



My Son's Requirements

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GIVING A TALK IS ALWAYS A CHALLENGE FOR ME. RECENTLY, I was reminded of this when I needed to prepare some brief comments in honor of my son Daniel's upcoming Bar Mitzvah. My wife, Dianne, had been active in most of the other aspects of the preparations, and we agreed that I would tackle the talk. The time was getting close, and I was feeling anxious. Despite nearly twenty years experience speaking in public, I am still amazed at the amount of time I spend going over what to say, even when I know what I want to say.

After a while I decided to rely on my NASA project experience. That is, I decided to ask the customer. I asked Daniel what he wanted from my talk. Specifically, I asked what his requirements were for a successful speech. He surprised me by responding without hesitation. "Dad," he said, "first of all, be brief; second, don't humiliate me; and third, don't make mom cry."

As I thought about Daniel's requirements, they also provided me with some simple yet powerful messages of learning.

Be brief ~ It is all too easy to get lost in the message. Project requirement documents mimic the tendency for overload in their attempt to capture the details. Why are we doing the project? You need to be able to briefly and quickly answer this question and communicate to the larger team. For this project, I needed to be clear about what I wanted to get across and avoid the surrounding fluff. I recalled a speech delivered by Winston Churchill at a university graduation. He said to the graduates, "Never give up, never give up, never give up." Then he sat down to thunderous applause. Churchill could certainly get to

the point of a talk. (For other lessons in leadership, just read Lincoln's Gettysburg Address—again, the power of focused communication.)

Don't humiliate me ~ This made me think of my tendency to occasionally use humor to liven up a presentation. In retrospect, I realized there have been times where my humor may have been at the expense of another. In the book *Lives of Moral Leadership* by Robert Coles, a true leader is one who is concerned about relationships with people from a stand of integrity and respect for the person. Okay, I told myself, don't go for an easy laugh that makes Daniel want to jump into a hole.

Don't make mom cry ~ I have thought much about this one. I have always valued the importance of bringing screaming passion to any assignment or task. In context, there are times where passion and a will to win can become excessive and blur the basic goals and outcomes desired. Wanting to demonstrate too much emotion can make others uncomfortable, like being around an over exuberant salesperson, or the discomfort that comes from watching an Academy Award recipient just go on and on. Fairly quickly the message gets lost and people start searching for an exit. Be clear about the goal, but don't get excessive. Trust the process. I certainly understood where Daniel was coming from. Too much emotional connection and Mom will cry.

When I asked Daniel for his criteria for a successful talk, I was hoping for an idea about the presentation. As it turned out, I learned several lessons about leadership and about myself. Asking the customer opened up a path of possibilities. •

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