

There are people who have created global businesses after doing it. Others who have seen their profits leap after attending a seminar. FTSE 100 companies that swear by its approach. Names like Nasa, Apple, Microsoft and GlaxoSmithKline that have benefited from its methodology. And yet others who claim that it's a cult, brainwashing, and evangelical — about which more later.

This is Landmark Forum, a self-development course and global educational enterprise dedicated to personal and professional growth, training and development. It marks the return of Werner Erhard, founder of 'est' and Seventies avatar of the human potential movement. In the Eighties, Erhard repackaged est as the (gentler and more success-oriented) Forum. In 1991 he sold it to some of his employees and, having been targeted by Scientologists who were hell-bent on destroying his reputation with spurious claims, left the US. And so Landmark was born, with Erhard as an occasional consultant.

Many global brands send staff on Landmark's seminars, and others benefit from its teachings through its corporate arm, Vanto Group. 'We customise for the company using the overall methodology from Landmark,' says Steve Zaffron, Vanto Group CEO, 'along with corporate consulting methodology to elevate profitability, market share, and so forth.'

It's a business revolution that has been happening globally (mostly in America), and now the UK is its biggest growing market. The former chief executive of Reebok, Paul Fireman, says Reebok's share price quadrupled after he introduced his employees to the training. So what's happening on these shores? I first heard about Landmark from an NHS executive, Carolyn Regan, who oversees 3,500 staff. 'Everyone would benefit from doing it, both personally and in business,' she enthused. 'It offers a useful framework for thinking about your past, present and future self, allowing helpful insights for changing as you move forwards. Such self-awareness and resilience are much-needed attributes for today's fast-paced world.'

Then London-based investment manager Jean-Marc Fraysse — fresh from having completed a

MORE THAN  
2.4 MILLION  
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LANDMARK'S  
PROGRAMME



forum — suggested I attend an introductory evening: 'Landmark is an important ingredient for dealing with big work and life issues,' he explained.

That's how I came to be sitting in a conference room in an office block behind Euston station while an American called Jerry Baden (a self-professed 'Jew with big teeth and beady eyes' who was also a 'former ballerina and son of a truck driver — go figure') boomed into a microphone in front of an audience of around 250 people. People were wearing their names on sticky labels and clapping too loudly at 'shares'. Creepy.

A man rushed to the stage to tell everyone about the breakthroughs he'd made in his life just twelve hours after completing the seminar. 'And yours isn't just any business... you have offices worldwide, don't you?' Baden raved. There was enough evangelical fervour and hard-sell in the room to ignite a rocket. I felt sceptical that a short personal development course could have such profound effects on business — and yet something made me want to come back. Maybe it was Baden's 'promise' of the possibility of participants making professional and personal transformations. Maybe it was the fact that I trust my friends who rate the seminar highly.

## RETURN TICKET

I was not alone in deciding to return. Most guests at the introductory evening legged it to the desks at the back to sign up. It's the same around the world. Here are the stats. Landmark's London centre offers about eleven forums a year, each training around 150 people. Around the world 200,000 participate annually. (It's available on every continent except Antarctica. Watch this space.) More than 2.4 million people have done it in 21 countries.

Fast forward two weeks and I'm sitting in the seminar room again. This time I'm a participant. There are 157 of us — aged 22 to 70, but mostly thirty- and fortysomethings — and roughly equal numbers of each gender. There is simultaneous Polish translation going on in a booth at the back, like irritating background radio noise. There must be 30 Poles here, some of whom have travelled from their homeland.

Baden is leading my seminar; he has 'hosted' 32 a year for 32 years. 'All I want is three crummy days



**CAROLINE PHILLIPS**  
IS A JOURNALIST  
AND PUBLIC  
RELATIONS  
CONSULTANT

# GROWTH INDUSTRY

*Life inside the evangelical universe of  
Landmark Forum's motivational training*





and one lousy evening to transform your life,' he says. 'As far as we know, you've only got one life. It's a privilege. Don't die with "If only I woulda, shoulda or coulda".' He also keeps promising that all will be revealed at 4.52pm on Sunday.

There are Powerpoint presentations, calls to action, confessional microphone shares, endless applause, confrontations and hugs. Jerry proves a human dynamo (he's 66 years old and his energy would be formidable for someone half his age), char-

ismatic, and intuitive. In the face of his authenticity and the group's willingness and vulnerability, I find my scepticism softening, my defences lessening, and my identification increasing.

Several people reveal that they've been made redundant or are starting new businesses. Others divulge stories of child abuse, unhappy marriages, and broken relationships with colleagues and family. During breaks there are assignments, with participants directed to 'clean up things on the phones' with people in their lives. 'Twenty years you haven't spoken to your mother?' asks Baden, after one break. 'And you fixed it with that five-minute phone call!' And a woman cries as she divulges how she's sorted out a long-standing problem with

her boss. Clap, clap, clap.

We're encouraged to take responsibility for our lives and 'get it' by discovering there's nothing to get. (I think that's what happened at 4.52pm on Sunday.) Our conventional perspectives and decision-making patterns are challenged, creating a shift in thinking and a freedom from the past. We're encouraged to take risks. To be our authentic selves. To live an empowered life. To be present and focused. And we're provided us with the tools to effect change.

It becomes clear that these approaches will improve a staff's level of engagement, creativity and performance, accelerating productivity; make a difference to people's ability to lead and manage; increase their personal and hence business effectiveness; allow insight and action; and help people relate, communicate and perform.

How does it work? It's not therapy. Above all it's grounded in ontology and phenomenology, and based in transformative (rather than informative) learning. The lingo is often opaque, like the utterances of some Bangalore mystic. One Powerpoint presentation read: 'New possibilities for being call you powerfully into being.' Another promised: 'You can have any result for yourself or your life that you invent as a possibility, and enroll others in your having gotten...'

## HARD SELL

And now to that important question: is it a cult, brainwashing and evangelical? Cross out the first two; tick the third (but not in a literal, bible-bashing way — it's just that there's a lot of American hard sell). The party line is that evangelism is not a corporate approach: they attribute it to the individuals' passion. But I don't buy that. Whipping up the fervour and lurge is how they put bums on seats.

Soon it's over. It cost £480, which includes ten follow-up evenings — a bargain for self-enlightenment and the possibility of professional effectiveness. And what of the Landmark business itself? It provides a model of a successful business. In 2016 its revenues are projected to be just under \$100 million. With just 500 employees (plus armies of volunteers) and a profit of approximately \$5 million, that's nice going.

After the seminar, the PR offers me introductions to business people who credit Landmark with their success. 'I started my hotel company, inspiring the bank to loan me £100 million, as a consequence of Landmark,' says Mustak Musa, a UK businessman and investor. His company now has a turnover of £60 million a year. Then there's Andrew Cherng, co-CEO of Panda Express, the largest chain of Asian food restaurants in the US. He enthuses that sending his employees on Landmark has positively influenced 'their satisfaction and the company's bottom line'.

This is about the American dream crossing the pond and making global inroads into business. The story upon which the American dream depends is one of limitless choice, endless possibilities. This narrative promises so much: freedom, happiness, success. It lays the world at people's feet and says they can have anything, everything. And that's just what Landmark is helping participants achieve. Very successfully. *f*

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