

Cavett Robert

We live in a society where the average individual will change professions three or four times in their lifetime. I don't mean jobs, I mean professions. This is nothing new, though. People have done it for years. But what about starting a profession that almost no one is practicing? What if there is no model to follow? What if you are pioneering a career in a field that almost doesn't even exist? Cavett Robert is a perfect example of an individual who changed professions several times in life and went on to great success. He is best known for the one he chose after age 60, a time when most people are looking forward to retirement! He even has an award named for himself. You may have never heard of Cavett, but when you finish reading his story, you will find that you have heard of his many accomplishments.

Cavett was born in 1907 in Starkville, Mississippi. He attended Furman University in Greenville, South Carolina and then the University of Mississippi, in Oxford, Mississippi. He graduated from Ole Miss in 1929 with BA and a BS degrees and went to Prairie Point, MS to teach school. He taught First through Twelfth grades in this small town one-room school. His second year he got a job installing a gas line through the area (*Change #1*). After several months, his brother-in-law who had just been appointed President of Washington and Lee University encouraged Cavett to come there and study Law (*Change #2*). This would become his profession for the next 30 years. After passing the Bar exam, he was appointed judge in Lexington, Virginia. Following that he got the opportunity to work in New York with a law firm and then with District Attorney (future Governor and Presidential candidate) Thomas Dewey, investigating gangsters and racketeers. He and his wife, Trudy (a former Miss South Carolina), decided that they should move to a warmer climate for their health, so they he took a position with a law firm in Arizona. This would become his new adopted home.

He worked for firms in Phoenix, Jerome and Douglas, Arizona. Arizona Edison Power Company hired him after several years, to travel around to their cities and speak and be public relations for the company. He did this for three years. He would go to small towns and speak to churches, Lions Clubs, chambers of commerce and Toastmasters. Following this speaking stint, he was hired by a law firm in Phoenix to work in Education and Real Estate. It was there that he got into selling insurance and cemeteries (*Changes #3 and 4*). There were a few other people doing this but Cavett Robert was the first person to start "pre-need" selling (advance selling of all services for your funeral, so your family will be spared the burden at your death). He would sell lots in advance for one-fourth the cost. He was so successful that he developed training seminars to educate sales people in selling real estate and cemetery lots. This was the beginning of his sales and training career (*Change #5*).

Cavett always had a desire to help other people and to speak. He joined Toastmasters International and won the International Speaking Contest in his second attempt. This launched his speaking career. He was also awarded the Golden Gavel Award from Toastmasters International, and Speaker of the Year by United Airlines and International Speakers Network. For the next 25 years he went around the country speaking. In those

days the only "professional" speakers were doctors, lawyers and politicians. In 1966, he got the desire to help other people to become better speakers with the idea that there was always enough room in the profession for more. This would be an uphill battle since only 3% of organizations in that day used outside professional speakers. But Cavett's life motto was: "Don't worry about how we divide up the pie, there is enough for everybody. Let's just build a bigger pie!" Most professions are so filled with competition, that this thinking isn't rewarded, but to the speaking profession, this would ignite an industry boom. An industry where very few of the organizations used professional speakers. He wanted to form a national organization with the goals of making speaking a full-time profession (there was no such thing) and helping people to become speakers through OPE (Other People's Experience).

His first attempt at getting speakers to join his organizations was met with stiff resistance and failed. The idea of full-time speaking was unheard of for the most part. The concept of helping each other out in a competitive market was unthinkable. Speakers would write or call him with discouraging statements: "Oh, it's been tried before...it'll never work." Remember these were the people who would one day be known as "motivational" speakers! After a year of discouragement, Cavett realized that he would have to use his skills as a salesman to win people over to the idea of a speaker's association. He had high standards and a clear purpose in mind. The National Speaker's Association was to promote high ethical and professional standards of its members. It was never to exist for selfish, self-promotion of its members. It was hoped that the public would recognize a member of NSA as one who adhered to the high standards of the profession.

Cavett's second attempt was different from the first. He appointed a board and advertised the high standards to prospective members. They elected a recognized professional speaker to be the first President (the late Bill Gove). They began with sales seminars in Phoenix for eight years. 20 people joined at the NSA's incorporation. At the fifth year convention held in New Orleans, 300 people attended, more than three times the number of any previous gathering.

As the organization grew, it never lost sight of its purpose. After a few years that purpose became the drive to give an annual award to the individual who embodied the profession's highest standards--known as the Cavett Award. Cavett, himself was the first recipient in 1979 and Bill Gove was the second. Today, as a professional member of NSA myself, I can say that our members adhere to strict standards including eight competencies in speaking and training. The association has over 4,500 members and continues to grow annually. There is now an International Speaking Federation for world-wide members. Cavett passed away in 1997, leaving a lasting legacy in every individual's life who has heard a motivational speaker or trainer from the National Speaker's Association.

Personally, we, the members of NSA we call the attitude of helping each other "The Spirit of Cavett." NSA has grown to be a place where people can share, grow and nurture each other just as he dreamed it would. Wouldn't it be great if every profession had this goal in mind? Next time you think of changing professions, remember Cavett Robert, a

man who changed many times and left a legacy of a better world through the encouragement of others.

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