“Australia, and of course, all countries in the G20, political, economic and social goals for their participation, in not just the summit, but the regular meetings that take place throughout the year. It was our team’s job to develop strategies that gave Australia the best chances of realising these outcomes. I was responsible for briefing the Australian delegation” Sara explains.

She was regularly called upon to respond to questions in high-level, large group meetings – and it wasn’t something she relished. “While I knew exactly what I needed to say I’d get really nervous and, as a result, would talk both quietly and fast often in a slightly convoluted way. I’d get the message across eventually, but certainly not in the best way possible. I wanted to improve my ability to better control my nerves so I could focus on clearly articulating my message.”

Despite not having the utmost confidence in her presentation skills, Sara had never backed away from an opportunity, even organising, hosting and speaking at two large charity fundraisers for the ACT Cancer Council in 2008 and 2010. “I decided to organise the fundraiser so I had no one else to blame but as it got closer and it dawned on me that I’d have to speak to an audience of over a hundred people I got really nervous, feeling physically ill and wondering if I could get out of it (which of course I couldn’t). I finally came around to the
realisation that some professional development might help."

With a myriad of presentation skills programs available, Sara was looking for something that stood out from the crowd. "Many of the courses try to change who you are when you're presenting, such as adopting a different persona. The name of the AGSM program really spoke to me because it was about being authentic and that's what I wanted."

AGSM’s Authentic Communicator: Activating Presence is a two day presentation and communication program that utilises innovative techniques from the acting and performance spheres, to develop participants’ individual communication styles and unique leadership presence.

Sara had taken drama classes in the past, so was familiar with how techniques from this space could make a difference to confidence and style. "The program team’s experience and background in performance really appealed. I was really looking forward to having these skills translated into a corporate environment."

Going into the program, to say Sara was nervous was an understatement. "I was terrified. If you are not a public speaker, the thought of this kind of program is nerve-racking." But Sara quickly found her niche. "By keeping the groups small and with everyone in the same boat, you bond really quickly and it was such a supportive environment from the outset."

Participants work throughout the program with both peers and the program team to complete experiential activities and receive feedback and coaching. "The program presenters were so supportive and the coaching feedback was really constructive."

One of the biggest issues Sara had with her presentation style was the speed of her speech. "I am a fast-talker and the speed naturally increases when I am nervous. This can be hard for others to understand in everyday settings, but I was regularly communicating with international delegations - when English is a second language, the impact is multiplied."

The program team coached Sara and gave her practical techniques to moderate her pace and tone to improve her impact. "The key things the team worked on were slowing my pace and projecting my voice. These things impact not only the quality of your communication, but also the way others perceive you."
Sara also found the preparation techniques taught both unique and useful. “We took turns leaving the room and when we returned we had to get everyone’s attention and speak immediately. Peter Fisher (Program Director) walked us through some of the physical ways we could prepare, such as doing a fist pump in the air. I guess it sounds silly, but it really does help to elevate your confidence.”

“We also learnt about building presence. It seems as though those with real presence have it naturally, so I was surprised that there are many small techniques you can apply to increase your presence.”

Back at work, Sara found the program had immediate effects on her interaction, both large and small.

“The program was such a great experience, invaluable really! I learnt so much about myself. It taught me that I could find and control my level of confidence before any interaction; be it an interview, a large audience presentation or a briefing to someone senior. If you go into a presentation or meeting feeling calm, you’ll present so much more clearly and with more authority.”

As for the fast speech, Sara says “I’m still a fast talker. But now, I more conscious of when my voice is accelerating or my tone is changing during presentations and am able to use what I learnt on the program to regulate it before it impacts on my ability to get the message across. There is no doubt that my presentation skills are significantly better than before the program and I don’t feel sick in the lead-up. It’s not just large group presentations either, the quality of my communications in conversations and meetings is also better.”

So did Sara fist-pump prior to G20 meetings? “Before a really big, key presentation to really senior people, you know what, I did…. and it worked” she laughs.