

HOW EDWARD TUFTE'S METHOD BLEW UP POWERPOINT AT AMAZON AND "IMPROVED QUANTITY/QUALITY OF EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION BY AN ORDER OF MAGNITUDE OVER POWERPOINT"

Colin Bryar and Bill Carr, *Working Backwards: Insights, Stories, and Secrets from Inside Amazon*, 2021, 79-97, edited.

"If you were to ask recently hired Amazon employees about what has surprised them most at the company, one response would top the list: 'The eerie silence in the first 20 minutes of many meetings.' After a brief exchange of greetings and chitchat, everyone sits at the table, and the room goes completely silent. Why? A six-page document that everyone reads before discussion begins. Amazon relies far more on written words to develop and communicate ideas than most companies, and this difference makes for a huge competitive advantage.

The End of PowerPoint: Our Inspiration [Edward Tufte]

"One of my roles as Jeff's shadow in the early days was to manage the agenda of weekly meetings, which took place Tuesdays and typically ran for four hours. The meeting was expensive: preparation and attendance consumed at least half a day each week for the top leaders. Given the decisions made in the meeting, the stakes were high.

In those early days, this involved an oral presentation backed up by PowerPoint slides. Too often, the presentations did not serve a purpose. The format made it difficult to evaluate actual progress. The deep dives were frustrating, inefficient, error prone.

Jeff and I often discussed ways to improve the S-Team meetings. After a difficult presentation in early 2004, on a business flight we read and discussed an essay "*The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint: Pitching Out Corrupts Within*" by Edward Tufte, a Yale professor who is an authority on information visualization. Tufte identified in one sentence our problem:

"As analysis becomes more causal, multivariate, comparative, evidence based, and resolution-intense, the more damaging the bullet list becomes."

"Tufte's description fit our discussions at the meetings: complex, interconnected, requiring plenty of information to explore. Such analysis is not well served by a progression of slides that makes it difficult to refer one idea to another. The Amazon audience of tightly scheduled, experienced executives was eager to get to the heart of the matter. They would pepper the presenter with questions and push to get to conclusions. Sometimes the questions did not serve to clarify a point or move the presentation along but would instead lead the entire group away from the main argument. Some questions might be premature and would be answered in a later slide. In his essay, Tufte proposed a solution:

"For serious presentations, replace PowerPoint slides with paper handouts showing words, numbers, data graphics, images together. High-resolution handouts allow viewers to contextualize, compare, narrate, and recast evidence. In contrast, data-thin, forgetful displays tend to make audiences stupid and passive, and also to diminish the credibility of the presenter."

"Tufte's wise advice on how to banish PowerPoint:

"Making this transition in large organizations requires a straightforward executive order: 'From now on your presentation software is Microsoft Word, not PowerPoint. Get used to it.'"

"That is essentially what we did. On June 9, 2004, the members of the S-Team received an email with this subject line: 'No PowerPoint presentations from now on at S-Team.' This message was simple, direct, earthshaking: from that day on team members were required to write short narratives [sentences, not bullet lists] describing their ideas, and PowerPoint was banned.

A narrative document anticipates objections, concerns, alternative points of view, questions, common misunderstandings. Edward Tufte bluntly sums up the benefits of narratives over PowerPoint:"

"PowerPoint becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of PowerPoint makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts."

WHAT HAPPENS FOLLOWING THE SILENT READING OF A DOCUMENT? HERE IS A DEEP ANALYSIS BY COLIN BRYAR AND BILL CARR

The Key Goal is to Seek the Truth. Ideas, Not Presenters, Matter Most

"During the discussion, notes are taken by someone knowledgeable about the subject who is not the primary presenter. The entire team contributes to crafting, reviewing, revising the narrative. The key goal is to seek the truth. Decisions draw from ideas, not individual performance skills. The time spent upon crafting gorgeous, graphically elegant slide presentations can now be used for more important things. *What matters is found on the page.* Anyone can edit or make comments, easily shared in the cloud. The document serves as its own record, the document increases the quantity and quality of effective communication – by an order of magnitude over traditional methods."

"This model imposes duties and expectations upon the audience. They must evaluate the idea, not the team or the pitch. The work product of the meeting is a joint effort of the presenters and their audience. Silence during the discussion is the equivalent of agreement with what is presented, but it carries the same weight as a full-blown critique. Presenters and audiences become linked to the subsequent success or failure of the initiative and business analysis."

"When looking at Amazon's big wins, every major success has gone through multiple narrative reviews, with contributions from the presenters and their audience."

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