"Every business major takes a writing course, but that's not our future. Instead, everyone with something to say is going to need to say it on camera. And Vern Oakley's crash course is a great place to start."

—**SETH GODIN**, author of *Unleashing the Ideavirus*

LEADERSHIP IN FOCUS

BRINGING OUT YOUR BEST ON CAMERA

VERN OAKLEY

4

The Sacred Space

If the idea of stepping in front of a camera and being real sounds hard, you're right. Actors spend their careers learning how to do it well, and those who have mastered it are considered legends. So, how can you be expected to do it within just a few minutes, often with no prep time at all?

The truth is, you can't. At least, you can't do it on your own. And you shouldn't have to.

Deep, honest communication can only come through in an atmosphere of trust and respect. I call this atmosphere the "sacred space," and it exists between you and your director. The sacred space is a safe environment where you sort out your message together and work closely to impart your humanity and authenticity on camera. It's where you and your director interact to convey your vision in a way that connects and sticks with the viewer.

Hollywood director and practicing Buddhist Peter Werner introduced me to the concept of the sacred space many years ago. He believes that of all the elements that go into a project, what happens in the sacred space is paramount. "With all the activity on a typical film set, all the technical gear, the noise, the sprawl, the people running around setting up lights, you can sometimes forget that the most important activity is often incredibly intimate: It's happening in a small space between maybe only two people, two actors, or the director and an actor. And it's the director's job to hold that space in the middle of the chaos, to allow for that connection to happen." Perhaps that's why he's been nominated for multiple Emmy and Director's Guild of America awards and has won an Oscar.

When you step in front of the camera, we're asking you to do something vulnerable and revealing. Actors are trained consistently over years to learn how to block everything out and maintain that trusted vibe with their director. It's the only way they can reveal their character to viewers in the most human way possible. The sacred space lets them remove the barrier between them and the lens.

It's only in corporate filmmaking that we treat this space so cavalierly. Leaders are expected—and expect themselves—to express their humanity on command. My peers who direct feature films, documentaries, and commercials always have at least one conversation with their actors so they can forge a connection. Movie stars meet with directors to see if they have a rapport. If they don't bond, the actor often won't do the film. But corporate leaders rarely get time to meet with their director in advance. As a top executive in your company, you're essentially playing a role every day. Your demanding job likely doesn't leave much room for your personal side to shine through.

Then you show up on set and are asked to take off the mask and *just be yourself*. It won't happen without trust. You can't be expected to deliver an honest performance without developing even the faintest rapport with your director.

Sometimes I need to create a sacred space almost instantly with someone who can't meet me until minutes before the camera rolls. I faced this challenge when filming the CEO of one of the fastest growing tech companies in Silicon Valley. He arrived on set late and I could immediately tell he expected to be treated like royalty because he had three personal handlers with him.

One of the ways I prep for a shoot is by observing what a leader wears in photos on his or her company website. This particular CEO wore a coat and tie, so I did the same on film day. When the leader arrived fifteen minutes late wearing an open-collar shirt, the first thing he said to me was, "Doesn't that tie cut off the circulation to your brain?" I kept my cool and simply said, "If you feel that way, you might want to change the photo on your website because you're wearing a tie in it." I didn't bristle or get defensive. In fact, I paired my reply with a warm chuckle to let him know I was on his side, even if I was pushing back on his comment.

Whether the CEO realized it or not, his tie comment was a test. He wanted to see what I was made of so he could figure out how much of himself he would be willing to give to me. He was gauging whether I was the kind of guy he could trust. This goes back to the concept of mirror neurons that I mentioned earlier. As the director, if I want the person I'm working with to be honest and open, I have to project that same vibe.

It's only natural to want to know you're in good hands, especially

when you're about to venture into unfamiliar territory. Jim Tusty compares the experience to working with a coach. He points out that the last thing the CEO wants is to be in the hands of a Little League coach. They want the major league coach. The director has to convey their own authenticity and confidence if they want to build trust.[1]

The CEO instantly relaxed because he could tell I was someone who was willing to talk straight to him. I was confident and honest—traits that I hoped he'd bring to the camera. In a world full of yes men, he knew he could trust me to tell him the truth. He was ready to get to work.

Directors have to find a way to make these quick connections, sometimes in just a couple of minutes. Our job—and your performance—depends on it. Sometimes it happens by kindly speaking truth to power, as I did with my client in Silicon Valley. It's about being warm while showing that you're a strong person who is comfortable in his or her role.

A PARTNER TO BREAK THE TENSION

We've all seen movie outtakes or bloopers. They're a great window into understanding the atmosphere that needs to be present on a film set. Performers have to stay loose and in the moment. When someone messes up, they laugh. When someone really messes up, everyone laughs. They get through their blunders by not being so uptight. They acknowledge what happened and move on. In the same vein, if a CEO doesn't laugh or make light of a mistake, everyone gets rigid. You can hear a pin drop in the room.

In these moments, the person safeguarding the sacred space—usually the director—will often sacrifice his or her good standing to save the situation. Sometimes this means going against what the CEO or communications team said they wanted and instead doing what the project actually needs. If the speaker is tense, the director might clear the room for a relaxed one-on-one talk. Other instances might call for riskier moves.

A few years ago I was directing the CEO of the most valuable company in the world at the time. The guy was understandably busy, and always rushed. My team was given one hour to film a high-stakes video announcement for the company. A project of this caliber usually needs several hours, but an hour was all they would give us—or so I thought.

When we arrived on film day our slot had been cut to thirty minutes. We had no choice but to jump right into filming. After one take, the leader said he was done. He didn't have time for more, and anyway, he felt he'd delivered what was needed. This one rushed take was nowhere near enough, and I could tell his team knew it. But nobody was willing to rock the boat by speaking up. They were too afraid to piss off the boss.

I knew I was the expendable one in the scenario. While others in the room may have feared for their job, I knew I'd still have my business if the client decided he didn't want to work with me. I'd rather push back in the moment so I can deliver an excellent video than be complacent and make a lackluster video. So I put my good standing with the CEO on the line. I told him we needed more. He was noticeably irritated, but I persisted. I explained that what we had was OK, but the video would be even better with a few more takes because his

passion hadn't come through in the material we had. He realized I was right. As I continued talking about a few things we could try, he inched away from the door and back into the room. It became clear he wasn't going to fire me. Instead, he'd decided to trust me.

You could feel the tension in the room break as the CEO settled in to shoot the next take. Our newly formed rapport allowed the conversation to flow more freely, and with that, the leader's performance was much more natural. With the sacred space firmly in place, the rest of the shoot took only an extra twenty minutes.

B-ROLL'S WELCOMED BY-PRODUCT

Taking a leader out to film B-roll before we shoot any speaking parts is a great way to establish trust before we ever step on set. It allows him or her the chance to become familiar with the crew, the camera, and me without the pressure of being "on." All they have to do is make-believe the crew and I aren't there.

Shooting B-roll is also the perfect way to introduce a leader to the filming process in general. My team is careful to praise good work and spontaneity during the sessions, and this helps our subject build confidence almost immediately. They begin to see that being on camera can feel natural.

When we shot B-roll of Becton Dickinson CEO Vince Forlenza, his comfort level rose almost immediately. Vince enjoys working with his leadership team, so we decided that putting them all together in a meeting might show off his confidence and ease with his colleagues.

"It was a lot of fun for me. You put me in a situation that I liked

being in, interacting with a leadership team, with a group, doing Q&A. It really was helpful for me. In doing that B-roll, you get used to being on camera. And that's the other part of becoming more comfortable."[2]

Often, someone I'm filming can have better, more natural B-roll scenarios in mind than I do. I'm grateful to hear about and act on them. If we have done our job they tell us, "Hey this isn't so hard. I should be the director."

WORKING WITH THE TRUSTED TEAM

An important point I highlight is that we're all working toward the same goal—we just have different jobs. My role is to create a bond with the speaker and help bring out their best communication style. I help sharpen the message, make sure the body language is right, and that the leader's personality comes through. I can only do this if I've made a personal connection with the speaker and he or she understands that I have their best interests in mind. Everything I do is to help the organization achieve their desired outcome—whether it's getting stakeholders excited about a big company change or inspiring consumers to see their brand in a new light. My rapport with leaders will help keep them focused on their core goal in the midst of all the hubbub going on around the set.

The communications team, by contrast, helps make sure we've covered all the right points. I count on them to tell me if we've missed mentioning an important detail, or if the message is saying what it really needs to say. Their input is critical, but to do my job well I need one-on-one time with the leader. Time constraints

sometimes force me to ask others to leave the filming area so I can set the right vibe quickly. It doesn't mean I don't want the team's input—I just need to create the right environment in which their input can be most effective.

I'll often set up a monitor off to the side, or in a nearby room, so the leader's team can see what's happening. I request that they let me ask the interview questions so I can build a rapport with the leader. The human rhythm that develops during a one-on-one interaction gives me a chance to ask the same questions in different ways to help the leader deepen his or her thinking on the subject. I promise to regroup with the team between takes so they can share their input. This keeps well-meaning colleagues from shouting out their feedback during filming. It's natural to want to do this, but I've found that when it happens the leader starts looking off camera and over at their colleagues for approval. It's hard to edit around these side glances, and at worst, it dilutes the sacred space and builds tension.

Klaus Schiang-Franck, owner of the film company Citizen Dane, also vies for one-on-one time with the speaker before filming. He often starts a shoot by asking the leader to tell him, without looking at a script, what he or she is going to talk about. Klaus says that when he does this, "You can see that this complicated thing can be explained so easily. They just tell me the story in a fraction of the time it would have taken to read it from a script. I encourage them to be short and precise, and they really like having the chance to just sit down and explain the story. It builds their confidence." In these moments Klaus makes sure nobody else is in the room. If someone on the communications team asks to participate, Klaus explains that he'd like this to be one-on-one time. If someone really wants to be involved, he asks

them to take a role similar to his own: Stand back, don't say anything, and let the leader tell the story in his or her own words.[3]

Many people in corporate communication don't have a theater or film background. (If you're a corp comm pro *with* this experience, you have an edge on your peers!) That means the sacred space is often a foreign concept to anyone who isn't on the film crew, and it takes some explaining. Some leaders have an in-house comrade who makes it his or her job to preserve the sacred space. At American Express, Bob Florance holds the intriguing title of VP, Executive Electronic Communications. Bob is a CEO's dream at American Express and was at the other blue-chip companies he's worked with because it's his job to help executives get the right stuff on video and stop the wrong stuff from ever happening. A huge part of this job is guarding the sacred space. If you're lucky enough to have an experienced video person or director on staff, he or she can perform the dual function of making sure you're great on camera as well as ensuring that you're telling your story—and the company story—effectively.

Bob recalls one video shoot in his prior career as a director where he had to ask an influential corp comm executive to leave the room. The CEO being filmed was struggling to get his message right while the executive kept chiming in, saying, "It's no big deal, just say a few words and we'll be done with this." Bob had an intimate connection with the CEO and knew he didn't trust that particular colleague, which made it difficult enough to have the guy in the room. On top of that, the executive's impatient comments were zapping any hope of maintaining a supportive atmosphere on set.

Bob delicately asked the executive and a few other individuals to leave. They weren't happy about it because they felt their presence

was critical to the video. But Bob had no choice. The video would be a flop if he didn't reclaim the sacred space with this CEO.

Once everyone was gone, Bob had a one-on-one talk with the leader to rebuild their trust and connection. They resumed filming with only the director and crew in the room. With nobody pressuring him to "get on with it," the CEO was able to deliver a heartfelt message in just a few takes.[4]

I've worked with Bob for years, at several companies, and it's amazing to witness his attention to detail when it comes to getting the job done right. He's extremely aware of what needs to happen and is not worried about throwing himself under the bus in the process. For Bob, it's all about building trust and integrity with the CEO he is there to support, and that trust is earned over time. Sometimes it involves asking an opinionated corp comm or PR person to leave the room during a shoot. Other times it means discreetly passing a tissue to a CEO so he can wipe his brow before going on camera.

It certainly helps to have someone like Bob on your side, whether they're part of your communications team or another trusted associate. But don't worry if you don't have such a dedicated copilot. A good director's first priority will be to establish a warm connection with you upon your first meeting.

Also take note if you're reading this as a member of your leader's support staff. It may not be your official job to foster the sacred space, but you can make yourself indispensible by stepping up to help bring warm vibes to a video shoot. This is because in business we often forget about the soft stuff. It's common for a leader's team to approach filming as if it's all about the words, not realizing their mind-set may inadvertently create a barrier that keeps the leader from being

vulnerable or real. The sacred space is the only route to getting a true, human performance. Just knowing that the sacred space exists, and that it's vitally important, will help you do your part in kindling that connection. The director will thank you, and you may quickly become one of the most important people on your team for every video shoot.

I want to emphasize that the sacred space isn't fluff or theory. The insights in this chapter come from professionals who have worked with clients from the king and queen of Denmark to top executives at American Express, Coca-Cola, Pfizer, Raytheon, AT&T, and many others. The advice here is practical and proven, and if embraced, can transform your video appearances.

The Sacred Space—Key Ideas

- Deep, honest communication can only come through in an atmosphere of trust and respect.
- You can't be expected to deliver an honest performance without developing a rapport with your director.
- Movie bloopers are a great window into understanding the atmosphere that needs to be present on a film set. Performers have to stay loose and in the moment, and be willing to laugh at their mistakes.
- A good director's first priority will be to establish a warm connection with you upon your first meeting.

Vern Oakley, CEO & Founder
Tribe 310 Main Street Chatham, NJ 07928
973.635.2660 I vern@tribepictures.com I www.tribepictures.com