

We've all been there. In an audience listening to one of the many motivational speakers increasingly seen by conference organisers as the essential star turn. When comparing notes on recent experiences, we discovered a shared horror of these types of talks; that we wince through the entire performance. We resent the pressure to let ourselves be carried along on the crest of some apparently euphoric wave. We intensely dislike being assaulted by the inane slogans these gurus inevitably use, like 'if you are in the room, be in the room.' Intellectually we reject the notion there is only one way – the guru's way – to do things. As soon as the speaker runs the length of the hall on to the stage, we get that sinking feeling. What makes the whole experience worse is knowing you're going to be bullied into joining in. Indeed it's like being dragged back to your worst childhood memories of being forced to take part in naff party games.

Undoubtedly some people enjoy such performances and find them energising and fun. They have no problem in deferring to someone else's judgement and of casting themselves in the role of follower. But we suspect that most Scots feel like us and wish that conference organisers would refrain from putting such items on the programme. Since there is a strong injunction in Scottish life not to rock the boat, most people thole such performances rather than speak out against them. But privately they feel compromised and annoyed. More importantly, their negative experience confirms the belief that all this 'personal development stuff' is shallow and intellectually suspect, something to be avoided at all costs. In other words, it stops many people from engaging in new ideas and traps them in old ways of thinking and behaving.

Indeed this is our main objection to the glib motivational approach to personal development. We passionately believe the time is ripe in Scottish education for people to develop new thinking skills and enhance their emotional literacy to help combat our many social ills. But we don't think the charismatic speaker route is the way to encourage people to engage with this process. In fact we think these types of events are so against the grain of Scottish culture that they are counterproductive – encouraging people in the long run to feel more, not less, resistant to change.

Many of the ideas promoted by such gurus are questionable. For example, it doesn't make sense to strive to be continually positive since we need some healthy scepticism to stop us from being foolhardy. The notion that we should plaster a smile on our faces and say we are fine when we feel miserable undermines the openness and honesty essential to personal relationships. Many gurus sell their ideas on the basis that they "will change your life". What balanced person wants to have their life changed overnight? You are not only told how to re-programme your mind, but what to eat and drink. You are also told that if it doesn't work you are not trying hard enough. Crucially these approaches assume we are all the same and don't allow for any individual differences.

So why does this type of approach often get such a hostile reaction? The most obvious turnoff for many Scots is that these sessions feel gimmicky and intellectually lightweight. The content of most performances are bereft of much intellectual rigour or ethical basis. Such one-off events have little impact on barriers to change. The fact that the motivational speaker usually projects himself as a guru who not only has all the answers but, like snakeoil salesmen in the past, can solve all your problems if you just follow their method, heightens the alien feel of such sessions for many people. Indeed this is even true when the speaker is a Scot, for as someone caustically remarked the idea of 'a Scottish guru' is a contradiction in terms.

Scottish culture encourages us to be wary of glib, new-fangled ideas and to value our independence of mind. We like to see the logic behind ideas and we don't like to be told what to think. As the comedian Cliff Hanley once remarked if Scotland had a slogan it would be 'aye, that'll be right'.

Unfortunately when carried too far such scepticism can undoubtedly be a weakness. As trainers we're aware of the problem. At any in-service day there is usually a phalanx of cynical staff, predominantly male, who sit stony faced and arms cross damned if you are going to convince them of anything. They have decided in advance there is little of merit in what you are going to say and their scepticism prevents them from engaging with any ideas. Ironically they don't realise they are echoing the truculent pupils they spend the day complaining about. But mostly such scepticism is an asset. Wanting to be convinced and see the clear rationale behind something prevents people from being gullible.

We don't think Scottish culture is closed to ideas from elsewhere and we are not against anything that energises us, challenges our thinking and nurtures greater self reflection but any approach needs to be respectful of our cultural preferences. What's the alternative? The trick is to channel this scepticism in a way that enhances our thinking. We should be open about our scepticism and not treat it as a fault. It is up to us what we get out of our own personal development. This is about a few tools and insights we might find helpful in our everyday life. We should always seek the face validity and "common sense" inherent in any material. Personal development means asking difficult questions and challenging traditional beliefs in the light of the most up to date knowledge. As any teacher knows growth comes from working in partnership to help the learners work things out for themselves.

