

Excerpt from the Article: At Office Retreats, Tales of Adversity Fire Up the Staff -By George Anders
The Wall Street Journal

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.

-- 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.

Years of scandals and strategic zigzagging 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."

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 Central 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 <invited> 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."

...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 audience 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... 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?"