How Emotional Intelligence Landed Mr. Rogers $20 Million

By Jean Greaves, Ph.D.

If your project needed $20 million in funding and you had to send someone to appear before the US Senate to get it, would you choose Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer or the beloved children’s television show host Fred “Mr.” Rogers? I imagine most people would choose Ballmer for his energy, experience closing big deals, and, more importantly, his aggressive go-getter style. Mr. Rogers, on the other hand, was mild-mannered, talked slowly, and the epitome of the nice-guy approach. It’s easy to think his gift was communicating with children, not adults. It’s easy to assume he had no place in the world of money, power, and influence. It’s easy to be mistaken. In 1969, Fred Rogers addressed the Senate for a mere six minutes and ensured $20 million in funding for PBS. How’d he do it? With authenticity and emotional intelligence.

Anyone who is authentic and emotionally intelligent can use this to have great influence over others. When used to influence others, emotional intelligence requires knowing your strengths and your present emotional state (self-awareness); knowing how to manage the moment you are in (self-management); knowing what’s important to your audience and how they’ll perceive your message (social awareness); and knowing how to forge a connection with decision makers (relationship management). These skills can be developed individually through simple practice.

On the 1st of May in 1969, Mr. Rogers addressed the Senate to argue that $20 million in funding for PBS should not be cut. John Pastore, the Senator from Rhode Island who led the hearing, had never seen nor hear of Mr. Rogers’ television show. It took Mr. Rogers just six minutes to convince the gruff and impatient Senator from Rhode Island that the $20 million was well worth it.

Here’s how Mr. Rogers used each emotional intelligence skill to his advantage:

**Self-Awareness:** Rogers understood that his strengths were his credentials and his understanding of children’s needs. Self-awareness made Rogers influential because he clearly understood the value he brought to the table. During his pitch, Rogers quickly and repeatedly noted his fifteen years of television experience, and the six years he spent studying the inner needs of children.

**Self-Management:** Rogers was adept at keeping his message focused, which is very difficult to pull off once you’ve taken the podium. At the beginning of Rogers’ pitch, Senator Pastore appeared dismissive and skeptical of this unknown speaker before him. This could have easily unnerved Rogers and destroyed his confidence. Rogers managed these emotions and remained focused—so much so that Rogers elected to “talk about” his key points rather than leaning on the safety of a pre-written 10-minute statement. Rogers kept his cool, and bought enough time to recite the song that proved so critical to his message.
Social Awareness: Reading your audience means understanding what they value and what they bring to the table. In this Senate hearing, Mr. Rogers understood he was addressing a Senator who was more than just the decision maker—he was a man who used to be a boy, a man who had a family, and a Senator whose sworn duty was to represent the needs of Americans. Rogers also knew the Senate needed facts (credible institutions that backed PBS), numbers ($6,000 creates 30 minutes of constructive viewing for kids, versus 2-minutes of absent-minded cartoons), deliverables (“Every day I give each child an expression of care”), and the show’s value to society (“When feelings are mentionable and manageable, it is a great service to mental health”).

Relationship Management: Relationship management skills helped Mr. Rogers exert influence with small, meaningful gestures, such as greeting Senator Pastore by name at the beginning of the hearing. Rogers also used his relationship management skills to create a personal appeal to Senator Pastore, such as telling the Senator, “The first thing a child in a healthy family learns is trust and I trust that you will read this document.” Rogers creates a second, direct connection with the Senator halfway through his appeal by establishing common ground, “I’m very much concerned with what children are watching as I know you are.” Finally, when Senator Pastore reveals his goose bumps, Rogers takes full advantage of this personal disclosure by saying, “I’m grateful for your goose bumps, and I acknowledge them as interest in our kind of communication.” This simple statement from Rogers says thank you for truly listening to what I’m saying, but it also points out to the Senator that it’s a clear sign he should approve the funding request.

How to Influence Using Your Emotional Intelligence

In preparation for your next big opportunity to exert influence, prepare yourself with strategies taken straight from Mr. Rogers’ playbook:

1. Understand your strengths and how you communicate best
2. Understand your audience and speak to what they value
3. Make a personal connection with the person you address
4. Remember, the only way to be authentic is to be yourself
5. Stay focused on your message when distracting emotions bubble to the surface
6. Use inclusive language to create common ground
7. Be polite and respectful with questions and answers

In honor of National Children’s Awareness Month, TalentSmart would like to take this opportunity to salute the parents, family, friends, teachers, coaches, and all others who work so hard to help raise emotionally intelligent children.
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Dr. Jean Greaves is the co-author of the best selling *Emotional Intelligence 2.0*, and co-founder and CEO of TalentSmart, the world’s leading provider of emotional intelligence books, assessments, training and coaching. Her best-selling books are available in 25 languages and more than 150 countries. Dr. Greaves leverages her twenty-five year track record of consulting, executive coaching, speaking and applied research. She has written for, or been covered by, *Newsweek, Fortune, Forbes, The Harvard Business Review, The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Washington Post.*