

By
Rob Lambert

generating ideas for conference talks

//Zero To Keynote

cultivatedmanagement.com

Generating Ideas For Conference Talks

Thank you for downloading this free mini-guide, which is a chapter taken from the book Zero To Keynote.

The Zero To Keynote book contains:

- **A Clear Path:** From idea to submission, writing your talk, rehearsing, and presenting—a logical, step-by-step process.
- **Conquer Your Fears:** Practical strategies to manage nerves and speak with confidence.
- **Master Communication:** Proven principles to captivate your audience and deliver your message effectively.
- **Insider Secrets:** Anecdotes and stories that bring the principles to life, and show you how to land those sought-after speaking slots.
- **Conference Survival Guide:** A mini-guide to navigate conferences like a pro.

Get your copy of Zero To Keynote here:

<https://www.cultivatedmanagement.com/zero-to-keynote/>

Plus, subscribers to the Meeting Notes newsletter get access to a **high-resolution Speaker's Checklist** – your essential tool for seamless preparation.



The Zero To Keynote Book

Where do ideas come from

An idea for a conference talk may come from anywhere. A topic you're interested in, a story you wish to tell, a problem you solved or something that lights your fire.

A good talk starts with a good seed of an idea. That idea though may not be complete, or could be made better. Sometimes, we want to do a talk but we have no solid idea about what.

That's where creative ideation comes in.

By creatively playing with a seed of an idea, a topic or a fully fledged idea, we can come up with something much more powerful.

In the book "Zero To Keynote" is a dedicated chapter about coming up with conference talk ideas. This guide is a free sample for you to use.

A good presentation, especially a keynote, comes from a well-considered idea.

This free guide will help you generate ideas, fine tune that idea, give it depth, explore it and allow you turn it into something worth talking about.

Get your copy of Zero To Keynote here:

<https://www.cultivatedmanagement.com/zero-to-keynote/>

The Curse of Knowledge

Many people don't contemplate speaking at a conference because they think they have nothing new to say. That's not true.

Your talk, subject, flavour, style and insights are unique. Therefore, nobody has heard **YOUR** talk before.

Sure, you may choose a topic others have spoken about, but that topic has never been spoken about by **YOU** before.

You have your own unique voice to offer.

People also tend to believe that other people know more than they do. Some people may indeed know more about a topic, but equally, some people will want to learn too.

There are plenty of people who would like the information and stories you have, presented in your own unique way, to hit their ears and feed their eyes.

Nobody else sees and feels the world through **your** lens.

You have your own flavour of life, your own season in life and your own motivations and perception of reality.

In this mix are stories, insights, information, and advice that other people will need and want.

Nobody has experienced your life – just you.

It would be a shame for others not to hear your story and insights from the stage.

When I started speaking at conferences, I talked about topics other people were already talking about, but I weaved in who I was, a little humour, plenty of energy and insights that others may have missed.

And it worked. And it works for every speaker I have seen at a conference.

There will be people who want to hear what you have to say. What you need to do now, is work out what you want to say.

Build a Hopper

I've found that careful curation of materials, observations and ideas is vital to the creation of a good talk.

When sourcing ideas for potential talks, keep the following principles and guidelines in mind.

Quantity and variety are essential

Make sure to read widely, study broadly and observe keenly. Store these insights, learnings and observations in a central place.

Create a central repository of ideas, more commonly known as a commonplace book.

A commonplace book doesn't have to be a physical book either, it could be a digital tool instead.

Consider your commonplace book a catalogue of potential ideas for new talks.

Capture anything interesting, insightful or funny. Capture anything that piques your curiosity.

Store any idea, large or small, and keep them in your commonplace book.

Take photos of cool art that inspires you. Capture poems, prose or sentences that move you. Capture observations from work. Capture methods and approaches.

Capture observations of other people.

Mash

Mash together with abundance

It can be tempting to take each captured input and turn it, and it alone, into a talk.

I believe this to be a futile struggle. I believe this will create something one dimensional.

Instead, liberally mash multiple ideas together.

At first this may seem silly. It may seem childish. But mashing ideas together is a fabulous way to come up with something new.

This is imagination and creativity in action.

Find connections, make connections or break ideas apart.

This act of mashing things together will create new seeds of ideas, and interesting topics for a good talk.

It's important to consider when mashing ideas together, that you are unlikely to find the outline of a complete talk.

You will need to expand, noodle, nudge, critique, start again, add, remove and *swim in the idea pool* you have created.

Finding time to do this activity is essential. And the more you do this, the more chance you have of coming up with something that inspires you and has the potential to be a really good talk.

Feed the hopper

You never know where your next idea may come from.

Keep feeding that commonplace of ideas. The more you put in, and the more you re-view and see your ideas side-by-side, the more you will get from it.

It will pay you back. Maybe not now, but at some point.

The more you observe and capture, the more items you can mash together.

Presenting is more than imagination and creativity, it is about communication and art, but good talks start with a creative process like this.

Your industry needs creative ways to explore the topics that matter and you're much better placed than many, if you capture anything of interest to you.

You have the seeds, they just need to grow.

Idea Generation

Here are some ways to generate ideas.

Challenge. Brain Dump. Time

A good way to generate a potential talk is to let those clever creative folk in your mind get to work. I mean your subconscious brain, but I prefer to describe this as the *clever & creative people in your brain*.

They sit there processing information, problems, requests and observations. They are creative and insightful by nature. You give them something to work on and they'll get busy. At some point they pop out of their brain-room, typically whilst you're in the shower, and give you ah-ha moments or deep insights.

And you usually don't have a pen and paper to hand! This is your subconscious mind working through a challenge.

With this talk generation technique you're going to set your clever folk a challenge. Simply write down a problem or question on a sheet of paper. Read it a few times maybe. Then go and do something different, like cooking some food, walking, meditating, reading, surfing, or spending some time with your kids.

At some point, maybe that day, maybe a few days later, those clever creative folk will appear. And they will have a gift for you.

Here are some examples:

- "How did we really achieve those business results? I mean really – at a deep level?"
- "What would happen if everything went well at work for a week?"
- "How can I get better at X or Y?"
- "Why does everyone work in X way, when Y clearly seems better?"
- "What really matters in life?"

Pose the question, **relax**, **write** down everything that comes back and **noodle** the output.

Is this a talk? Or another idea for the commonplace book? Or just utter garbage?

Observations

Spend time studying what is happening around you. Truly watching and studying.

Notice people, words, actions, outcomes, nature, movement – everything and anything.

I'm a natural people watcher. I like to study and watch how people move through time and space. I would encourage you to do the same. Study and watch. There is much to learn if we simply look.

There are lessons around us if we look deeply enough. Other people are a great source of inspiration. When people succeed, fail, interact, exhibit good or bad behaviours, they give us a great source of ideas.

For example, in one of my Keynotes I open the talk with a story about Mr Freaking Furious. He was a real person I met who was so angry at everything, and me, that it really was quite comical and tragic at the same time.

This encounter gave me a brilliant seed for a brand new talk. I didn't want to be like Mr Freaking Furious, so I created a talk called "How to thrive in your career".

Capture funny stories, sad stories, moments of WOW, moments of horror, successes, failures, interactions, behaviours and more. They are rich sources of insights and great seeds for either entire talks, or stories to weave into a talk.

I suggest carrying a notebook around with you, or using your phone, to simply capture what you observe.

Add them to your commonplace book.

Experience

There's nothing simpler than coming up with talks based on your own experience.

I often say that these types of talks are the simplest and easiest, and probably the best talks to start out with.

What has happened to you at work or in your career, or even in your own personal life?

- What journey have you been on?
- What path did you take and why?
- What does your daily life look like?
- Why do you do what you do?
- Why is it a pleasure/chore/pain to work with the people you work with?

What may seem mundane to you, could be wildly interesting to others.

What's gone well?

What did you fail at and what did you learn from it?

These are particularly interesting to people who are following a similar path to yours.

If you can help identify pitfalls and point out traps to avoid, you can save people time and energy, and help them avoid failure.

You'd be surprised at how much we encounter in our day-to-day work that would be a good conference talk.

Take the time to capture details of your work, life and observations - and see what picture, or patterns, emerges.

The Zero To Keynote book contains:

- **A Clear Path:** From idea to submission, writing your talk, rehearsing, and presenting—a logical, step-by-step process.
- **Conquer Your Fears:** Practical strategies to manage nerves and speak with confidence.

- **Insider Secrets:** Anecdotes and stories that bring the principles to life, and show you how to land those sought-after speaking slots.
 - **Conference Survival Guide:** A mini-guide to navigate conferences like a pro.
-

Get your copy of Zero To Keynote here:

<https://www.cultivatedmanagement.com/zero-to-keynote/>

Plus, subscribers to the Meeting Notes newsletter get access to a **high-resolution Speaker's Checklist** – your essential tool for seamless preparation.

Industry Trends

Industry trends are a brilliant source of talk material.

I especially like to look at what the mainstream are doing and explain why we're doing something different. The ***masses*** aren't always ***right***.

Equally, if topics are trending in your industry and you're in the mix of this, then share what you know to date.

Add to the mix, throw in something different and explain your view on the topic.

Could you mash trending topics with any of the ideas from your commonplace file?

Are you experienced in a trending topic but feel it's not been covered well by other speakers?

Try your own take on it.

Change

A good source of presentation ideas is change.

What's changed in your world? What new tech has disrupted your work?

- What shift in society has meant you needed to pivot as a company?
- What's changed in yourself?
- How have you shifted your own thinking or behaviours to better accommodate your challenges, goals or work?

One of my most popular talks, "How to thrive in your career", resonates deeply with people who feel stuck in their life and career.

I share my story and ideas about the ten ways I have thrived in my career after feeling stuck. This talk resonates well with people at a difficult juncture in their life. They often find wisdom in the talk.

Equally, some people won't resonate with the talk, as they're on a path they are happy with.

Change is a powerful topic for talks.

Random Words

If you can't find a talk from anything above then how about combining random words, items and ideas together?

When I run the in-person Zero To Keynote workshop, I ask the attendees to write down a single word on a post-it note.

It could be any word. Anything at all.

We then stick all of the post-it notes on the wall and look at potential combinations.

Without fail, someone will find a seed for a talk.

They will mash together two or more random words and generate a potential talk topic.

The Future

The future is a tricky place to play as a conference speaker. Nobody can predict the future but what we can do is anticipate a variety of futures.

The key words here are “anticipate” based on our current knowledge, and “futures” implying that there will be variations that we should consider.

The challenge with talks about the future is that people will disagree with you.

Based on their own understanding and knowledge, they will likely see different potential futures.

Don't let that hold you back – we cover how to deal with tough questions in the book.

Every industry needs people pondering and talking about futures.

Talks about the future encourage critical thinking, challenge our current world views and engage deep personal contemplations about remaining relevant in these potential futures.

Talks about potential futures open our minds to futures we may never have considered.

Future orientated talks engage our imagination and creative spirit.

Even if you're wrong about the futures you anticipate, it can sow many seeds of change and inspiration within the audience and industry.

- How would the future unfold if we just let things continue as they are?
- What would happen if we fixed every problem in work (or life)?
- What if we lose market share and fall into decline?
- What will be good or bad about the future of the industry?
- What technology will be available in the future?

Be like an artist and **paint a bright picture of the future, then share your art with the world.**

Artists often show us reality in different ways, and allow us to envision how things could be different. Talks about the future can be highly interesting.

Alternatives

Considering alternatives to your present reality is a cracking way to generate talk ideas (and, as a side note, also a good way to generate ideas about immediate business or life improvements).

I often say that ***other ways work***. As in, other people are succeeding doing things differently.

Every industry, hobby or niche has people who are dogmatic about certain approaches, methodologies and tools. ***The other way often works***.

There's also a rich idea pool in studying what people in other industries are doing too. A lot of this fodder can be good for a talk, but may also help you with your current work too.

- What are people in other industries doing?
- What can we pull across, weave in or copy?
- What other ways are there to achieve the same outcomes?
- What alternative roles or jobs exist in other industries?
- What are other companies in the same industry doing?
- Are you doing things differently to others?
- What are other people doing in their lives?

These can make very interesting talks indeed, especially if you can talk about how you weaved in some alternative way of working into your current job or industry.

Experiments

I often say that all of life is an experiment.

In the world of business though, many leaders aren't always comfortable with the word experiment.

Many leaders simply want ***predictability***.

However, in some companies experimentation is expected and encouraged.

- Did you run an experiment recently?
- Maybe a new way of working, or a new tool, or some new product launch.
 - What did you learn?
- How did you run the experiment?
 - What were the results?
 - How did you convince management to let you run it?

Did you experiment with a new hobby, or community project, or ways of organising your life? Could other people use your blueprint to run their own experiment?

These are all interesting ideas for talks. People really love a failed experiment by the way, especially one where something important was learned in the process.

Be Positive

This idea generation approach is simple but effective.

Take a seemingly negative experience and turn it positive.

What good came from this bad experience? Why was it good? How did you get past the negative effects of this experience?

Could other people materialise the good, without experiencing the bad?

In my other book, [Take A Day Off](#), I tell the story of Colin who suffered a heart attack - a truly life changing negative experience.

However, this life event provided him with a crystallising moment. He realised he hadn't really ever taken a day off, nor really lived his life. He was always on the career ladder, always working, always grinding through his tough leadership days.

After this moment though, he went on a path of creative expression and self care. It was a very negative experience that led to something positive.

The interesting part about his story though, was that he didn't need to suffer a heart attack to have made that change.

That's why his talks about this experience are so emotionally compelling. He didn't need the negative event to make change. He could, and should, have done something before his heart attack.

Your experience doesn't have to be so dramatic or life threatening. I'm writing this chapter on the train back from a very bad sales meeting. A meeting where I lost all of my self confidence.

It was a negative experience that I am certain some good will come from. I've just got to find it or wait for it to reveal itself.

It could then be a seed for an impactful talk.

Begin Again

When you're a specialist you tend to take your knowledge for granted.

You may discount early steps of a process, or forget some of the pathways you took in your career. You have a depth of knowledge that many don't have.

You may also think everyone else has the same level of insights that you have.

It's a good thing then, to become a beginner again.

Pick a new skill, interest or hobby to learn - and go back to the beginning of the learning cycle. Embrace not knowing the answers. Embrace sucking at what you do and not being a specialist. Embrace the lessons that are learned on this journey and how they could be a good seed for a talk.

For the production of my first printed book, I needed to become a beginner again. I wanted this project to be entirely self published. To do this I needed to learn how to design, edit and produce the zine using desktop publishing software.

I could have outsourced this, but I wanted to learn this myself. I wanted to become a beginner again.

Going back to the beginning is a humbling experience.

The late nights editing, or the hours of research about how to use the publishing tool, brought fresh perspectives to my understanding about myself and my ability.

There are stories in this process of becoming a beginner again, if we look deep enough. There are ideas for entire talks, or anecdotes you can weave into another talk.

- How did you start from scratch with something? And why?
- What happened when you hit a low point, when the energy ran out and you realised it's much harder than you thought?
- What learning resources did you use?
- Are any of the skills transferable to your day job?
- Did you master the topic or skill?

Some of the best stories for a talk are ***about self-reflection***.

How did you change? What did you learn about yourself? Did you change for the better?

What do the experts discount?

The experts in your industry often discount approaches, movements, ideas and methods.

They do this for a variety of reasons - protectionism, mistrust, naivety, ignorance, lack of experience in that topic, etc.

As such, the “things” these experts discount are great fodder for talks (and approaches to work!).

- What are they discounting?
- Why are they discounting it?
- Where is the evidence to support their claims?
- Do you have a different view?
- Do you have a different set of data or evidence?
- Do you agree with them?
- Are you doing exactly what they are telling people not to do?

I remember an early talk I did at a software engineering conference. I talked about this new idea I had called “Releasing Agility”. It’s the main theme of my work and consulting, but 15 years ago it flew in the face of the mainstream communities.

I was working in the Telecoms industry at the time and the audience, many of whom worked in the same industry, were getting pretty uncomfortable with my talk.

One man, physically **agitated** by my talk, **stood** up, **interrupted** my talk (which is really **rude**) and declared himself the UK’s number **one** expert on Telecoms Software Engineering.

He called me an “idiot” and said I shouldn’t be allowed back at conferences, and that what we were doing was insane, immoral and a bad use of investment. His buddies joined in.

The mood was declining, the air filled with anger, all directed at me. Who was I to talk about “Releasing Agility” in the telco space? Especially when I had the No.1 expert in the audience. How rude of me.

I told him that I respected his No.1 position and said that I was the mere 75th best known expert on the subject in the UK.

I suggested he watch this space. He did indeed watch this space, remotely via LinkedIn, where he continued his abuse, disdain and displeasure through the comments section of my posts. His buddies joined in too.

I blocked them all.

Two years later though, after we had sold the business, dominated the market and grown exponentially, the No.1 and No.75th experts happened to be at the same conference.

Two years earlier he had said I was an idiot and we’d never succeed. I politely reminded him of that, then took to the stage to share my story of growth, challenging the norms, and ignoring those who discounted what we were doing.

I rather cheekily mentioned that the No.1 expert in the country had said it couldn’t be done. But, as the 75th expert in the country I had chosen to ignore this negativity. He

never spoke to me again after that. Thankfully.

Sometimes, what the experts (and self-declared experts) discount is exactly what you should be doing.

Whether they are right or not sometimes doesn't matter - there's a talk (and learning) somewhere in that journey.

Stay in Touch

I hope you have enjoyed this mini-guide and it has given you some food for thought about ideas for talks.

To learn more about turning an idea into a talk, including how to get it accepted, how to structure the talk, how to rehearse it, and then deliver with your own style, check out the [book](#).

<https://www.cultivatedmanagement.com/zero-to-keynote/>

The Meeting Notes newsletter is a weekly collection of stimulating thoughts and ideas around learning, communication and creativity in the workplace.

<https://www.cultivatedmanagement.com/zero-to-keynote/#/portal>

info@cultivatedmanagement.com

[cultivatedmanagement.com](https://www.cultivatedmanagement.com)