

A man with a passion for empowering people through communication

John K. Bates spoke at two AmCham events last year – the HR Conference in June and the ACE Best Practice Conference in October. He turned both of his presentations into captivating performances. John is a startup enthusiast with extensive experience in early stage companies, an excellent communicator who possesses the ability to pass his confidence and passion on to his audience and, above all, a charismatic character with a very strong personal presence. We had the privilege of meeting him for coffee and a short talk...

How does one become a public speaker, a communication specialist, and a leadership coach? Is it a calling or do you have to be born with it? How does that happen?

I think that's a great question and the part that I'm going to focus on is – are you born to do something? Are you a born communicator? Are you a born leader? Because I think that a lot of people think you are. And I would really argue strongly that you're not.

I started speaking when I was very young in church because I grew up in Salt Lake City, Utah. My Dad would help me write little speeches. What was great about that was that my father would coach me and he would make sure that it was a really good experience for me. That helped, because very early on I had good experience with public speaking. Was I scared? Yes, I was terrified! I was so scared I couldn't even see straight! But I did it anyway and with his coaching it was really fun.

Then in high school I took a class called "forensics", because this really beautiful girl named Joanne Babalis was going to take it. So my best friend and I took the class and it turns out forensics is public speaking and debate. So it was totally random. Joanne Babalis took the class, that's all. Our coach was a guy named D.L. Smith and he was an internationally top-ranked coach and he just happened to be at my public high school. Because I did everything he told me just like he told me, and when he said practice this ten times, I practiced it

ten times, maybe even eleven. And interestingly, my best friend and I won almost every contest we ever entered in high school. And it's not because we were so special. It was because we were so coachable! We loved this guy, he gave us great coaching and we did everything he said.

Then I started working in the dotcom arena and I worked in a company called Virtual Vegas, the first place in the world that was an entertainment destination on the internet and people wanted to know about it. I had a lot of performance and stage time, I also sang in a band for a while, so they made me talk to the press. Everybody was scared to do it but they made me do it. I ended up speaking all over the world and talking to the press for several years because of this and then every place I went after that they said: "Oh, you've got the experience, why don't you do it."

Then a few years ago I just realized how much I love making a difference in other peoples' lives. For a long time I was trying to be a great speaker and I'm always trying to make myself better but I realized how fulfilling it was to share what I have with other people and watch them blossom, watch them grow. Now I know why D.L. Smith loved what he did so much. And that's how I came to this.

So I don't think that you're ever born to something. I think if you want to be good at something the way you get good at it is you do it. There are a lot of things that scare people, that only a few people are willing to do, like

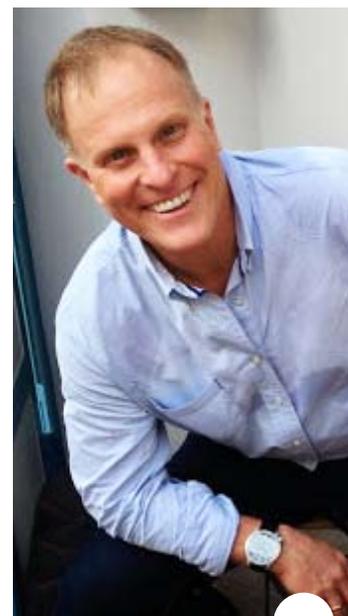
public speaking or leadership. You are in the spotlight when you are the leader, people don't like that, it's uncomfortable, it's scary. People who do that are not natural born leaders. They're scared too. The only difference is they did it.

When it comes to the power of communication, what is the right balance between the content and the form?

Imagine if you had really great talent, you're a scientist or a business person, you've got a great product... Let's say that you have all that but you're just an ok communicator, you're not so good. And then imagine another version of you, just as good at everything as this one but really excellent communicator. Which one is going to win? The communicator is always going to win. And it goes the other way too. Let's imagine you're a really great communicator but you don't have anything really great to say. That doesn't work either. So I think it's like riding a tricycle. You push this pedal all the way forward and if you keep pushing that pedal you just get stuck. When this pedal gets as far as it can now you've got to push the other pedal. So you've got to keep working on both because one without the other just isn't as good as both.

When listening to you speak, one thing that strikes me immediately is your passion. That must be a very important component of what you do. Is it something that can be learned just like communication skills?

People have told me for a long time that they love and appreci-



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BIOGRAPHY

John K. Bates is an internationally regarded communications trainer and keynote speaker and a startup enthusiast with extensive experience working for early stage companies. He has been involved in helping to found and start up Goldstar, BigWords.com (which raised over \$80 million) and VirtualVegas (the first online destination site). He has raised hundreds of millions of dollars in venture capital funds, successfully opened resistant markets for new products and has run the customer service department for a multi-million dollar company. John has been actively coaching since 2005 providing sophisticated Communications, Leadership and Innovation training using human evolutionary biology and human neurophysiology. He founded Executive Speaking Success in 2006 offering individual, small group and large group training. John is also known for being an active member of the TED community, having trained hundreds of speakers for TED and TEDx.



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ate my passion or my enthusiasm. I think they mean it as a compliment but I would always hear it as if it was a booby prize. I would hear it like: "Wow, you're not very smart or you don't have anything great going on but you're sure excited about it". And I think that was my own insecurity. It's funny because it really took starting to coach people and starting to have these honest conversations with people when it's just the two of us to realize that one of the big things that people ask me about is "John, how do I be passionate like you are, how can I get that enthusiasm like you have?". And that was the first time in my whole life that I realized that it actually was good. That it actually really does matter. And that passion and enthusiasm, looking back on it, I think it's one of the greatest things I have and I don't think you can fake it.

One of the things that has really worked for me throughout my whole career is that I never did anything where I had to fake it. There were a lot of time when I took a job that was much less money or status because I was passionate about it. I've always been a startup guy, I've always been in early stage companies and most of those don't work. So my stock options that would have been worth millions are now worth nothing. And that has happened many times in my life. And sure I'd love to be a multi-millionaire already but I'm not anywhere near there yet. But I would never trade what I've done for that and that's one of the reasons I've always been able to have this passion and this enthusiasm so I really don't think you can fake it.

But here is what I think you can do: I think that people forget that they are passionate about something. People do the same thing day after day after day and they forget that there is a reason they chose this. You are where you are because you made all the choices that got you there. Mick Jagger does not perform "Satisfaction" like it's the millionth time he's singing it. He comes out on stage and he remembers

that there's a lot of people in the audience that have never seen him sing this before. So he sings it for them. If you're willing to, you can experience anything, for the millionth time, like it's the first time. You just have to go back and get in touch with those feelings and then bring those feelings to now. And that's a great place to start to bring your passion to things again.

When was the first time you visited Slovakia? Is there anything specific about the Slovak audience?

I think it was two years ago. I've been here a number of times but I came here for the first time maybe two years ago.

One of the things that I say to people is, if you're speaking to an audience, if you let how they show up dictate how it's going to go, it doesn't go as well as if you say how it's going to go. Create your audience! So I go in and I believe my audience. They are already great communicators, they're interested, they're courageous, they're great. They don't always look like that, it doesn't always seem like that.

When I'm in other places besides Slovakia, I'll say, if you want to know what I mean, would you like to know how Slovaks look when they're loving it? And I fold my arms and I scowl. Then I look around a little bit and I scowl some more. Of course, everybody laughs, and when I told that in Slovakia, they laughed even harder. But the same is true about Brussels, the UK, actually a lot of places.

The other thing though, the upside, is that in this setting, the people who are lit up, who are doing something, who are committed to great customer service, are excited about having a new product or a new company – they are in a setting where that's so unusual that when you meet each other and when you hang out together it's like you're in the trenches and you just become best friends.

You also had a chance to

work with Slovak startups. One thing that gets mentioned very often when people evaluate Slovak startups is a lack of communication skills, inability to pitch and sell their product. What is your take on this?

I think that it's tough to pitch anything for anybody. And the people that are good just practice longer. It's not just Slovakia. But because of the things we talked about earlier it might be more difficult here than it is some places.

There are a lot of people here who get very excited and they want to go out and start a company but they don't have any experience. There are not a whole lot of other role models, so it's tough. You run out there all excited but you didn't do your market research and all of a sudden you realize this product you spent all this money and time on, there's already another one that's way better, way ahead of you. But the good news is when you figure something like that out the hard way, you know it. Failing like that is actually a big component of big success.

Brene Brown, one of the most popular TED speakers of all time said something very interesting and very true. She said: "Look around, TED is a failure conference. Everybody in here has failed at enormous levels. There is no way you'd be here if you hadn't." Making failure wrong is like throwing away your most valuable assets.

What is your personal experience with customer service here in Slovakia? Do you think it's linked to the things we have mentioned previously?

I had mixed experiences with customer service here. At some places I've experienced great customer service but it still is a little bit like a rose in the desert. Because people haven't had an experience with business in the same way for generations they don't get the value of customer service.

It drives me crazy when people think like an employee. There's

still a mentality here of "I'm not in charge, I can't do it, I'm just an employee. I just show up and you pay me for my hours and I go home". That drives me insane. What if you took pride in what you did no matter what it was? What if you tried to do it more efficiently and save money and make it a better experience for people no matter what it was? Like you were your own little entrepreneur in your own little job. That's just more fulfilling no matter what you do. The problem is twofold: One, people think like an employee instead of like a business owner. And two, people are not very empowered by their management. They think that if they treat you well they're going to get in trouble. These people don't think they have the power to make a good decision and they're not even thinking about what a good decision is, they're just following the rules.

But the good news is that the little places where you do have good customer service stand out and I think that good customer service is one of the huge opportunities here. Anything you do if you really focus on customer service you're going to beat so many people that aren't even thinking about it yet.

Why it matters to me so much is because I care. I love Slovakia and I have a vision for Slovakia being one of the top places to live in the world. A great work-life balance, really great nature. I think that that's something that I feel wanting to happen here. So, when I get bad customer service or when people act like they're victims and they can't do anything about it, the reason it upsets me so much is that I care so much. I see something possible, something wants to happen here and I want it to happen. I come here because I see this wanting to happen and I want to help it. That is the reason I would get so excited and why I would be so upset but it's also the reason that I value the people here that are doing good things, that care about customer service, that care about their contribution to the world and want to do great things.