



By James E. Leemann, Ph.D.

## Death by bullet points

Bullets don't kill people, but bullet points can

All of us have been subjected to “death by PowerPoint” presentations in office meetings, conferences, symposia, lectures, etc. You know the routine, the death march begins with slides covered in bullets and 10-point font text. The coup de grâce comes when the speaker reads everything on each slide.

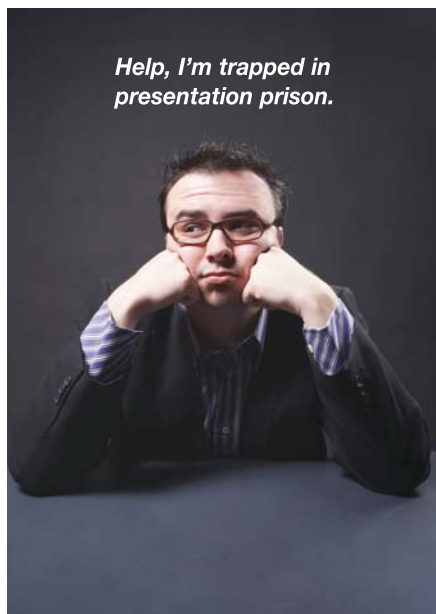
For decades, the bulleted PowerPoint slidedeck has been the principal means of communication between individuals and groups of people in all sorts of organizational settings. Obviously, certain situations warrant more intimate visuals, such as flipcharts, a whiteboard, a blackboard, or simply talking from a handout. All of us have had to endure a bullet-laden PP slide presentation.

According to Alexei Kapterev, a “conservative” estimate puts worldwide PowerPoint users at 300 million with 30 million giving presentations each day and at least 50 percent of these are unbearable.<sup>1</sup> As Kathy Sierra writes in her blog, *Creating Passionate Users*, “it is universally assumed that where there is a talk, there is PowerPoint. Saying you don't have slides is like saying you'll give your talk naked.”<sup>2</sup>

### Abuse of power

Many label PowerPoint as the worst means of communicating ever invented by man. Actually, PowerPoint is a tool, which has been and is being used to abuse the power of effective communication.

As Edward Tufte has written, “PowerPoint is a competent slide manager and projector. But rather than supplementing a presentation, it has



become a substitute for it. Such misuse ignores the most important rule of speaking: Respect your audience.”<sup>3</sup>

Recall, it was Tufte that reviewed the 28-PowerPoint slidedeck dealing with the debris impact of the foam insulation on the final tragic voyage of the space shuttle *Columbia*. On one slide entitled “Review of Test Data Indicates Conservatism for Tile Penetration,” Tufte describes the slide as “a PowerPoint festival of bureaucratic hyper-rationalism, 6 different levels of hierarchy are used to display, classify, and arrange 11 phrases.”<sup>4</sup>

Have you ever wondered why you think your brain is going to explode as you sit through a grueling PowerPoint presentation? Neurological research has recently shown that there is actually a “dual-channel” correlation as to how people process visual and audio information.<sup>5</sup> In other words, your brain processes and retains more information if it is delivered in verbal or written form, but not if both mechanisms are at

play at the same time.<sup>6</sup> A speaker, for example, reading all of his slides leads to cognitive overload.

### Operator error

In all fairness, PowerPoint is not the problem; operator error is what contributes to the dysfunctional communication in organizations. Environmental, health and safety (EHS) professionals have been complaining for decades that their message is not being received by those in decision-making positions, yet EHS pros continue, I might say obsessively, to use bullet points to make their power points.

It is time to hit the pause button folks and rethink our approach to communicating with PowerPoint. Late last year, my friend and colleague, Dirk Berard, Honeywell Aerospace HSE director, and I met for lunch and he introduced me to a completely new way of delivering PowerPoint presentations. I must admit, I had abandoned using PowerPoint in 2002 in favor of using MindManager to make presentations, so I was bit skeptical listening to Dirk at first.

Dirk walked me through his PP slidedeck that he was going to present at this year's Auditing Roundtable Winter Meeting. Dirk's slides were the result of effectively applying an entirely new technique of creating slides with no bullet points. His slides amplified the story he was telling me instead of being the story. His slides were comprised of stock photo images with few, if any, words. I anxiously waited for Dirk to finish his story and asked him, “Where in the world did you come up with this technique?”

Dirk introduced me to two books

by Garr Reynolds that have changed my entire perception of the “power” of PowerPoint presentations. The first book is entitled *Presentation Zen*<sup>7</sup> and the second is *Presentation Zen DESIGN*.<sup>8</sup> I strongly recommend buying, reading, and using Garr Reynolds’ technique for all of your presentations.

Garr draws upon Dan Pink’s “six senses” or the six “right-brain directed aptitudes” of *Design, Story, Symphony, Empathy, Play and Meaning* to set the stage for his approach.<sup>9</sup> Design of your slides begins in the preparation phase before turning on your computer. Next is the *Story* you plan to tell your audience. This is followed by *Symphony*, which means your ability to bring together seemingly unrelated information, discarding what is not related, and making it sensible to your audience. Learn to express *Empathy* toward your audience by putting yourself in their shoes – is my audience “getting it?” Inject *Play* into your presentation through “good, old fashion humor that leads to laughter.” Finally, when asked to present, make sure your message has

*Meaning* that can lead to making a difference for yourself and your audience.<sup>10</sup>

So, next time you have an opportunity to make a presentation, take a chance and consider using Garr Reynolds’ approach. Remember, in our profession, effective communication is paramount to our success in achieving our objectives and presentation Zen is the means to changing the conversation.

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1 Kapterev, A. “Death by PowerPoint (and how to fight it)” at <http://www.slideshare.net/thecroaker/death-by-powerpoint>

2 Sierra, K. 2005. “Stop your presentation before it kills again” at Creating Passionate Users at [http://headrush.typepad.com/creating\\_passionate\\_users/2005/06/kill\\_your\\_](http://headrush.typepad.com/creating_passionate_users/2005/06/kill_your_)

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3 Tufte, E.R. “PowerPoint is Evil.” *Wired* 11.09, September 2003. Found at <http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/11.09/ppt2.html>

4 Tufte, E.R. 2006. *The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint: Pitching Out Corrupts Within*. 2nd Ed. Graphics Press LLC. Cheshire, CT.

5 Mayer, R.E. 2009. *Multi-media Learning*. 2nd ed. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge, U.K.

6 Patty, A. April 4, 2007. “Research points the finger at PowerPoint.” The Sydney Morning Herald at <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2007/04/03/1175366240499.html>

7 Reynolds, G. 2008. *Presentation Zen – Simple Ideas on Presentation Design and Delivery*. New Riders. Berkley, CA.

8 Reynolds, G. 2010. *Presentation Zen DESIGN – Simple Design Principles and Techniques to Enhance Your Presentation*. New Riders. Berkley, CA.

9 Pink, D.H. 2006. *A Whole New Mind – Why Right-Brainers Will Rule the Future*. Riverhead Books. New York, NY.

10 Reynolds, 2008, pp. 14-19.



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