If you want to shut up a consultant, just uninstall PowerPoint from his or her laptop! The same is true for most professionals—including executives, speakers, presenters, and sales and marketing people—for whom PowerPoint has become dam near life's necessity.

Recently, PowerPoint quietly celebrated its 20th birthday. Lee Gomes wrote about in The Wall Street Journal: "There won't be a lot of birthday celebrations for PowerPoint; the program is one the world loves to mock almost as much as it loves to use. While PowerPoint has served as the metronome for countless crisp presentations, it has also allowed an endless expanse of dimwit ideas to be dressed up with graphical respectability."

Love-Hate Relationship

Even those for whom PowerPoint has become the lifeblood, can recount an awful experience of having to sit through an interminable slide show of 108 slides—one boring slide after another—only to wonder what came over us to cancel the dentist appointment instead.

The love-hate relationship regarding PowerPoint is not new. The Power Pointers appear to be in two distinct camps: Those who say a bad presentation is the reflection of the uninitiated craftsman and those who believe that the tool itself is to blame for the bad craftsmanship.

Someone squarely in the second camp, and perhaps one of the harshest critics, is Edward R. Tufte. In his scathing critique titled "The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint: Pitching Out Corrupts Within," Tufte rails against PowerPoint by saying that "The evidence indicates that PowerPoint, compared to other common presentation tools, reduces the analytical quality of serious presentations of evidence." He lambastes PowerPoint for its "ready-made templates, which corrupt statistical reasoning, and often weaken verbal and spatial thinking."

Tufte is hardly alone. Peter Norvig asks us to "imagine a world with almost no pronouns or punctuation. A world where any complex thought must be broken into seven-word chunks, with colorful blobs between them." Then he reminds us that we don't have to imagine it. It is a present-day reality of a PowerPoint presentation. As a hilarious example of how Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg address would have appeared in PowerPoint format, visit Norvig's website.

Robert Gaskins, the co-creator of PowerPoint doesn't disagree. Apparently, PowerPoint presentation was never supposed to be the entire proposal—just a quick summary of something longer and better thought out.

Others argue that Tufte is simply criticizing the symptom. For example, Richard E. Meyer says, "We would not necessarily say that books are rarely a good method, because books can be designed using effective or ineffective methods. In my opinion, the same principle applies to PowerPoint."

Let's Just Talk!

Whichever side of the argument holds more credibility, one cannot argue that presenting to someone is inherently one-way communication, which is rarely a very effective method in several situations. Oftentimes, PowerPoint creates an obstacle to an honest, shirtsleeve conversation. While PowerPoint didn't invent one-way communication, it certainly perfected it.

Lou Gerstner's remarkable turnaround of IBM from near-collapse began with a briefing he asked for on the state of the mainframe business that accounted for more than 90 percent of the company's profits, which were sinking fast. Gerstner describes this critical meeting in his book...
"Who Says Elephants Can't Dance" as follows:

"At the time, the standard format of any important IBM meeting was a presentation using overhead projectors and graphics on transparencies that IBMers called—and no one remembers why—"foils." Nick was on his second foil when I stepped to the table and, as politely as I could in front of his team, switched off the projector. After a long moment of awkward silence, I simply said, "Let's just talk about your business." I mention this episode because it had an unintended, but terribly powerful ripple effect."

Scott McNealy, a self-styled "chairman, president, founder, chief cook and bottlewasher" of Sun Microsystems famously declared in 1997: "We had 12.9 gigabytes of PowerPoint slides on our network. And I thought, 'What a huge waste of corporate productivity.' So we banned it. And we've had three unbelievable record-breaking fiscal quarters since we banned PowerPoint. Now, I would argue that every company in the world, if it would just ban PowerPoint, would see their earnings skyrocket. Employees would stand around going, 'What do I do? Guess I've got to go to work.'"

Regardless of whether the ban was real or its contribution to record-breaking profits a hyperbole, there is something to be said for PowerPoint slide shows in the form of an infomercial getting in the way of having an honest discussion of complex issues and detracting from finding out the truth.

Dumb and Dumber

According to Pulitzer Prize winning columnist Julia Keller writing for the Chicago Tribune, "PowerPoint has a dark side. It squeezes ideas into a preconceived format, organizing and condensing not only your material but—inevitably, it seems—your way of thinking about and looking at that material. A complicated, nuanced issue invariably is reduced to headings and bullets. And if that doesn't stultify your thinking about the subject, it may have that effect on your audience—which is at the mercy of your presentation."

Whether people can have an honest discussion reflects equally on the organization's culture and leaders' desire to know the truth. If the culture supports not talking about the elephant in the room, there is nothing PowerPoint can do to help. I had an experience recently where the senior leaders were in no mood to understand the complexity of the project during a planning update. They indicated that they only cared about the short-term results—not about complications created by interrelated processes cutting across different stakeholders and resulting in sizable change management issues. The leader simply didn't want to hear any bad news. "We're on target!" is the mantra they wanted everyone to chant.

Many leaders exude a certain leadership style that results in them being told only what they want to hear. And the underlings develop an amazing sixth sense in figuring out which side of their bread is buttered. In these situations, truth goes out the window and window-dressing becomes the accepted norm. And PowerPoint, with its hierarchical bullet lists and clipped jargon to obfuscate the truth, oversimplifies complex relationships, conceals true accountability and becomes the easy tool of choice to facilitate the charade.

The Columbia Accident Investigation Board (CAIB) looking into the shuttle disaster had this to say about PowerPoint: "As information gets passed up an organization hierarchy, from people who do analysis to mid-level managers to high-level leadership, key explanations and supporting information are filtered out. In this context, it is easy to understand how a senior manager might read this PowerPoint slide and not realize that it addresses a life-threatening situation."

Compelling Communication

Whether we like it or not, PowerPoint has become ubiquitous in the business world. But that
doesn't mean that we have to check our common sense at the door. Here are some useful tips for creating compelling communication:

• **Ten Commandments:** Contrary to popular belief, using PowerPoint is not one of the ten commandments. Ask yourself if using PowerPoint is going to help or hurt. Is it going to dumb down the content too much? Recognize the inherent drawbacks of PowerPoint. By definition, "presenting" information is a one-way street. Is PowerPoint the right medium for your meeting? As Tufte says, "The core ideas of teaching—explanation, reasoning, finding things out, questioning, content, evidence, credible authority not patronizing authoritarianism—are contrary to the cognitive style of PowerPoint."

Remember, there is a grave danger in making things so simple that they become simplistic!

• **What's Your Story?** If you must use PowerPoint, think about your storyline. Headline at the top of each slide should be a complete sentence that conveys one main idea. Headlines shouldn't just introduce the topic, but should make a concrete statement to serve as the conclusion. Headlines read in sequence should tell the whole story of the presentation.

As Barbara Minto in her classic book The Minto Pyramid Principle has said, “This classic pattern of story-telling—Situation, Complication, Question, Answer—permits you to make sure that you and the reader are "standing in the same place" before you take him by the hand and lead him through your reasoning.” So provide a framework that will hold the listeners’ interest.

What is the current situation as you objectively see it? What are some of the barriers to resolving the issue? What is it that you are trying to achieve? What are the specific actions you recommend to remedy the situation or capitalize on the opportunity? What are the results you expect? Make sure to answer the who, what, how, when, and where. If you leave these things out, your slides will simply seem like advertising billboards.

• **Vertical Logic:** Avoid creating more than a couple of levels of hierarchy on a slide. It is difficult to relate to something buried five levels deep. As much as possible, write full sentences rather than writing shorthanded, fragmented, and clipped jargon. The content on the slide should provide solid support to the headline. The bullets should provide the "how" and "why" that justify the conclusion in a headline.

Listeners shouldn’t be left scratching their collective heads to figure out what your point is and why you arrived at it.

• **Graphic Violence:** If you use graphics, make sure that you can easily explain the graphic and that it conveys the key message on that page while displaying complex data and relationships. Avoid visual clutter and eliminate excess data. Make sure to include title, labels, legend, and source for your exhibits and avoid clip art or flashing Vegas lights!

• **Data Dump:** As tempting as it may be, don’t feel obliged to tell the audience everything you know about the topic. Be selective when showing the information. Don’t show irrelevant information, and at the same time, don’t hide relevant information even if it counters your argument. Be honest about what you don’t know yet. If appropriate, put supporting material in the appendix. Also, as a rule of thumb, allow five minutes of comments and discussion per slide. When delivering the presentation, don’t turn your back to the audience and read the slides. Worse yet, don’t wave the laser pointer at the slide to show them what you are reading!

**Means To An End**

Robert Gaskins, the co-creator of PowerPoint, has complained that "A lot of people in business have given up writing the documents. They just write the presentations, which are summaries
without the detail, without the backup. A lot of people don't like the intellectual rigor of actually doing the work.”

Remember, PowerPoint is simply a means to an end. It is only a visual aid. Don't hide behind it and don't let it overshadow the protagonist—the speaker. Feel free to turn off the projector if you want to ask a provocative question or generate a discussion of options, issues or implications.

As Mark Twain once said, “I never let schooling interfere with my education.” Similarly, don't let PowerPoint interfere with your communication. This will have the added benefit of having your audience awake and engaged!

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