

Step Up to the Podium

Guidelines for a Good Project Presentation

Wayne Turk

Let's face it—as a project manager, or even as a team member, you are going to have to give briefings or presentations at some time. It may be to your boss or your boss's boss, to future users of your product, or to your peers. It may be a milestone briefing. In fact, you could be speaking to an audience for any of a dozen reasons. There are some simple keys to a successful presentation.

We've all suffered through painful presentations. We've listened to the mumbler, the reader, the statue, the unprepared, and the boring. We've seen slides that you couldn't read, slides that didn't apply, slides with obvious errors, and slides that failed because they used too many tricks. You don't want people to suffer when you present, do you? So let's look at some ways to make a good presentation.

Before going any further, I want to point out that this article is limited to the kinds of presentation you might make as a PM, not presentations for a class, a large conference, or as a keynote speaker. Most of the guidelines are similar, but there are a few distinct differences. The focus here is on decision briefings, status briefings, and other project-related presentations.

Matthew Tropiano, in a previous *Defense AT&L* article ("Aristotle and the Art of Successful Presentations," May-June 2006), wrote about ethos, pathos, and logos, and how they affect your success as a briefer. Ethos is your personal credibility as the speaker. Pathos is your ability to connect with the audience. Logos is the substance of the presentation—the words, organization, and logic. This article will give you some help in raising the level of ethos, pathos, and logos for your briefings as well as some other suggestions. It augments Tropiano's article with some specific guidelines. Remember, though, that the guidelines here are just that—guidelines.



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Don Freedman taught a class at the Defense Systems Management College on how to give presentations. Much of what follows can be credited to him.

Analyze the Audience

The first step when you know you have to give a presentation is to analyze the audience—specifically the decision maker, if a decision is to come out of the presentation. How much background and knowledge about the project does the decision maker have? Does he have the final say or will he have to brief it up the chain? What are his pet rocks or pet peeves? What are his biases? Is he already on your side (and thus, you just have to give him the facts) or do you have to overcome his negative bias?

But don't forget the "strap hangers" who will be there along with the decision maker. They can kill your chances of success. Always note who else will attend the meeting. What are their relationships to the decision maker? What are their positions and level of influence? How will they be affected by what you are briefing/recommending? Who else will be affected and how?

Make sure you take all of this into account as you prepare. As Ethel M. Cook, an eminent speaker and past president of the New England Speakers Association said, in creating your presentation, think like a reporter and answer the "who, what, why, how, and where" questions. That is good advice for any presentation.

- **Who** will attend—and how many?
- **What** is the purpose of the presentation? Is it to explain a plan or project; report on what's been done; get support; define or solve a problem; gain consensus for a decision; get approval for an action; or something else?
- **Why** are they there? Assume that they will be asking themselves, "What's in it for me?" Be sure you answer that question for them.
- **How** will you present the information that is needed to support your purpose? Keep your points short, concise, and understandable to your audience. Use visuals to clarify and reinforce your message.
- **Where** is it going to take place? The room that the presentation is in will have an impact on how you present. Will you need to bring anything or is it already there?

Focus the Topic

For a project-related briefing, try to keep it to one topic, if possible. Focus on cost, schedule, or tech performance if it is a decision brief. Avoid presenting on topics requiring compound decisions—they make life too complicated. Sometimes, you won't be able to get around compound decisions, but try to minimize those. For a status briefing, you will have to cover much more than one topic.

Here are some things to think about or ask yourself before deciding what to brief. "If I were the audience, what would

I like or need to hear?" Tailor your presentation to give the essential information that the listeners need and limit it to that. If you have briefed this topic before, check what you said. If you are going to say something different, explain what has changed and why. This affects your credibility because some people have long memories. Don't try to tell them everything you know about the subject. Avoid side trips and excursions—keep it focused. Show them the "what's in it for me." And remember the primary syllable in briefing is *brief*.

To get the information across, use a logical sequence for the presentation. Make sure it fits the topic and you are comfortable with the sequence. Some of the most common sequences are:

- Building block
- Sequential or chronological
- Categorical
- Comparison
- Elimination.

You've heard it before, but it's worth saying again: Tell them what you are going to tell them; tell them; and tell them what you told them. Set the stage, give them the information, and sum it up. When you get to the end of your briefing, set forth your recommendation(s) or conclusion(s). You'll probably want to reiterate one or two of the major points or factors. Then you'll want to conclude with what actions need to be taken. A normal ending is "Are there any questions?"

Plan What to Say and Show

Here are some interesting facts: 83 percent of our information comes from seeing, 11 percent from hearing. After five days, we retain 5 percent of what we are told, 15 percent of what we see, but 70 percent of what we gather from combined audio and visual stimuli. Therefore, you want the important points to be seen *and* heard!

When creating a Microsoft® PowerPoint presentation, each slide should stand on its own. You should, for the most part, be able to randomly shuffle them and have the presentation still make sense. Keeping that in mind will help you to winnow out slides that are unnecessary. For every slide, ask yourself, "Why is this necessary?" Make sure each one adds to the briefing.

Some general rules for slides:

- **Clarity**—make the slides understandable
- **Simple concepts**—if they are complex, try to simplify them
- **Accuracy**—make sure that everything is correct (e.g., make sure that numbers add up and things are labeled properly)
- **Unity of concept**—focus the slide to a single topic
- **Smallest number**—use no more slides than are necessary

- **Pertinence**—ensure the slide relates to the point you want to get across
- **Format consistency**—use the same basic format throughout (some variety can help keep it interesting, but it also can detract from the main points).

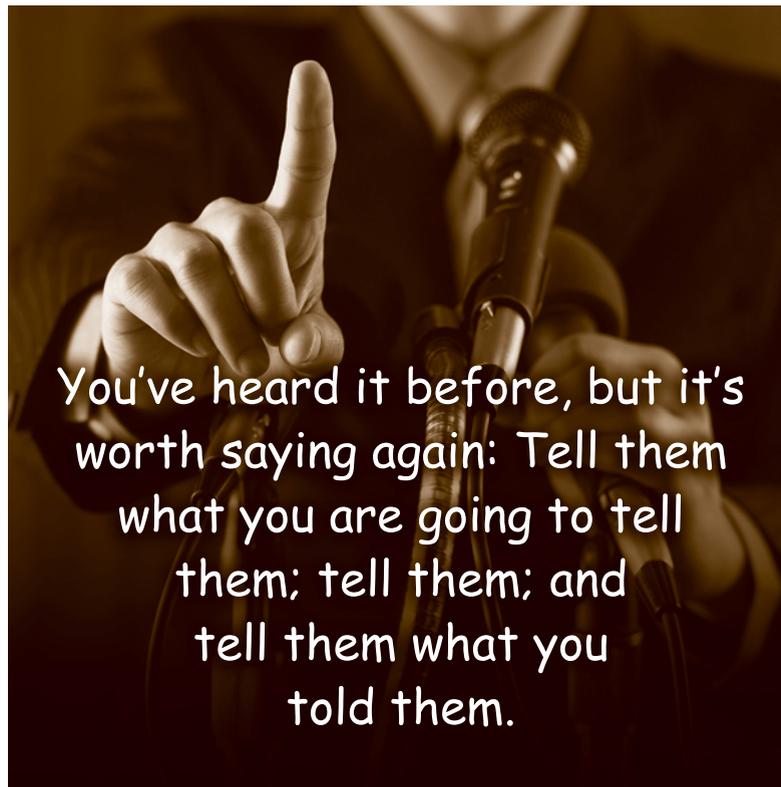
Here are some rules for the individual slides:

- No more than three main points.
- A maximum of eight lines per point (some people say no more than five lines).
- Use 25 to 30 words per slide.
- Simple (sans serif) font—Arial is a good choice.
- Use both upper and lower case.
- For bullets or numbers, your points should not be full sentences, but should be short highlights.
- They must be readable! Use big fonts (at least 18-point type), especially for figures. Also, use thick lines for graphs. It is good to test your slides in real conditions to see if they are readable. If that isn't possible, try putting a printed slide on the floor and see if you can read it while standing above it.
- Slides should be landscape orientation.
- Use strongly contrasting colors and avoid dark backgrounds. Avoid red and green combinations, which colorblind people often can't distinguish.
- For figures/graphs, include legends and units that make clear what is good and what is bad. Include some kind of reference plot/point/numbers (something for comparison) .
- Each slide should have a title and a slide number (except the title page).
- Use transition charts. Transition charts prepare the audience for what is next.

That's more than enough on your slides. Let's move on to other things.

Practice, Practice, Practice

You have your topic, you've built the slides, and you know what you want to say. What's next? Practice, of course. It helps to dry run the presentation on someone who will give you honest feedback. The person can help



you find problems with the slides, the organization, or the overall presentation and how you come across. As you practice, listen to what they have to say about how you did. Then try it again. Do it until it is right.

Giving the Presentation

This is the moment of truth. If you have done the appropriate preparation, giving the presentation will be a breeze. You just have to stand up there and do it. One suggestion that may help you: Put paper copies of your slides

in front of you, keeping them face up. As you change slides, move the current slide across to a second pile, keeping it face up. Then you can tell at a glance what your current slide is without having to turn round and read the screen. It also will show you what the next slide is, so you can change to it at the right moment.

Some people can give their presentation with no notes. Most people can't. It might be a good idea to put notes on your paper copy (in large print). Don't feel embarrassed about using the slides as notes, or even having cards with notes. Just don't use your notes as a script. They should be memory aids, used to jog your memory about what you wanted to say.

During your presentation, face your audience. Try to face the screen as little as possible. Remember, you are presenting to the people in the room, not to the screen. In the same vein, don't stare at the table, lectern, floor, or your notes. Look at your audience. This might be tough, but making eye contact adds to your credibility. You can also tell if you are losing them. Use gestures and movement, but don't overdo it or try to choreograph them.

Make sure you don't read the slides word for word. The slides should reinforce what you say, not the other way around.

When briefing, speak up and speak clearly. Explain what acronyms mean unless you are 100 percent sure that your audience will understand them. In project management,

especially in DoD, acronyms and jargon are a way of life, but the same acronym doesn't always mean the same thing to everyone in the audience; and jargon, especially technical jargon, can lose people quickly. So simplify your language. Make it easy to understand. Get rid of the gobbledygook and 25-cent words. Your goal is not to impress listeners with your vocabulary. Your goal is to communicate—as clearly as possible.

Most experts say that for a long presentation, each slide should be up 2 to 4 minutes; for a short one, 1 to 2 minutes. Of course, this depends on the complexity of what is being presented. Rarely should a slide be up for less than a minute.

You have to know the material you are presenting. You are the expert on the project. Be ready for questions at any time. Of course, the best answer to a question is, "Next chart please." That shows you have the listener thinking the same way you are. It is also a good idea to prepare backup slides to answer anticipated questions. This is very helpful if the answer is complex and a slide can help clarify it. If the question doesn't come up, you don't have to show the backup slide(s). If you get a question that you don't know the answer to, say, "I don't know, but I will find out and get back to you." Trying to waffle or make up an answer on the fly will just get you in trouble. We've all seen that happen.

Getting Over Your Nerves

Being nervous is normal. Here are some additional tips on how to control nervous jitters:

- Relax. Take a deep breath. When nervous, we have a tendency to breathe shallowly. If you concentrate on breathing deeply, you'll get enough air to speak and ease your panic.
- If you forget what you were going to say, don't panic. Just stop, look at your notes or the slide, and find your place. Then go on. The audience will forgive you.
- Use good posture, but don't be a statue. We have more power and energy when we stand erect with weight balanced equally on our feet. It also helps your credibility. Adding a little movement helps make it more interesting.
- Concentrate on the message, not on how you think that you are coming across. Look convinced. Act convinced, even if you're not. You are the salesman for your project.
- Learn to laugh at yourself. The problems that occur during presentations can be funny (e.g., you trip, the equipment doesn't work, you find some of lunch on your shirt) and it gets the audience on your side if you can laugh.
- Build in appropriate humor (not jokes). The accent is on appropriate.



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Speaking of humor, everybody loves humor, but you have to be careful. Not everyone has the same sense of humor. Most of the time, PMs don't need to include much humor in their briefings. It is great if you can slip a little appropriate humor into the presentation, but don't push it. Humor keeps it more interesting for the audience. But if you are giving a status briefing to your boss and the project is behind schedule, over budget, or not meeting technical requirements, it might not be too good of an idea to joke about it.

As a PM, you are going to have to give briefings. There is no way around it. Okay, if you are creative and have good people working for you, it might be possible, but it's not a good idea to skip giving the briefings. You need to be the spokesman for the project. The bottom line is you need to prepare, practice, and present. The more that you do it, the better you'll get. Just take the guidelines here to heart, listen to the feedback that you get, and strive to improve with each new opportunity—and you'll be okay. Briefing an audience never killed anyone, and it can help your project and your career if you do a good job.

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