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### ***Briefing Notes:***

## **Options for Reengaging Participants when Using PowerPoint**

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PowerPoint has become a pervasive form of organizational communication in both internal and external presentations. PowerPoint has many strengths for summarizing an idea or argument. CFAR, in some early research for 3M (Oppenheim, 1991) on the use of presentations in making a strategy argument, found that there was a 60/40 to 40/60 switch in a board's substantive decision based on the presentation mode, as early on people conflated the clear form of the argument with better substantive justification.

Cialdini conducted an experiment in which he displayed the same information in three different formats. He found that PowerPoint increased the rating of a candidate by one and a half to two points on a seven-point scale. Cialdini concludes, "PowerPoint seems to be a way for organizations to turn expensive, expert decision-makers into novice decision-makers" (Parker, 2001). As PowerPoint has made this tool available to everyone, Clifford Nass states that it has both "lifted the floor" but "lowered the ceiling" (Parker, 2001).

But like any tool, PowerPoint can be abused. Its "bullet" mode of organizing thoughts interrupts more potent, narrative ways of thinking that have more texture and motivation built into them (Shaw, Brown and Bromiley, 1998).

Most importantly, given the use of PowerPoint for persuasive speech, it creates a particular dependency dynamic between the speaker and the audience. Edward Tufte writes, "PowerPoint's pushy style seeks to set up a speakers' dominance over the audience. The speaker, after all, is making PowerPoints with bullets to followers" (Tufte, 2003).

The PowerPoint format, particularly when the presenter follows widely suggested rules for this tool—such as not too much text on a slide, not giving the slides out in advance (because people will read ahead and not concentrate on your points), etc.—can feel enormously controlling and linear. The human brain is capable of reading and comprehending the typical PowerPoint slide extremely quickly once it's flashed on the screen, and if it is available on paper, even faster—estimates range from 8-15 seconds per slide (Tufte, 2003).

Yet presenters will often do little more than summarize or restate what's on the slide, often adding a story or enriching it in some way. As a result both the intellectual assets and the emotional engagement of the group around the ideas are under-tapped. If there is a ground rule of asking questions during the presentation, the dynamic of the exchange is usually hub and spoke, with the presenter serially exchanging with different questioners, rather than a conversation “in the round” among the audience. This mode de-socializes thinking and inhibits the development of thinking as a group that is critical to reaching agreements that have high commitment. Cathy Belleville states:

“Instead of human contact, we are given human display. I think that we as a people have become unaccustomed to having real conversations with each other, where we actually give and take to arrive at a new answer. We present to each other, instead of discussing.” (Parker, 2001)

### **Alternative Strategies to Engaging Participants**

CFAR has developed several alternative modes to working with PowerPoint decks that result in more collaborative setting of the agenda for the time spent together between the presenter and the group, more conversation “in the round,” and higher internalization and ownership of the thinking by the group.

PowerPoint makes its contribution, as originally intended, in empowering the provider/presenter of simple content. The abuse has been in what gets done after the deck has been created and in the presentation. One key solution is to shift the dynamic from dyadic: presenter and audience, to triadic: presenter, colleagues, and the deck. In this latter configuration, the colleagues are empowered by the transparency of the argument embodied in the deck and are co-oriented with the presenter/author towards the shared aim of the conversation (a decision, an assessment, a competitive response, a launch plan, mutual learning, etc.). This mode reframes a deck from being a presentation to being a briefing, enabling a thicker text on each slide, which in turn increases the richness of engaging with it.

What follows are some options for using PowerPoint.

#### ***Option 1: Advance Distribution, Identify Issues, and Discuss***

Distribute the deck in advance with a thoughtful charging memorandum or cover email that states there will not be a full presentation, but rather the deck will be used to spark the group's focus on a few of the vital issues. People are asked to read over the deck, pen in hand, “talking back” to the slides, noting questions, comments, or associated ideas stimulated by the slides.

It is not a good idea to distribute it too many days in advance for two reasons. First, one does not want a lot of informal conversations, which most likely happen among existing cliques that can politicize the thinking by coming with advance points of view. Second, when a deck contains some painful data that can provoke

denial and anger, it is best to have people in a collective sense-making setting before they have too much time to brood and react individually. Harry Levinson (1972) used a format of reviewing a diagnostic report with a client the evening before, with no discussion and then taking it up the next morning when people are ready to interact on the findings.

When participants receive the deck prior to the meeting, it is often useful to frame the key objectives of the meeting and ask people to take three to five minutes to review their notes on the deck (or skim it if they have not yet read it). Then the leader or a facilitator can invite people to identify the three to five most important issues that they want to take up. This can either be via the nominal group technique (Delbecq, Van de Ven, and Gustafson, 1986) in which each person contributes one new item, going round robin until all the items are listed, or via a quicker method whereby each person writes their ideas on separate Post-it notes and puts them up on the wall, quickly clustering related items. In either process, within 15-20 minutes the group has identified the issues they feel are most relevant.

If it's a large group (e.g. more than 15 people) inviting participants to huddle with three or four people sitting near them to share reactions and their sense of the key issues gets everyone actively engaged. By inviting one mini team to offer up an idea and then quickly (by a show of hands) polling how many other groups acknowledged that issue or a related point rapidly identifies the center of gravity in the group's concerns.

Two options are possible after the participants have surfaced the issues. If there is considerable complexity around the issues, the presenter can present, but now in a way that delves deeply into the areas of greatest interest, taking as accepted those portions of the deck that did not get many mentions. This is a significant difference in the dynamic. Rather than the speaker *pushing* the content into the group, the group is *pulling* the presenter's attention to the issues they have identified as significant. It makes for a far more interactive dynamic.

Alternatively, the group can now switch from the deck as the organizing logic to their own list of the issues, taking each up in turn with more symmetric engagement by the presenter and the participants.

### ***Option 2: Skim in Real Time, Identify Issues, and Discuss***

If the deck has not been distributed in advance, you can have the participants skim it at the beginning of the meeting. With a few framing statements and setting the aims clearly, participants can be invited to review the deck on their own with pen in hand. The instructions, as above, are to "talk back" to the deck, noting issues for clarification, moments of resonance, and alternative points of view. CFAR has found that people can effectively skim a deck of 30-50 slides in 10 minutes.

Adults being quiet together, all oriented to the same text, is a powerful experience. Given that many of the individuals have rushed into the meeting with many other things on their minds, this transition, like a “green room” before an actor goes on stage, helps each person collect their thoughts before the interactive part of the meeting begins along the lines described above.

Contrast these alternatives with the high control of the presenter in a typical presentation—setting the pace, sequencing the points, etc. This amplifies the dependency dynamic, amplifying the presenter’s knowledge advantage from having created the deck in the first place. Often the presenter becomes more animated as the group becomes more passive an audience. This dynamic is a big reason why there is a lull at the end of presentations when the speaker opens it up for questions or comments—there is a disconnect that the audience experiences from having been lectured at for a period of time. The audience begins to “leave the driving” to the presenter, and as is often the case as a passenger on a journey, one is less vigilant, more passive and less likely to remember the route than if you actively shared some of the responsibility.

### ***Option 3: Enact a Team Conversation***

If it's a small, intact organizational team working with a presentation from a consultant or from an ad hoc group charged with working up a key issue, the group can jump right into a conversation about the deck. This can be preceded by reading it in advance or via a quiet period of study in the meeting itself.

Then, the presenter or facilitator invites the group to converse among themselves for 10 or 15 minutes with the ground rule that the presenter is not going to interrupt or clarify, etc., but just listen. The charge to the group would be along the lines of “what are the most critical issues raised by this work?” The presenter has an opportunity to eavesdrop on the impact that this set of ideas and arguments have had on a group without bullying, spinning, interrupting or reacting. It's a little like Ulysses lashed to the mast, listening to the Sirens, as his crew with wax-filled ears rowed past.

By only being able to listen for a period of time, we listen deeply, before reacting or responding until participants have voiced their perspectives. Interactive conversation powerfully reveals preoccupations, their concerns, the sets of issues that they think are most important, and their blind spots. Furthermore, the process dynamics can be as revealing as the substance. In a sense, this turns what can be excessively one-way presentations with too little time at the end for reactions into a focus group in which one is progressively learning together and understanding the impact of ideas on people and groups. (For a fuller description and case study of the use of this method see CFAR, 2000.)

## In Conclusion

Parker suggests that PowerPoint's origins were linked to the increased need for efficient cross-functional dialog to be more customer-driven: "Employees had to find ways to talk to colleagues from other departments, colleagues who spoke a different language" (Parker, 2001). What began as enabling has in its misuse become constraining. The technology has dominated and the challenge is to reintroduce process dynamics to the exchange of ideas. This is particularly true in conferences or extended board meetings where different presenters each are making their own PowerPoint presentations, and no one is thinking of the participants' experience across the set of sessions.

Clearly, there are some situations in which a PowerPoint presentation is effective and can make the argument in the most effective way, but there are many fewer than presenters believe. The challenge is not to demonize a powerful tool, but rather to marry it with our knowledge about people: their hopes and fears, their passions, their love of engagement. As E. M. Forster wrote: "Only connect."

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