calloway typically does a lot of research before his presentations so that each speech is relevant and timely. He also believes that his focus on writing has been a key part of this process because it forces him to learn and synthesize current information on the issues that challenge his clients.

“New ideas really jazz me up,” he says. “And people would prefer to hear relevant information rather than a perfectly crafted speech.”

Calloway says the second impact of the NSA speech was, “I had to eat my own cooking.”



WATCH JOE’S 2004 KEYNOTE

If you haven’t yet seen Joe Calloway’s famous speech—or you just want to see it again—visit speakermagazine.com/calloway-2004-speech to watch the video.

He got tougher about hanging on to some of the things he’d been doing. For instance, he had a family and didn’t want to travel too much. So, he let go of international programs and focused more on regional clients. Plus, he changed the types of organizations he pursued. Rather than large audiences, he chose to speak for smaller groups of senior leaders. Calloway embraced Warren Buffett’s quote: “The difference between successful people and really successful people is that really successful people say no to almost everything.”

When Calloway reflects on the success he’s experienced, he acknowledges that being relevant and saying “no” played the biggest roles. Additionally, writing and publishing a good book was critical. The goal for his book, *Becoming a Category of One*, was not to make a lot of money through sales but to get speaking engagements. He figured that if it was well written and relevant, CEOs would read it and say, “We need to hire this guy.”

When asked what he thinks the biggest mistake most new speakers make, Calloway says, “Being satisfied with their speech too soon, and then just focusing on selling it. If people worked harder on improving the quality of the speech, the selling part would be much easier.”

THE TURNING POINT

Calloway opened his NSA presentation in 2004, by saying, “In a few years, when you’re being interviewed about how fabulous your life is and how great your career is, and the interviewer says, ‘Was there a turning point for you?’... I want you to say that there was. It was in 2004 at the National Speakers Association’s National Convention. I remember the Sunday morning keynote. I don’t remember the speaker ... he wasn’t that impressive. But I remember I started thinking of what I needed to let go of. And everything changed.”

Many speakers took that to heart. The one thing they didn’t let go of, though, was the memory of the speech heard ’round the (NSA) world. ■



RON CULBERSON, MSW, CSP, CPAE, is a speaker, humorist, and author of four books, but he has not yet let go of the need to tell people that. He was also the 2012–2013 NSA president.