Colorful Management

When I graduated from college and first began working as a research engineer, I had an opportunity to present a technical paper at a professional conference in New York City. I was very nervous about speaking in public, and did not appreciate the fact that I was required to give a dry run of the briefing to upper management. Nevertheless, I steeled my nerve and did the best I could to make my presentation to a few colleagues and management personnel.

I expected some genuine technical feedback after my talk, and so I waited with great anticipation for words of wisdom from the audience. Our Deputy Director told me, after listening to the details of my work, that the presentation needed color. He totally ignored the technical content, and was worried only about the appearance of the slides. I was somewhat flabbergasted.

This was back in the day of plastic transparencies, made by a thermal process that would produce only black and white images. There was no time for our graphics department to make color slides before the actual conference, so to respond to the manager's wish we put a piece of transparent blue plastic on the viewgraph machine so that each image had a blue tint. I felt ridiculous doing this before my would-be professional peers.

My boss was fooled by the illusion of added value of color, even if there was no actual meaning associated with it. This reminds me of the joy that friends experienced once when they visited us and watched color television for the first time. This was in the early days of such devices and we had one of the first ones in town because my dad was an electronic "geek" (though it wasn't known by that name at the time). My friends became excited when they saw a greenish tint on the television screen – they thought this was what color television was all about. The truth is, in those days there were very few actual color programs, so what our friends were actually seeing was a black and white show that was incorrectly color-balanced. We had to explain to them that when they saw a show that was actually transmitted in color, like in real life, they would be truly in awe!

The use of color can add a great deal of information, as in charts and graphs, to a presentation. Its use (or misuse) for political or purely personal reasons is misleading. We tend to add things in our communication that are for show but which do not improve our meaning. We perhaps need to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth – let our yes be yes and our no be no[1] without putting whitewash[2] it as a disguise.

1. Matthew 5:37
2. Matthew 23:27