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Peter Bregman speaks, writes, and consults on leadership. He is the CEO of [Bregman Partners, Inc.](#), a global management consulting firm, and the author of *Point B: A Short Guide To Leading a Big Change*. [Sign up](#) to receive

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The #1 Killer of Meetings (And What You Can Do About It)

10:41 AM Thursday April 14, 2011 | [Comments \(32\)](#)

"That was dreadful. Not only was I bored, everyone else was bored too. Disengaged. I'm terrible at facilitating these kinds of meetings. But they're so important. I've got to get better at it. I need to find a better way."

I wrote that in a journal entry about seven years ago. I still remember the meeting that finally drove me to change how I run meetings. There were about 10 people involved — the CEO and his direct reports — and we met for two days offsite, in a hotel, so we wouldn't be distracted. The goal was to discuss and agree on our plans for the next year. A strategy offsite.


I had prepared meticulously. I met one on one with each person on the team and collected their thoughts about the strategy of the company and what might get in the way of its successful execution. Using their input, I designed the flow of the two days and asked each person to prepare a PowerPoint presentation of the strategy for their area.

The result? When each person stood up to present his strategy, everyone else did one of two things: tune out or poke holes.

Most presentations elicit those reactions because most presentations are polished and thorough and designed to *satisfy* their audience, as well as to build confidence that the speaker knows what he's talking about. People tune out because nothing is required of them. Or they poke holes because, if they don't tune out, it's the most interesting thing to do when someone is trying to prove there are no holes.

So over the following seven years, I experimented with designing offsites. I did team-building activities, I stayed at the front of the room throughout the meeting, I took myself out of the meeting completely, I taught skills critical to the meeting like communication and team dynamics, I had the

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CEO run the meeting, I took the CEO out of the meeting completely, and dozens of other tweaks.

Over time, I identified a single factor that makes the biggest difference between a great meeting and a poor one: PowerPoint. The best meetings don't go near it.

PowerPoint presentations inevitably end up as monologues. They focus on answers, and everyone faces the screen. But meetings should be conversations. They should focus on questions, not answers, and people should face each other. I know it sounds crazy, but I've found that even the hum of the projector discourages dialogue.

Meetings are exorbitantly expensive when you add up the number of highly paid people in the room at the same time. They should be used as a time to engage deeply in issues, not to update each other on progress.

Try this. Instead of having executives prepare clear, well-thought-out (and boring) PowerPoint presentations about their *own* businesses, try having them lead informal discussions about their *colleagues'* businesses, using flip charts to collect important points, draw conclusions, and agree on action plans with owners and timelines.

Before the meeting, assign each executive an issue to explore that is outside his or her silo. A problem related to manufacturing might be assigned to the head of sales. A problem in marketing might be assigned to the head of operations. The executive's task is to investigate the issue and prepare some ideas and solutions for discussion.

This breaks people out of their silos (a challenge I wrote about in [Solving Your Organization's Open-Faced Sandwich](#)), conveys their collective ownership of the company, and keeps people from getting too prideful or too defensive about their particular business. In other words, it keeps the meeting real.

Save at least an hour or two at the end of the meeting to develop communication plans to disseminate the decisions. I'm always a little surprised at how many inconsistencies and disagreements are surfaced only when it comes time to commit to precisely what is going to be communicated.

There is, of course, a lot more that goes into a successful meeting. But following the "no PowerPoint rule" has the greatest impact because it keeps the energy where it should be: solving problems together.

I always get a little nervous when I run an offsite because, if it's run well, it's unpredictable. Ideas, insights, and solutions arise that never would have come up without the collaboration of the people in the room. Arguments can break out at any time. But what makes offsites unpredictable is also what makes them exciting and valuable.

Last week I spent two days running a strategy offsite with the CEO and leadership team of a large technology company that is experiencing the good-but-very-real problems that accompany rapid growth. Each executive led a conversation about an issue in a colleague's business. Each conversation ended with an agreed-upon action plan with owners and timelines. All this was accomplished without the background hum of a projector.

At the end of the meeting, after a two-hour conversation about communicating our decisions to the rest of the organization, the CFO — a true cynic when it comes to spending (wasting?) time in meetings — turned to me and said "that was a really useful way to spend a couple of days."

Coming from him? That's journal-worthy.

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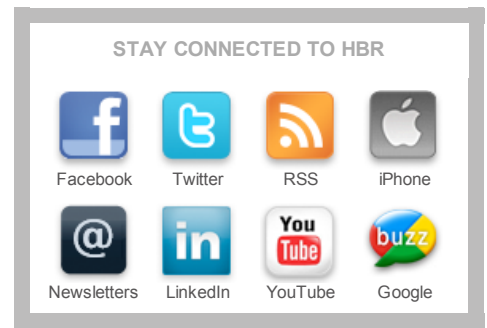
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 **Marc Vandenstein** 5 days ago

Great speakers have the Power to make their Point without using a single PP

10 people liked this. [Like](#) [Reply](#)

 **Samsaussie** 4 days ago in reply to Marc Vandenstein

Agreed, however.


An electronic aid for conveying a message is very useful. MS/PP or MAC/KN (or maybe others) are very broad tools made to assist conveying the message.

If your message is spiritual, you need the audience focus on you 100% and any electronic aid will just be interference, however, conveying a scientific message, where the basics are comparing or basing your argument on a reference, it is critical to have "evidence" presented.

Indeed, the presenter should decide how to plan the audience focus and zoom through the ears or eyes.


Maybe the next generation of presentation would be to incorporate other senses, like vibration of the floor when discussing earthquakes, or scents when presenting a new perfume

[Like](#) [Reply](#)

 **Wade Laycook** 5 days ago


I agree that Power Points can be absurdly mundane, but I wouldn't entirely nix the potential of presentations. The problem is not Power Point itself, but rather the way we have been taught to use the software: slide-after-slide of endless bullet points and uninspiring graphs. Effective presentations, on the other hand, should tell a story throughout. They use big words and pictures so that even a three-year old can understand the gist of the presenter. Look at Steve Jobs' or Guy Kawasaki's keynote presentations for example: big text, big pictures, fewer words, better message. This strategy yields more interesting presentations, whether in the boardroom, in the classroom, or at huge conferences.

 dalelane and 10 more liked this [Like](#) [Reply](#)

 **Jason B.** 1 day ago in reply to Wade Laycook

I agree, Wade. A PP pres should visually support what's happening in the meeting. I've just finished going through Dan Roam's book, The Back of the Napkin, and it has helped us lessen the role of PP, while making it more effective in the smaller role.

[Like](#) [Reply](#)

 **dalelane** 5 days ago

I think you're oversimplifying.



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A good, engaging, articulate speaker is a good, engaging, articulate speaker - whether they use PowerPoint or not.

A dry, dull bore can still be dry and dull if you take PowerPoint away from them.

Blaming the tool is a distraction from the real problem. Saying stuff like "PowerPoint presentations inevitably end up as monologues" is a poor excuse. If your approach to presenting is to make a tedious monologue, then you need to review your approach, not try and blame your choice of software.

4 people liked this. [Like](#) [Reply](#)



Bruce - PMToolsThatWork.com 1 day ago

The Account Director went up to the white board and showed the CEO and Chairman of the Board how we could develop the software fast enough to hit the deadlines he had agreed to with the customer. The CEO and CB agreed (the CIO "suppressed" our objections with a steely look - the AD was talking pure science fiction). It was a disaster. We didn't even come close. The medium size company deflated and was bought out by a competitor (who let go the executive staff and account director).

I hear it often, the other guy knows better how to manage our domain than we do. I've never seen it actually work that way (IT, software, security, etc.).

As to doing away with PP, I love it. The only issue is that often the PP slides are what the individual will commit to or where the assumptions are. Trying to capture everything on a blank slate (paper, slide, whiteboard, etc.) at the end doesn't seem to work as well as updating the original PP slides real time and saying "are we in agreement?"

I can believe that getting rid of PP could break a group out of their lethargy, especially in regular meetings and where some often hide behind the presentation (often put together by their staff).

1 person liked this. [Like](#) [Reply](#)



JJ Walsh 1 day ago

I disagree with the idea of executives presenting issues outside of their areas of responsibility. Don't see where that is going, especially in large corporations where execs are held accountable for their business units or staff functions. If someone from accounting got up in such a meeting to tell me how to run business development, the meeting wouldn't last very long. I always enjoy your posts, Peter, but this one is too far off base for me.

1 person liked this. [Like](#) [Reply](#)



Scott Bonnell 2 days ago

Ever notice how every PPT begins with an ebullient speaker stating that s/he wants to make the presentation interactive and then plows through 30 slides? And, yes, I am guilty of it as well.

1 person liked this. [Like](#) [Reply](#)



Jamey Stegmaier 5 days ago

Peter--Thanks for another great blog entry. I was eager to read this entry, as I really struggle with meetings at my nonprofit, but we actually have the opposite problem that you're describing. Our meetings are actually TOO engaging. We're all really passionate about what we do, so discussions can get pretty heated and go way longer than we originally planned. I'm sure there's a way all that passion and energy can be channeled so it doesn't get out of hand, but I have no idea what it is!

Perhaps I need to incorporate PowerPoint into our meetings to calm things down. :)

3 people liked this. [Like](#) [Reply](#)



Karen_Tiede 4 days ago in reply to Jamey Stegmaier


Read Death by Meeting--an easy-read fable-book about how to change the way meetings run. One take away--have different types of meetings for different types of content.

1 person liked this. [Like](#) [Reply](#)



Mark Jenkins 5 days ago

Sounds like the word meeting is being used to mean a range of scenarios where people get together. While I agree PowerPoint is a distraction in meetings where the participants are there to interact with each other to achieve a common goal, the same could not be said of a meeting where the participants are there to receive information and interact primarily with the presenter (think a conference session). I agree with Wade, how presentation tools are used is often the problem and not the tool itself.

 dalelane and 1 more liked this [Like](#) [Reply](#)



Rick Ross 5 days ago

Assigning each executive to explore an issue outside his or her silo before the meeting - great idea! Thanks!

2 people liked this. [Like](#) [Reply](#)



Norm Patry 4 days ago

Peter, thank you for the post. Your acquired lesson that cross-fertilizing business unit leaders can be produce engagement and provide enlightened insights from all is very revealing. I agree to some extent with dalelane that we can't place all the blame on the sw. I am reminded of how Tom Peters jazzes up his PP presentations as a stepping stone for discussion of key points he wants to make. My own observations also tell me that, in these days of ubiquitous electronic connectivity and professionals who attend meetings only in body while seamlessly "working" via their open laptop or other business appliance, there is a critical need for some adult supervision to set some respectful groundrules for any meeting: provide clear objectives, defined timeline, and expect everyone's full attention...without any electronic distractions.


1 person liked this. [Like](#) [Reply](#)



OldGuy 4 days ago

If you are using PowerPoint to give a status update and intend to do a monologue I suggest giving an "ignite" talk. Twenty slides advancing automatically every fifteen seconds to give a five minute talk. People will pay attention just to see if you can do it without making a mistake.

But like many of the comments above, I believe the software is neither the problem nor the solution.

 Karen_Tiede liked this [Like](#) [Reply](#)



Paul Nicholas 5 days ago

Fascinating conversation. I too have been through and around most of this. I still use PowerPoint, but seldom as a presentation. Properly used it can be a superb stimulus to conversation and creative thinking. I use the slides - frequently just images, certainly with a minimum of words and information - to stimulate feelings and emotion that then becomes backdrop to the emergence of ideas through dialogue. And when using it this way I do not stand up and talk - we all sit around a table. Sometimes we may spend 5, 10 or even 15 seconds just staring at an image, allowing our thoughts to emerge before any of us speaks. This has proved extremely effective and made a profound difference to the way colleagues plan, run and engage with meetings. The sparseness and focus of the slides seems to induce a similar focus to our conversation - participants tending to use fewer words, listen more attentively and be more measured and reasoned in their articulation.

1 person liked this. [Like](#) [Reply](#)



Greg Denon 1 day ago

Powerpoint (or other presentation software) may kill a meeting. However, visuals can definitely aid the audience or learner. They require thoughtful design and development though. TED talks are a great example of slidedecks done right.

Want an alternative to PP? I am a fan of Prezi. The presentation moves around a whiteboard, rather than slides.

[Like](#) [Reply](#)



Lisa 1 day ago

Hey! People sure have STRONG opinions about this!!

Meetings that waste our time are common and we all hate that. Maybe one issue is HAVING to go to meetings vs. feeling included more than what the technology being used.

Good luck with the new book! Cant wait to read it in September.

We are in Taiwan on a 2 week trip. Our blog which started 10 months ago is nearing 20,000 views.
www.wesaidgotravel.blogspot.co...

All of your articles have really encouraged me on this journey with travel, social media and making it happen. Thank you for all you have written!

Lisa

Like Reply



John Q. Corporate 1 day ago

Great article! Here is the PowerPoint back story.

The executives approached Bill Gates in 1983 and asked him to develop a tool that made the information they were presenting seem like a big deal and made them look highly prepared. Thusly, PowerPoint was born and for the first 4 years it was exclusively available only to management.

The big mistake that they made though was to employee techie underlings and pay them peanuts to create the slide decks. By doing so, the technology leaked into the mainstream in 1987 and Microsoft capitalized by shredding the exclusive arrangement and offering it as part of the Office Suite. Soon everyone was taking completely boring information, creating annoying slides, reading the annoying slides word for word, and standing with their back to their audience.

Although the "no PowerPoint Rule" sounds nice, it would require more eye contact and actual discussions with you coworkers. Different, yes. Better, ?

Sincerely,

John Q. Corporate
CEO, employeehumor.com

Like Reply



Itamar Elbaum 2 days ago

Hi Peter

Thank you for the interesting post. Though I agree with you, that a PowerPoint presentation could kill a conversation and leave the ownership of the issue by the presenter, I believe that visual aids can help structure meetings and make a point. You can do it with a flip chart or with PowerPoint. The problem is not PowerPoint, it's what we do with it.

Wishing you happy holidays

Itamar

Like Reply



Pia 2 days ago

Update Haha, so sorry! I read about the TEDx talk in May and somehow confused that for the book publishing date. Sorry!
Looking forward to the talk and the book.

Like Reply



Pia 2 days ago

Hi Peter, thanks for the post. valuable as always.
I just pre-ordered your book ad it says estimated delivery in september. is that correct? (i am based in the uk, but ordered via us amazon).

thanks for your help,
Pia

Like Reply



Kameel Vohra 2 days ago

The idea of assigning executives issues outside of their silo is brilliant. I can see how that would add an incredible amount of perspective, respect and understanding of the work other team members do.

Like Reply



Romain L. 2 days ago

Thanks for the article Peter! really pleasant to read

what about the minutes of the meeting? since it seems way more productive to avoid PPT presentation during meetings, shouldn't the minutes or sum up of the meeting be issued to the attendees in a PPT format? it might be more straight to the point and clear for everyone. a word document can complete if needed. Any thoughts?

Like Reply



Sri Chandra Sekhar Kallakuri 2 days ago

Interesting one. I fully agree that in certain situations / forums PowerPoint or Key Note or any such presentation is counter productive. Not only that such presentations waste participants' time and energy levels, but also waste (usually) numerous person hours in preparing such presentations.

~ Sri Chandra Sekhar K
www.value-excellence.com

Like Reply



Loraine Antrim 3 days ago

Meetings are about communicating, and PowerPoint is probably one of the least effective forms of communication; most users make it ego-centered, not audience-centered. One of the best strategies for facilitating a meeting is to throw away the deck and take out a white board and engage with each and every member. Get a group discussion going and bring up relevant topics that are important to the team members. Bottom-line, good meetings are about having conversations, not monologues. Loraine Antrim, <http://twitter.com/loraineantr...>

Like Reply



Bruce Gabrielle 3 days ago

I agree with Mr. Bregman that executive offsites are intended as decision-making meetings, and not presentations.

However, the reader should not assume that PowerPoint is always the #1 killer of all meetings. Research shows people learn more from a meeting when the speaker uses PowerPoint than when they don't.

There are many presentation approaches: storytelling, whiteboards, flip charts. The secret is not to eliminate one, but knowing when each approach will be most effective. See my article below

<http://speakingppt.com/2011/04...>

Like Reply



Patti Bannon 4 days ago

I agree PPTs can negatively impact a meeting. Strategic discussions don't really need them. Unfortunately some technical meetings require the illustrations, boring at times but necessary as even the best orator sometimes can not create the vision or flow. Interesting!

Like Reply



Karen_Tiede 4 days ago

+1 to PP being a symptom, not the cause. Agreed, most people can't use PP to much good effect at all, and that MS/PP haven't done anything to help. But it's as much that people don't know how to tell useful stories as that they don't know how to use PP to help them tell useful stories.

I'd posit that the biggest reason for the recent meeting being more useful to all is that someone thought very hard about why previous iterations didn't work, and was willing to do something different.

Is this the Hawthorne effect at work?

Like Reply



Cordelia Ditton 5 days ago

Thanks for a great post.

I spend a lot of my time trying to wean people off PowerPoint, as a trainer and coach in presentation and public speaking skills. Having been an actor for many years, I've invariably found it a distraction, rather than an aid to my concentration on the speaker. I think your comment 'People tune out because nothing is required of them' is spot on.

A while ago I thought I'd try and find out what the inventors of PP think of how it is so often used. I found some comments from Bob Gaskins & Dennis Austin, who invented it in the 1980s, in a Wall Street Journal article, 20th June 2007.

"People often make very bad use of PowerPoint", was Bob Gaskin's comment. He said it was envisaged as a quick summary of something longer and better thought out. He cites as an example his original business plan for the program: 53 densely argued pages long. The dozen or so slides that accompanied it were but the highlights.

For me, communication is all about stories or narrative which engage the imagination of the audience. PP in meetings just bores people. I could count the presentations I've seen with effective use of PP, in any context, on the fingers of one hand. I wish more people would realise that their crutch is our intrusion. It gets in the way!

Like Reply



Seth 5 days ago

Death by PowerPoint?

I agree with much of the premise put forth in the article and have faced the exact same dilemma over the years both at start-ups, Fortune 2000 companies and as a consultant. We have become a PowerPoint first culture and I confess, I am no fan.

However, PowerPoint is simply a medium to deliver a message and like any medium, it comes with its own set of constrictions and limitations. While it would be great if I never see it at another meeting, to blame the medium is really missing the point. People make presentations and, it is the presenter's responsibility to engage the audience whatever limitations are attached to the delivery method. The bigger issue I feel is we (the greater we) are all inward focused in our little silos that we don't really care about other business counterpart's interest—we are just consumed with our own. Guilty as charged at times myself.

The bigger issue to ensure people don't get BlackBerry finger fatigue in meetings is knowing how weave a cohesive story, tell a story and ensure it connects the dots to others in attendance. While it is very easy to point the finger at PowerPoint being the culprit, it is really a case of disinterested attendees combined with a me first focus on content. Improve these, and even PowerPoint presentations can capture your attention.

Seth

Like Reply



Sartaj Anand 5 days ago

Great Article Peter but I should've guessed it from the title :)

You're absolutely right about PowerPoint and the impact it has on people, especially those at the CxO level, but I think that has more to do with how we're using it ! But the basic premise still stands good:

Presentations are passive and non-participatory 99.9% of the time. Meetings need to be active. Do not mix the two.

Like Reply



motiur_rahman 5 days ago

I agree with you about the Power Point issue. Though I am not a business student , I am pursuing a Computer Science major ; I find it hard to collaborate with my teacher during Power Point sessions . Unfortunately , though power point teaching is turning into a norm in class , the usage of it simply takes the student and teacher relationship into a unchartered domain , which both of us is very uncomfortable with. Even though the subject material may be interesting , use of a projector some time includes an awkward intrusive third party , which becomes a nuisance for effective communication .

Like Reply

Real-time updating is paused. (Resume)

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