

THE CAMERA NEVER LIES

BY W. SCOTT CAMERON



THROUGHOUT MY LIFE, PEOPLE HAVE ALWAYS STRESSED TO ME THE IMPORTANCE OF EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION WITH OTHERS. ONE OF THE FIRST TIMES I REMEMBER HEARING IT WAS IN THE SIXTH GRADE. MY ENGLISH TEACHER WOULD HARP ON ME ABOUT HOW HIS SPEECH CLASS WAS GOING TO BE SO IMPORTANT TO ME IN THE FUTURE. BUT BEING ONLY 12 AT THE TIME, THE IMPACT OF THIS SAGE ADVICE FELL ON DEAF EARS. I HEARD THIS SAME ADVICE AGAIN IN A COLLEGE SPEECH COURSE. THE COURSE DIDN'T HELP ME GET OVER BEING NERVOUS ABOUT SPEAKING IN FRONT OF PEOPLE, BUT IT DID REITERATE THE IMPORTANCE OF VERBAL COMMUNICATION.

SO, WHEN I ENTERED THE WORKFORCE I ALREADY KNEW communication skills would be considered an important asset; but I was an engineer, and the stereotype of engineers at that time was that they didn't have well-developed writing and speaking skills. Because of this, the success bar for an engineer's presentation skills was set fairly low, and I evaluated my own skills. What I came up with, in my "unbiased opinion," was that I communicated

much more effectively than the typical engineer, and only minor improvements were needed to be seen as having better communication skills than my peers. Needless to say, I felt pretty good about myself.

During an annual performance evaluation, after working for about five years, my boss suggested I attend a communications training course instead of the standard technical or project management (PM) courses

I had attended in the past. Most of my previous training recommendations were based on increasing my knowledge of the nuts and bolts of PM and engineering (i.e. making schedules, scope development, cost control, team dynamics, etc.) so I was somewhat taken aback by this suggestion.

Apparently, the feedback I had received—from not only my hierarchy but also from my peers—indicated that I could benefit from a communications course. I thought I had good presentation skills, and it had always appeared others liked my presentations and meetings. But I decided to take the feedback as an opportunity to improve and made the decision to attend a two-day communications course.

taped presentation pointed out the different flaws in my communication, and I got to see the impact it had on my audience first-hand.

I completed the course, and I am happy to say it has had a positive and lasting effect on my verbal communication skills, how I view the presentations of others, and how I provide feedback for them. Because of lessons I learned from this course, my boss and my peers commented on the marked improvement they saw in my communication skills in a variety of settings.

To this day I call upon these communication skills constantly, since as a Project Manager I am often the focal point of many one-on-one, project team, and review meetings. I've learned it is important to be able to step back

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The course I chose was different from any other training I'd experienced. Its sole purpose was to improve your verbal communication/presentation skills by addressing three separate situations encountered in the workplace. One situation was a one-on-one meeting with another person, another was a two-minute question and answer session, and the last was a five-minute prepared presentation with a question and answer period at the end. The presentations were videotaped and critiqued during the first day of the course. They were taped again at the end of the second day so you could evaluate your progress and hopefully see a positive difference.

I was shocked at what I saw on the first tape. Yes, that was me talking in each of the situations, only now I was seeing myself as others saw me. They say the camera never lies, but this was not the way I had envisioned myself. My eye contact was terrible, I swayed back and forth, there were too many hesitations, my body was stiff, I didn't have a command of the material or the stage... the list could go on. To make matters worse, in a class of fifteen other students, I compared my style to theirs and realized I was not even in the top 50% for communication skills. Each

and see yourself the way others see you. It helps you gain credibility, and if you are not credible, then your effectiveness as a project manager can be greatly diminished.

When I coach and mentor project managers, I find myself focusing on their “soft communication skills” as potentially huge growth opportunities for them, but also as ways to differentiate themselves from other Project Managers. I try to pass along that taking a communication training course and seeing yourself as others see you can improve your overall effectiveness.

After all, effective communication is a must for project managers and it's our job to set the success bar higher for the future of project management. It still amazes me how my sixth-grade English teacher had it right all those years ago, but I just didn't listen. •



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