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Why Present?

The Challenge

Modern presenting has developed a well-run formula: open PowerPoint and start typing the words you are going to say into a series of frames, which will become slides. Add features and a picture or two. Run through the timing a few times and hey presto: you have your presentation. Present the slides by using them as if they were an auto-prompt and at the end make the slide deck available as necessary.

It's OK. It's rarely better than that. It's often really dire. And it's actually not presenting. It's a "read-along". Presenting has increasingly become about the slide deck. We need to remind ourselves that slides or videos or guest speakers or anything we might throw into the mix should not detract from *what is our message?*

Mmm: let's just think about *why* we are trying to present?

The Detail

We present to get something to happen. The nature of putting a body of people in a room and somebody (the

presenter, the facilitator) guiding them through to conclusions can be remarkably powerful. Nothing else can do it. An executive summary can't. Nor an email. Nor a video, however exciting. No, put a good presenter in a room and you are much more likely to get the action you seek. And if you throw in a great presentation too, then you are on to a winner.

Action? Yes: to buy the product or approve the headcount. Or sign off the health and safety regulation. A presentation is intended to create and to get action. If you are running a training module, you want people to change: there is always an action. If there isn't an action then – you've guessed it – why are you wasting the valuable time of all these good people? Just send them the information and be done with it.

But a presentation motivates. It can cajole. It answers questions, overcomes fear, ensures that there is real buy-in. It's perfect. So long as it is done well. Because a poor presentation does more harm than good: the dullness, the boredom, the confusion, the poor handling of questions becomes associated with the message you are trying to put across. So decision-makers reject a very good proposal because it was badly presented, for example.

And where does the power of a presentation come from? Eyeball-to-eyeball connection, from words that are said, from pace and from connection. And thus we get to the heart of the matter that slides, and in particular the slide deck, can destroy all of that if we are not careful. And that's why, as we get into this process of helping you

become an even better presenter and help you create an even better presentation, we will be very wary of the slide and the slide deck.

Slides have several problems:

- They encourage reading: it takes a strong speaker to wrest the attention away from the written word. And so you are no longer in control.
- They encourage data overload. What does an audience participant do? Listen to the speaker, read the words . . . ?
- They remove joined-up thinking and replace it with a series of bullets. PowerPoint slides have become increasingly attractive as they allow a series of words to be thrown at a screen. But rarely is much attention given to how such words are connected or fully explained. The bullets look good, they look definitive until they are given closer study . . .
- They quickly replace communication with content. And most critically, instead of a presenter concentrating on how he/she will get the message across, he/she becomes distracted by PowerPoint features.
- They are everywhere and because so many people have experienced such poor sessions, they are a little wary as they settle down to yours.

The Story

Sam hated giving presentations and she hated attending them. Nobody at her firm seemed to talk any more. They wrote and circulated slide decks. She sat through endless meetings, which in themselves were not that organized but they were excruciating because of poor planning and rapidly thrown together slides. She had been suspicious for a long time that there was a better way and had even managed to book herself on the company's Presentation Skills course but was shocked to discover that all they did was design bigger and brighter PowerPoints.

The thinking in this section was all a bit of an epiphany. Things were going to change.

The Q&A

My company loves slide decks. How am I going to persuade my company to change its way of thinking?

Your company, their company, everybody's company! They're all at it. A suggestion is to start small. Try a team meeting without everything on PowerPoint (we're going to show you how). Notice how everyone is more engaged and comments are much more favourable at the end of the meeting. Start small. Drop a few slides. Notice the positive reaction. We're going to give you lots of help and ideas.

But surely slide decks are also a great record of the presentation? Lose the slides and you lose the handouts . . .

Well, we will debate later whether a slide deck is a great record. Just briefly, have you noticed how because of their bullet nature many slides don't really make much sense after the event? We'll show you how to create a much more powerful record.

The Solution

- 1.** Look afresh at the purpose of presenting.
- 2.** And thus look afresh at the approach to presenting.