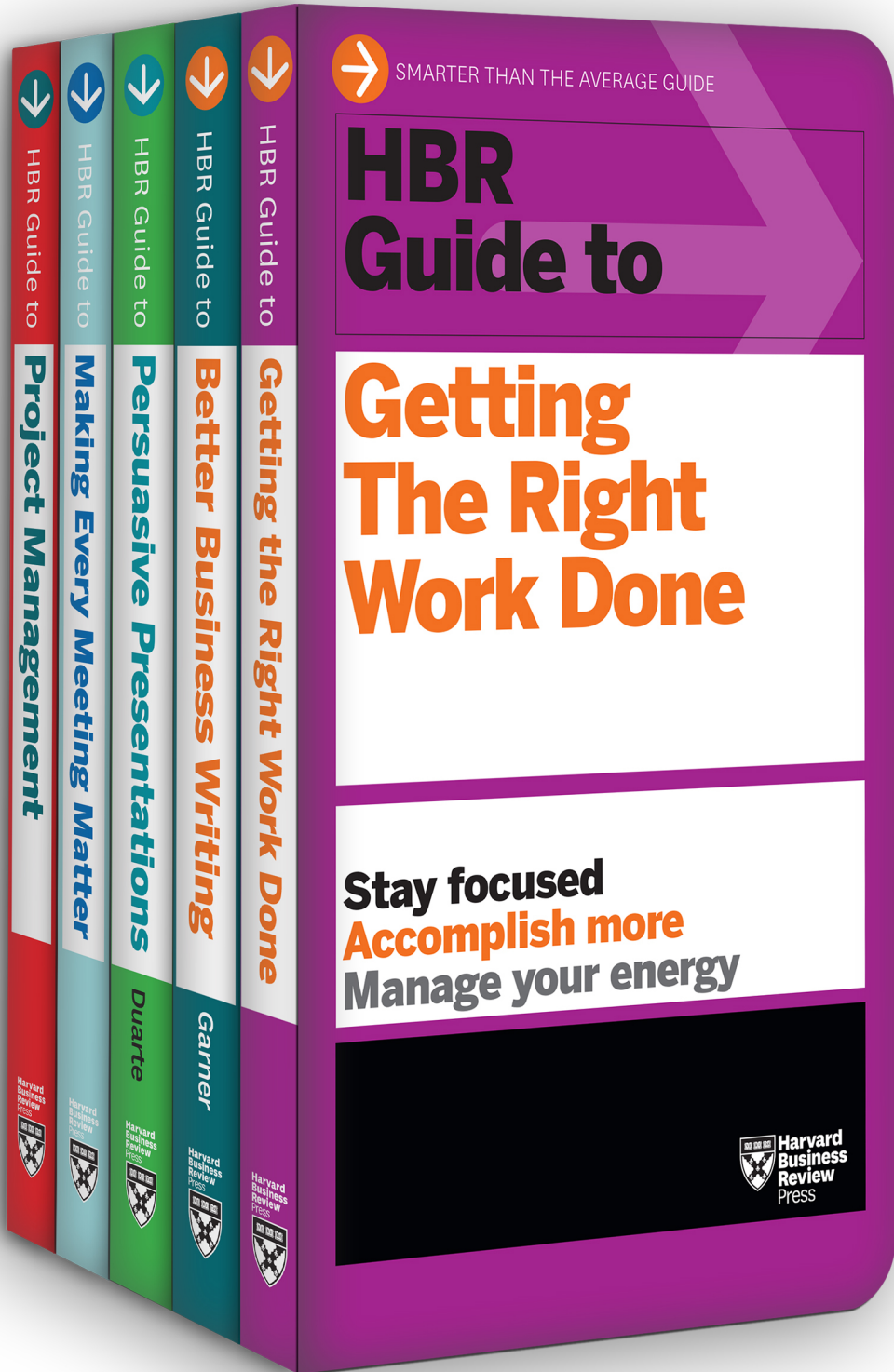




About the pagination of this eBook

This eBook contains a multi-volume set.

To navigate this eBook by page number, you will need to use the volume number and the page number, separated by a hyphen.

For example, to go to page 5 of volume 1, type "1-5" in the Go box at the bottom of the screen and click "Go."

To go to page 5 of volume 2, type "2-5"... and so forth.

Contents

HBR Guide to
Getting the Right Work Done

HBR Guide to
Better Business Writing

HBR Guide to
Persuasive Presentations

HBR Guide to
Making Every Meeting Matter

HBR Guide to
Project Management

HBR Guide to
**Getting the
Right Work Done**

Harvard Business Review Guides

Arm yourself with the advice you need to succeed on the job, from the most trusted brand in business. Packed with how-to essentials from leading experts, the HBR Guides provide smart answers to your most pressing work challenges.

The titles include:

HBR Guide to Better Business Writing

HBR Guide to Finance Basics for Managers

HBR Guide to Getting a Job

HBR Guide to Getting the Mentoring You Need

HBR Guide to Getting the Right Work Done

HBR Guide to Giving Effective Feedback

HBR Guide to Making Every Meeting Matter

HBR Guide to Managing Stress

HBR Guide to Managing Up and Across

HBR Guide to Persuasive Presentations

HBR Guide to Project Management

HBR Guide to **Getting the Right Work Done**

HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW PRESS

Boston, Massachusetts

Copyright 2012 Harvard Business School Publishing Corporation

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise), without the prior permission of the publisher. Requests for permission should be directed to permissions@hbsp.harvard.edu, or mailed to Permissions, Harvard Business School Publishing, 60 Harvard Way, Boston, Massachusetts 02163.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

HBR guide to getting the right work done.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-1-4221-8711-1 (alk. paper)

1. Time management. 2. Decision making. I. Harvard Business Review Press. II. Title: Harvard Business Review guide to getting the right work done. III. Title: Guide to getting the right work done.

HD69.T54.H374 2012

650.1'1—dc23

2012012383

The paper used in this publication meets the requirements of the American National Standard for Permanence of Paper for Publications and Documents in Libraries and Archives z39.48-1992.

What You'll Learn

Are you paralyzed by the pile of projects on your plate? Has fear of delegation buried you in administrivia? Is your focus destroyed by the incessant call of e-mail and Twitter? Do you leave work exhausted—but with little to show for it? Are promotions passing you by because your peers are more productive?

You can't possibly tackle every task that awaits you. But here's the good news: You can learn to get the *right* work done, focusing your time and energy where it'll yield the greatest reward—for you and your organization. This guide will help by offering a range of accessible tools so you can sample them and see what works for you.

You'll get better at:

- Prioritizing
- Staying focused
- Working less but accomplishing more
- Stopping bad habits and developing good ones
- Writing to-do lists that work

What You'll Learn

- Breaking overwhelming projects into manageable pieces
- Thwarting e-mail overload
- Refueling your energy

Contents

Section 1: GET STARTED

1. You Can't Get It <i>All</i> Done	3
<i>. . . so what should you do?</i>	
BY PETER BREGMAN	
2. Nine Things Successful People Do Differently	9
<i>It's not who you are; it's what you do</i>	
BY HEIDI GRANT HALVORSON	
3. Being More Productive: An Interview with David Allen and Tony Schwartz	23
<i>Do you need the right system or the right frame of mind?</i>	
BY DANIEL MCGINN	

Section 2: PRIORITIZE YOUR WORK

4. Get a Raise by Getting the Right Work Done	35
<i>Focus on the work that will bring the greatest reward—for your organization and for you</i>	
BY PETER BREGMAN	

5. The Worth-Your-Time Test 39

Stop wasting time on the wrong work

BY PETER BREGMAN

6. Say Yes to Saying No 43

Make it easier to decline projects and invitations

BY ALEXANDRA SAMUEL

Section 3: ORGANIZE YOUR TIME

7. A Practical Plan for When You Feel Overwhelmed 49

How to get started when you don't know where to begin

BY PETER BREGMAN

8. Stop Procrastinating—Now 53

Five tips for breaking this bad habit

BY AMY GALLO

9. Don't Let Long-Term Projects Become Last-Minute Panic 57

What to do when you have "all the time in the world"

BY PETER BREGMAN

10. Stop Multitasking 63

Do just one thing to get many things done

BY PETER BREGMAN

11. How to Stay Focused on What's Important 69

Stop fighting fires

BY GINA TRAPANI

12. To-Do Lists That Work	73
<i>The secret is specificity</i>	
BY GINA TRAPANI	
13. How to Tackle Your To-Do List	77
<i>Use your calendar</i>	
BY PETER BREGMAN	
14. Reward Yourself for Doing Dreaded Tasks	81
<i>When crossing items off your list just isn't enough</i>	
BY ALEXANDRA SAMUEL	

Section 4: DELEGATE EFFECTIVELY

15. Management Time: Who's Got the Monkey?	87
<i>Delegate, Delegate, Delegate</i>	
BY WILLIAM ONCKEN, JR., AND DONALD L. WASS, WITH COMMENTARY BY STEPHEN R. COVEY	
16. Levels of Delegation	109
<i>Teach them to fish</i>	
BY LINDA A. HILL AND KENT LINEBACK	

Section 5: CREATE RITUALS

17. Ritual: How to Get Important Work Done	113
<i>Make good habits automatic</i>	
BY TONY SCHWARTZ	
18. Power Through Your Day in 90-Minute Cycles	117
<i>Work with your body's natural rhythms</i>	
BY TONY SCHWARTZ	

Contents

- 19. An 18-Minute Plan for Managing Your Day** 121

Frequent check-ins with yourself will keep you on course

BY PETER BREGMAN

- 20. Use a 10-Minute Diary to Stay on Track** 125

The best way to spend the last few minutes of your day

BY TERESA AMABILE AND STEVEN KRAMER

Section 6: RENEW YOUR ENERGY

- 21. How to Accomplish More by Doing Less** 135

Take breaks to get more done

BY TONY SCHWARTZ

- 22. Manage Your Energy, Not Your Time** 139

Time is limited, but your energy is not

BY TONY SCHWARTZ AND CATHERINE MCCARTHY

- 23. Why Great Performers Sleep More** 147

. . . and how you can, too

BY TONY SCHWARTZ

Section 7: TAKE CONTROL OF YOUR E-MAIL

- 24. Simplify Your E-mail** 153

Three folders will do it

BY GINA TRAPANI

- 25. Eight E-mail Overload Experiments** 157

Don't be afraid to be extreme

BY ALEXANDRA SAMUEL

Section 8: MAINTAIN YOUR NEW APPROACH

26. Sustaining Your Productivity System 165

You've become productive! Now keep it up

BY ALEXANDRA SAMUEL

Section 9: EXPLORE FURTHER

27. More Productivity Books to Explore 171

*Summaries of three popular titles by Covey,
Morgenstern, and Allen*

BY ILAN MOCHARI

28. Productivity Apps and Tools 175

Tech tools to keep you on track

Index 181

Section 1

Get Started

Chapter 1

You Can't Get It *All* Done

by Peter Bregman

Brad is as hard a worker as anyone I know. (Names and some details have been changed.) He's not just busy, he's keenly focused on getting the right things done. And it pays off—he is the largest single revenue generator at his well-known professional services firm. A few days before Thanksgiving, Brad flew from Boston to Los Angeles with his family. During the five-hour flight, he decided not to use the plane's Internet access, choosing to play with his children instead. A five-hour digital vacation.

When they landed, Brad turned on his BlackBerry and discovered that a crisis had developed while he was in the air. He had close to five hundred new e-mail messages.

So much for a digital vacation.

The truth is, we can't really get away from it. There's no escaping the nonstop surge of e-mail, text, voice

mail, Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn—and that’s just the technology-based stream. How can we ever catch up?

We can’t.

The idea that we can get it all done is the biggest myth in time management. There’s no way Brad can meaningfully go through all his e-mail, and there’s no way any of us are going to accomplish everything we want to.

Face it: You’re a limited resource.

On the one hand, that’s depressing. On the other hand, acknowledging it can be tremendously empowering. Once we admit that we aren’t going to get it *all* done, we’re in a much better position to make explicit choices about what we *are* going to do. Instead of letting things haphazardly fall through the cracks, we can intentionally push the unimportant things aside and focus our energy on the things that matter most.

That’s what this guide is all about.

There are two main challenges in doing the right things: identifying what they are and then doing them.

To determine the “right things,” we need to make choices that will move us toward the outcomes we most want. Which, of course, means we need to know what our priorities are.

In terms of the second challenge—the “doing” or follow-through—we need tools. Rituals. To-do lists. Delegation skills.

But which tools will work best for you? Which rituals will help you follow through? You might be the kind of person who can read through a book like this, full of great advice, and implement it all at once. I am not. I get overwhelmed and end up not changing anything.

So, here's one way to use this guide:

1. **Identify your time management challenges.** Do you leave the office with a nagging feeling that you worked all day but didn't get your most important work done? Are you distracted by little things? Avoiding big, hairy projects? Take this three-minute quiz (see "How well do you manage distraction?") to discover where you're distracting yourself the most.
2. **Find one piece of advice you think will have the greatest impact on your work.** Once you've identified your biggest challenges, read through this guide and find a tip that speaks to you. Maybe you're not clear on your "right things." Maybe the rituals you're using aren't working. Maybe you procrastinate. Choose one tactic you think will help you the most. Then do that *one* thing.
3. **Do it again.** Once that tactic has had an impact on your work, repeat the process. Return to this guide and select another tip.

Because Brad is a paragon of productivity, he decided to put his BlackBerry away and wait to reply to the messages until he was in his hotel room. Then, using his laptop, he attacked the crisis: called his client to allay their concerns, delegated tasks to his team, and sent an e-mail to his team and his client detailing the plan. Within an hour, he had finished, shut his laptop, left his BlackBerry in his room, and enjoyed a fun, chaos-filled dinner with

TABLE 1-1

How well do you manage distraction?

1. Even though it feels like I work nonstop all day, I still don't get the most important things done.	Never	Occasionally	Often	Always
2. No matter what I intend to focus on at the beginning of the day, as soon as I start working (checking e-mail, etc.), I seem to get derailed and lose my focus.	Never	Occasionally	Often	Always
3. When I have something important and challenging I want to accomplish, I spend my time doing lots of little things and avoiding the big one.	Never	Occasionally	Often	Always
4. When my work gets challenging, I somehow keep interrupting myself by surfing the Web, doing e-mail, and other distractions.	Never	Occasionally	Often	Always
5. When I'm on a conference call, I get bored and start multitasking until I miss something important; then I try to recover without making it obvious that I wasn't paying attention.	Never	Occasionally	Often	Always
6. I'm late for meetings and appointments because I try to get one more thing done instead of leaving enough time for preparation and/or travel.	Never	Occasionally	Often	Always
7. I feel overwhelmed and stressed out by the number of things I have to do.	Never	Occasionally	Often	Always
8. My work day ends in frustration as I think about all the things I intended to accomplish but didn't.	Never	Occasionally	Often	Always
9. When I try to make space for my own work, I get interrupted by others and I find it hard to protect my time.	Never	Occasionally	Often	Always
10. I don't spend enough time at work in my "sweet spot" (doing work I'm really good at and enjoy the most).	Never	Occasionally	Often	Always

Score yourself

Number of checks in:

Never _____

Occasionally _____

Often _____

Always _____

Guide to scores

If you selected mostly “Never,” congratulations! You’re already doing a great job of focusing on the work that will give you—and your organization—the highest reward. You likely already have rituals and tactics that make you productive. Look to this guide for some new tips and ideas to expand your collection of productivity tools.

If you selected mostly “Occasionally,” you’re doing pretty well. Perhaps willpower or delegating is helping you focus on getting the right work done. But there’s even more you could be doing to boost your productivity. Perhaps you haven’t experimented with rituals. Perhaps your obsession with e-mail is derailing you. Read on to discover new ideas about how you can get even more of the right work done.

If you selected mostly “Often,” you could use a process to help you get and stay focused on the right work. Resist the allure of “urgent” projects to focus on the work with the greatest long-term rewards. Learn how to craft the most useful to-do lists so that you can power through them and leave work feeling a sense of accomplishment.

If you selected mostly “Always,” you need help. But you know that, because you bought this guide, so you’re already on the path to productivity. Pick your biggest pain point and start there, then return to the Guide as often as you need to.

This quiz is derived from Peter’s book, *18 Minutes: Find Your Focus, Master Distractions, and Get the Right Things Done*. For free *18 Minutes* tools and resources (including an online version of this quiz offering more detailed results and feedback), visit <http://www.peterbregman.com>.

his family—which, at that time, was precisely the right thing for him to do.

Peter Bregman is a strategic adviser to CEOs and their leadership teams. His latest book is *18 Minutes: Find Your Focus, Master Distraction, and Get the Right Things Done*.

Chapter 2

Nine Things Successful People Do Differently

by Heidi Grant Halvorson

Why have you been so successful in reaching some of your goals, but not others? If you aren't sure, you're far from alone. Even brilliant, highly accomplished people are pretty lousy when it comes to understanding why they succeed or fail. The intuitive answer—that you're born predisposed to certain talents and lacking in others—is really just one small piece of the puzzle. In fact, decades of research on achievement suggest that successful people reach their personal and professional goals not

Excerpted with permission from *Nine Things Successful People Do Differently* (product #11065).

simply because of who they are, but more often because of what they do.

What follows are the nine things that successful people do—the strategies they use to set and pursue goals (sometimes without consciously realizing it) that have the biggest impact on performance.

1. Get Specific

When you set a goal, be as specific as possible. “Lose five pounds” is a better goal than “lose some weight,” because it gives you a clear idea of what success looks like. Knowing exactly what you want to achieve keeps you motivated until you get there. Also, consider the specific actions you’ll need to take to reach your goal. Promising you’ll “eat less” or “sleep more” is too vague. “I’ll be in bed by 10 PM on weeknights” leaves no doubt about what you need to do, and whether or not you’ve actually done it.

Spelling out exactly what you want to achieve removes the possibility of settling for less—of telling yourself that what you’ve done is “good enough.” It also makes your course of action clearer.

Instead of “getting ahead at work,” make your goal more concrete, such as “a pay raise of at least \$ ____” or “a promotion to at least the ____ level.”

To be successful, you also need to get specific about the obstacles you may encounter. In fact, what you really need to do is go back and forth, thinking about the success you want to achieve and the steps it will take to get there. This strategy is called **mental contrasting**, and it’s a remarkably effective way to set goals and strengthen your commitment.

To use the mental contrasting technique, first imagine how you'll feel attaining your goal. Picture it as vividly as you can—really consider the details. Next, think about the obstacles in your way. For instance, if you wanted to get a better, higher-paying job, you would start by imagining the sense of pride and excitement you would feel accepting a lucrative offer at a top firm. Then you would think about what stands between you and that offer—namely, all the other really outstanding candidates. Kind of makes you want to polish up your résumé a bit, doesn't it?

That's called **experiencing the necessity to act**; it's a state that's critical for reaching your goal, because it gets the psychological wheels in motion. Mental contrasting turns wishes and desires into reality by bringing attention and clarity to what you will need to do to make them happen.

2. Seize the Moment to Act on Your Goals

Given how busy most of us are and how many things we're juggling at once, it's not surprising that we routinely miss opportunities to act on a goal. Did you really have no time to work out today? No chance at any point to return that phone call?

To seize the moment, decide when and where you'll take action, in advance. Be specific ("If it's Monday, Wednesday, or Friday, I'll work out for thirty minutes before work"). Studies show that this **if-then planning** helps your brain to detect and take advantage of the

opportunity when it arises, increasing your chances of success by roughly 300 percent. (For more on planning when and where you'll perform tasks, see "How to Tackle Your To-Do List," later in this guide.)

Deciding in advance when and where you will take specific actions to reach your goal (or how you will address obstacles you might encounter) is probably the most effective single thing you can do to ensure your success.

If-then plans take the form:

If X happens, then I will do Y.

For example:

If I'm getting too distracted by colleagues, then I'll stick to a five-minute chat limit and return to work.

Why are these plans so effective? Because they're written in the language of your brain—the language of contingencies. Humans are particularly good at encoding and remembering information in "if X, then Y" terms, and using these contingencies to guide their behavior, often below their level of awareness.

Once you've formulated your if-then plan, your unconscious brain will start scanning the environment, searching for the situation in the "if" part of your plan. This enables you to seize the critical moment ("Oh, it's 4 PM! I'd better return those calls!"), even when you're busy doing other things.

Since you've already decided exactly what you need to do, you can execute the plan without having to consciously think about it.

3. Know Exactly How Far You Have Left to Go

Achieving any goal also requires honest and regular monitoring of your progress—if not by others, then by you yourself. If you don't know how well you're doing, you can't adjust your behavior or your strategies accordingly. Check your progress frequently—weekly, or even daily, depending on the goal.

Feedback helps motivate us because we subconsciously tune in to the presence of a discrepancy between where we are now and where we want to be. When your brain detects a discrepancy, it reacts by throwing resources at it: attention, effort, deeper processing of information, and willpower.

If self-monitoring and seeking out feedback are so important, you may be wondering why we don't always do it. The first and most obvious reason is that it's effortful; you need to stop whatever else you're doing and really focus on assessment. And of course, the news isn't always positive; sometimes we avoid checking in on our progress because we don't want to acknowledge how little progress we've made. Self-monitoring requires a lot of willpower, but you can make it easier by using if-then planning to schedule your self-assessments.

Done the right way, assessing your progress will keep you motivated from start to finish. Done the wrong way, it may actually lower your motivation. Recent research by University of Chicago psychologists Minjung Koo and Ayelet Fishbach examined how people pursuing goals were affected by focusing on either how far they had al-

ready come (**to-date thinking**) or what was left to be accomplished (**to-go thinking**).

Koo and Fishbach's studies consistently show that when we're pursuing a goal and consider how far we've already come, we feel a premature sense of accomplishment and begin to slack off.

When we focus on progress made, we're also more likely to try to achieve a sense of "balance" by making progress on other important goals. As a result, we wind up with lots of pots on the stove, but nothing is ever ready to eat.

If, instead, we focus on how far we have left to go (to-go thinking), motivation is not only sustained, it's heightened. So when you're assessing your progress, stay focused on the goal and never congratulate yourself too much on a job half-done. Save it for a job well—and completely—done.

4. Be a Realistic Optimist

When you're setting a goal, by all means engage in positive thinking about how likely you are to achieve it. Believing in your ability to succeed is enormously helpful for creating and sustaining your motivation. But don't underestimate the time, planning, effort, and persistence it will take to reach your goal. Thinking things will come to you easily and effortlessly leaves you ill prepared for the journey ahead and can significantly increase the odds of failure.

This is the difference between being a realistic optimist and an unrealistic optimist.

Realistic optimists believe they will succeed, but also believe they have to make success happen—through things like planning, persistence, and choosing the right strategies. They recognize the need for considering how they'll deal with obstacles.

Unrealistic optimists, on the other hand, believe that success will happen to them—that the universe will reward them for their positive thinking.

Cultivate your realistic optimism by combining a positive attitude with an honest assessment of the challenges that await you. Don't just visualize success; visualize the steps you will take in order to make success happen. If your first strategy doesn't work, what's plan B? (This is another great time to use your if-then plans.) Remember, it's not "negative" to think about the problems you are likely to face—it's foolish not to.

5. Focus on Getting Better, Rather Than Being Good

Believing you have the ability to reach your goals is important, but so is believing you can *get* the ability. Many of us believe that our intelligence, personality, and physical aptitudes are fixed—that no matter what we do, we won't improve. As a result, we focus on goals that are all about proving ourselves, rather than developing and acquiring new skills.

Fortunately, **abilities of all kinds are profoundly malleable**. Embracing the fact that you can change will allow you to make better choices and reach your fullest potential. People whose goals are about getting better,

rather than being good, take difficulty in stride and appreciate the journey as much as the destination.

How can you motivate yourself to approach new responsibilities with confidence and energy? The answer is simple, though perhaps a little surprising: **give yourself permission to screw up.**

I know this may not be something you're thrilled to hear, because you're probably thinking, if you screw up you'll be the one to pay for it. But you needn't worry, because when people feel they're allowed to make mistakes, they're significantly less likely to actually make them!

People approach any task with one of two types of goals: what I call **be-good goals**, where the focus is on proving that you have a lot of ability and already know what you're doing, and **get-better goals**, where the focus is on developing ability and learning to master a new skill.

The problem with be-good goals is that they tend to backfire when we're faced with something unfamiliar or difficult. We quickly start feeling that we don't actually know what we're doing, that we lack ability—and this creates a lot of anxiety. And nothing interferes with performance quite like anxiety does; it is *the* productivity killer.

Get-better goals, on the other hand, are practically bulletproof. When we think about what we're doing in terms of learning and mastering—accepting that we may make some mistakes along the way—we stay motivated despite setbacks that might occur.

A focus on getting better also enhances the experience of working; we naturally find what we do more interest-

ing and enjoyable when we think about it in terms of progress, rather than perfection. Finding what you do interesting and believing it has inherent value is one of the most effective ways to stay motivated despite unexpected roadblocks. In fact, interest doesn't just keep you going despite fatigue; it actually replenishes your energy.

6. Have Grit

Grit is a willingness to commit to long-term goals and to persist in the face of difficulty. Gritty people obtain more education in their lifetimes and earn higher college GPAs. Grit predicts which cadets will stick out their first grueling year at West Point. In fact, grit even predicts how far contestants at the Scripps National Spelling Bee will go.

The good news is that if you aren't particularly gritty now, you can do something about it. People who lack grit often believe that they just don't have the innate abilities successful people have. If that describes your own thinking, you're wrong. As I mentioned earlier, effort, planning, persistence, and good strategies are what it really takes to succeed. Embracing this knowledge will not only help you see yourself and your goals more accurately, but also do wonders for your grit.

Study after study of successful people, whether they are athletes, musicians, or mathematicians, shows that the key to success and enhanced ability is deliberate practice—thousands of hours spent mastering the necessary skills and knowledge.

Grit is all about not giving up in the face of difficulty, even when you're tired or discouraged. And the best predictor of not giving up is how we explain that difficulty in

the first place. When you're having a hard time, what do you blame?

Entity theorists, who are convinced that ability is fixed, tend to **blame setbacks on a lack of ability**. If this is hard for me, I must not be good at it. As a result, they lack grit; they give up on themselves way too soon, inadvertently reinforcing their misconception that they can't improve.

Incremental theorists, on the other hand, tend to **blame setbacks on more controllable factors**—insufficient effort, using the wrong strategy, poor planning. When faced with difficulty, they try harder, armed with the belief that improvement is always possible. This gritty attitude leads to far greater long-term accomplishments.

Change really is always possible, and the science here is crystal clear. There is no ability that can't be developed with experience. The next time you find yourself thinking, "But I'm just not good at this," remember: You're just not good at it *yet*.

7. Build Your Willpower Muscle

Our self-control "muscle" is just like others in your body; when it doesn't get much exercise, it becomes weaker over time. But when you give it regular workouts, it will grow stronger and help you reach your goals.

To build willpower, take on a challenge that requires you to do something you'd rather not do. Give up high-fat snacks, do a hundred sit-ups a day, try to learn a new skill. When you find yourself wanting to give in or give up—don't. Start with just one activity and make a plan

for how you'll deal with troubles when they occur ("If I want a snack, I'll eat one piece of fresh or three pieces of dried fruit"). It will be hard in the beginning, but it will get easier, and that's the whole point. As your strength grows, you can take on more challenges and step up your self-control workout.

Like biceps or triceps, willpower can vary in its strength, not only from person to person, but from moment to moment.

The good news is that willpower depletion is only temporary. Give your muscle time to bounce back, and you'll be back in fighting form. When rest is not an option, you can accelerate your recovery simply by thinking about people you know who have a lot of self-control.

Or, you can try giving yourself a pick-me-up. Anything that lifts your spirits—listening to a favorite song, calling a good friend, or reflecting on a past success—should also help restore your self-control when you're looking for a quick fix.

8. Don't Tempt Fate

No matter how strong your willpower muscle becomes, it's important to always respect the fact that it's limited, and if you overtax it, you will temporarily run out of steam. Don't try to take on two challenging goals at once, if you can help it (like quitting smoking *and* dieting). And make achieving your goal easier by keeping yourself out of harm's way. Many people are overly confident in their ability to resist temptation, and as a result they put themselves in situations where temptations abound. Suc-

Successful people know not to make reaching a goal harder than it already is.

Resisting temptation is a key part of successfully reaching just about any goal. What we want to do is often the very opposite of what we need to do. This may sound a bit counterintuitive, but the very first thing you're going to want to do if you're serious about resisting temptation is **make peace with the fact that your willpower is limited.**

Even if you've built up large reserves of willpower, you won't have much left for sticking to your resolutions at the end of a long day of putting out fires at work. That's why it's so important to give some thought to when you're most likely to feel drained and vulnerable and make an if-then plan to keep yourself out of harm's way.

It's far easier to abstain from doing something all together than it is to give in just a little and then stop. And you need more and more self-control to stop a behavior the longer it goes on. If you don't want to eat the entire slice of cake, don't take "just one bite."

9. Focus on What You Will Do, Not What You Won't Do

Do you want to get promoted, quit smoking, or put a lid on your bad temper? Then plan how you'll replace counterproductive behaviors with more constructive ones. Too often, people concentrate all their efforts on what they want to stop doing and fail to consider how they will fill the void. Trying to avoid a thought can make it more active in your mind ("Don't think about white bears!"). The same holds true when it comes to behavior; by trying

not to do something, you strengthen rather than diminish the impulse.

If you want to change your ways, ask yourself, “What will I do instead?” For example, if you’re trying to gain control of your temper, you might make a plan such as, “If I’m starting to feel angry, then I’ll take three deep breaths to calm down.” By using deep breathing as a replacement for giving in to your anger, your success-sabotaging impulse will get worn away over time until it disappears completely.

Once you’ve decided to make an if-then plan to help you reach your goal, the next thing you need to do is figure out how to construct it.

There are three types of if-then plans:

- **“Replacement” if-then plans** do just what the name suggests—replace a negative behavior with a more positive one (as in the anger management strategy just described).
- **“Ignore” if-then plans** are focused on blocking out unwanted feelings, like cravings, performance anxiety, or self-doubts. (“If I have the urge to smoke, then I’ll ignore it.”)
- Finally, **“negation” if-then plans** involve spelling out the actions you won’t be taking in the future. With these plans, if there is a behavior you want to avoid, you simply plan not to perform this behavior. (“If I am at the mall, then I won’t buy anything.”)

Of all three types, replacement plans are most successful. When it comes to reaching your goals, focusing on what

you *will* do, not what you *won't* do, is the most effective way to achieve them.

Heidi Grant Halvorson, PhD, is a motivational psychologist and author of the HBR Single *Nine Things Successful People Do Differently* (Harvard Business Press, 2011) and the book *Succeed: How We Can Reach Our Goals* (Hudson Street Press, 2011). Her personal blog, *The Science of Success*, can be found at <http://www.heidigranthalvorson.com/>.

Chapter 3

Being More Productive

An Interview with David Allen
and Tony Schwartz

by **Daniel McGinn**

David Allen is a productivity consultant and the author of the best seller *Getting Things Done*, which outlines the list-driven efficiency system adherents call by its acronym: GTD. Tony Schwartz, the author of the best-seller *Be Excellent at Anything*, is the CEO of The Energy Project, which helps people and organizations fuel engagement and productivity by drawing on the science of high performance.

Excerpted from *Harvard Business Review*, May 2011 (product # R1105D).

In this edited conversation with HBR, they discuss the distractive pull of e-mail, how they've been influenced by each other, and why you should do your most important task first thing in the morning (even though only one of them does).

HBR: Let's start with something simple. How does each of you define what you do?

Allen: I help people and organizations produce more with less input. I teach a set of best practices and a methodology that produce a greater sense of concentration and control.

Schwartz: We teach individuals and organizations how to manage energy more skillfully in order to get more work done in less time, more sustainably. That requires a new way of working—one that balances periods of high focus with intermittent renewal.

Both of you have written several books describing your techniques, but give me a quick summary.

Allen: I call what I've uncovered "the strategic value of clear space." Say you're going to cook dinner for people, it's 5:00 PM, and they're coming at 6:00. You want to have all the right ingredients. You want to have the right tools. You want the kitchen to be nice and clear. You need the freedom to make a creative mess. I teach people to achieve that freedom by taking very immediate, concrete steps: downloading all your commitments and projects into lists, focusing

on “next actions,” and thinking about the context—work that needs to be done in your office, or on the phone, or on the computer. You don’t need to change who you are. You just need some simple but very powerful techniques.

Schwartz: We focus on the four primary dimensions of energy that we all need to perform at our best. The ground level is physical—fitness, sleep, nutrition, and rest. At the emotional level, it’s about cultivating positive emotions—and as a leader, communicating them to others. At the mental level, it’s about gaining more control of your attention—both by increasing [your] ability to focus on one thing at a time and by learning to shift into the right hemisphere to do more-creative work. And at the spiritual level, it’s about defining purpose, because when something really matters, you bring far more energy to it. Very few [managers and] leaders I’ve met fully appreciate how meeting these needs—in themselves and for others—is absolutely critical to sustainable high performance. They’re good at doing things, and they’ve been rewarded by being given more things to do. But increasingly, demand is outrunning their capacity. They’re overloaded with e-mail and texts and all the information that comes in. We have to teach them to step back and say, “What do I actually want to do? What are the right choices? What are the costs of this choice?”

Let’s talk about some of the concrete principles you teach. Tony, explain why you think people should

approach work as a series of short sprints, not an all-day marathon.

Schwartz: There's a fundamental misunderstanding about how human beings operate at their best. Most of us mistakenly assume we're meant to run like computers—at high speeds, continuously, for long periods of time, running multiple programs simultaneously. It's just not true. Human beings are designed to be *rhythmic*. The heart pulses; muscles contract and relax. We're at our best when we're moving rhythmically between spending energy and renewing it. We need to recognize the insight of athletes, who manage their work-rest ratios. We encourage people to work intensely for 90 minutes and then take a break to recover. We teach them to eat small, energy-rich meals every few hours, rather than three big meals a day. We believe napping drives productivity, although that remains a tough sell in most companies. Still, the reality is that if a person works continuously all through the day, she'll produce less than a person of equal talent who works very intensely for short periods and then recovers before working intensely again. (To learn more, see “Power Through Your Day in 90-Minute Cycles” and “Manage Your Energy, Not Your Time,” later in this guide.)

Allen: It's also an issue of choosing the right work. Peter Drucker said that the toughest job for knowledge workers is defining the work. A century ago, 80% of the world made and moved things. You worked as long as you could, and then you slept, and then you

got up and worked again. You didn't have to triage or make executive decisions. It's harder to be productive today because the work has become much more complex.

David, what's the biggest roadblock to productivity that you typically observe when you go into an organization for the first time?

Allen: People don't capture stuff that has their attention. They don't acknowledge it or objectify it. And it keeps rolling around in the organizational psyche as well as the personal psyche, draining energy and creating incredible psychic residue. People say, "I'll do that," but they don't write it down, and it goes into a black hole. That would be fine if it were just one thing, but it's hundreds of things. And people don't determine exactly what their commitment to that stuff is—what's the outcome they want to achieve, what's the next action required to move it forward. Your head is for having ideas, not holding them. Just dumping everything out of your head and externalizing it is a huge step, and it can have a significant effect.

The devil's advocate position is that this results in gigantic to-do lists, which are overwhelming in themselves.

Allen: You need lists because your brain isn't good at keeping them. Your mind is this dumb little computer that will wake you up at 3:00 AM and beat you

bloody over stuff you can't do spit about while you're lying there. All it's doing is repeating stuff in open loops, and it sucks your energy like crazy.

Schwartz: There's a process of humility that's required here. It's a little bit of a turn on the 12-step notion of admitting that you're powerless over your addictions. In this case, the addiction is to e-mail and information. The problem is that our willpower and self-discipline are wildly overrated. We think the way to make a change is to push harder—to resist that chocolate-chip cookie, or wake up early and get to the gym. It doesn't work. It's humbling to discover that we're creatures of habit, and what we did yesterday is what we're going to do today. You want to co-opt the process by which negative habits arise without your intention, and substitute what we call “positive rituals,” or deliberate practices. (See Section 5: Create Rituals.)

How much do you know about each other's work—and how much do you use each other's strategies?

Schwartz: I always kept lists, but until I connected with David's work, I didn't realize that anything I didn't download would potentially create distractions—so now I keep lists of *everything*. Another ritual I have that aligns with David's work is to always do the most important task of the day first thing in the morning, when I'm most rested and least distracted. Ninety percent of people check their e-mail as soon as they get to work. That turns their agenda over to someone else.

David, how has Tony's thinking influenced the way you work?

Allen: The piece that's made the biggest difference is his work on energy cycles. I actually brought a pillow into work. I work in a glass office, and now people can see me lying on my floor taking a nap for 20 minutes. That's directly from Tony's work. I wish I had the discipline Tony does to tackle the hardest tasks first thing in the morning, but I don't.

Schwartz: It's not that you don't have the discipline—it's that you don't have the ritual. If you built that ritual, I have zero doubt that you could do it.

Allen: Part of the way to attack that problem is to break big tasks down and focus on smaller "next actions," which can seem more manageable. What most people put on a to-do list are vague things like "Mom." Great! So Tony will write down "Mom," signifying that he has to decide whether to get his mother a birthday present, and what to buy, and how to deliver it. He'll resist looking at the list, because he knows there's a lot of work in that simple notation. Instead the list should specify a smaller next action—say, "Call sister re: Mom's birthday." Oh, look—I can do that! There's actually a part of us that loves to produce, that loves to be complete. Now I've created motivation: I see a desired result, I have the confidence I can get there, and I see the path. A lot of what GTD does is set it up so that you only have to think about things once. The problem is that everybody is multitasking and getting distracted by the latest and loudest. They fail because

they haven't captured, clarified, organized, or built in a regular review system they trust.

Schwartz: Let me beg to differ a little. Say you're working on a primary task and you get an e-mail. You hear that little Pavlovian beep, and you cannot resist it. So you turn to the e-mail and lose track of the initial task, and it takes you time to reconnect to it afterward. Researchers have found that over time and with practice, people get better at task shifting, but they never get remotely as good as they'd be if they did one thing at a time. (For more on effective to-do lists and multitasking, see Section 3: Organize Your Time.)

Allen: Let's take it a step further. Why do people get disturbed by that e-mail beep? It's because they don't trust that they've emptied their e-mail every 24 hours. Most people are living in an emergency scan mode. They never deal with their e-mail, so they're afraid there's still something sitting in there, and they're constantly allowing themselves to get distracted by it. (See Section 7: Take Control of Your E-mail.)

Last question: If people could take just one thing away from your work, what should it be?

Schwartz: [We] need to recognize that human beings are basically organisms containing energy. And that energy is either being renewed or being dissipated over time. An organization has to realize that part of its responsibility, whether it wants it or not, is to

ensure that people have full tanks of energy. This is one of the big variables that will determine which organizations thrive in the next 10 or 20 years. [And until organizations do so, we need to take on that responsibility for ourselves.]

Allen: Think about it this way: While we've been sitting here talking, stuff has been piling up in our in-boxes and our voice mails. Some of it has the potential to meaningfully shift our priorities. When we turn to this accumulated stuff, we'll need to eliminate old business that is pulling on us, that's taking our attention, and reallocate our resources to these new priorities. You can only do one thing at a time, and you only have so many resources. You either feel OK about sitting here talking to us, or you feel bad about the 9,000 other things you're not doing. Everybody needs a system to make those choices wisely.

Daniel McGinn is a senior editor at *Harvard Business Review*.

Section 2

Prioritize Your Work

Chapter 4

Get a Raise by Getting the Right Work Done

by Peter Bregman

My friend Dave is notorious for eating fried food. (Names and some details changed.) Yet recently he was surprised to learn that his cholesterol was high because, as he put it, “The day before the test, I ate really well.”

The idea of immediate results is alluring. But whether it’s managing our diet or prioritizing our workload, there are no quick fixes.

I was reminded of this when a reporter asked me what advice I would give to someone who wanted to ask for a raise at a time when most wages are stagnating or falling. My answer? Don’t ask.

It’s not that I think people can’t get raises right now. But if you haven’t spent the last year laying the ground-

work, it's highly unlikely that you'll be successful now. There's no formula—no perfect words or spinning of events—that will magically deliver a raise with a day or two of preparation.

But there is a formula for getting more money over time. And it starts with your ability to prioritize.

The formula is based on one simple premise: We can get more money when we demonstrate that we've added more value. And we can add more value when we spend the majority of our time focusing on the work that the most senior leaders in our organization *consider* valuable, which is almost always work that increases revenue or profits, either short-term or long-term.

But when we're not clear about what work is most important to our organization, one of two things can happen: Either we put the same amount of energy and effort into everything or we let the wrong things fall through the cracks.

Making more intentional and strategic choices about where to spend our time can mean the difference between a stagnant salary and a growing one. We can be more productive when we know which initiatives deserve our highest priority.

Here's my formula for getting a raise:

1. During this year's compensation conversation, take whatever is given to you without negotiation and with appreciation. Then explain that you're less interested in a raise right now and more interested in **how you can add tremendous value to the organization.**

2. Think like a shareholder of the company. Ask lots of questions about the strategy and what's keeping the top leaders awake at night. Understand how your department affects revenue or profitability and what's important to your direct manager. With your manager, identify the top two or three things you can work on that will drive revenue or profitability. Once you've had that conversation, **you'll have your raiseworthy work focus.**
3. Now **keep those two or three revenue and/or profitability drivers at the top of your to-do list.** Approach your daily work so that the majority of your effort moves the organization further in those areas. Share your to-do list with your manager, to keep you on the same page about your priorities and how your work affects the bigger picture. Quantify the impact you're making. If your manager asks you to do things outside of your top priorities, push back and discuss the possible trade-offs you could make. Sure, you'll need to work on some things that aren't important. But make a strategic choice to shortchange those.

After about six months of this laser focus, you'll be ready to talk about how you've added tremendous value on the things that matter most.

During that discussion you'll also be ready to talk about a real raise. That's good timing, since most organi-

zations are beginning to think through their departmental budgets and promotions around the six-month mark.

Here's why this formula works: It's not a trick. If you focus on your highest-priority work—even if it requires that you push back when your manager asks you to work on other tasks—ultimately you and your manager will be more productive, and the organization will benefit. That's money in the bank. It will make your job more secure and you more promotable.

“So,” I asked Dave. “Now that you know you have high cholesterol, are you going to change the way you eat?”

“No,” Dave answered, true to form, “I’m taking a pill. My cholesterol will be lower in a few days and I can still eat everything.”

Maybe I like doing things the hard way. But as far as I know, there's no pill for getting a raise.

Peter Bregman is a strategic adviser to CEOs and their leadership teams. His latest book is *18 Minutes: Find Your Focus, Master Distraction, and Get the Right Things Done*.

Chapter 5

The Worth-Your-Time Test

by Peter Bregman

Nate Eisman recently started working for a large consulting firm after many years as an independent consultant. (Some details changed to protect privacy.) He called me for some advice.

“I’m wasting a tremendous amount of time,” he complained. “I’m in meetings all day. The only way I can get any real work done is by coming in super early and staying super late.”

Nate had gone from an organization of one to an organization of several thousand and was drowning in the time suck of collaboration. He is not alone.

Working with people takes time. And different people have different priorities. Someone may need your per-

Adapted from content posted on hbr.org on April 1, 2010.

spective on an issue that's critical to him but not to you. Still, if he's a colleague, it's important to help. And often, we want to help.

On the other hand, we've all felt Nate's pain: How can we spend time where we add the most value and let go of the rest?

We need a way to quickly and confidently identify and reduce our extraneous commitments, to know for sure whether we need to deal with something or delegate it, and to manage our desire to be available to others. I propose a brief test that every commitment should pass before you agree to it. When someone comes to you with a request, ask yourself:

1. Am I the right person?
2. Is this the right time?
3. Do I have enough information?

If the request fails the test—if the answer to any one of these questions is “no”—then don't do it. Pass it to someone else (the right person), schedule it for another time (the right time), or wait until you have the information you need (either you or someone else needs to get it).

Sometimes it's impossible or inappropriate to wall yourself off completely. For example, what if your boss is the person who interrupts you? Or what if you're on vacation and an important client reaches out with a time-sensitive and crucial question?

The three test questions offer a clear, easy, and consistent way of knowing how to respond—and help us avoid the tendency to say yes to everything.

If your boss asks you to do something and her request fails the test, it's not just okay, it's *useful* to push back on or redirect her so the work is completed productively. It's not helpful to you, your boss, or your organization if you waste your time on the wrong work.

That's the irony. We try to be available because we want to be helpful. And yet being overwhelmed with tasks—especially those we consider to be a waste of our time—is exactly what will make us unhelpful.

When we get a meeting request that doesn't pass the test, we should decline it. When we're cc'd on an e-mail that doesn't require our attention, we need to delete it. And a 50-page presentation needs to pass the test before we read it—and even then, it's worth an e-mail asking which are the critical pages to review.

A few weeks after sharing the three questions with Nate, I called him at his office at around 6 PM to see how it was going. I guess it was going well, because I never reached him. He had already gone home.

Peter Bregman is a strategic adviser to CEOs and their leadership teams. His latest book is *18 Minutes: Find Your Focus, Master Distraction, and Get the Right Things Done*.

Chapter 6

Say Yes to Saying No

by Alexandra Samuel

If your e-mail in-box looks like mine, it's full of requests and invitations that promise challenging new projects, clients, and commitments. Sure, you enjoy the stimulation and excitement that come with these offers, but it's a fine line. You have to be selective about what you take on—and disciplined about retiring long-standing activities to make room for new ones. You have to be able to say no. Frequently, politely, and effectively.

The good news is that the same technologies that threaten to overload you with things to say yes to can also help you say no. Here's how:

Adapted from content posted on hbr.org on January 8, 2010.

Set your intentions

Before you say no, make it clear to yourself what you want to say yes to. Sites like 43Things.com and SuperViva.com can help you create lists of what you want to accomplish and experiences you want to have. Writing down your goals will help you clarify what's important, identify what you want to eliminate, and get the community support to achieve it.

Prioritize your commitments

A simple Excel spreadsheet can help you evaluate what's on your plate before you agree to take on more. Capture every project you're working on—even ones you've only thought about—and list these in column A, one row per task. Use column B to assign a priority to each project, ranking items from 1–5. In column C, capture the name of anyone who could take over or help with certain projects. Sort your projects according to priority.

For high-priority tasks you've noted could be delegated, e-mail or meet with everyone to whom you hope to transfer projects.

Review with your boss the list of high-priority tasks that only you can handle. Are they aligned with her and your unit's goals? If not, reevaluate to see if you should: shift priorities; delegate more of the projects; or defer some to a later date. (To download a sample Excel spreadsheet, visit my website at <http://www.alexandrasamuel.com/career-work/excel-template-7-steps-to-achieving-your-goals>.)

Make it easy to say “no”

When my in-box piles up with unanswered messages, you can bet that it's full of e-mails that require a no—ones that I can't bring myself to write. To make it easier, I've created a few different signature files in my e-mail client, with polite “no” messages for different circumstances: *I'd love to join you, but my schedule is really booked for the next month*; or *Thanks for thinking of us, but we're only taking on XYZ type of client right now*; or *That sounds like a great project, but my pro bono work is already committed for this quarter*. Using these removes the burden of working up the energy to let someone down.

Make “no” your default answer

Say no to the majority of invitations and project offers you receive unless they meet a short set of criteria. For example, I look for conferences that combine business development (getting clients), professional development (improving skills or knowledge), and personal development (regeneration or personal growth), and attend only events that promise meaningful value on at least two of those fronts. Write down your criteria and stick them to your computer monitor, or put them on a digital sticky note.

None of these practices will eliminate the anxiety that comes from saying no or the fear that you may be passing up a fantastic opportunity. But it's because saying no is so difficult that we need tools and systems to make it a little easier and a little more habitual. The more you say no, the better you'll be able to focus on your most important work.

Alexandra Samuel is the Director of the Social + Interactive Media Centre at Emily Carr University, and the co-founder of Social Signal, a Vancouver-based social media agency. You can follow Alex on Twitter at [@awsamuel](#) or her blog at [alexandrasamuel.com](#).

Section 3

Organize Your Time

Chapter 7

A Practical Plan for When You Feel Overwhelmed

by Peter Bregman

We've all experienced it: that feeling that we've got so much to do that there's no chance we'll get it all done. And certainly not done on time. Right now, I'm feeling completely overwhelmed by my to-do list.

Here's the crazy part. I just spent the last two days *trying* to work without actually working. I start something but get distracted by the Internet. Or a phone call. Or an e-mail. At a time when I need to be most efficient, I've become less efficient than ever.

You'd think it would be the opposite—that when we have a lot to do, we'd become very productive in order to get it done. Sometimes that happens.

Adapted from content posted on hbr.org on September 23, 2010.

But often, when there's so much competing for our attention, we don't know where to begin—so we don't begin anywhere.

Next time you find yourself in this situation, try this approach:

1. **Write down everything you have to do on a piece of paper.** Resist the urge to use technology for this task. Why? I'm not sure, but somehow writing on paper—and then crossing things out—creates momentum.
2. **Spend 15 minutes completing as many of the easiest, fastest tasks on your list as you can.** Make your quick phone calls. Send your short e-mails. Don't worry about whether these are the most important tasks on your list. You're moving. The goal is to cross off as many tasks as possible in the shortest time. Use a timer to keep you focused.
3. **Work on the most daunting task for the next 35 minutes without interruption.** Turn off your phone, close all the unnecessary windows on your computer, and choose the most challenging task on your list, the one that instills the most stress or is the highest priority. *Then work on it and only it*—without hesitation or distraction—for 35 minutes.
4. **Take a break for 10 minutes, then begin the cycle again.** After 35 minutes of focused work, take

a break. Then start the hourlong process over again, beginning with the 15 minutes of quick actions.

“Thirty years ago,” Anne Lamott writes in her book *Bird by Bird*, “my older brother, who was ten years old at the time, was trying to get a report on birds written that he’d had three months to write. It was due the next day. We were out at our family cabin in Bolinas, and he was at the kitchen table close to tears, surrounded by binder paper and pencils and unopened books on birds, immobilized by the hugeness of the task ahead. Then my father sat down beside him, put his arm around my brother’s shoulder, and said, ‘Bird by bird, buddy. Just take it bird by bird.’”

That’s it. *Bird by bird, starting with a bunch of easy birds to help you feel accomplished and then tackling a hard one to gain serious traction and reduce your stress level.* All timed.

Working within a specific and limited time frame is important because the **race against time keeps you focused**. When stress is generalized and diffuse, it’s hard to manage. Using a short time frame actually increases the pressure but keeps your effort specific and particular to a single task. That increases good, motivating stress while reducing negative, disconcerting stress. So the fog of feeling overwhelmed dissipates, and forward movement becomes possible.

In practice, I’m finding that although I make myself work at least the full 35 minutes, I don’t *always* stop when the 35 minutes of hard work are over, because I’m

in the middle of something and I have traction. On the other hand, though it's tempting, I don't exceed the 15 minutes of easy, fast work. When the timer stops, so do I, immediately transitioning to the hard work.

Maybe this method has been working simply because it's novel for me and, like a new diet, offers some structure to motivate my effort. Today, though, it doesn't matter, because it's a useful tool for me. And I'll keep using it until I don't need it or it stops working.

Am I still stressed? Sure. But overwhelmed? Much less so. Because I'm crossing things off my list and getting somewhere on my little tasks as well as my big ones, bird by bird.

Peter Bregman is a strategic adviser to CEOs and their leadership teams. His latest book is *18 Minutes: Find Your Focus, Master Distraction, and Get the Right Things Done*.

Chapter 8

Stop Procrastinating— Now

by Amy Gallo

It seems that no one is immune to procrastination. When someone asked Ernest Hemingway how to write a novel, he replied, “First you defrost the refrigerator.” But putting off tasks takes a big toll on our productivity and our psyche.

Here are five principles to follow the next time you find yourself procrastinating:

1. Figure Out What’s Holding You Back

When you find yourself ignoring or delaying a task, ask yourself why. Psychiatrist Ned Hallowell says there are two types of tasks we most often defer:

Adapted from content posted on hbr.org on October 11, 2011.

- **Something you don't like to do.** This is the most common one. As Hallowell says, "You don't put off eating your favorite dessert."
- **Something you don't know how to do.** When you lack the necessary knowledge or are unsure of how to start a job, you're more likely to avoid it.

Once you've identified why you've put something off, you can break the cycle and prevent future bouts of procrastination.

2. Set Deadlines

One of the simplest things to do is create a schedule with clear due dates for each task. "As soon as you get the project, chunk it down into a few manageable segments," advises Teresa Amabile, coauthor of *The Progress Principle*. Then, assign deadlines for each task. "Put an appointment in your calendar to work on a small piece of the next segment each day to allow yourself to get it done a bit at a time," she says. These "small wins" make the work more manageable and contribute to your sense of progress. And achieving them is much easier than trying to barrel through a complex project.

Use whatever visual cues work for you: Set reminders in your calendar, add items to your to-do list, or put a sticky note on your computer screen.

3. Increase the Rewards

We often dally because the reward for doing an assignment is too far off. To make a task feel more urgent, focus

on short-term rewards. If you always procrastinate on filing your taxes, for example, focus on getting a refund by a certain date. And if there aren't any obvious rewards, create your own. Treat yourself to a coffee break or a quick chat with a coworker once you've finished a task. Embed the reward into the work by making it more fun to do, like partnering with a colleague on a particularly difficult project.

4. Involve Others

One of the principles Hallowell emphasizes is “Never worry alone.” If you don't know how to do something, ask for help. Turn to a trusted colleague or a friend for advice. Asking people to review your work can also help spur you to get started, because you know they're expecting it.

5. Get in the Habit

“People throw up a hand and say ‘I'm such a procrastinator’ as if they have no control,” says Hallowell. “You do have control over this, and you'll be very proud when you change it.” There are immediate benefits when you start getting things done right away, and it's a habit you can cultivate. Amabile suggests tracking your improvement. “Spend just five minutes a day to note the progress you made, any setbacks you encountered, and what you might do the next day to enable further progress,” she says. She recommends you do this in a work diary (see “Use a 10-Minute Diary to Stay on Track,” later in this guide). Then see yourself—and talk about yourself with others—as someone who gets things done. “The most

powerful event for maintaining positive inner work life is making progress in meaningful work,” says Amabile.

Amy Gallo is a contributing editor at *Harvard Business Review*. Follow her on Twitter at @amyegallo.

Chapter 9

Don't Let Long-Term Projects Become Last-Minute Panic

by Peter Bregman

I want to write a screenplay.

Actually, I wanted to write one last year, but then other work took more time than I expected, and I kept pushing “Write screenplay” off my to-do list.

I know I'm not alone in struggling to make incremental progress on long-term projects or goals. How *do* you get started when you have “all the time in the world”?

Maybe you have no due date, like my screenplay. Or maybe you have a deadline that's months away—like preparing a speech, developing a business plan, or designing

a training program. Perhaps you tend to procrastinate on projects with generous schedules—until “next month” becomes “next week” and then “next day,” and suddenly your long-term project has morphed into a short-term, panic-filled nightmare.

Accomplishing something big and important is rarely as simple as just getting it done. Often we don’t know how to start and, even when we do, we rarely have all the knowledge and skills we need to see it through. Also, we always have more urgent things to do and so we push off long-term goals. (See the previous article, “Stop Procrastinating—Now,” for more ideas about overcoming the temptation to postpone work.)

We all know the basic advice: Break the work into smaller, more manageable chunks; focus on the next small step; set intermediate deadlines.

It’s good advice. But, in my experience, it’s not enough.

The reason we procrastinate on a big, long-term project is because it’s important. So important, we’re too scared to work on it.

I’ve never written a screenplay. I don’t know how to format it. I don’t know how to structure the story. I don’t even know the story I want to tell.

I’m afraid that I’ll fail. That I’ll spend a lot of time on it—while other more immediate things don’t get done—and that it’ll be terrible, anyway.

My screenplay is work I care about deeply. Almost all big projects fit into that category—including the competitive analysis your boss asked for. Because a big project is a mirror. Even if you think you don’t care about it, a big project reflects your smarts, effort, and character. It has

your signature on it. Failure in a long-term project isn't just a work issue, it's an identity issue.

So what's the antidote?

Acknowledge your fear

As soon as you know you're going to give that speech or design that training program, take a quiet moment and feel the fear that comes with the importance—and unknowns—of the project. Maybe you're afraid of getting in front of all those people to give your speech. Maybe you're afraid that your training design will expose how much you *don't* know. Maybe you're afraid of letting other people down.

Share your fear

Some people may think you're a wimp, but that hasn't been my experience. Telling others you're intimidated by something you have to do gives them permission to feel—and maybe express—their own fear. I find that people are gracious, supportive, and empathic.

Round up the tools you need

Acknowledging your fear also serves another, crucial purpose: it *informs* you. By recognizing that you don't have everything you need to see the project through, you're identifying your next, manageable step: gathering the necessary tools, information, skills, and support.

Lower your expectations

You're scared because you expect a lot from yourself and you're afraid you'll underperform. When you acknowl-

edge that fear, you recognize that you might not have all that it takes to meet your expectations. Admitting that, in turn, reduces your expectation of getting it perfect right off the bat. And lowering your expectation of getting it right is key to getting started.

Make it a priority

Even if the long-term project isn't your choice—commit yourself to it fully. Make it one of your top five priorities. This forces you to also identify what's *not* a priority. If you have too many important goals, you'll never get to the big long-term ones. So slash your list until you're left with only five.

I use a six-box to-do list—each box represents one of my top five priorities and the sixth box, labeled “The Other 5%,” is for everything else. (See figure 9-1, “Sample 18 Minutes daily to-do list.”) That last box shouldn't take more than 5% of your time. One of my five boxes always represents a long-term priority, which, for this year, contains my screenplay. Having a long-term project on my daily to-do list means every day I make incremental progress toward my big goal.

Break the work into smaller pieces, and set deadlines

Now you're ready for the standard advice. Break the work into manageable chunks and make sure you know how to do the first chunk. Set an intermediate deadline. If you need other people's help, get them involved early. Finally, decide when and where you're going to accomplish the

FIGURE 9-1

Sample 18 Minutes daily to-do list

Date: _____

Do great work with current clients - Follow-up meetings with Anycorp and Bigorg GMs - Mary appt for next week - Jason—on-boarding docs - Set up flight to SF - E-mail request to clients for Howie to call - Speak with Luisa about 360 - Ideas for General Corporation leadership team	Develop new business opportunities - Abigail—M&A work? - Referrals from Tom - Talk to Fernanda about real estate opportunity - Lunch with Joe
Speak and write about my ideas - Next HBR article - Review changes to WSJ article - Speaking engagement call with Loretta - Rich—ideas for future management guides - Slides for keynote speech	Express myself creatively - Talk with Alice about screenplay
Nurture myself and my family - Write in journal 30 minutes/day - Type with Isabelle - Book flights to Bahamas - Exercise 60 minutes/day - Make reservation for dinner with Eleanor	The other 5% - Dr. Clancy—confirm Wed CT scan - Call Tim - Lunch with Kathy to talk about job search - Andrew—Amex card - Research new running sneakers - Buy bathing suit - Get exact numbers from Kristin

© PeterBregman.com. All rights reserved. Reprinted with permission.

Download a blank six-box to-do list at <http://peterbregman.com/18minutes/>.

first chunk and make an appointment with yourself in your calendar.

When you sit down to start your work, you may feel the resistance—fear—come up again. But now you know what it is. Acknowledge it, and it'll be easier to move into the work.

Peter Bregman is a strategic adviser to CEOs and their leadership teams. His latest book is *18 Minutes: Find Your Focus, Master Distraction, and Get the Right Things Done*.

Chapter 10

Stop Multitasking

by **Peter Bregman**

During a conference call with the executive committee of a nonprofit board on which I sit, I decided to send an e-mail to a client.

I know—multitasking is dangerous.

But I wasn't texting while driving. I was safe at my desk. What could go wrong?

Well, I sent the client the message. Then I had to send him another one, this time with the attachment I'd forgotten to append. Finally, my third e-mail to him explained why that attachment wasn't what he was expecting. When I eventually refocused on the call, I realized I hadn't heard a question the board's chair had asked me.

I swear I wasn't sleep-deprived or smoking anything. But I might as well have been. A study showed that people distracted by incoming e-mail and phone calls saw a 10-point drop in their IQs. What's the impact of

Adapted from content posted on hbr.org on May 20, 2009.

10 points? The same as losing a night of sleep. More than twice the effect of smoking marijuana.

Doing several things at once is a trick we play on ourselves, thinking we're getting more done. In reality, our productivity decreases by as much as 40%. We don't actually multitask. We switch-task, shifting rapidly from one thing to another, interrupting ourselves, and losing time in the process.

You might think you're different, that you've done it so much you've become good at it.

But research shows that heavy multitaskers are less competent at doing several things at once than light multitaskers. Unlike most things, the more you multitask, the worse you are at it. Practice, in this case, works against you.

I decided to try an experiment. For one week I would do no multitasking and see what happened. What techniques would help? Could I sustain a focus on one thing at a time for that long?

For the most part, I succeeded. If I was on the phone, I did nothing but participate in the conversation. In meetings, I was fully focused on the presentation or discussion at hand. And when I was working at my desk, I held off any interruptions—e-mail, a knock on the door—until I finished my task.

I discovered six things:

1. **It was delightful.** When I shut off my cell phone I was much more deeply engaged and present. While it may seem that thumbing out a text under the table during a meeting takes only a

split second, it's a longer distraction than that. First you think about your text, then you type it out, then you think about how the other person might respond, then you check for her response, etc. Before you know it, you've missed the whole meeting.

2. **I made significant progress on challenging projects.** Activities like writing or strategy work require thought and persistence. They're the kind I usually try to distract myself from. I stayed with each project when it got hard, and I experienced a number of breakthroughs.
3. **My stress level dropped dramatically.** Multitasking isn't just inefficient, it's stressful. It was a relief to focus on only one thing at a time. It felt reassuring to completely finish a task before moving to the next.
4. **I had no patience for wasted time.** I became laser-focused on getting things done. An hour-long meeting seemed interminable. A meandering conversation was excruciating.
5. **I had tremendous patience for useful and enjoyable things.** When I was on a call with a client, I closed my computer, shut my eyes, and focused completely. I was able to pick up nuance and subtle emotion. And when I was brainstorming about a difficult problem, I stuck with it. Nothing else was competing for my attention, so I was able to settle into the one thing I was doing.

6. **There was no downside.** I lost nothing by not multitasking. No projects were left unfinished. No one became frustrated with me for not answering a call or failing to return an e-mail the second I received it.

So how do we resist the temptation to multitask?

Turn off interruptions

Often I write at 6 AM, when there's nothing to distract me. I shut down my computer's wireless connection and turn off my phone. In my car, I leave my phone in the trunk. Drastic? Maybe. But most of us shouldn't trust ourselves.

Prioritize

Say you're the only person with information that your team needs in order to move forward with a time-sensitive project, but you're on an important conference call. What do you do? Decide which task is more important to focus on and ask the other one to wait. Making a conscious choice to interrupt one task for another is better than trying to do them at the same time. So either excuse yourself from the conference call for a moment, or tell your team to wait until you're done.

Use your loss of patience to your advantage

Create unrealistically short deadlines. Cut all meetings in half. Give yourself a third of the time you think you need to accomplish something.

There's nothing like a deadline to keep things moving. And when things are moving fast, we can't help but focus on them. If it turns out you only have 30 minutes to finish a presentation you thought would take an hour, are you really going to answer your cell phone?

Because multitasking is so stressful, single-tasking to meet a tight deadline will actually reduce your stress. And giving yourself less time to do things may make you even more productive and relaxed.

Peter Bregman is a strategic adviser to CEOs and their leadership teams. His latest book is *18 Minutes: Find Your Focus, Master Distraction, and Get the Right Things Done*.

Chapter 11

How to Stay Focused on What's Important

by Gina Trapani

Most of us spend our workdays in one of two ways: reacting to urgent demands, or proactively focusing on what we decided ahead of time are our most critical tasks to accomplish. The best way to be productive is to mitigate the urgent to work on the important.

What's the difference between urgent and important?

“Urgent” tasks include things like:

- Frantic e-mails that need a response “right now”
- Sudden requests that seem like they'll take only two minutes but instead take an hour

Adapted from content posted on hbr.org on February 18, 2009.

Organize Your Time

- Putting out fires—especially others’
- Fixing the day’s crisis rather than stepping back to consider what will solve the chronic problem
- Tasks you’d rather do first because they’re less intimidating than your priorities

We’re drawn to these seemingly “urgent” tasks because they keep us busy and make us feel needed and essential. If we label projects as urgent, it justifies the time and attention we throw at them.

But dealing with a constant stream of “urgent” tasks leaves you wrung out at the end of the day, wondering where all your time went, staring at the important work you’ve yet to start, much less complete.

On the flip side, important work:

- Moves you and your business toward long-term goals
- Can be hard work that feels scary because you’re not confident you can actually do it
- May not give you that same shot of adrenaline that “urgent” requests do

If your workplace encourages constant, frantic headless-chicken running, it can feel impossible to focus on what’s actually important versus what seems urgent. Still, an awareness of the difference and a few simple techniques can help. Here are three.

Choose three important tasks to complete each day

Write them down on a slip of paper and keep it visible on your desk. If, for example, you're tempted to respond to an e-mail notification, check your list and remember that that "ding" probably has nothing to do with your most critical work. When you have an unexpected hour thanks to a canceled meeting, move forward on those three important tasks.

Turn off your e-mail

Shut down Outlook, turn off e-mail notifications on your mobile, and do whatever else you have to do to muffle e-mail interruptions. When you decide to work on one of your important tasks, give yourself at least an hour of uninterrupted time to complete it. If the Web is too much of a temptation, disconnect your computer from the Internet for that hour.

Set up a weekly 20-minute meeting with yourself

Put it on your calendar, and don't book over it—treat it with the same respect you'd treat a meeting with your boss. If you don't have an office door or you work in a busy open area, book a conference room. Go there to be alone. Bring your project list, to-do list, and calendar, and spend the time reviewing what you finished in the past week and what you want to get done next week. This is a great time to choose your daily three important tasks. Productivity author David Allen refers to this as

Organize Your Time

the “weekly review,” and it’s one of the most effective ways to be mindful of how you’re spending your time.

For other ideas on how to tackle your day, see “Power Through Your Day in 90-Minute Cycles” (later in this guide) and “A Practical Plan for When You Feel Overwhelmed” (earlier in this guide).

Gina Trapani is the founding editor of the personal productivity blog Lifehacker.com.

Chapter 12

To-Do Lists That Work

by Gina Trapani

Here's how to write to-do lists that work:

1. **Break it down.** Take a task and carve it into bite-sized chunks. Then break it down some more. Don't confuse to-do's with goals or projects. A to-do is a single, specific action that will move a project toward completion. It's just one step. For example, "Plan the committee lunch" is a project. "E-mail Karen to get catering contact" is a to-do.

Breaking down your task into the smallest possible actions forces you to think through each step up front. With the thinking out of the way, it's easy to dash off that e-mail, make

that call, or file that report, and move your work along with much less resistance.

2. Use specific action verbs and include details

You're overdue for a check-in with your mentor, but the "Lunch with Judy" to-do just hasn't gotten done. When you write down that task, use an action verb (call? e-mail?) and include whatever details your future self needs to check it off. "Call Judy at 555-4567 for lunch on January 17, 18, or 19" is a specific, detailed to-do.

Make your to-do's small and specific to set yourself up for that glorious moment when you can cross them off your list as *DONE*.

Here are some more tips for effective to-do lists from the hbr.org community.

- Bucket your work in any way that makes sense for you (for example, work/home/freelance); by area of responsibility (Smith account/Culver account/web team); by difficulty level (group all of your "easy" five-minute tasks together so when you have spare time, you can quickly spot them and knock a few off). Give each bucket its own column.
- Deliberately use a small-trim book or paper (6" × 9") to keep your list short or a distinctive size (like an 8.5" × 11" piece of paper folded in half) that makes it stand out from other papers you carry.

- Make a two-view list. Two lists, with the same to-do's, but one organized by buckets, one by week. Bonus: You get the joy of crossing off one task in *TWO* places.
- Pick a medium that works for you: a notebook you love (for example, Moleskine); a web-based app that syncs on your mobile and computer, wherever you are; your mobile's voice-memo function.
- Make notes in the margin or beside an item to mark when it's due (M or 2/16).
- Highlight your top-priority items or put a bright-colored sticky with your top three things to do for the day on top of your longer list/buckets.
- Build in rewards. For example, for every three things you cross off your work list, allow yourself to do one home/personal task; or for every one difficult work task you accomplish, reward yourself with three easy or fun work ones.
- Rewrite your list every other day or so to help you reprioritize.
- When a task is done, check off a box or cross off the item with a fat marker—whatever gives you the most satisfaction.

Gina Trapani is the founding editor of the personal productivity blog Lifehacker.com.

Chapter 13

How to Tackle Your To-Do List

by Peter Bregman

For many of us, our to-do list has become more of a guilt list: an inventory of everything we want to do and really should do, but never get to. And the longer the list, the less likely we'll get to everything on it, and the more stressed we become.

So how do we turn *intention* into *action*?

It's the power of when and where.

Decide when and where you'll do something, and the likelihood that you'll follow through increases dramatically. The reason we're always left with unfinished items on our to-do lists is because they're the wrong tool to drive our accomplishments. A list is useful as a *collection* tool—to ensure we know the pool of things that we need to do.

Adapted from content posted on hbr.org on March 2, 2011.

A calendar, on the other hand, is the perfect tool to guide our daily accomplishments. A calendar is finite; there are only so many available hours. This becomes clear the instant we try to cram an unrealistic number of things into any one day.

Once you have your to-do list, open your calendar and decide when and where you're going to do each item. Schedule each task for a specific time, placing the most challenging and important items at the beginning of the day—before even checking your e-mail.

Since your entire to-do list won't fit into your calendar, prioritize. What do you really need to do today? What important items have you been ignoring? Where can you slot them into your schedule? Once you schedule an item, cross it off your list.

Transferring items from your to-do list to your calendar will help you make strategic choices about where you spend your time, but it will also leave you with a long list of items that didn't fit into your calendar for the day.

What do you do with those things?

I created a three-day rule to prevent items from haunting me indefinitely.

Here's what I do: After I've filled my calendar for the day, I review what's left on the list. I leave new items, those I just added that day or in the previous two days, on the list to see if they make it onto my calendar the following day.

But for everything else—anything that's been on my calendar for three days—I do one of four things:

1. **Do it immediately.** I'm often amazed at how many things have been sitting on my list for

days that, when I finally decide to do them, take no time at all. Often they turn out to be 30-second voice mails or two-minute e-mails.

2. **Schedule it.** For those things that I don't do immediately, I look for a time to slot them into my calendar, even if it's six months away. If it's important enough for me to have on my list, then I need to commit to doing it at a specific time and day. I can always change my plan when I review my calendar for that day, but if I want to do it, I need to schedule it.
3. **Let it go.** That's a nice way of saying delete the to-do. If I'm not willing to do something immediately or schedule it for a specific time and day, I won't ever do it. I face the reality that while I might like these things to be priorities, they currently aren't.
4. **Add it to a someday/maybe list.** Sometimes it's too hard to delete something. I don't want to admit that I'm not going to do it. And I want to remember that I think, someday, maybe it would be a good idea. So I put those items in a someday/maybe list, which I learned about from David Allen, author of *Getting Things Done*. It's where I put things to slowly die. I rarely, if ever, do things on this list. I look at it occasionally, get rid of the items that are no longer relevant, and then put the list away for another month. I probably could delete everything on this list, but I sleep a little better

knowing I can put things on it when I'm not courageous or guilt-free enough to do away with them right off the bat. And who knows? Perhaps someday, maybe, I'll do something on that list.

Peter Bregman is a strategic adviser to CEOs and their leadership teams. His latest book is *18 Minutes: Find Your Focus, Master Distraction, and Get the Right Things Done*.

Chapter 14

Reward Yourself for Doing Dreaded Tasks

by Alexandra Samuel

For some of us, checking off each item on our to-do lists provides the endorphin rush we need to make task completion an intrinsic joy. But most of us need a little extra motivation, especially for boring work like recording billable hours, uncomfortable tasks like facing awkward conversations with dissatisfied clients, or major projects like writing a complex case study. Setting up a compelling reward system can help you power through your to-dos.

Here are some types of rewards to consider:

Regenerative

By rewarding yourself in a way that recharges your body and brain, you'll give yourself more energy to tackle your next task or project. Use these brief rewards midmorning,

midafternoon, or midproject to help maintain your momentum. Examples of regenerative rewards include:

- Meditating for 20 minutes in a secluded spot
- Using your lunch hour to treat yourself to a yoga class, run, or walk
- Doing 5 to 10 minutes of stretches in your office, guided by a video on your computer or iPad
- Talking with a good friend for 5 or 10 minutes
- Treating yourself to a second cup of coffee or a snack after an hour of focused work

Productive

Often—hopefully—work is rewarding in and of itself: meeting with colleagues you respect and enjoy or crafting a PowerPoint deck that incorporates self-deprecating humor or favorite photographs. Use these aspects of your job as rewards for completing something more difficult or tedious. Other examples of productive rewards include:

- Reading a popular business book or article
- Taking a working meeting to a good restaurant
- Installing or tweaking a piece of software you've been eager to use
- Reading/posting an article you think your colleagues/clients would enjoy to Twitter, LinkedIn, or Google+
- Cleaning your desk

Concurrent

Some tasks are so odious or boring that even the prospect of a pint of ice cream can't help you face them. These tasks call for a concurrent reward: something you do *while* working so that you can bear to plow through your in-box backlog or complete your quarterly budget report.

This type of reward works especially well for tasks that are time-consuming but not concentration-intensive. You can make even difficult tasks that require your full concentration more pleasant in the right setting. Some concurrent rewards include:

- Setting up camp in a Wi-Fi-enabled restaurant so you can eat while you work
- Making a work date with a friend so you can chat while you purge your e-mail in-boxes
- Storing up mindless tasks to complete while watching your favorite TV show at home
- Downloading some new music to listen to while you purge your files
- Making arrangements to work from home for the day

Cumulative

Establish a special-purpose account to pay into every time you complete an especially challenging or large project. Set different dollar values depending on the size and unpleasantness of the task. Examples include:

Organize Your Time

- An iTunes account
- A replenishable gift card to your favorite coffee shop or store
- A PayPal account you can refill with quick micropayments to treat yourself to some online shopping
- A discretionary savings account that you use to fund something significant like tickets to a sports or arts event

You'll know your reward system is working when your to-do list no longer includes tasks you've been avoiding for weeks, or when you find yourself racing to complete your least-favorite work so that you can get to that delicious brownie, fantastic concert, or backlog of *Mad Men* episodes.

Alexandra Samuel is the Director of the Social + Interactive Media Centre at Emily Carr University, and the co-founder of Social Signal, a Vancouver-based social media agency. You can follow Alex on Twitter at @awsamuel or her blog at alexandrasamuel.com.

Section 4

Delegate Effectively

Chapter 15

Management Time

Who's Got the Monkey?

*A summary of the full-length HBR article by **William Oncken, Jr.**, and **Donald L. Wass**, highlighting key ideas, with commentary by **Stephen R. Covey**.*

THE IDEA IN BRIEF

You're racing down the hall. An employee stops you and says, "We've got a problem." You assume you should get involved but can't make an on-the-spot decision. You say, "Let me think about it."

You've just allowed a "monkey" to leap from your employee's back to yours. You're now working for the person who works for you. Take on enough monkeys, and you won't have time to focus on your own priorities.

How do you avoid accumulating monkeys? Develop your employees' initiative. For example, when one of your people tries to hand you a problem, clarify whether he should: recommend and then implement a solution; take action, then brief you immediately; or act and report the outcome at a regular update.

When you encourage your employees to handle their own monkeys, they acquire new skills—and you gain time to do your own job.

THE IDEA IN PRACTICE

How do you return monkeys to their proper owners? Try these tactics:

Make Appointments to Deal with Monkeys

Avoid discussing any monkey on an ad hoc basis—for example, when you pass an employee in the hall. You won't convey the proper seriousness. Instead, have your employee schedule an appointment to discuss the issue.

Specify Level of Initiative

Your employees can exercise five levels of initiative in handling on-the-job problems. From lowest to highest, the levels are:

1. Wait until told what to do.
2. Ask what to do.

3. Recommend an action, then with your approval, implement it.
4. Take independent action but advise you at once.
5. Take independent action and update you at an agreed-on time; for example, your weekly meeting.

When an employee brings a problem to you, outlaw use of level 1 or 2. Agree on and assign level 3, 4, or 5 to the monkey. Take no more than 15 minutes to discuss the problem.

Agree on a Status Update

After deciding how to proceed, agree on a time and place when the employee will give you a progress report.

Develop Employees' Skills

Employees try to hand off monkeys when they lack the desire or ability to handle them. Help employees develop needed problem-solving skills. It's initially more time-consuming than tackling problems yourself—but it saves time in the long run.

Foster Trust

Developing employees' initiative requires a trusting relationship. If they're afraid of failing, they'll keep bringing their monkeys to you rather than working to solve their own problems. To promote trust, reassure them that it's safe to make mistakes.

Why is it that managers are typically running out of time while their subordinates are typically running out of work? Here we shall explore the meaning of management time as it relates to the interaction between managers and their bosses, their peers, and their subordinates.

Specifically, we shall deal with three kinds of management time:

Boss-imposed time—used to accomplish those activities that the boss requires and that the manager cannot disregard without direct and swift penalty.

System-imposed time—used to accommodate requests from peers for active support. Neglecting these requests will also result in penalties, though not always as direct or swift.

Self-imposed time—used to do those things that the manager originates or agrees to do. A certain portion of this kind of time, however, will be taken by subordinates and is called subordinate-imposed time. The remaining portion will be the manager's own and is called discretionary time. Self-imposed time is not subject to penalty since neither the boss nor the system can discipline the manager for not doing what they didn't know he had intended to do in the first place.

To accommodate those demands, managers need to control the timing and the content of what they do. Since what their bosses and the system impose on them are subject to penalty, managers cannot tamper with those

requirements. Thus their self-imposed time becomes their major area of concern.

Managers should try to increase the discretionary component of their self-imposed time by minimizing or doing away with the subordinate component. They will then use the added increment to get better control over their boss-imposed and system-imposed activities. Most managers spend much more time dealing with subordinates' problems than they even faintly realize. Hence we shall use the monkey-on-the-back metaphor to examine how subordinate-imposed time comes into being and what the superior can do about it.

Where Is the Monkey?

Let us imagine that a manager is walking down the hall and that he notices one of his subordinates, Jones, coming his way. When the two meet, Jones greets the manager with, "Good morning. By the way, we've got a problem. You see" As Jones continues, the manager recognizes in this problem the two characteristics common to all the problems his subordinates gratuitously bring to his attention. Namely, the manager knows (a) enough to get involved, but (b) not enough to make the on-the-spot decision expected of him. Eventually, the manager says, "So glad you brought this up. I'm in a rush right now. Meanwhile, let me think about it, and I'll let you know." Then he and Jones part company.

Let us analyze what just happened. Before the two of them met, on whose back was the "monkey"? The subordinate's. After they parted, on whose back was it? The

manager's. Subordinate-imposed time begins the moment a monkey successfully leaps from the back of a subordinate to the back of his or her superior and does not end until the monkey is returned to its proper owner for care and feeding. In accepting the monkey, the manager has voluntarily assumed a position subordinate to his subordinate. That is, he has allowed Jones to make him her subordinate by doing two things a subordinate is generally expected to do for a boss—the manager has accepted a responsibility from his subordinate, and the manager has promised her a progress report.

The subordinate, to make sure the manager does not miss this point, will later stick her head in the manager's office and cheerily query, "How's it coming?" (This is called supervision.)

Or let us imagine in concluding a conference with Johnson, another subordinate, the manager's parting words are, "Fine. Send me a memo on that."

Let us analyze this one. The monkey is now on the subordinate's back because the next move is his, but it is poised for a leap. Watch that monkey. Johnson dutifully writes the requested memo and drops it in his out-basket. Shortly thereafter, the manager plucks it from his in-basket and reads it. Whose move is it now? The manager's. If he does not make that move soon, he will get a follow-up memo from the subordinate. (This is another form of supervision.) The longer the manager delays, the more frustrated the subordinate will become (he'll be spinning his wheels) and the more guilty the manager will feel (his backlog of subordinate-imposed time will be mounting).

Or suppose once again that at a meeting with a third subordinate, Smith, the manager agrees to provide all the necessary backing for a public relations proposal he has just asked Smith to develop. The manager's parting words to her are, "Just let me know how I can help."

Now let us analyze this. Again the monkey is initially on the subordinate's back. But for how long? Smith realizes that she cannot let the manager "know" until her proposal has the manager's approval. And from experience, she also realizes that her proposal will likely be sitting in the manager's briefcase for weeks before he eventually gets to it. Who's really got the monkey? Who will be checking up on whom? Wheel spinning and bottlenecks are well on their way again.

A fourth subordinate, Reed, has just been transferred from another part of the company so that he can launch and eventually manage a newly created business venture. The manager has said they should get together soon to hammer out a set of objectives for the new job, adding, "I will draw up an initial draft for discussion with you."

Let us analyze this one, too. The subordinate has the new job (by formal assignment) and the full responsibility (by formal delegation), but the manager has the next move. Until he makes it, he will have the monkey, and the subordinate will be immobilized.

Why does all of this happen? Because in each instance the manager and the subordinate assume at the outset, wittingly or unwittingly, that the matter under consideration is a joint problem. The monkey in each case begins its career astride both their backs. All it has to do is

MAKING TIME FOR GORILLAS

by Stephen R. Covey

When Bill Oncken wrote this article in 1974, managers were in a terrible bind. They were desperate for a way to free up their time, but command and control was the status quo. Managers felt they weren't allowed to empower their subordinates to make decisions. Too dangerous. Too risky. That's why Oncken's message—give the monkey back to its rightful owner—involved a critically important paradigm shift. Many managers working today owe him a debt of gratitude.

It is something of an understatement, however, to observe that much has changed since Oncken's radical recommendation. Command and control as a management philosophy is all but dead, and "empowerment" is the word of the day in most organizations trying to thrive in global, intensely competitive markets. But command and control stubbornly remains a common practice. Management thinkers and executives have discovered in the last decade that bosses cannot just give a monkey back to their subordinates and then merrily get on with their own business. Empowering subordinates is hard and complicated work.

The reason: when you give problems back to subordinates to solve themselves, you have to be sure that they have both the desire and the ability to do so. As every executive knows, that isn't always the case. Enter a whole new set of problems. Empowerment often means you have to develop people, which is initially

much more time consuming than solving the problem on your own.

Just as important, empowerment can only thrive when the whole organization buys into it—when formal systems and the informal culture support it. Managers need to be rewarded for delegating decisions and developing people. Otherwise, the degree of real empowerment in an organization will vary according to the beliefs and practices of individual managers.

But perhaps the most important lesson about empowerment is that effective delegation—the kind Oncken advocated—depends on a trusting relationship between a manager and his subordinate. Oncken's message may have been ahead of his time, but what he suggested was still a fairly dictatorial solution. He basically told bosses, "Give the problem back!" Today, we know that this approach by itself is too authoritarian. To delegate effectively, executives need to establish a running dialogue with subordinates. They need to establish a partnership. After all, if subordinates are afraid of failing in front of their boss, they'll keep coming back for help rather than truly take initiative.

Oncken's article also doesn't address an aspect of delegation that has greatly interested me during the past two decades—that many managers are actually *eager* to take on their subordinates' monkeys. Nearly all the managers I talk with agree that their people are underutilized in their present jobs. But even some of the most success-

(continued)

(continued)

ful, seemingly self-assured executives have talked about how hard it is to give up control to their subordinates.

I've come to attribute that eagerness for control to a common, deep-seated belief that rewards in life are scarce and fragile. Whether they learn it from their family, school, or athletics, many people establish an identity by comparing themselves with others. When they see others gain power, information, money, or recognition, for instance, they experience what the psychologist Abraham Maslow called "a feeling of deficiency"—a sense that something is being taken from them. That makes it hard for them to be genuinely happy about the success of others—even of their loved ones. Oncken implies that managers can easily give back or refuse monkeys, but many managers may subconsciously fear that a subordinate taking the initiative will make them appear a little less strong and a little more vulnerable.

How, then, do managers develop the inward security, the mentality of "abundance," that would enable them to relinquish control and seek the growth and development of those around them? The work I've done with numerous organizations suggests that managers who live with integrity according to a principle-based value system are most likely to sustain an empowering style of leadership.

Given the times in which he wrote, it was no wonder that Oncken's message resonated with managers. But it was reinforced by Oncken's wonderful gift for

storytelling. I got to know Oncken on the speaker's circuit in the 1970s, and I was always impressed by how he dramatized his ideas in colorful detail. Like the Dilbert comic strip, Oncken had a tongue-in-cheek style that got to the core of managers' frustrations and made them want to take back control of their time. And the monkey on your back wasn't just a metaphor for Oncken—it was his personal symbol. I saw him several times walking through airports with a stuffed monkey on his shoulder.

I'm not surprised that his article is one of the two best-selling HBR articles ever. Even with all we know about empowerment, its vivid message is even more important and relevant now than it was 25 years ago. Indeed, Oncken's insight is a basis for my own work on time management, in which I have people categorize their activities according to urgency and importance. I've heard from executives again and again that half or more of their time is spent on matters that are urgent but not important. They're trapped in an endless cycle of dealing with other people's monkeys, yet they're reluctant to help those people take their own initiative. As a result, they're often too busy to spend the time they need on the real gorillas in their organization. Oncken's article remains a powerful wake-up call for managers who need to delegate effectively.

Stephen R. Covey is vice chairman of the Franklin Covey Company, a global provider of leadership development and productivity services and products. He is the author of *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (Simon & Schuster, 1989) and *First Things First* (Simon & Schuster, 1994).

move the wrong leg, and—presto!—the subordinate deftly disappears.

The manager is thus left with another acquisition for his menagerie. Of course, monkeys can be trained not to move the wrong leg. But it is easier to prevent them from straddling backs in the first place.

Who Is Working for Whom?

Let us suppose that these same four subordinates are so thoughtful and considerate of their superior's time that they take pains to allow no more than three monkeys to leap from each of their backs to his in any one day. In a five-day week, the manager will have picked up 60 screaming monkeys—far too many to do anything about them individually. So he spends his subordinate-imposed time juggling his “priorities.”

Late Friday afternoon, the manager is in his office with the door closed for privacy so he can contemplate the situation, while his subordinates are waiting outside to get their last chance before the weekend to remind him that he will have to “fish or cut bait.” Imagine what they are saying to one another about the manager as they wait: “What a bottleneck. He just can't make up his mind. How anyone ever got that high up in our company without being able to make a decision we'll never know.”

Worst of all, the reason the manager cannot make any of these “next moves” is that his time is almost entirely eaten up by meeting his own boss-imposed and system-imposed requirements. To control those tasks, he needs discretionary time that is in turn denied him when he

is preoccupied with all these monkeys. The manager is caught in a vicious circle. But time is a-wasting (an understatement). The manager calls his secretary on the intercom and instructs her to tell his subordinates that he won't be able to see them until Monday morning. At 7 PM, he drives home, intending with firm resolve to return to the office tomorrow to get caught up over the weekend. He returns bright and early the next day only to see, on the nearest green of the golf course across from his office window, a foursome. Guess who?

That does it. He now knows who is really working for whom. Moreover, he now sees that if he actually accomplishes during this weekend what he came to accomplish, his subordinates' morale will go up so sharply that they will each raise the limit on the number of monkeys they will let jump from their backs to his. In short, he now sees, with the clarity of a revelation on a mountaintop, that the more he gets caught up, the more he will fall behind.

He leaves the office with the speed of a person running away from a plague. His plan? To get caught up on something else he hasn't had time for in years: a weekend with his family. (This is one of the many varieties of discretionary time.)

Sunday night he enjoys ten hours of sweet, untroubled slumber, because he has clear-cut plans for Monday. He is going to get rid of his subordinate-imposed time. In exchange, he will get an equal amount of discretionary time, part of which he will spend with his subordinates to make sure that they learn the difficult but rewarding managerial art called "The Care and Feeding of Monkeys."

The manager will also have plenty of discretionary time left over for getting control of the timing and the content not only of his boss-imposed time but also of his system-imposed time. It may take months, but compared with the way things have been, the rewards will be enormous. His ultimate objective is to manage his time.

Getting Rid of the Monkeys

The manager returns to the office Monday morning just late enough so that his four subordinates have collected outside his office waiting to see him about their monkeys. He calls them in one by one. The purpose of each interview is to take a monkey, place it on the desk between them, and figure out together how the next move might conceivably be the subordinate's. For certain monkeys, that will take some doing. The subordinate's next move may be so elusive that the manager may decide—just for now—merely to let the monkey sleep on the subordinate's back overnight and have him or her return with it at an appointed time the next morning to continue the joint quest for a more substantive move by the subordinate. (Monkeys sleep just as soundly overnight on subordinates' backs as they do on superiors'.)

As each subordinate leaves the office, the manager is rewarded by the sight of a monkey leaving his office on the subordinate's back. For the next 24 hours, the subordinate will not be waiting for the manager; instead, the manager will be waiting for the subordinate.

Later, as if to remind himself that there is no law against his engaging in a constructive exercise in the interim, the manager strolls by the subordinate's office, sticks his

head in the door, and cheerily asks, "How's it coming?" (The time consumed in doing this is discretionary for the manager and boss imposed for the subordinate.)

When the subordinate (with the monkey on his or her back) and the manager meet at the appointed hour the next day, the manager explains the ground rules in words to this effect:

At no time while I am helping you with this or any other problem will your problem become my problem. The instant your problem becomes mine, you no longer have a problem. I cannot help a person who hasn't got a problem.

When this meeting is over, the problem will leave this office exactly the way it came in—on your back. You may ask my help at any appointed time, and we will make a joint determination of what the next move will be and which of us will make it.

In those rare instances where the next move turns out to be mine, you and I will determine it together. I will not make any move alone.

The manager follows this same line of thought with each subordinate until about 11 AM, when he realizes that he doesn't have to close his door. His monkeys are gone. They will return—but by appointment only. His calendar will assure this.

Transferring the Initiative

What we have been driving at in this monkey-on-the-back analogy is that managers can transfer initiative back

THE DELEGATION CHECKLIST

by Peter Bregman

When it comes to delegating effectively, communication is key. Most of us think we communicate well, which is why we often inadvertently leave out important information. Sometimes we assume that the people to whom we're delegating share our understanding. Or we resist clarifying something because we don't want to insult the person.

Thankfully, there's a simple solution to ensure projects you delegate will transfer well: Create a checklist and use it during every handoff.

Before you pass off a project, complete the delegation checklist with the person who'll be taking on the responsibility. Reviewing the list together ensures that you transfer all important information. With the following questions as a starting point, add or delete some to suit your particular situation. It takes no longer than 10 minutes to complete the checklist, but it could save you countless dropped balls and service failures.

to their subordinates and keep it there. We have tried to highlight a truism as obvious as it is subtle: namely, before developing initiative in subordinates, the manager must see to it that they *have* the initiative. Once the manager takes it back, he will no longer have it and he can kiss his discretionary time good-bye. It will all revert to subordinate-imposed time.

Delegation Checklist

- What do you understand the priorities of this project to be?
- What are your next key steps, and by when do you plan to accomplish them?
- What key contingencies should you plan for now?
- When will you next check in with me on progress/issues?
- Who else needs to know our plans, and how will you communicate them?
- What concerns or ideas do you have that we haven't already discussed?

Adapted from content posted on hbr.org on January 25, 2011.

Peter Bregman is a strategic adviser to CEOs and their leadership teams. His latest book is *18 Minutes: Find Your Focus, Master Distraction, and Get the Right Things Done*.

Nor can the manager and the subordinate effectively have the same initiative at the same time. The opener, “Boss, we’ve got a problem,” implies this duality and represents, as noted earlier, a monkey astride two backs, which is a very bad way to start a monkey on its career. Let us, therefore, take a few moments to examine what we call “The Anatomy of Managerial Initiative.”

Delegate Effectively

There are five degrees of initiative that the manager can exercise in relation to the boss and to the system:

1. wait until told (lowest initiative);
2. ask what to do;
3. recommend, then take resulting action;
4. act, but advise at once;
5. and act on own, then routinely report (highest initiative).

Clearly, the manager should be professional enough not to indulge in initiatives 1 and 2 in relation either to

TIPS FOR DELEGATING EFFECTIVELY

- Recognize the capabilities of your employees and trust their ability to get the job done.
- Consider delegation a development opportunity—a way to broaden your people's skills.
- Focus on results and let go of your need to get involved in *how* tasks are accomplished.
- Explain assignments clearly and provide resources needed for successful completion.
- Always delegate to the lowest possible level to make the best use of staff resources.

Adapted from *Pocket Mentor: Managing Projects* (product #1878), Harvard Business Review Press, 2006.

the boss or to the system. A manager who uses initiative 1 has no control over either the timing or the content of boss-imposed or system-imposed time and thereby forfeits any right to complain about what he or she is told to do or when. The manager who uses initiative 2 has control over the timing but not over the content. Initiatives 3, 4, and 5 leave the manager in control of both, with the greatest amount of control being exercised at level 5.

In relation to subordinates, the manager's job is two-fold. First, to outlaw the use of initiatives 1 and 2, thus giving subordinates no choice but to learn and master "Completed Staff Work." Second, to see that for each problem leaving his or her office there is an agreed-upon level of initiative assigned to it, in addition to an agreed-upon time and place for the next manager-subordinate conference. The latter should be duly noted on the manager's calendar.

The Care and Feeding of Monkeys

To further clarify our analogy between the monkey on the back and the processes of assigning and controlling, we shall refer briefly to the manager's appointment schedule, which calls for five hard-and-fast rules governing the "Care and Feeding of Monkeys." (Violation of these rules will cost discretionary time.)

Rule 1

Monkeys should be fed or shot. Otherwise, they will starve to death, and the manager will waste valuable time on postmortems or attempted resurrections.

Rule 2

The monkey population should be kept below the maximum number the manager has time to feed. Subordinates will find time to work as many monkeys as he or she finds time to feed, but no more. It shouldn't take more than five to 15 minutes to feed a properly maintained monkey.

Rule 3

Monkeys should be fed by appointment only. The manager should not have to hunt down starving monkeys and feed them on a catch-as-catch-can basis.

Rule 4

Monkeys should be fed face to face or by telephone, but never by mail. (Remember—with mail, the next move will be the manager's.) Documentation may add to the feeding process, but it cannot take the place of feeding.

Rule 5

Every monkey should have an assigned next feeding time and degree of initiative. These may be revised at any time by mutual consent but never allowed to become vague or indefinite. Otherwise, the monkey will either starve to death or wind up on the manager's back.

“Get control over the timing and content of what you do” is appropriate advice for managing time. The first order of business is for the manager to enlarge his or her discretionary time by eliminating subordinate-imposed time.

The second is for the manager to use a portion of this newfound discretionary time to see to it that each subordinate actually has the initiative and applies it. The third is for the manager to use another portion of the increased discretionary time to get and keep control of the timing and content of both boss-imposed and system-imposed time. All these steps will increase the manager's leverage and enable the value of each hour spent in managing management time to multiply without theoretical limit.

William Oncken, Jr., was chairman of the William Oncken Corporation until his death in 1988. His son, William Oncken III, now heads the company. **Donald L. Wass** was president of the William Oncken Company of Texas when the article first appeared. He now heads the Dallas-Fort Worth region of The Executive Committee (TEC), an international organization for presidents and CEOs.

Chapter 16

Levels of Delegation

by **Linda A. Hill and Kent Lineback**

If you think that delegation is appropriate only for employees who've already demonstrated complete competence in an area, then you may be trapped in this vicious cycle: Until your employee has the opportunity to perform an activity by herself, she'll never develop the necessary skill and experience to do it well. But until she does it well, you'll continue to believe that you must be involved—either by performing the task yourself or by micromanaging her so closely she never learns to do it independently.

Here's a way to think about delegation as three levels corresponding to your direct reports' increasing levels of competence:

Delegation level 1 Low delegation—high control	Delegation level 2 Moderate delegation—moderate control	Delegation level 3 High delegation—low control
Use with someone about to do work he's never or rarely done before	Use with someone who has some experience, perhaps someone who's observed others and should be ready to act on her own	Use with someone who has actually demonstrated competence
Prep: Here the problem is more likely one of skill versus will, so describe how to do the work and coach him through the steps involved. Make clear the boundaries: budget, strategy, policy, and so on. If appropriate, take him through practice runs. If the problem is also one of will, set the activity in the context of the team's work and its purpose and goals. Make sure he understands the consequences of possible outcomes.	Prep: Ask her to describe her plan for doing the work and the various "What . . . ?" questions. Satisfy yourself that she's well prepared and ready. Explain constraints or boundaries. Agree on what constitutes success. Coach as necessary. Make sure she understands the reason for doing the work and why it's important. See whether she can link to team purpose and goals.	Prep: Leave the prep to him. Involve yourself only if the work—say, a discussion he will have with an important prospective customer—is unusually important to team purpose and goals. If it is, ask for his preparatory thinking. Provide clear direction and boundaries. Agree on success. Here the issue may be more one of will than skill, so make sure he understands the importance and consequences of the action.
Do: At first, you do the work as he observes. If the consequences of failure are low, you could observe while he performs the task.	Do: Let her do the work, perhaps with you present observing, perhaps alone, depending on the situation and your judgment of her readiness.	Do: He conducts the discussion without your involvement or presence.
Review: Walk through what you (or he) did. Answer questions. Identify lessons. Have him describe how he would do it next time.	Review: Ask for her self-assessment of how it went, in terms of both skill and will. What went well and what could be improved? Then, if you were present, give your assessment and discuss any differences. Identify lessons. Focus on tangible outcomes and specific behaviors. If you couldn't be present, ask others who were there. Reach agreement with her about what should be different or better next time.	Review: If this was routine work and it had a good or expected outcome, you won't have a review discussion except as part of a periodic general performance review. If it was more than routine work or the outcome was unexpected, ask for his self-assessment of what happened and what might be learned from it.

Section 5

Create Rituals

Chapter 17

Ritual

How to Get Important Work Done

by Tony Schwartz

Most of us feel pulled in more directions than ever, expected to work longer hours, and asked to get more done, often with fewer resources. But we also know people who get lots done, including the important stuff, and still manage to have lives.

What have they figured out that the rest of us haven't?

The answer, surprisingly, isn't that they have more will or discipline than we do. The counterintuitive secret to getting things done is to make them more automatic, so they require less energy.

How do we do that? By developing **rituals—highly specific behaviors, done at precise times, so they**

Adapted from content posted on hbr.org on May 24, 2011.

eventually become automatic and no longer require conscious will or discipline. Decide what behavior you want to change, design the ritual you'll undertake, and then get out of your own way.

Over the past decade, I've built a series of rituals into my daily schedule to make sure that I get to the most important things—and that I don't get derailed by the endlessly alluring trivia of everyday life.

Here are four of the rituals that have made the biggest difference to me:

1. **Going to bed at the same time every night.** This ritual ensures that I get eight hours of sleep. Nothing is more critical to the way I feel every day. If I'm flying somewhere and know I'll arrive too late to get my eight hours, I make it a priority to make up the hours I need on the plane.
2. **Working out as soon as I wake up.** Since exercise has a huge impact on how I feel all day long, this ritual ensures that I work out even when I don't feel like it.
3. **Launching my workday by focusing first on whatever I've decided the night before is my most important activity.** Then I take a break after 90 minutes to refuel. Today—which happens to be a Sunday—this blog was my priority. My break was playing tennis for an hour. During the week it might be chatting with a colleague for a few minutes or getting a snack. (Working

in 90-minute segments throughout your day can be another useful ritual to develop. See the next article, “Power Through Your Day in 90-Minute Cycles,” to learn more.)

4. **Immediately writing down on a list any idea or task that occurs to me over the course of the day.** Once it's on paper, it means I don't walk around feeling preoccupied by it—or risk forgetting it.

Obviously, I'm human and fallible, so I don't perform every one of these rituals every day. But when I do miss one, I pay the price, and feel even more pulled to it the next day.

Tony Schwartz is the president and CEO of The Energy Project and the author of *Be Excellent at Anything*. Become a fan of The Energy Project and connect with Tony on Twitter at @tonyschwartz and @energy_project.

Chapter 18

Power Through Your Day in 90-Minute Cycles

by Tony Schwartz

For nearly a decade, I've begun my workdays by focusing for 90 minutes, uninterrupted, on the task I decide the night before is the most important to tackle the following day. After 90 minutes, I take a break. When my break is up, I begin the cycle again.

To make this possible, I turn off my e-mail while I'm working, close unnecessary windows on my computer, and let the phone go to voice mail.

I typically get more work done and feel more satisfied than I do for any comparable period of time the rest of the day. It can be tough on some days to fully focus

Adapted from content posted on hbr.org on May 24, 2011.

for 90 minutes, but I always have a clear stopping time, which makes it easier.

I launched this practice because my energy, will, and capacity for intense focus diminish as the day wears on. Anything really challenging that I put off tends not to get done, and it's the most difficult work that generally produces the greatest value. Usually, that means a challenge that is "important but not urgent," to use Steven Covey's language. These are precisely the types of activities we most often postpone in favor of those that are more urgent, easier to accomplish, or provide more immediate gratification. (See "How to Stay Focused on What's Important," earlier in this guide.)

I first made this discovery while writing a book. At the time, I'd written three previous books. For each one, I'd dutifully sit down at my desk at 7 AM and I'd often stay there until 7 PM.

I never finished a book in less than a year. Looking back, I probably spent more time avoiding writing than I did actually writing. I made lists, responded to e-mail, answered the phone, and kept my desk clean and my files well organized. There were days I never got to writing at all. It was incredibly frustrating.

For my new book, *The Way We're Working Isn't Working*, I wrote without interruptions for three 90-minute periods and took a break between each one. I had breakfast after the first session, went for a run after the second, and had lunch after the third. I wrote no more than 4 ½ hours a day, and finished the book in fewer than six months. By writing in several cycles of 90 minutes each

and building in periods of renewal, I was able to focus far more intensely and get more done in less time.

What made me so productive? Creating the ritual of tackling the most important work at the start of the day and working with my body's natural rhythms. At the heart of making this work is to build highly precise, deliberate rituals, done at specific times, so they eventually become automatic and don't require much expenditure of energy or self-discipline, akin to brushing your teeth at night.

Pioneering sleep researcher Nathaniel Kleitman observed that our bodies operate by the same 90-minute "basic rest-activity" cycle during the day that we do when we sleep. When we're awake, we move from higher to lower alertness every 90 minutes. This "ultradian rhythm," researcher Peretz Lavie and others have found, governs our energy levels. The human body is hardwired to pulse, and requires renewal at regular intervals, not just physically, but also mentally and emotionally.

Many of us unwittingly train ourselves to ignore signals from our body that we need a rest—difficulty concentrating, physical restlessness, irritability. Instead, we find ways to override this need with caffeine, sugar, and our own stress hormones—adrenalin, noradrenalin, and cortisol—all of which provide short bursts of energy but impair our ability to consistently focus on our work for a significant period of time.

By intentionally aligning with my body's natural rhythms, I've learned to listen to its signals. When I notice them, it usually means I've hit the 90-minute mark.

At that point, I take a break, even if I'm on a roll, because I've learned that if I don't, I'll pay the price later in the day.

When I'm not working on a book, I still choose the next day's most important work the night before, because I don't want to squander energy thinking about what to do during the time I've set aside to actually work. I start at a very specific time, because when I don't, I give myself license to procrastinate.

Ideally you'll be able to divide up your day into several 90-minute focused work segments, with brief periods of renewal in between each. However, it's not always possible to structure your days this way. So make it a high priority to find at least one time a day to focus single-mindedly on your most challenging and important task.

Tony Schwartz is the president and CEO of The Energy Project and the author of *Be Excellent at Anything*. Become a fan of The Energy Project on Facebook and connect with Tony on Twitter at @tonyschwartz and @energy_project.

Chapter 19

An 18-Minute Plan for Managing Your Day

by Peter Bregman

I began my day yesterday with the best intentions. I walked into my office in the morning with a vague sense of what I wanted to accomplish. Then I sat down, turned on my computer, and checked my e-mail. Two hours later, after fighting several fires, solving other people's problems, and dealing with whatever happened to be thrown at me through my computer and phone, I could hardly remember what I had originally set out to do.

Most of us start every day knowing we're not going to get it all done. So how we spend our time is a key strategic decision. That's why it's a good idea to create both a to-do list and a *to-don't* list.

But even with those lists, the challenge—as always—is execution. How can you stick to a plan when so many things threaten to derail it? How can you focus on just a few important tasks when so many others require your attention?

We need a trick.

Jack LaLanne, the fitness guru, knew all about tricks. He had one trick that I believe was his real secret power.

Ritual.

At the age of 94, he still spent the first two hours of his day exercising. Ninety minutes lifting weights and 30 minutes swimming or walking. Every morning. He needed to do so to achieve his goals: on his 95th birthday he planned to swim from the coast of California to Santa Catalina Island—a distance of 20 miles.

So he worked consistently and deliberately. He did the same things day in and day out. He cared about his fitness and he built it into his schedule.

Managing our time needs to become a ritual, too. Not simply a list or a vague sense of our priorities. That's not consistent or deliberate. It needs to be an ongoing process we follow, no matter what, to keep us focused on our priorities throughout the day.

We can do it in three steps that take fewer than 18 minutes over an eight-hour workday:

1. **(5 minutes): Set Your Plan for the Day.** Before turning on your computer, sit down with a blank piece of paper and decide what will make this day highly successful. What can you real-

istically accomplish that will further your goals and allow you to leave at the end of the day feeling productive? Write those things down. Now, most important, take your calendar and schedule those things into time slots, placing the hardest and most important items at the beginning of the day—before checking your e-mail. If your entire list doesn't fit into your calendar, reprioritize your list. There is tremendous power in deciding when you're going to do something. (See "How to Tackle Your To-Do List," earlier in this guide.)

2. **(1 minute every hour): Refocus.** Set your watch, phone, or computer to ring every hour. When it rings, take a deep breath, look at your list, and ask yourself: *Am I doing what I most need to be doing right now?* Then look at your calendar and deliberately recommit to how you're going to use the next hour. Manage your day hour by hour. Don't let the hours—or the inevitable interruptions—manage you.
3. **(5 minutes at end of day): Review.** Shut off your computer and review your day. What worked? Where did you focus? Where did you get distracted? What did you learn that will help you be more productive tomorrow?

The power of rituals is their predictability: You do the same thing in the same way over and over again. And the

outcome of a ritual is predictable, too. If you choose your focus deliberately and wisely and consistently remind yourself of that focus, you will *stay* focused.

This particular ritual may not help you swim 20 miles through the ocean or live to be 100. But it may just help you leave your office feeling productive and successful. And, at the end of the day, isn't that a higher priority?

Peter Bregman is a strategic adviser to CEOs and their leadership teams. His latest book is *18 Minutes: Find Your Focus, Master Distraction, and Get the Right Things Done*.

Chapter 20

Use a 10-Minute Diary to Stay on Track

by Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer

What's the best way to use the last 10 minutes of your day? Many productivity gurus recommend an end-of-the-day meeting with yourself to review your to-do list, check how you're doing against short- and long-term goals, or select the most challenging project you'll tackle the following day. Our research suggests that not only should you do an end-of-day review, but you'll reap the greatest benefits for your productivity and personal well-being if you actually record your thoughts in a "mini-diary." A work diary will improve your focus, track your progress, and make you more satisfied with your work—which will help you be even more productive.

No question: This reflective time is often the first thing that we drop when we're feeling overloaded. Adding a daily writing assignment—the word “diary” conjures up a long-term commitment—seems counterproductive to making headway on “real” work. So **try it for just one month**, focusing on just one short-term project (for example, developing a departmental staffing plan), or just one area of professional development (improving your presentation skills).

Take 10 minutes at the end of each workday, write no more than 100 words, and see what you've learned after four weeks. You may be surprised.

You'll get five benefits from keeping a work diary. You:

1. **Track your progress.** The diary is a record of your “small wins,” incremental steps toward meaningful goals, that can boost your motivation—if only you take a moment to reflect on them.
2. **Plan.** You use the diary as a tool for drafting your next steps.
3. **Fuel personal growth.** The diary gives you a way of working through your difficult—even traumatic—events, gaining new perspectives on them.
4. **Sharpen your focus.** You identify your strengths, passions, and challenges by looking at patterns in your entries over time. For example, your diary may reveal that you've been spending a lot of time on low-priority issues. Reviewing your diary and identifying

this pattern can help you recommit to focusing your time and energy on your most important work.

5. **Develop patience.** The diary serves as a reminder during frustrating days that, in the past, you've persevered through days that, at the time, seemed even worse.

Our research shows that, of all these benefits, using a work diary to track your progress may be the most important one for your productivity and psychological well-being. As part of a massive study on the psychology of everyday work life, we collected nearly 12,000 diary entries from 238 professionals working on complex, creative projects. Our analyses revealed a big surprise. Of all the things that could make people feel both happy and highly motivated to dig into their work, the single most important event was simply making progress in work they cared about. We call this *the progress principle*, and it applies even when the progress is an incremental small win. When we see we're making progress, we're motivated to keep going, and it's easier to keep our focus—even when we encounter setbacks. Witness this example, from the diary of a software engineer in our study:

Today, when I started work [...] there was a note from a user regarding some work I had done for him. It was very complimentary and it made me feel pretty good. Also in the note was a request to go ahead with an enhancement to the database analysis package. I was able to code and load this request today in less than the

estimated time, which makes me feel good. And I know it will please our user when he comes in tomorrow.

That entry probably took fewer than five minutes to write. Yet, at the end of the day, that engineer was quite happy—and seems motivated toward high productivity the next day, too. Making progress, and noting it, can provide a real lift—and give you the boost you need to keep working on the projects that will yield the greatest benefit for your organization and its customers.

Daily writing and review helps in negative situations, too. In the following entry, an employee struggles to gain a sense of control during a traumatic event in her company—a downsizing. Even though her own job might still be in jeopardy, her work diary helps her shape a healthy perspective; it enables her to focus on her work, amid swirling gossip and uncertainty. Her personal growth is almost palpable in this entry:

This morning, my project manager came over and sat next to me and asked me if I was okay after all the layoffs that went on yesterday. I thought that was really nice. We all had a very rough day yesterday, but I feel better today. In 45 days, we will all know our fate, and then we can get on with our lives one way or the other. The outcome of all this is really out of our control. I'm trying to concentrate on what IS in my control, by doing my job.

And here, in his final entry for our study, a professional tells us directly how valuable it was for him to fill

out the diary questionnaire that we sent every day during his project:

I did find value in doing the questionnaires, especially when I was disciplined enough to do them at the end of the day, when everything was still fresh in my mind. It helped me to reflect on the day, my accomplishments, the team's work, and how I was feeling in general. When you're working at a hectic pace, reflection time is rare, but [it's] really beneficial.

Don't dismiss the idea of trying a work diary because you think you have to create finely-crafted entries for posterity. We've found that if you avoid making a big commitment to it, you'll be more successful. Don't worry about how to express yourself. Simply describe one event or insight from the day. In our study, the average length of the entries was a mere 54 words.

To get started:

- **Pick a time.** Consider when you're most likely to have ten minutes to yourself. Ideally, this will be the same time each day, because it's much easier to get into the habit that way. For some of us, that will be the very end of the day, just before bed. For others, it's at the end of the workday, or on the train ride home.
- **Create a memory trigger.** Choose something you'll see or hear at the designated writing time. For example, if you want to do the diary before you leave the office at 5:00, set a repeating alarm in your

calendar for 4:50. If you choose bedtime, put your diary notebook and a pen on your bedside table.

- **Select a medium.** Find something you enjoy using. People have very different preferences for diarykeeping. Some love a leather-bound, monogrammed, silk-bookmarked, five-year diary, with just a few pre-ruled lines for each day. Others like online journaling programs (like iDoneThis). Whether it's a Word doc, a note app, a spiral-bound notebook to an Excel spreadsheet, use whatever works for you.
- **Reflect on your day.** Some people discover what they think as they write, but most of us need a bit of time to collect our thoughts. Use the first three minutes to let your mind go to any one of these types of events from the day:
 - Progress . . . and what led to it. (Congratulate yourself!)
 - Setbacks . . . and what might have caused them. (Learn from them!)
 - Something good. (Feel grateful!)
 - Something difficult. (Get it off your chest!)
 - One thing you can do tomorrow to make your work go better. (Then plan how to do it!)
 - Anything else that dominates your reflection time.

- **Write.** Use the remaining seven minutes to jot down your thoughts. Don't give a thought to grammar, proper sentence construction, style, etc. Focus on the event.
- **Review.** Once in a while, take a few minutes to sit down with your journal and a favorite beverage in a comfy chair. Much of the value in a diary comes from periodically reviewing the past few days (or more).

Keep a diary for just one project, for just a few weeks, and you might find it's a productivity tool you don't want to give up.

Teresa Amabile is the Edsel Bryant Ford Professor of Business Administration at Harvard Business School. She researches what makes people creative, productive, happy, and motivated at work. **Steven Kramer** is a psychologist and independent researcher. They are coauthors of *The Progress Principle* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2011).

Section 6

Renew Your Energy

Chapter 21

How to Accomplish More by Doing Less

by Tony Schwartz

We know that it's not just the number of hours we sit at our desks that determines the value we generate. It's the energy and focus we bring to those hours. Human beings are designed to pulse rhythmically between spending and renewing energy. That's how we operate at our best. Maintaining a steady reservoir of energy—physically, mentally, emotionally, and even spiritually—requires refueling intermittently.

Take for example, two people of equal skill—Bill and Nick—who work in the same office. Each day they arrive at work at 9:00 AM and leave at 7:00 PM.

Adapted from content posted on hbr.org on December 13, 2011.

Bill works for 10 hours—essentially without stopping—juggling tasks at his desk and running between meetings all day long. He even eats lunch at his desk. By 1:00 PM, Bill's feeling tired and beginning to lose focus. Between 4:00 and 7:00 PM, he's really dragging and easily distracted.

It's the **law of diminishing returns**. Because he doesn't take breaks to renew his energy, Bill effectively delivers about 6 hours of productive work over his 10-hour day—about 60% of his capacity.

Now contrast that with Nick. He puts in the same 10 hours as Bill. But rather than working essentially without stopping, Nick paces himself: he works intensely for approximately 90 minutes at a stretch, and then takes a 15-minute break before resuming work. At 12:15, he goes out for lunch for 45 minutes or works out in a nearby gym. At 3:00 PM, he goes out to his car and takes a brief rest. Sometimes it turns into a 15- or 20-minute nap. Finally, between 4:30 and 5:00, he takes a 15-minute walk outside.

Nick takes off a total of two hours during his 10 at work, so he “only” puts in 8 hours. But because he's building in periods of renewal with scheduled breaks, he's able to work at 80% percent of his full capacity over the course of the whole day—**20% more than Bill**.

Cycling through periods of work and rest allows Nick to be more focused and alert than Bill, to make fewer mistakes, and to return home at night with more energy left for his family.

Work the way Nick does, and you'll get more done, in less time, at a higher level of quality, more sustainably.

Learn how to **manage your energy, not your time**, in the next article.

Tony Schwartz is the president and CEO of The Energy Project and the author of *Be Excellent at Anything*. Become a fan of The Energy Project on Facebook and connect with Tony on Twitter at @tonyschwartz and @energy_project.

Chapter 22

Manage Your Energy, Not Your Time

*A summary of the full-length HBR article by **Tony Schwartz** and **Catherine McCarthy**, highlighting key ideas.*

THE IDEA IN BRIEF

Is your job demanding more from you than ever before? Do you feel as if you're working additional hours but rarely getting ahead? Is your mobile device leashing you to your job 24/7? Do you feel exhausted, disengaged, sick?

Spending longer days at the office and putting in extra hours at home doesn't work because your time is a limited resource. But your personal energy is renewable. By fostering deceptively simple **rituals** that will help you regularly replenish your energy, you can strengthen your

physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual resilience. These rituals include taking brief breaks at specific intervals, expressing appreciation to others, reducing interruptions, and spending more time on the activities you do best and enjoy most.

THE IDEA IN PRACTICE

Try these practices to renew the four dimensions of your personal energy:

Physical Energy

- Enhance your sleep by setting an earlier bedtime and reducing alcohol use.
- Reduce stress by engaging in cardiovascular activity at least three times a week and strength training at least once a week.
- Eat small meals and light snacks every three hours.
- Learn to notice signs of imminent flagging energy, including restlessness, yawning, hunger, and difficulty concentrating.
- Take brief but regular breaks away from your desk at 90- to 120-minute intervals throughout the day.

Emotional Energy

- Defuse negative emotions—irritability, impatience, anxiety, insecurity—through deep abdominal breathing.

- Fuel positive emotions in yourself and others by regularly expressing appreciation to people in detailed, specific terms through notes, e-mails, calls, or conversations.
- Look at upsetting situations through new lenses. Adopt a **reverse lens** to ask, “What would the other person in this conflict say, and how might he be right?” Use a **long lens** to ask, “How will I likely view this situation in six months?” Employ a **wide lens** to ask, “How can I grow and learn from this situation?”

Mental Energy

- Reduce interruptions by performing high-concentration tasks away from phones and e-mail.
- Respond to voice mails and e-mails at designated times during the day.
- Select the most important challenge for the next day the night before. Then make that challenge your first priority when you arrive at work in the morning.

Spiritual Energy

- Identify your “sweet spot” activities—those that give you feelings of effectiveness, effortless absorption, and fulfillment. Find ways to do more of these. One executive who hated doing sales reports delegated them to someone who loved that activity.

- Allocate time and energy to what you consider most important. For example, spend the last 20 minutes of your evening commute relaxing, so you can connect with your family once you're home.
- Live your core values. For instance, if being considerate is important to you but you're perpetually late for meetings, practice intentionally showing up five minutes early for meetings.

Are You Headed for an Energy Crisis?

Take the following quiz to identify which areas of your life could benefit from energy-renewing rituals.

Please check the statements below that are true for you:

Body

- ☐ I don't regularly get at least seven to eight hours of sleep, and I often wake up feeling tired.
- ☐ I frequently skip breakfast, or I settle for something that isn't nutritious.
- ☐ I don't work out enough (meaning cardiovascular training at least three times a week and strength training at least once a week).
- ☐ I don't take regular breaks during the day to renew and recharge, or I often eat lunch at my desk, if I eat it at all.

Emotions

- ☐ I frequently find myself feeling irritable, impatient, or anxious at work, especially when work is demanding.
- ☐ I don't have enough time with my family and loved ones, and when I'm with them, I'm not always *really* with them.
- ☐ I have too little time for the activities that I most deeply enjoy.
- ☐ I don't stop frequently enough to express my appreciation to others or to savor my accomplishments and blessings.

Mind

- ☐ I have difficulty focusing on one thing at a time, and I am easily distracted during the day, especially by e-mail.
- ☐ I spend much of my day reacting to immediate crises and demands rather than focusing on activities with longer-term value and high leverage.
- ☐ I don't take enough time for reflection, strategizing, and creative thinking.
- ☐ I often work in the evenings or on weekends, and I almost never take an e-mail-free vacation.

Spirit

- ☐ I don't spend enough time at work doing what I do best and enjoy most.

Renew Your Energy

- ☐ There are significant gaps between what I say is most important to me and how I actually allocate my time and energy.
- ☐ My decisions at work are more often influenced by external demands than by a strong, clear sense of my own purpose.
- ☐ I don't invest enough time and energy in making a positive difference to others or to the world.

How Is Your Overall Energy?

Total number of statements checked: _____

Guide to energy scores

0–3: Excellent energy management skills

4–6: Reasonable energy management skills

7–10: Significant energy management deficits

11–16: A full-fledged energy management crisis

What Do You Need to Work On?

Number of checks in each category:

Body _____

Mind _____

Emotions _____

Spirit _____

Guide to category scores

- 0: Excellent energy management skills
 - 1: Strong energy management skills
 - 2: Significant deficits
 - 3: Poor energy management skills
 - 4: A full-fledged energy crisis
-

Tony Schwartz (tony@theenergyproject.com) is the president and CEO of The Energy Project in New York City, and a coauthor of *The Power of Full Engagement: Managing Energy, Not Time, Is the Key to High Performance and Personal Renewal* (Free Press, 2003).

Catherine McCarthy (catherine@theenergyproject.com) is a senior vice president at The Energy Project.

Chapter 23

Why Great Performers Sleep More

by Tony Schwartz

Why is sleep one of the first things we're willing to sacrifice as the demands in our lives keep rising? We continue to live by a remarkably durable myth: Sleeping one hour less will give us one more hour of productivity. In reality, even small amounts of sleep deprivation take a significant toll on our health, mood, cognitive capacity, and productivity.

How Much Sleep Do You Need?

When researchers put test subjects into environments without clocks or windows and ask them to sleep any

Adapted from content posted on hbr.org on March 3, 2011.

time they feel tired, 95% sleep between seven and eight hours out of every 24. Another 2.5% sleep more than eight hours. That means just 2.5% of us require fewer than seven hours of sleep a night to feel fully rested. That's one out of every 40 people.

In my talks, when I ask who has had fewer than seven hours of sleep several nights during the past week, the majority raise their hands. That's true whether it's an audience of corporate executives, teachers, cops, or government workers.

Great performers are an exception. Typically, they sleep significantly *more* than the rest of us. In Anders Ericsson's famous study of violinists, the top performers slept an average of eight and a half hours out of every 24, including a 20- to 30-minute midafternoon nap—some two hours a day more than the average American.

The top violinists also reported that except for practice itself, sleep was the most important factor in improving their skills.

As I gathered research about sleep, I felt increasingly compelled to give it higher priority in my own life. Today, I go to great lengths to ensure that I get at least eight hours every night, and ideally between eight and a half and nine hours, even when I'm traveling.

I still take the overnight redeye from California to New York, but I'm asleep by takeoff—even if I have to take a sleeping aid. When I get home at 6:00 or 7:00 AM, I go right to bed until I've had my eight hours. What I've learned about those days is that I'd rather work at 100% for five or six hours than at 60% for eight or nine hours.

With sufficient sleep, I feel better, I work with more focus, and I manage my emotions better, which is good for

WHAT PEOPLE ARE SAYING ON HBR.ORG

Try the coffee nap—Lifehacker had a great article about [naps]. I'm a paramedic and I've used this trick for ages. Fix a cup of coffee so you can drink it quickly. Set up the spot where you'll nap and then drink the coffee. Set a timer for 20 minutes and make sure you get up when it goes off. Any longer and you'll feel worn out. I know this has saved my life on many late-night, long-distance transports. —Posted by John

everyone around me. I dislike enduring even a single day when I haven't had enough sleep because the impact is immediate and unavoidable. On the rare days that I don't get enough, I try hard to get at least a 20- to 30-minute nap in the afternoon. That's a big help.

How to Get More Sleep

Here are three other tips to improve the quantity and quality of your sleep:

- **Write down what's on your mind before you get into bed.** If you leave items such as unfinished to-do's and unresolved issues in your working memory, they'll make it harder to fall asleep, and you'll end up ruminating about them if you wake up during the night.
- **Go to bed earlier—and at a set time.** Sounds obvious, right? The problem is there's no alternative. You're already waking up at the latest possible time

you can. If you don't ritualize a specific bedtime, you'll find ways to stay up later, just the way you do now.

- **Start winding down at least 45 minutes before you turn out the light.** You won't fall asleep if you're all wound up from answering e-mail or doing other work. Create a ritual around drinking a cup of herbal tea, listening to music that helps you relax, or reading a dull book.

Tony Schwartz is the president and CEO of The Energy Project and the author of *Be Excellent at Anything*. Become a fan of The Energy Project on Facebook and connect with Tony on Twitter at @tonyschwartz and @energy_project.

Section 7:

Take Control of Your E-mail

Chapter 24

Simplify Your E-mail

by Gina Trapani

If you spend more time dealing with e-mail than getting the right work done, it's time for an e-mail makeover.

Clear Out Your In-Box

Computer scientists developed e-mail based on the paradigm of postal mail, so think of your in-box like your physical mailbox. You wouldn't keep bills you have to pay and the invitation to that birthday party in there forever, right? Sort by sender, date, or subject line to clear out your messages as efficiently as possible. Then delete the junk; unsubscribe from newsletters you never read or websites you no longer visit. If you have thousands of messages in your main folder, business writer Amy Gallo

Adapted from content posted on hbr.org on June 9, 2009.

suggests creating a new subfolder in your Archive folder called “Old In-box” and putting all of your messages in there. You’ll still have access to them if you need them, but you’ll be able to jump-start your new e-mail process without the drudgery of actually reviewing every old message.

Set Up Just Three Folders

Sometimes it’s not just the sheer volume of messages that makes e-mail management a time-sink, it’s the complicated folder system we’ve concocted. Streamline your in-box by creating these three folders:

Follow-up: For messages you have to respond to or act on that will take longer than a couple of minutes. (Put a corresponding item on your to-do list for each of these messages.)

Hold: For messages where you’re waiting for something to happen, like a package shipment or event invitation. (Put a corresponding item on your calendar for each of these messages.)

Archive: For messages you’re done with but want to keep for reference.

Maintain Your New System

Once you’ve cleaned out your in-box, you’ll want to keep it organized and manageable, so you can focus your attention on your most important work.

Here are some techniques to keep your e-mail under control:

- **Process your e-mail in batches.** Most of us are on e-mail all day, scanning for anything urgent and ignoring everything else, which is how backlog accumulates in your in-box. Instead of checking every time you hear the incoming message “ding,” process your e-mail in batches. Completely shut down your e-mail or set it and your handheld to check for messages only every few hours. Then, when you have time or are in between tasks, fully commit yourself to processing new messages. Alexandra Samuel, cofounder of Social Signal, recommends selecting specific times when you’ll process e-mail (for example, 8:00 to 10:00 AM and 4:00 to 6:00 PM). Notify correspondents and colleagues of your schedule through your e-mail signature or a note on your blog (and clear this approach with your supervisor, if applicable). Assume that if it’s an emergency, people will call you—but refrain from actually suggesting that, since you don’t want to encourage a constantly ringing phone.
- **Use the “two-minute” rule.** As you process your e-mail in batches, reply to any messages that will take fewer than two minutes on the spot. Don’t delay and leave them in your in-box marked as read, thinking you’ll get back to them; don’t even file them away in “Follow-up.” Just take care of them immediately. To help keep you within the two-minute mark, try answering all e-mails in three sentences or fewer (visit **Three.Sentenc.es**), says Dave Kerpen, CEO of Likeable Media. Anything

that takes more text probably requires a quick call instead. Have your team or department try this as a group experiment, and watch your collective e-mail-processing time shrink.

- **End “Reply all.”** Kerpen also recommends using internal social networking tools instead of e-mail to chat with your coworkers, facilitate collaboration and passive listening, and eliminate the dreaded “Reply all” e-mail chains. Try a private, closed Facebook group. Or explore proprietary tools such as **Jive** and **Yammer**, which allow organizations to set up private social networking platforms. Jive is best for large enterprises, while Yammer is suitable for departments or smaller organizations. Get an on-the-spot answer and get on with your work.
- **Stop spamming people.** Samuel notes that a major contributor to e-mail overload is the widely held expectation that every e-mail must get a reply, even if it’s just “OK” or “Thanks.” Don’t do it.

For more suggestions on keeping your e-mail under control, see the next article, “Eight E-mail Overload Experiments.”

Gina Trapani is the founding editor of the personal productivity blog Lifehacker.com.

Chapter 25

Eight E-mail Overload Experiments

by Alexandra Samuel

If you've tried all of the basic ways to structure and manage your e-mail, but are still feeling overwhelmed, here are eight road-tested experiments for battling e-mail overload that range from reasonable to radical. Try each one, or a couple at a time—but push yourself to the very limits of your comfort zone, because the tactics that seem most inconceivable may be just the ones that help you discover a new way to work more effectively with e-mail.

If your company's culture includes expecting instant replies to every message, e-mail your colleagues and regular correspondents to let them know about your experiment. This will help avoid ruffled feathers over some of the more radical suggestions.

1. **Reject the mandatory reply.** Set up an auto-responder that lets all correspondents know that you're only replying to selected e-mail, depending on your availability and priorities—and make it clear you don't expect a reply to every e-mail you send them, either.

Here's one version:

SUBJECT: Limited e-mail means I may not reply to the message you sent

Thank you for getting in touch. I'm experimenting with a new approach to e-mail: I'm sending and replying to a smaller number of messages. I still check e-mail regularly, so if you don't get a reply within 72 hours please assume I have reviewed and filed your message. This approach should help me focus my attention on my current priorities. Thank you for your understanding.

For a less extreme solution, add a polite line to your standard e-mail signature. Here's mine:

Alexandra Samuel, PhD
Director, Social + Interactive Media Centre,
Emily Carr University
alex@alexandrasamuel.com |
Twitter @awsamuel

Join the fight against e-mail overload:

- Focus on *your* priorities; I'll understand if you don't reply.
- Sorry if I don't reply; I'm trying to focus, too.
- If it's urgent, reach me by Twitter or SMS.

- 2. Set message quotas.** For outbound messages, limit the number of e-mail threads you initiate each day. Assume that every e-mail you send will generate 4–10 responses, so you’re creating work for yourself with each message. Send fewer, and you’ll get fewer. For incoming messages, guesstimate the number and make that your daily quota. Use filters in your e-mail software to sort incoming mail and keep all but the most crucial messages out of your in-box. Auto-file other messages in alternative folders. Keep adding rules until your daily in-box volume falls below the quota you’ve set.

For example, I automatically direct e-mails into different folders for internal mail, messages I’m cc’d on, social network notifications, and more. My closest colleagues know that any e-mail marked “URGENT” still comes directly to my in-box; you might set your rules to ensure that all messages from your boss come through marked as high priority or color coded in a way that makes them stand out. The filters thin the incoming messages to a manageable level and ensure that e-mails from current or prospective clients don’t get lost in a sea of spam.

- 3. Reply by phone.** You can eliminate dozens of e-mails a day with quick calls. A five-minute chat about a landmine your project just stumbled on may be more efficient than crafting an

e-mail that adequately explains the situation. Also, thank people in person or by phone, even if that means leaving a voice mail (detailed thanks for project work, however, should always go by e-mail, so the recipient can file it for performance reviews). Most crucially, switch to phone or in-person communication whenever you get a message that angers or hurts you, because e-mail exchanges tend to escalate and solidify grievances.

4. **Do not copy.** Refuse to send, read, or reply to cc'ed messages. As blogging entrepreneur Anil Dash puts it, including someone as a cc on an e-mail is like saying "This is important enough for me to interrupt you [with] but not to write to you [about directly]." If a message you're sending requires a recipient's attention, include that person in the "to" field; if not, leave them off entirely. Tell colleagues they should address messages to you directly if they need you to reply.
5. **Don't touch that phone!** When you have a few minutes between meetings or while waiting for a plane, don't use that time to respond to e-mail on your mobile's tiny keyboard. Rather than send a rash or typo-ridden reply, wait until you're back at your desk or with your laptop or tablet, when you can craft a better response in less time.

- 6. Take an e-mail vacation:** Try a two-week vacation, a six-month sabbatical, or something in between. But it's not much of a break if you come back to an overflowing in-box, so before you tune out, turn on the vacation auto-responder with a message like this:

Thanks for your message. I'm taking an e-mail vacation until the new year. The message you've just sent me has been filed, so it's not lost forever, but if you need a reply it would be great if you could e-mail me sometime on or after January 4. If you need to reach me urgently, I'll be available by Twitter or mobile phone.

Set your e-mail program to file everything in a folder labeled "Vacation," and when you return, take a quick look for any truly life-changing messages you may have missed and actively ignore the rest. If someone really wants to reach you, they'll e-mail again.

- 7. Reply to every e-mail:** If ignoring e-mail makes your palms sweat, maybe it's time to give into its primacy. For two weeks, make your *entire morning* an e-mail processing zone. (If three hours isn't enough, block as big a chunk of time as you think you'll need.) See whether your commitment to a 100% response rate makes you more effective. This will help you make some conscious decisions about how

to better allocate your time and triage your in-box.

8. **Give up e-mail altogether:** For the ultimate in in-box liberation, give it up. Yes, you really can—especially if you're comfortable with social media tools. Use your blog to post updates on your work instead of sending an e-mail to a big distribution list; Basecamp or another project management tool to communicate with project teams; Google Docs to circulate drafts; Skype for a quick conversation instead of a 14-message exchange; and Twitter DMs, chat, and SMS for tight, efficient, and confidential messaging. Take your e-mail address off your business card and Web page, and encourage anyone who needs to reach you to pick up the phone.

Alexandra Samuel is the Director of the Social + Interactive Media Centre at Emily Carr University, and the co-founder of Social Signal, a Vancouver-based social media agency. You can follow Alex on Twitter at @awsamuel or her blog at alexandrasamuel.com.

Section 8

Maintain Your New Approach

Chapter 26

Sustaining Your Productivity System

by Alexandra Samuel

A productivity system is like any other faith: It works for as long as you continue to believe in it. Let a hint of skepticism creep in—about the discipline required, the rewards promised, or the potential superiority of other ideologies—and the threat of disorder quickly returns.

If you can accept that your system is a work in progress, it's a lot easier to keep that threat at bay. Here are some tips for sustaining your productivity system:

1. **Focus on outcomes.** Many productivity methodologies are so specific about their recommended processes that your zeal for maintaining your folders, sorting your communications,

or acquiring snazzy storage bins can easily eclipse the problems or benefits that motivated you in the first place. Remember that adherence to a system is a false god: Don't stick to it just because you bought the book or the software. If you're working effectively and meeting your deadlines, it doesn't matter if you no longer geocode your task list.

2. **Make micro commitments.** When you embrace a new productivity religion, adopt its minor practices as well as its major ones. Sometimes the smaller commitments are the most sustainable. For example, two years after I got serious about In-box Zero, I no longer process my in-box to empty *every day*. But my e-mail is still dramatically easier to manage, thanks to the various filters I initially set up as part of my in-box zero approach.
3. **Find fellow adherents.** One of my big stumbling blocks with David Allen's book *Getting Things Done* was Allen's denunciation of hanging folders; my file cabinet *only* worked with hanging files. Happily, I thought to Google "GTD hanging files," and discovered a community of enthusiasts discussing the merits of various folder styles—and even brands—with the seriousness of Talmudic scholars. Reading about how other people implemented and adjusted the system liberated me from my slavish

adherence to every detail. You can also *make* your own adherents: Marnie Webb, the CEO of nonprofit tech resource CompuMentor/TechSoup, keeps a shelf full of copies of *Getting Things Done*. “When one of my team members complains about not being able to manage their lists or having too much to do, I pull a book off my shelf,” Webb says. “I tell them to complain again after they’ve implemented [GTD] for three months.”

4. **Schedule routine maintenance.** A few years ago I sorted all the junk in our home office into beautifully labeled boxes. Six months later, a friend observed that whether you opened a box labeled “Bills to Pay” or “Pens and Highlighters,” you were guaranteed to find a pad of Post-its, an iPod adapter, a handful of batteries, and 37 cents in change. Now I know that *getting* organized isn’t enough—to *stay* organized, I have to set aside a couple of days every 4–6 months so that I can reestablish order and update my systems. (This is one of my favorite ways to make productive use of the few days after a major trip or project wrap-up, when I’m too brain-dead to do anything more demanding.)
5. **Anticipate obsolescence.** Even the best productivity systems and tips may not survive the passage of time and the advent of new

technologies. So stick with software tools that provide options for exporting your data to .csv, iCal, or other standard formats, so you don't get trapped by any one platform.

6. **Embrace eclecticism.** Troy Angrignon, vice president of sales and marketing at Cloudscaling, is religious about tracking his tasks and goals using a single, two-column document whose structure borrows from just about every productivity guru out there—Brian Tracy, David Allen, Robert Fritz. While combining approaches might amount to apostasy in the eyes of any one system's adherents, it's allowed Angrignon to develop a customized method that's served him well for 15 years, even as he continues to make adjustments and sample new tools. You may also find that tweaking your productivity system, whether it's trying out a new calendaring approach or sorting your paper files, is part of your creative process—a way of preparing yourself for a new year or project.

Alexandra Samuel is the Director of the Social + Interactive Media Centre at Emily Carr University, and the co-founder of Social Signal, a Vancouver-based social media agency. You can follow Alex on Twitter at @awsamuel or her blog at alexandrasamuel.com.

Section 9

Explore Further

Chapter 27

More Productivity Books to Explore

by Ilan Mochari

This guide provides a wide range of tactics and tips for improving your productivity. If you wish to explore further, we've summarized the approaches of three other experts: Stephen Covey, Julie Morgenstern, and David Allen.

The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, **by Stephen R. Covey**

The Basic Idea: This is a guide to changing your life, not just the way you manage your day. To zero in on the best ways to spend your time and energy, focus on things you can control, keep your desired outcomes (for both individual projects and your life overall) in mind, improve your personal and professional relationships, nurture yourself, and classify your tasks as urgent or important.

Ideal if you:

- Want to transform how you live. For example, you *can* break old habits like procrastination, but it will require work on your character, not just your productivity practices.
- Have spiritual leanings and want to develop mission statements for different areas of your life (“I want to raise two self-confident children” or “I’m here to deliver smart and media-savvy public relations services to my customers. I will draw on my industry knowledge, my understanding of my clients and their challenges, and a genuine passion for what I do.”).
- Enjoy a longer read, rich with personal anecdotes and scholarly references.

Not ideal if you:

- Are happy with your life outside work and simply want a nuts-and-bolts system for managing workflow.
- Will roll your eyes at phrases like “opening the gate of change,” “emotional bank account,” and “abundance mentality.”
- Are looking for advice that addresses modern worklife and gadgets. Covey’s advice transcends trends, but his book predates smartphones and social networking.
- Are looking for advice on organizing your physical workspace.

Additional resources: franklincovey.com, stephencovey.com, the3rdalternative.com.

Organizing from the Inside Out, **by Julie Morgenstern**

The Basic Idea: This book will help you organize your physical spaces depending on your personality, needs, and goals. Identify the root cause of your clutter (Is your current system too complex? Are you by nature a packrat?). Find homes for your most important things by using the Kindergarten approach: Divide your space into specific activity zones that have everything necessary to do whatever type of work you've assigned to that area, with appropriate supplies and storage units to keep them contained. For example, set up a bill-paying area with everything you need—even if it means duplicates (like postage stamps) in multiple zones.

Ideal if you:

- Literally have trouble finding things.
- Want advice about organizing physical spaces (desks, offices, filing systems).
- Prefer lists and tips in clearly signposted sections.

Not ideal if you:

- Aren't a fan of self-reflection.
- Are looking for more advice about productivity or time management.
- Are looking for a quick fix or an excuse to purge everything. Morgenstern recommends a three-step approach (analyze, strategize, attack), with a five-step process for the attack phase.

Additional resources: juliemorgenstern.com, oprah.com/home/More-with-Organizing-Expert-Julie-Morgenstern, amazon.com/Julie-Morgenstern/e/B001IGQY78

***Getting Things Done*, by David Allen**

The Basic Idea: This book will help you gather, evaluate, and make progress on all of your tasks. Don't rely on your brain to remember everything you have to do. Instead, write it all down in a calendar and series of lists (projects, next actions, waiting for, maybe/someday). Review each task and determine if you should: do it, delegate it, or defer it. When you're ready to start a new task, use four criteria to decide what to do: context, time available, energy available, priority. Once a week, gather your lists and calendar to review your system, update your lists, and check in with yourself about where you are relative to your workload and schedule.

Ideal if you:	Not ideal if you:
• Want a nuts-and-bolts guide to determining priorities and mastering workflow. • Prefer bulleted lists, diagrams, scattered inspirational quotes, and flowcharts. • Have the authority or resources to delegate. • Are looking for advice on setting up physical work spaces, as well as productivity in general.	• Seek spiritual guidance, too. • Enjoy storytelling or personal anecdotes in your business reading. • Are overwhelmed by setting up elaborate physical file-folder systems. • Aren't comfortable delegating.

Additional resources: davidco.com, gtdtimes.com, [youtube.com/watch?v=Qo7vUdkTlhk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qo7vUdkTlhk)

Ilan Mochari is chief writer for *The Build Network* and a contributor to the *MIT Sloan Management Review*.

Chapter 28

Productivity Apps and Tools

Here are some apps and websites to further fuel your interest in making the most of your time and energy. This is by no means an exhaustive list—we've compiled favorites from some of the most productive members of our hbr.org community: Joshua Gans, Skoll Chair in Innovation and Entrepreneurship, Rotman School of Management, University of Toronto; Heidi Grant Halvorson, PhD, author of *Nine Things Successful People Do Differently*; Whitney Johnson, author of *Dare Dream Do*; Dave Kerpen, author of *Likeable Social Media*; and Andrew McAfee, author of *Enterprise 2.0*. Since technology is ever-evolving, consider this an inspiration list. For example, if Longer Days is no longer available when you look for it, try a search for virtual assistant to see what new offerings exist.

Manage Your Schedule

- **Longer Days**, **Brickwork**, and **Uassist.ME** are just three of dozens of virtual assistant companies

that provide online access to people to help with administrative tasks, such as scheduling meetings and calls, researching individuals' backgrounds for networking opportunities, marketing research (such as company information or revenue data); other professional functions, such as copywriting and managing event RSVPs; and even personal tasks like scheduling doctor's appointments. Virtual assistants add extra hands without adding extra headcount. The programs are relatively inexpensive: Longerdays.com offers 20 hours for \$350 and Uassist.ME charges \$650 per month for about 40 hours/month's worth of work. —*Dave Kerpen*

- **Tungle.Me** and **Doodle** will end those long, painful e-mail chains that often result when you're trying to set up a meeting with multiple people inside and outside of your organization. **Tungle.Me** allows people to see your calendar availability and easily schedule meetings and phone calls, and it syncs with most Web and mobile calendar applications. **Doodle** allows multiple parties to share their availability via poll and quickly find a mutually convenient date and time for an event.

—*Dave Kerpen*

Make Your Lists

- **Workflowy** is an online tool and app that allows you to better organize yourself by mimicking the way you naturally think. It helps you make a list of

high-level ideas and tasks and then breaks them into smaller pieces. For example, I've started with Personal and Work as my two broad categories. Under "Work," I've created sublists such as Rose Park Advisors, Book launch, and HBR blog. You can subdivide lists like this almost infinitely.

—*Whitney Johnson*

- **Remember The Milk** is an online task manager that allows you to easily track your to-do list from your smartphone. You can add items to your to-do list, set location tags to help you remember to take care of things when you're out and about, organize tasks by priority, schedule tasks by integrating with popular calendar tools (including Outlook and Google Calendar), and sync everything so that you can see your updated, prioritized list whether you're at your desk or on the go. —*Dave Kerpen*
- **Evernote** allows you to capture notes, files, and images and later access them from your tablet, mobile, or computer through a robust search feature. Save favorite Web pages with notes about them, take a picture of a potential location for a future launch party, record your thoughts on your next product idea and add to it whenever and wherever inspiration strikes, or keep your scanned itineraries and travel docs all in one place. Evernote also makes it easy to share notes and documents with friends, classmates, and colleagues. —*Dave Kerpen*

Manage Your Reminders

- **Due** is an iPhone app that repeatedly reminds you to do something at a certain time—until you do it. Here’s how it works: You need to remember to write an e-mail to someone but can’t do it right now. With Due, you set your phone to alert you to write the e-mail at a certain time (30 minutes from now, 4 PM). I used to leave myself notes or write on my hand. With Due, I can do the same thing but with more precision. It will continue to beep until I accept the reminder or change the time I want to be reminded. —*Joshua Gans*
- **Nudge-mail** helps you remember what you need to do when you need to do it. Whether your spouse asks you to pick up milk on your way home or a client requests a draft proposal, Nudge-mail reminds you of the task at the right time. Just forward an e-mail to addresses like “tomorrow@nudge-mail.com” or “2hours@nudge-mail.com” and free your mind to focus on your next important task.
—*Dave Kerpen*

Manage Your Files

- If you use multiple computers, work on several projects, and/or have multiple colleagues, try **Dropbox**. It’s a cloud-based storage utility that eliminates file-related hassles. It puts your files in one folder that all of your devices can access, and synchronizes them in the background without

your having to lift a finger. It also allows you to share different folders with collaborators. How many times have you tried to send a file via e-mail, only to have a server reject it because it was too big? Just create a Dropbox folder, invite the recipient(s) to share it, and your problems are past tense. —*Andrew McAfee*

- **JotNot** is an iPhone app that allows you to take a photo of any image or document and instantly turn it into a .pdf—for example, you can sign and fax back a contract in seconds, on the go.

—*Dave Kerpen*

Manage Your Social Media

- I don't know what I would do without **HootSuite**. It's a social media dashboard that allows you to monitor and post to all your networks simultaneously. If you blog or use social media for your work, this is a *huge* timesaver. When I've written something new or read something I want to share on my networks, I can let everyone know with a single entry, rather than having to log on to each network separately. I use it to manage my Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Google+ accounts, and you can also use it with Tumblr, WordPress, and Foursquare. —*Heidi Grant Halvorson, PhD*
- **Buffer** allows you to schedule Tweets and Facebook messages (and soon, LinkedIn posts) ahead of time, and automatically spaces them out. In five minutes, you can find interesting articles worth

sharing with colleagues and prospective clients, and be tweeting all day, without actually going to Twitter again. —*Dave Kerpen*

- **Rapportive** is a browser add-on for Gmail that transforms Gmail's bland sidebar into a time-saver. Instead of ads, you'll see social media information about the sender of the e-mail: his picture, links to his profile, recent Tweets, etc. The add-on is available for Firefox, Chrome, and Safari, is free to use, and integrates smoothly with Gmail. This tool obviates the need for a separate search to find out more about new contacts or clients.

—*Dave Kerpen*

- **Dragon Dictation** is a voice-recognition application that allows you to easily dictate text or e-mail messages. Speak into the program and instantly see the transcription. Faster and safer than typing while on the go, you can dictate everything from Tweets to longer e-mail messages. —*Dave Kerpen*
- **NutshellMail** eliminates the need for multiple visits to your social network accounts. It sends you a daily summary and includes only important information such as Facebook likes, posts, and comments; and Twitter mentions, new followers, and Tweets. —*Dave Kerpen*

Index

- ability development, 18
- Allen, David, 23–31
- appreciation, expressing, 141
- attention, focusing, 25
- be-good goals, 16
- behaviors
 - focusing on positive, 20–22, 28
 - rituals for, 113–115, 119
- bodily rhythms, 119–120, 135–137
- boss-imposed time, 90–91, 98–99, 100
- breaks, 50–51, 119–120, 135–137, 140
- calendars, 78–79, 123
- coffee nap, 149
- commitments
 - being overwhelmed by, 49–52
 - prioritizing, 39–41, 44
- concurrent rewards, 83
- control, relinquishing, 96
- core values, 142
- Covey, Stephen R., 172
- cumulative rewards, 83–84
- deadlines
 - far away, 57–58
 - setting, 54, 60, 66–67
- delegation
 - checklist, 102–103
 - effective, 87–107
 - levels of, 109–110
 - tips for, 104
- diary, work, 125–131
- distractions
 - e-mail, 30
 - impact of, 63–64
 - managing, 6–7, 141
 - turning off, 66, 71, 117
- e-mail
 - managing, 157–162
 - responding to, 141
 - saying no via, 45
 - simplifying, 153–156
 - turning off, 71
 - vacations from, 161
- emotional energy, 25, 140–141
- employees
 - delegation to, 87–107, 109–110
 - developing initiative of, 88–89, 101–105

Index

- employees (*continued*)
 - empowering, 94–96
 - skill development for, 89
 - trusting relationship with, 95
- empowerment, 94–96
- end-of-day review, 125
- energy cycles, 25, 29–31,
 - 119–120, 135–137
- energy management, 139–145
- entity theorists, 18
- exercise, 114, 140
- expectations, lowering your,
 - 59–60
- failure
 - allowing for, 16
 - fear of, 59
- fears
 - acknowledging your, 59
 - sharing your, 59
- file management, 178–179
- get-better goals, 16–17
- Getting Things Done* (Allen), 23,
 - 79, 166, 174
- goals
 - acting on, 11–12
 - be-good, 16
 - get-better, 16–17
 - long-term, 57–62
 - monitoring progress toward,
 - 13–14
 - optimism about, 14–15
 - setting specific, 10–11
 - writing down, 44
- grit, 17–18
- habits, 28, 55–56. *See also* rituals
- if-then planning, 11–12, 20–22
- “ignore” if-then plans, 21
- important tasks, 28, 70–72,
 - 118–119
- in-boxes, 153–154
- incremental theorists, 18
- interruptions. *See* distractions
- law of diminishing returns,
 - 136
- lists
 - of goals, 44
 - someday/maybe, 79–80
 - to-do, 27–28, 50, 60, 61,
 - 73–75, 77–80, 176–177
 - to-don’t, 121
 - tools for, 176–177
- long lens, 141
- long-term projects, 57–62
- management time, 87–107
- managerial initiative, 103–
 - 105
- meetings, with self, 71–72,
 - 125
- mental contrasting, 10–11
- mental energy, 141
- mistakes, allowing for, 16
- Morgenstern, Julie, 173
- motivation
 - to-go thinking and, 14
 - using rewards for, 54–55,
 - 81–84
- multitasking, 29–30, 63–67
- naps, 149
- “negation” if-then plans, 21
- negative behaviors, replacing
 - with positive, 20–22, 28
- negative emotions, 140
- 90-minute cycles, 114–115,
 - 117–120, 136–137
- no*, saying, 43–46

- optimism
 - realistic, 14–15
 - unrealistic, 15
- Organizing from the Inside Out* (Morgenstern), 173
- physical energy, 25, 140
- planning, if-then, 11–12, 20–22
- positive emotions, 141
- positive rituals, 28
- practice, 17–18
- priorities
 - long-term projects and, 60
 - setting, 4, 36–41, 44, 66, 122–123, 141
- problems, delegating to employees, 87–107
- procrastination
 - with long-term projects, 57–62
 - overcoming, 53–56
- productive rewards, 82
- productivity
 - books on, 171–174
 - deadlines and, 66–67
 - impact of multitasking on, 64
 - priority setting and, 36–38
 - roadblocks to, 27
 - sustaining system for, 165–168
 - techniques for increasing, 23–31
 - tools for, 175–180
- progress
 - monitoring your, 13–14
 - principle, 54, 127–128
- projects, long-term, 57–62
- raises, 35–38
- realistic optimism, 14–15
- regenerative rewards, 81–82
- reminders, 54, 62, 123, 129, 178
- “replacement” if-then plans, 21
- reverse lens, 141
- rewards, 54–55, 75, 81–84
- rituals
 - developing, 113–115, 119
 - for energy management, 139–145
 - positive, 28
 - for time management, 121–124
- saying no, 43–46
- scheduling tools, 175–176
- Schwartz, Tony, 23–31
- self-control, 18–20
- self-discipline, 28
- self-imposed time, 90–91
- self-monitoring, 13–14
- setbacks, 18
- Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (Covey), 97, 172
- skill development, 15–17, 89
- sleep, 140, 147–150
- social media tools, 179–180
- someday/maybe lists, 79–80
- spiritual energy, 25, 141–142
- stress, 51, 65, 140
- stress hormones, 119
- subordinates. *See* employees
- system-imposed time, 90–91, 98–100
- tasks
 - being overwhelmed by, 49–52
 - breaking down large, 26, 29, 51, 54, 58, 60, 73
 - completing easiest first, 50
 - delegation of, 87–107
 - doing most important first, 28, 119
 - focusing on challenging, 50
 - important, 28, 70–72, 118–119

Index

- tasks (*continued*)
 - prioritizing, 44, 66, 141
 - reasons for deferring, 53–54
 - rewards for completing,
 - 81–84
 - saying no to, 43–46
 - time-wasting, 39–41
 - urgent, 69–70, 118
- telephone calls, 159–160
- temptations, resisting, 18–20
- thinking
 - to-date, 13–14
 - to-go, 14
- time management
 - rituals for, 121–124
 - tips for, 106–107
 - tools for, 4–5, 175–180
- to-date thinking, 13–14
- to-do lists, 27–28, 50, 60, 61
 - effective, 73–75
 - tackling items on, 77–80
 - tools for, 176–177
- to-don't lists, 121
- to-go thinking, 14
- trust, 89, 95
- ultradian rhythm, 119–120
- unrealistic optimism, 15
- urgent tasks, 69–70, 118
- value creation, 35–38
- virtual assistants, 175–176
- weekly review, 71–72
- wide lens, 141
- willpower, 18–20, 28
- work diary, 55, 125–131
- work-rest ratio, 26, 118–119,
 - 135–137, 140
- worth-your-time test, 39–41

Notes

Notes

Notes

Notes

Notes

Notes

Notes

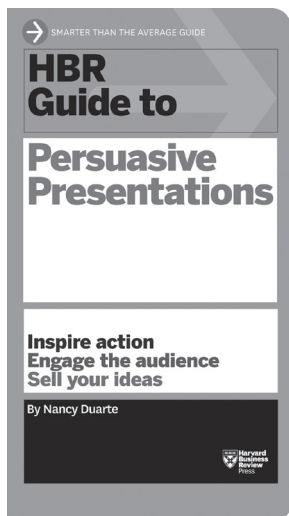
Notes

Notes

Notes

Notes

Smart advice and inspiration from a source you trust.

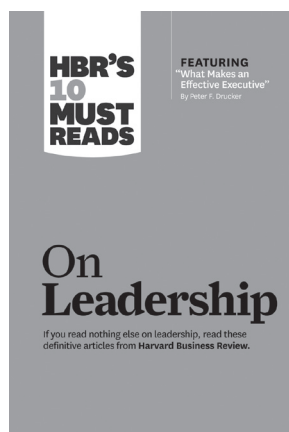


Whether you need help tackling today's most urgent work challenge or shaping your organization's strategy for the future, *Harvard Business Review* has got you covered.

HBR Guides Series

HOW-TO ESSENTIALS FROM LEADING EXPERTS

HBR Guide to Better Business Writing
HBR Guide to Finance Basics for Managers
HBR Guide to Getting the Right Work Done
HBR Guide to Managing Up and Across
HBR Guide to Persuasive Presentations
HBR Guide to Project Management



HBR's 10 Must Reads Series

IF YOU READ NOTHING ELSE, READ THESE DEFINITIVE ARTICLES FROM HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW

HBR's 10 Must Reads on Change Management
HBR's 10 Must Reads on Leadership
HBR's 10 Must Reads on Managing People
HBR's 10 Must Reads on Managing Yourself
HBR's 10 Must Reads on Strategy
HBR's 10 Must Reads: The Essentials

SAVE

**Buy for your team, clients, or event.
Visit our site for quantity discount rates.**

hbr.org/books/direct-and-bulk-sales



HBR Guide to
**Better Business
Writing**

Harvard Business Review Guides

Arm yourself with the advice you need to succeed on the job, from the most trusted brand in business. Packed with how-to essentials from leading experts, the HBR Guides provide smart answers to your most pressing work challenges.

The titles include:

HBR Guide to Better Business Writing

HBR Guide to Finance Basics for Managers

HBR Guide to Getting the Mentoring You Need

HBR Guide to Getting the Right Job

HBR Guide to Getting the Right Work Done

HBR Guide to Giving Effective Feedback

HBR Guide to Making Every Meeting Matter

HBR Guide to Managing Stress

HBR Guide to Managing Up and Across

HBR Guide to Persuasive Presentations

HBR Guide to Project Management

Other Books Written or Edited by Bryan A. Garner

Garner's Modern American Usage

Garner's Dictionary of Legal Usage

Black's Law Dictionary (all editions since 1996)

Reading Law: The Interpretation of Legal Texts, with
Justice Antonin Scalia

Making Your Case: The Art of Persuading Judges,
with Justice Antonin Scalia

Garner on Language and Writing

The Redbook: A Manual on Legal Style

The Elements of Legal Style

The Chicago Manual of Style, Ch. 5, "Grammar and
Usage" (15th & 16th eds.)

The Winning Brief

Legal Writing in Plain English

Ethical Communications for Lawyers

Securities Disclosure in Plain English

Guidelines for Drafting and Editing Court Rules

The Oxford Dictionary of American Usage and Style

A Handbook of Basic Legal Terms

A Handbook of Business Law Terms

A Handbook of Criminal Law Terms

A Handbook of Family Law Terms

HBR Guide to **Better Business Writing**

Bryan A. Garner

HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW PRESS

Boston, Massachusetts

Copyright 2012 Bryan A. Garner

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in, or introduced into a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise), without the prior permission of the publisher. Requests for permission should be directed to permissions@hbsp.harvard.edu or mailed to Permissions, Harvard Business School Publishing, 60 Harvard Way, Boston, Massachusetts 02163.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Garner, Bryan A.

HBR guide to better business writing / Bryan A. Garner.

p. cm. — (Harvard business review guides)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4221-8403-5 (alk. paper)

1. Commercial correspondence. 2. Business writing. I. Harvard business review. II. Title. III. Title: Guide to better business writing.

HF5718.3.G37 2013

808.06'665—dc23

2012032809

The paper used in this publication meets the requirements of the American National Standard for Permanence of Paper for Publications and Documents in Libraries and Archives Z39.48-1992.

To J.P. Allen,
my lifelong friend

What You'll Learn

Do you freeze up when writing memos to senior executives? Do your reports meander and raise more questions than they answer for key stakeholders? Do your e-mails to colleagues disappear into a void, never to be answered or acted on? Do your proposals fail to win clients?

You'll lose a lot of time, money, and influence if you struggle with business writing. And it's a common problem. Many of us fumble for the right words and tone in our documents, even if we're articulate when we speak. But it doesn't have to be that way. Writing clearly and persuasively requires neither magic nor luck. It's a skill—and this guide will give you the confidence and the tools you need to cultivate it.

You'll get better at:

- Pushing past writer's block.
- Motivating readers to act.
- Organizing your ideas.
- Expressing your main points clearly.

What You'll Learn

- Cutting to the chase.
- Holding readers' attention.
- Writing concise, useful summaries.
- Trimming the fat from your documents.
- Striking the right tone.
- Avoiding grammar gaffes.

Contents

Introduction: Why you need to write well	xv

Section 1: Delivering the Goods Quickly and Clearly

1. Know why you're writing	3
2. Understand your readers	7
3. Divide the writing process into four separate tasks	13
4. Before writing in earnest, jot down your three main points—in complete sentences	19
5. Write in full—rapidly	27
6. Improve what you've written	31
7. Use graphics to illustrate and clarify	37

Section 2: Developing Your Skills

8. Be relentlessly clear	43
9. Learn to summarize—accurately	49

10. Waste no words	53
11. Be plain-spoken: Avoid bizspeak	57
12. Use chronology when giving a factual account	67
13. Be a stickler for continuity	71
14. Learn the basics of correct grammar	77
15. Get feedback on your drafts from colleagues	85

Section 3: Avoiding the Quirks That Turn Readers Off

16. Don't anesthetize your readers	91
17. Watch your tone	99

Section 4: Common Forms of Business Writing

18. E-mails	105
19. Business Letters	111
20. Memos and Reports	125
21. Performance Appraisals	133

Appendixes

A. A Checklist for the Four Stages of Writing	139
B. A Dozen Grammatical Rules You Absolutely Need to Know	143

C. A Dozen Punctuation Rules You Absolutely Need to Know	153
D. Common Usage Gaffes	163
E. Some Dos and Don'ts of Business-Writing Etiquette	165
F. A Primer of Good Usage	169
 <i>Desk References</i>	 199
<i>Index</i>	203
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	209
<i>About the Author</i>	211

Introduction: Why you need to write well

You may think you shouldn't fuss about your writing—that good enough is good enough. But that mind-set is costly. Supervisors, colleagues, employees, clients, partners, and anyone else you communicate with will form an opinion of you from your writing. If it's artless and sloppy, they may assume your thinking is the same. And if you fail to convince them that they should care about your message, they *won't* care. They may even decide you're not worth doing business with. The stakes are that high.

Some people say it's not a big deal. They may feel complacent. Or they may think it's ideas that matter—not writing. But good writing gets ideas noticed. It gets them realized. So don't be misled: Writing well *is* a big deal.

Those who write poorly create barriers between themselves and their readers; those who write well connect with readers, open their minds, and achieve goals.

All it takes is a few words to make a strong impression, good or bad. Let's look at four brief passages—two effective and two not. See whether you can tell which ones are which:

1. In the business climate as it exists at this point in time, one might be justified in having the expectation that the recruitment and retention of new employees would be facilitated by the economic woes of the current job market. However, a number of entrepreneurial business people have discovered that it is no small accomplishment to add to their staff people who will contribute to their bottom line in a positive, beneficial way.
2. In this job market, you might think that hiring productive new employees would be easy. But many entrepreneurs still struggle to find good people.
3. The idea of compensating a celebrity who routinely uses social media to the tune of thousands of dollars to promote one's company by tweeting about it may strike one as unorthodox, to say the least. But the number of businesses appropriating and expending funds for such activities year on year as a means of promotion is very much on the rise.
4. Paying a celebrity thousands of dollars to promote your company in 140-character tweets

may seem crazy. But more and more businesses are doing just that.

Can you tell the difference? Of course you can. The first and third examples are verbose and redundant. The syntax is convoluted and occasionally derails. The second and fourth examples are easy to understand, economical, and straightforward. They don't waste the reader's time.

You already recognize business writing that gets the job done—and trust me, you can learn to produce it. Maybe you think writing is a bother. Many people do. But there are time-tested methods for reducing the worry and labor. That's what you'll find in this book, along with lots of “before” and “after” examples that show these methods in action. (They're adapted from real documents, but disguised.)

Good writing isn't an inborn gift. It's a skill you cultivate, like so many others. Anyone of normal athletic ability can learn to shoot a basketball or hit a golf ball reasonably well. Anyone of normal intelligence and coordination can learn to play a musical instrument competently. And if you've read this far, you can learn to write well—probably very well—with the help of a few guiding principles.

Think of yourself as a professional writer

If you're in business, and you're writing anything to get results—e-mails, proposals, reports, you name it—then you're a professional writer. Broadly speaking, you belong to the same club as journalists, ad agencies, and book

authors: Your success may well depend on the writing you produce and its effect on readers. That's why what you produce should be as polished as you can make it.

Here's an example you may be familiar with. Various versions of this story exist—it's sometimes placed in different cities and told with different twists:

A blind man sits in a park with a scrawled sign hanging from his neck saying, "I AM BLIND," and a tin cup in front of him. A passing ad writer pauses, seeing only three quarters in the cup. He asks, "Sir, may I change your sign?" "But this is my sign. My sister wrote it just as I said." "I understand. But I think I can help. Let me write on the back, and you can try it out." The blind man hesitantly agrees. Within two hours the cup is full of coins and bills. As another passerby donates, the blind man says: "Stop for a moment, please. What does my sign say?" "Just seven words," says the newest contributor: "It is spring, and I am blind."

It matters how you say something.

Read carefully to pick up good style

To express yourself clearly and persuasively, you'll need to develop several qualities:

- An intense focus on your reason for writing—and on your readers' needs.
- A decided preference for the simplest words possible to express an idea accurately.

- A feel for natural idioms.
- An aversion to jargon and business-speak.
- An appreciation for the right words in the right places.
- An ear for tone.

How can you acquire these traits? Start by noticing their presence or absence in everything you read. Slow down just a little to study the work of pros. This shouldn't be a chore, and it shouldn't be squeezed in at the end of a long day. Grab a few spare minutes, over your morning coffee or between tasks, and read closely. Find good material that you enjoy. It could be the *Economist* or the *Wall Street Journal*, or even *Sports Illustrated*, which contains tremendous writing.

If you can, read at least one piece aloud each day as if you were a news announcer. (Yes, literally aloud.) Read with *feeling*. Heed the punctuation, the phrasing, the pacing of ideas, and the paragraphing. This habit will help cultivate an appreciation of the skills you're trying to acquire. And once you've honed your awareness, all you need is practice.

Recognize the payoff

An ambiguous letter or e-mail message will require a "corrective communication" to clear up a misunderstanding—which saps resources and goodwill. A poorly phrased and poorly reasoned memo may lead to bad decision-making. An ill-organized report can obscure

important information and cause readers to overlook vital facts. A heavy, uninviting proposal will get put aside and forgotten. A badly drafted pitch to a key client will only consume the time of higher-ups who must rewrite it at the eleventh hour to make it passable—lowering its chances of success because of the hectic circumstances surrounding its preparation.

That's a lot of wasted time—and a drag on profits. But you can prevent these problems with clear, concise writing. It's not some mysterious art, secret and remote. It's an indispensable business tool. Learn how to use it, and achieve the results you're after.

One prefatory note: Asterisks are used in the text throughout this book to mark examples of incorrect English grammar, spelling, or usage.

Section 1

Delivering the Goods Quickly and Clearly

Chapter 1

Know why you're writing

Many people begin writing before they know what they're trying to accomplish. As a result, their readers don't know where to focus their attention or what they're supposed to do with the message. So much depends on your *purpose* in writing that you must fix it firmly in your mind. What do you want the outcome to be? Do you want to persuade someone to sign a franchise contract, for instance? Or to stop using your trademark without permission? Or to come to a company reception?

Say clearly and convincingly what the issue is and what you want to accomplish. With every sentence, ask yourself whether you're advancing the cause. That will help you find the best words to get your message across.

Form follows function

Say your firm rents space in an office building that has thoroughly renovated the entrance and the entire first

Delivering the Goods Quickly and Clearly

floor. Your general counsel has alerted you that the landlord has violated the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). For example, there are no wheelchair-access ramps or automatic doors. You've decided to write to the landlord. But *why* are you writing? The answer to that question determines much of what you'll say and *all* of the tone that you'll use. Consider three versions of the letter you might write:

Version #1

You're good friends with the landlord, but you think that the law should be followed for the good of your employees and your customers. Purpose: to gather more information. Tone: friendly.

Dear Ann:

The new foyer looks fantastic. What a great way for us and others in the building to greet customers and other visitors. Thank you for undertaking the renovations.

Could it be that the work isn't finished? No accommodations have yet been made for wheelchair accessibility—as required by law. Perhaps I'm jumping the gun, and that part of the work just hasn't begun? Please let me know.

Let's get together for lunch soon.

All the best,

Version #2

You're on good terms with the landlord, but on principle, you don't like being in a building that isn't ADA-compliant. You have a disabled employee on staff, and you want the

situation righted. Purpose: to correct the oversight. Tone: more urgent.

Dear Ann:

Here at Bergson Company, we were delighted when you renovated the first floor and made it so much more inviting to both tenants and visitors. We are troubled, however, by the lack of wheelchair-access ramps and automatic doors for handicapped employees and customers, both of which are required by state and federal law. Perhaps you're still planning that part of the renovations. If so, please advise.

If this was a mere oversight, can you assure us that construction on ramps and automatic doors will begin within 60 days? Otherwise, as we understand it, we may be obliged to report the violation to the Vermont Buildings Commission. Without the fixes, you may be subject to some hefty fines—but we feel certain that you have every intention of complying with the law.

Sincerely,

Version #3

You've had repeated problems with the landlord, and you have found a better rental property elsewhere for your company. Purpose: to terminate your lease. Tone: firm, but without burning bridges.

Dear Ms. Reynolds:

Four weeks ago you finished renovating the first floor of our building. Did you not seek legal counsel? You have violated the Americans with Disabilities Act—as

Delivering the Goods Quickly and Clearly

well as state law—by failing to provide a wheelchair-access ramp and automatic doors for handicapped visitors and employees. Because four weeks have elapsed since you completed the work, we are entitled under state law to terminate our lease. This letter will serve as our 30 days’ notice.

Although we have no doubt that your oversight was a good-faith error, we hope that you understand why we can’t stay in the building and have made plans to go elsewhere.

We hope to remain on friendly terms during and after the move.

Sincerely,

These three letters are quite different because you are writing them to accomplish different things. Focus on the reaction you’re trying to elicit from the reader. You want results. Yet notice how even the sternest letter—Version 3—maintains a civil tone to foster goodwill. No hostility is necessary.

Recap

- Consider your purpose and your audience *before* you begin writing, and let these guide both what you say and how you say it.
- Plainly state the issue you’re addressing and what you hope to achieve.
- Keep your goal in mind: Don’t undermine your efforts with a hostile or inappropriate tone.

Chapter 2

Understand your readers

Communication is a two-way exercise. Without knowing something about your readers—and about psychology in general, for that matter—you'll rarely get your ideas across. What are their goals and priorities? What pressures do they face? What motivates them?

Respect readers' time constraints

The most important things to realize about all business audiences are these:

- Your readers are busy—*very* busy.
- They have little if any sense of duty to read what you put before them.
- If you don't get to your point pretty quickly, they'll ignore you—just as you tend to ignore long, rambling messages when you receive them.

Delivering the Goods Quickly and Clearly

- At the slightest need to struggle to understand you, they'll stop trying—and think less of you.
- If they don't buy your message, you may as well have stayed in bed that day.

Each of these universal tendencies becomes magnified as you ascend the ranks of an organization. Your job as a writer, then, is to:

- Prove quickly that you have something valuable to say—valuable to *your readers*, not just to you.
- Waste no time in saying it.
- Write with such clarity and efficiency that reading your material is easy—even enjoyable.
- Use a tone that makes you likable, so that your readers will want to spend time with you and your message.

Do these things and you'll develop a larger reservoir of goodwill. You'll not only have a genuinely competitive edge, but you'll also save time and money.

Tailor your message

If you're writing a memo to colleagues, for example, consider where they sit in the organization and what they're expected to contribute to its success. Or if you're responding to a client's request for proposal, address every need outlined in the RFP—but also think about the client's industry, company size, and culture. Your tone will change depending on your recipients, and so will your content. You'll highlight the things they care about most—the ever-important “what's in it for them.”

***Connect with particular readers to
connect with large audiences***

It's challenging to write for a large, diverse group of readers, especially if you don't know them. But you can make it easier by focusing on some specific person you know. In his preface to the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission's *Plain English Handbook*, Warren Buffett suggests grounding your prose by having a particular reader in mind:

When writing Berkshire Hathaway's annual report, I pretend that I'm talking to my sisters. I have no trouble picturing them: Though highly intelligent, they are not experts in accounting or finance. They will understand plain English, but jargon may puzzle them. My goal is simply to give them the information I would wish them to supply me if our positions were reversed. To succeed, I don't need to be Shakespeare; I must, though, have a sincere desire to inform.

If you focus on a smart nonspecialist who's actually in your audience—or, like Buffett, imagine that you're writing for a relative or a friend—you'll strike a balance between sophistication and accessibility. Your writing will be more appealing and more persuasive.

Your readers may have little or no prior knowledge about the facts or analysis you're disclosing. But assume that they're intelligent people. They'll be able to follow you if you give them the information they need, and they won't be bamboozled by empty, airy talk.

Delivering the Goods Quickly and Clearly

NOT THIS:

We aspire to be a partner primarily concerned with providing our clients the maximal acquisition of future profits and assets and focus mainly on clients with complex and multi-product needs, large and midsized corporate entities, individual or multiple entrepreneurial agents, and profit-maximizing institutional clients. By listening attentively to their needs and offering them paramount solutions, we empower those who wish to gain access to our services with the optimal set of decisions in their possible action portfolio given the economic climate at the time of the advice as well as the fiscal constraints that you are subject to. Against the backdrop of significant changes within our industry, we strive to ensure that we consistently help our clients realize their goals and thrive, and we continue to strengthen the coverage of our key clients by process-dedicated teams of senior executives who can deliver and utilize our integrated business model. On the back of a strong capital position and high levels of client satisfaction and brand recognition, we have achieved significant gains in market share. We hope that you have a favorable impression of our company's quantitative and qualitative attributes and will be inclined to utilize our services as you embark on your financial endeavors.

BUT THIS:

We're a client-focused firm dedicated to making sure you get the most out of our services. Our client base includes individual entrepreneurs, midsized companies, and large corporations. If you decide to do business with us, we'll give you financial advice that is in tune with the current economy and with what you can afford to invest. For years, we've consistently received the highest possible industry ratings, and we have won the coveted Claiborne Award for exceptional client satisfaction 17 of our 37 years in business. We hope to have the opportunity to work with you in your financial endeavors.

Recap

- Understand that your readers have no time to waste: Get to the point quickly and clearly to ensure that your message gets read.
- Use a tone appropriate for your audience.
- Emphasize the items most important to your readers. If they can easily see how your message is relevant to them, they will be more likely to read it and respond.
- Choose an intelligent, nonspecialist member of your audience to write for—or invent one—and focus on writing for that person. Your message will be more accessible and persuasive to all your readers as a result.

Chapter 3

Divide the writing process into four separate tasks

Do you feel anxious every time you sit down to write? Your main difficulty is probably figuring out how to begin. Don't try to picture the completed piece before you've gathered and organized your material. It's much too soon to think about the final, polished product—and you will just make the challenge ahead of you seem overwhelming. The worry can take more out of you than the actual writing.

Instead, break up your work. Think of writing not as one huge task but as a series of smaller tasks. The poet, writer, and teacher Betty Sue Flowers has envisioned them as belonging to different characters in your brain: MACJ.¹ That stands for Madman–Architect–Carpenter–

1. Betty S. Flowers, "Madman, Architect, Carpenter, Judge: Roles and the Writing Process," *Proceedings of the Conference of College Teachers of English* 44 (1979): 7–10.

Judge, representing the phases that a writer must go through:

- **The Madman** gathers material and generates ideas.
- **The Architect** organizes information by drawing up an outline, however simple.
- **The Carpenter** puts your thoughts into words, laying out sentences and paragraphs by following the Architect's plan.
- **The Judge** is your quality-control character, polishing the expression throughout—everything from tightening language to correcting grammar and punctuation.

You'll be most efficient if you carry out these tasks pretty much in this order. Sure, you'll do some looping back. For example, you may need to draft more material after you've identified holes to fill. But do your best to compartmentalize the discrete tasks and address them in order.

Get the Madman started

Accept your good ideas gratefully whenever they come. But if you're methodical about brainstorming at the beginning of the process, you'll find that more and more of your good ideas will come to you early—and you'll largely prevent the problem of finally thinking of your best point after you've finished and distributed your document.

Get your material from memory, from research, from observation, from conversations with colleagues and oth-

ers, and from reasoning, speculation, and imagination. The problem you're trying to solve may seem intractable, and you may struggle to find a good approach. (How on earth will you persuade the folks in finance to approve your budget request when they're turning down requests left and right? How will you get the executive board to adopt a new mind-set about a proposed merger?) Don't get hung up on the size of the challenge. Gathering ideas and facts up front will help you push through and defuse anxiety about the writing.

How do you keep track of all this preliminary material? In the old days, people used index cards. (I wrote my first several books that way.) But today the easiest way is to create a rough spreadsheet that contains the following:

- Labels indicating the points you're trying to support.
- The data, facts, and opinions you're recording under each point—taking care to put direct quotes within quotation marks.
- Your sources. Include the title and page number if citing a book or an article, the URL if citing an online source. (When writing a formal document, such as a report, see *The Chicago Manual of Style* for information on proper sourcing.)

As you're taking notes, distinguish facts from opinions. Be sure to give credit where it's due. You'll run aground if you claim others' assertions as your own, because you'll probably be unable to back them up convincingly. Worse, you'll be guilty of plagiarism.

This groundwork will save you loads of time when you're drafting and will help you create a well-supported, persuasive document.

Let the Architect take the lead

You may feel frustrated at first as you're groping for a way to organize your document. If a sensible approach doesn't come to mind after you've done your research and scouted for ideas, you may need to do more hunting and gathering. You want to arrive at the point of writing down three sentences—complete propositions—that convey your ideas. Then arrange them in the most logical order from the reader's point of view (see chapter 4). That's your bare-bones outline, which is all you typically need before you start drafting.

Give the Carpenter a tight schedule

The key to writing a sound first draft is to write as swiftly as you can (you'll read more about this in chapter 5). Later, you'll make corrections. But for now, don't slow yourself down to perfect your wording. If you do, you'll invite writer's block. Lock the Judge away at this stage, and try to write in a headlong rush.

Call in the Judge

Once you've got it all down, it's time for deliberation—weighing your words, filling in gaps, amplifying here and curtailing there. Make several sweeps, checking for one thing at a time: the accuracy of your citations, the tone, the quality of your transitions, and so on. (For an editorial checklist, see chapter 6.) If you try to do many things

at once, you won't be doing any of them superbly. So leave plenty of time for multiple rounds of editing—at least as much time as you spent researching and writing. You'll ferret out more problems, and you'll find better fixes for them.

Recap

- Approach a writing project as a series of manageable tasks using the MACJ method.
- Use the Madman to gather research and other material for the project, diligently keeping track of quotations and sources. And allow more of your best ideas to come early by methodically brainstorming at the beginning of the process.
- As the Architect, organize the Madman's raw material into a sensible outline. Distill your ideas into three main propositions.
- In the Carpenter phase, write as quickly as possible—without worrying about perfecting your prose.
- Finally, assume the role of the Judge to edit, polish, and improve the piece. Do this in several distinct passes, each time focusing on only one element of your writing.

Chapter 4

Before writing in earnest, jot down your three main points— in complete sentences

A mathematician once told me that there are really only four numbers in the world: one, two, three, and many. There's something to that: Four items just seem to be one too many for most people to hold in their memory. But a proposal, a report, or any other piece of business writing feels underdeveloped when it's supported by only one or two points.

So write down your three main points as full sentences, and spell out your logic as clearly as you can. That way, you'll force yourself to think through your reasons

for recommending a vendor, for example, or pitching an offer to a client—and you’ll make a stronger case.

If you try to simply think things out as you write, you’ll run into trouble because you won’t really know yet what you’re hoping your reader will think or do. You’ll flail about, gradually clarifying your point as you make several runs at it. In the end, after multiple attempts, you may finally figure out what you have to say, but you probably won’t say it in a way that your reader can follow.

An example of finding your focus

Let’s say your name is Carol Sommers, and you work at a small management-consulting firm. Your boss, Steve, owns the business and is considering acquiring a 17,000-square-foot building as his new office. Because you’re the office manager, Steve has asked you to think through the logistics and to write up your recommendations before the company makes an offer to purchase the building. At first, you’re at a loss—there are so many issues to sort through. But you’ve got to start somewhere.

So before you write your memo, you put on your Mad-man hat and brainstorm a list of considerations:

- Ownership
- Maintenance
- Buildout
- Security
- Offices vs. cubicles
- Real-estate values—comparables?

Before writing in earnest, jot down your three main points

- The move—bids on movers?
- Timing
- Tax consequences
- Employee and visitor parking
- Environmental inspection and related issues
- Smooth transitioning: phone and Internet service, mail forwarding, new stationery, updating business contacts, subscriptions, etc.
- Insurance
- Leaving current landlord on good terms
- Taking signage to new location?

These are just *topics*, not fully formed thoughts. But now that you have a rough list, you can start the Architect phase of writing and categorize in threes.

Steve's responsibilities (before acquisition):

- Consider an environmental inspection to make sure that the building has no hidden issues. Our commercial realtor can help.
- Check with our accountant to find out what tax consequences we might have depending on how we time the closing.
- Ask the accountant and perhaps a tax lawyer whether Steve should own the property personally, whether the company should own it, or whether a

Delivering the Goods Quickly and Clearly

newly formed entity (an LLC, for example) should own it. There may be liability issues.

My responsibilities (before acquisition):

- Cost out insurance coverage.
- Interview contractors for building out the space to our satisfaction. (Note to self: Confirm that we can roll the buildout into the mortgage.)
- Cost out the annual bill for providing the kind of security we currently have.

My responsibilities (postacquisition):

- Contract for maintenance (cleaning and trash services, lawn and parking-lot care).
- Plan the move, with a smooth transition in operations (the physical move, mail forwarding, phone and Internet, new stationery, address updates, announcement to customers, moving signage, etc.).
- Help Steve plan the architectural buildout to foster collaboration and use space efficiently.

To come up with all this, put yourself in Steve's place, imagining what you'd want *your* office manager to think of to help you do your job better. But it also takes a little legwork—for example, talking to people at firms that have recently changed locations or acquired buildings. Can't find anyone like that through your network? Ask the commercial realtor to put you in touch with one or two of its clients.

Before writing in earnest, jot down your three main points

For each stage, we've listed the three big issues—at least what we *think* they are. Look how easy it is now to begin your Carpenter work (writing a useful memo to Steve):

Memo

To: Steve Haskell

From: Carol Sommers

Re: The Prospective Purchase of 1242 Maple Avenue

Date: April 12, 2012

As you requested, I've thought through the logistics of purchasing and moving into the Maple Avenue property. Here are my suggestions for each stage of the process.

Now

I'd like your approval to tackle the following tasks immediately because they'll give us a more complete picture of how expensive the acquisition and move would be:

- Cost out insurance coverage.
- Interview contractors for building out the space to our satisfaction. (I've checked with the bank to see if we can roll the buildout into the mortgage, and we can.)
- Cost out the annual bill for providing the kind of security we currently have.

Preclosing

If you decide to go forward with the purchase and your offer is accepted, I'll take care of these items before we close on the loan:

Delivering the Goods Quickly and Clearly

- Arrange for at least one thorough inspection of the building.
- Work with our accountant, to the extent you'd like, to get papers in order for obtaining the bank financing you mentioned.
- Ensure that all due-diligence deadlines are met.

After Closing

After closing, I'll get into the nuts and bolts of the move:

- Help you plan the architectural buildout to foster collaboration and use space efficiently.
- Plan the move, with a smooth transition in operations (the physical move, mail forwarding, phone and Internet, new stationery, address updates, announcement to customers, moving signage, etc.).
- Contract for maintenance (cleaning and trash services, lawn and parking-lot care).

Issues for You to Think About

While I'm attending to the details above, you might want to:

- Consider environmental and structural inspections to make sure the building has no hidden issues. Our commercial realtor says he can provide guidance—I'd be happy to set up a meeting if you like.
- Check with our accountant to find out what tax consequences we might have depending on how we time the closing.
- Ask the accountant and perhaps a tax lawyer whether you should own the property person-

Before writing in earnest, jot down your three main points

ally (highly unlikely), whether Haskell Company should own it, or whether a newly formed entity (such as an LLC) should own it. You or the company may face liability issues with outright ownership.

Of course, I'm always on hand to take on whatever tasks you need. Just let me know.

Prewriting in threes resulted in a clear, useful memo. It helped us forestall writer's block, organize the material, and make concise, well-reasoned recommendations.

But did you notice that the finished memo breaks things down into four categories, not three? As hard as I tried to think of everything before writing the memo, I couldn't. Looking at my preliminary list, I identified a gap in time—a period in which there would be other necessary tasks. So I added the preclosing category and wrote those items on the fly. But I probably wouldn't have come up with them if I hadn't started with a plan. Organizing my main points in sets of three helped me see the preclosing gap; after that, filling it in wasn't difficult.

The order of categories changed, too. Why move Steve's tasks from the beginning to the end? The memo was about what you, Carol Sommers, the office manager, could do for Steve. To think of your responsibilities, you needed to think of Steve's. That was your starting point for brainstorming—but not for your memo.

You couldn't very well lead by telling your boss what he needs to do. That's not your place, and that's not what he asked for. So Steve's to-dos can go at the end, as helpful reminders. That way, you can focus his attention mainly on items you'll take care of to make his decisions easier.

Recap

- Find your focus by first generating a list of topics to cover.
- Develop these raw ideas into full sentences and categorize your main points in sets of three.
- Arrange these sets in a logical order, keeping your reader's needs in mind.

Chapter 5

Write in full—rapidly

Once you've written your three main points so that you know where you're going, you're in Carpenter mode—ready to put together the ideas you've generated and organized. Write as quickly as possible. Your sentences will be shorter than they otherwise would be, your idioms will be more natural, and your draft should start taking shape before you know it. If there's a painful part of writing, it's doing the first draft. When you shorten the duration, it's not as painful.

Time yourself

To prevent premature fussing, write against the clock. (Creative writers call this speed writing. They often use it as an exercise to get juices flowing.) Allow yourself 5 or 10 minutes to draft each section—the opener, the body, and the closer—and set the timer on your computer or phone to keep yourself honest.

Don't edit as you go

It's counterproductive to allow the Judge and the Carpenter to work side by side. That's essentially multitasking—you're just doing two things inefficiently rather than simultaneously. And besides, the editorial part of the brain is simply incompatible with the production part. Who needs a fault-finding critic's kibitzing when you're trying to create something new and fresh? You're best off keeping the Judge away as you produce your first draft. You'll spend plenty of time editing later.

Don't wait for inspiration

Inspiration rarely comes when you want it to. After the careful planning you've done, you won't need it anyway. As the management expert Peter Drucker famously said about innovation, good writing takes careful, conscious work, not a "flash of genius."

If you follow the MACJ process, you'll inspire *yourself*—and minimize your procrastinating. Once the Madman and the Architect have worked, you should be primed to write. Schedule the time when the Carpenter is to begin, and when the appointed time comes, get started.

Begin by writing in support of what you're most comfortable addressing. When you get stuck, skip to something else. You need to get into a flow. If you're still struggling when you come back to that problem passage, say out loud (to yourself or to a colleague) what you're trying to convey. Sometimes speaking will help you find the right words. The point is to get your ideas on paper—knowing

that you'll still have time to elaborate and perfect them at the next stage.

Recap

- Write your first draft as quickly as you can.
- Don't get stuck waiting for inspiration. Try giving yourself 5 to 10 minutes for each section when drafting.
- Resist the urge to perfect as you write. Saving the editing until the draft is finished will keep the Judge from getting in your way.
- Schedule a time for the Carpenter to work—and when that time comes, begin.
- If you find yourself stumped, move on to a different section you're more comfortable with and come back to the problem once you've found your flow.

Chapter 6

Improve what you've written

Once you've written a complete draft, you'll revise first and then edit. Revising is a reconsideration of what you're saying as a whole, and where you're saying it. It's rethinking the floor plan. Editing is more a matter of fine-tuning sentences and paragraphs. You need to allow time for both. On the one hand, don't let some neurotic obsession with perfectionism delay important projects. On the other hand, don't rashly send things out without proper vetting and improvement.

Revising

As a reviser, you're asking several questions:

- Have I been utterly truthful?
- Have I said all that I need to say?
- Have I been appropriately diplomatic and fair?

Delivering the Goods Quickly and Clearly

- Do I have three parts to the piece—an opener, a middle, and a closer?
- In my opener, have I made my points quickly and clearly? And concretely?
- Have I avoided a slow wind-up that unnecessarily postpones the message?
- In the middle, have I proved my points with specifics?
- Is the structure immediately apparent to my readers? Have I used informative headings?
- Is my closer consistent with the rest—yet expressed freshly? Have I avoided lame repetition?

Editing

When it comes to editing, you're asking different questions as you read through your sentences and paragraphs:

- Can I save some words here?
- Is there a better way of phrasing this idea?
- Is my meaning unmistakable?
- Can I make it more interesting?
- Is the expression relaxed but refined?
- Does one sentence glide into the next, without discontinuities?

An example of revising and editing

To understand the process more concretely, let's take a look at how an internal memo takes shape through three

drafts. The first draft is not very clear and omits important information, but the germ of an idea is there:

First Draft

To: All Sales Personnel

From: Chris Hedron

Subject: Changes in Order-Processing Procedure

In order to facilitate the customers' placement of orders, a new order-processing procedure has been designed. The process will require a customer to enter the product and/or service code into our order-entry system, which will then generate a quote for the job and return it to the customer for approval. This will make time for the customer to review the quote and transmit any changes before work begins. Upon receipt of the customer's written approval, the quote will be transformed into a work order. This procedure will make it easier and faster for us to process customers' orders.

This memo needs some amplification, especially in the realms of who, what, why, and when. The second draft, a full-fledged revision, fleshes out much that was unclear about the first draft.

Second Draft

To: All Sales Personnel

From: Chris Hedron

Subject: New Work-Order-Processing Procedure

Because our current work-order-processing procedure requires a lot of paperwork and phone calls, it's difficult for customers to make changes prior to the

Delivering the Goods Quickly and Clearly

commencement of work. The procedure is inefficient and subject to numerous errors. And it takes up to four weeks from quote to approval to work order. So we have designed a new four-step order-processing procedure that will allow customers to place orders through our website and allow us to begin jobs faster.

Beginning in January 2013, we will inform our customers about the new procedure, and on April 20, 2013, we will implement the new procedure, which will work as follows. First, to initiate or change a work order, customers can visit our website to request a quote by filling out a detailed form and providing a purchase-order number. Second, we will transmit a quote to the customer for approval. Third, if the customer approves, they can return the quote with an electronic signature and purchase-order number. Fourth, we will transform the quote to a work order immediately. Work-order changes can be made using the same procedure except that instead of a quote, customers will request a work-order change.

The focus there was on saying all that needed to be said—not on refining the expression. Now, though, it's possible to engage in fine-tuning and to produce a much-improved draft.

Third Draft

To: All Sales Personnel

From: Chris Hedron

Subject: New Work-Order-Processing Procedure

Our current work-order processing takes a lot of paper-work and phone calls, so it's hard for our customers to

make changes to the work before it begins. The procedure is inefficient and subject to error. And it takes up to four weeks from quote to approval to work order. We have therefore designed a new four-step procedure that has two key benefits: (1) Customers can place orders through our website, and (2) we can start jobs faster.

Beginning January 2013, we'll tell our customers about the new procedure. On April 20, 2013, we'll implement it. The new procedure will work in four steps:

- Customers can visit our website to request a quote for a job by filling out a form and providing a purchase-order number.
- We'll then send a quote for the customer's approval.
- The customer can return the approved quote with a digital signature.
- We'll instantly convert the quote to a work order.

Work-order changes can be made using the same procedure except that instead of a quote, customers will request a work-order change.

Recap

- Allow yourself ample time to revise and edit your work.
- Consider your draft in its entirety. Take a fresh look at your content and structure: Have you said everything you need to—and in the most effective way?
- Then edit your work, fine-tuning to tighten, sharpen, and refine your prose.

Chapter 7

Use graphics to illustrate and clarify

When you're writing about complex ideas, for example, or looking for useful ways to break up a long stretch of text, you can use a simple, elegant chart to convey critical information at a glance. Such graphics especially serve people who want to skim what you've written.

A few crucial principles:

- Make sure your graphics illustrate something discussed in the text.
- Place them near the text they illustrate, preferably on the same page or on a facing page.
- Use legends and keys that readers can easily grasp.

To learn how to produce effective graphics, consult the books of Edward Tufte, especially *Envisioning*

Information and *Beautiful Evidence*. You'll marvel at the amount of learning and the sophisticated thought that lie behind superb visuals.

It would be gross negligence to leave off without a graphic, so here's one to round out the section. Note that when you flip through this book, your eye stops here. That's because any departure from the norm achieves a special emphasis. If every third or fourth page had such a

FIGURE 7-1

The Who-Why-What-When-How Chart

Who are you writing for?	Key point: Consider your audience's concerns, motivations, and background.
Why are you writing?	Key point: Keep your purpose firmly in mind. Every sentence should advance it.
What needs saying?	Key point: Include only the main points and details that will get your message across.
When are you expecting actions to be taken?	Key point: State your time frame.
How will your communication benefit your readers?	Key point: Make it clear to readers how you're meeting their needs.

chart, the effect would be nullified. So make your graphics distinctive—and don't overuse them.

Recap

- Distill your report (or part of it) into a chart, diagram, or other visual aid that helps your audience understand the content and its import.
- Take your design cues from visuals you have found effective.
- Read the books of Edward Tufte to develop this skill.

Section 2

Developing Your Skills

Chapter 8

Be relentlessly clear

Clarity can be a double-edged sword. When you're forthright enough to take a position or recommend a course of action, you're sticking your neck out. People who don't want to commit make their writing muddy. Perhaps they're trying to leave room for their views to evolve as events unfold. Or perhaps they're hoping they can later claim credit for good results and deny responsibility for bad ones.

The fact is, though, that many readers will perceive them not as savvy wait-and-see participants but as spineless herd-followers who are slow to see (much less seize) opportunities within their reach. So clean up the mud.

Adopt the reader's perspective

Always judge clarity from the reader's standpoint—not your own. Try showing a draft to colleagues with fresh eyes and asking them what they think your main points are. If they can't do that accurately, then you're not being clear enough.

Your ideal should be to write so unmistakably that your readers can't possibly misunderstand or misinterpret. Anything that requires undue effort from them won't be read with full attention—and is bound to be misunderstood.

Keep your language simple

Simplicity breeds clarity. Strive to use short words and sentences. Over the years, research has confirmed again and again that the optimal average for readable sentences is no more than 20 words. You'll need variety to hold interest—some very short sentences and some longer ones—but aim for an average of 20 words. With every sentence, ask yourself whether you can say it more briefly.

NOT THIS:

Efficiency measures that have been implemented by the company with strong involvement of senior management have generated cost savings while at the very same time assisting in the building of a culture that is centered around the value of efficiency. We anticipate that, given this excising of unnecessary expenditures and enhanced control of other expenditures, the overall profitability of the company will be increased in the near term of up to four quarters.

BUT THIS:

Our senior management team has cut costs and made the company more efficient. We expect to be more profitable for the next four quarters.

If you're writing about technical matters for an audience of nonspecialists—for example, explaining the benefits of a software upgrade to end users or putting together an investment primer for your company's 401(k) participants—don't try to define each term in the sen-

tence where it first appears. That will bulk up your sentences and make the material even harder for people to grasp. Sometimes you'll need a new sentence or even a new paragraph to explain a term or concept in simple, straightforward English.

Show, don't tell

You probably heard writing teachers in school say, "Show, don't tell." It's excellent advice no matter what you're writing—even business documents. The point is to be specific enough that you lead your readers to draw their own conclusions (conclusions that match yours, of course), as opposed to simply expressing your opinions without support and hoping people will buy them.

Consider these examples:

NOT THIS:

He was a bad boss.

The company lost its focus and floundered.

The shares of OJM stock issued to Pantheon stockholders in the merger will constitute a significant proportion of the outstanding stock of OJM after the merger. Based on this significant proportion, it is expected that OJM will issue millions of OJM shares to Pantheon stockholders in the merger.

BUT THIS:

He got a promotion based on his assistant's detailed reports, but then—despite the company's record profits—denied that assistant even routine cost-of-living raises.

The CEO acquired five unrelated subsidiaries—as far afield as a paper company and a retailer of children's toys—and then couldn't service the \$26 million in debt.

We expect that OJM will issue about 320 million shares of its stock to Pantheon shareholders in the merger. That figure will account for about 42% of OJM's outstanding stock after the merger.

WRITE LETTERS TO SHARPEN YOUR SKILLS

Your letter writing is the best barometer of your writing skills generally. And it's a safe way to practice—to prepare yourself for your more difficult writing tasks. Write thank-you letters, congratulatory letters, letters of recommendation (when asked), complaint letters, letters to the editor, personal notes (handwritten), and all sorts of others. If you can write good letters, you can write just about anything. (See chapter 19, “Business Letters,” for pointers on how.) That's because they help you to focus on *others*. When you write a letter, you're connecting with one particular recipient. And letters help you build goodwill with people. An e-mail message may create an impression, but it's far less likely to be remembered than a personal letter is.

To develop the habit, try writing a few letters a week. Make many of them handwritten notes. (When you receive one in a stack of mail, isn't that the first thing that grabs your attention?) They're personal and, if well done, memorable and even savable. They'll help you build and maintain relationships. Write them to tell those you supervise how much you appreciate their hard work, congratulate colleagues on promotions, motivate team members to meet goals, let new partners know you're eager to start collaborating, and so on. To write a good one, keep it neat, try limiting it to one page, make it warm and friendly, use *you* more than *I*, and use tasteful, mature stationery.

A short, vague sentence (like “He was a bad boss”) may register in the readers’ minds—but only as a personal impression that’s potentially biased. It’s credible only if its source is highly credible. As for the long, vague sentence about OJM stock, there’s nothing for readers to hold on to, and they’ll get tired trying.

Concrete business writing is persuasive because it’s evidence-based, clear, and memorable. When you supply meaningful, objective details (explaining, for example, that the floundering company “couldn’t service the \$26 million in debt”), you’re sharing information, not just your opinion that the company “lost its focus.” You earn credibility by demonstrating a command of the facts. You also give your message staying power. People don’t care about—or even remember—abstractions the way they do specifics.

So if you’re marketing your firm’s consulting services to potential clients, don’t just tell them you’ll save them money. Say how much money you’ve saved others. Don’t just promise that you’ll make their lives easier. List the time-consuming tasks you’ll take off their hands. Don’t just claim to have deep experience in the health care industry. *Name names:* Mention several hospitals and medical centers you’ve done work for, and include testimonials saying how happy clients are with the time and money you’ve saved them.

Recap

- Put yourself in the reader’s shoes to assess your clarity. Better yet, see whether a colleague can accurately summarize the main points of your draft from a quick read-through.

Developing Your Skills

- Phrase your ideas as plainly and briefly as possible, aiming for an average sentence length of 20 or fewer words.
- Pave your readers' way with concrete details. Don't try to push them there with abstract assertions.
- Cultivate your letter writing to improve your writing skills more generally.

Chapter 9

Learn to summarize—accurately

A good summary is focused and specific—and it's at the beginning of your document so readers don't have to dig. It gets to the point. It lays the foundation for what's to follow. There's no holding back on the crucial information.

Consider the difference between these two openers to a recommendation that a proposal be rejected:

NOT THIS:

Summary

The cell phone changeover that has been proposed should be rejected. For the reasons stated below, the company would not be well served by accepting the proposal.

BUT THIS:

Summary

Last year, we adopted an officewide policy of issuing cell phones to all executives and sales reps at an annual cost of \$58,000 (including voice and data plans). The Persephone company has proposed that we switch to its phones and service at an annual cost of \$37,000. The committee charged with evaluating this proposal recommends that we reject it for four reasons:

1. The new plans would have significantly less coverage in Europe and Asia, so our international sales reps might suffer lost opportunities.
2. Our current provider has been highly responsive and has tailored its service to our needs.
3. The \$21,000 savings is dwarfed by potential costs (even one dropped sales call could result in a loss of much more money than that).
4. Persephone's customer service appears from credible online reviews to be inferior.

What makes the second version better? It can be fully understood by anyone who reads it—at any time. The first version, by contrast, assumes familiarity: It's clear to only a few “insiders”—and for only a limited period. And because it's vague, it lacks the credibility that the second version earns through specifics.

Struggling to incorporate the right amount of detail to make your summary clear and useful? Write a descriptive outline of your document—summarize each paragraph or section with a sentence that captures the who, what, when, where, why, and how—and try creating your overall summary out of that. Also, keep your readers' needs foremost in your mind. What questions will people have when they open your document? Provide brief but concrete answers to those questions. These will assure readers that what follows will matter to them.

Be brief—but not too brief

People often assume that shorter is better when it comes to summaries. But brevity without substance is worthless. Never say more than the occasion demands—but never say less, either. Adopt the reader’s perspective: Fill in as much information as it takes to get people up to speed. Think of your summary as the CliffsNotes version of your document. Although the second example is longer, it conveys the whole gist of the message. And there’s not one wasted word, which brings us to our next chapter.

Recap

- Summarize the vital information at the beginning of the document.
- Summarize each section with a sentence that addresses “the five Ws” (who, what, when, where, why) and how—and use these sentences to build your general summary.
- Provide only the information the reader needs to understand the issue—no more and no less.

Chapter 10

Waste no words

Make every word count. When you mean *before*, don't say or write *prior to*, much less *prior to the time when*.

Though *prior to* is a linguistic choice that the dictionary offers us, it's a bad choice. Never use two words for one, three words for two, and so on. Syllables add up fast and slow people down. Of course, stick to idiomatic English. Don't start dropping articles (*a, an, the*) where we'd all normally expect them. And don't cut the important word *that* left and right—more often than not, you really need it to be clear. But remove all the words that aren't performing a real function. Doing so saves readers time and effort and makes your ideas easier to grasp and apply.

Wordiness can exist on many levels, from rambling statements to unnecessary repetition to verbose expressions that could be replaced by shorter, sharper alternatives. Whatever the manifestation, it's bad. Consider the following examples:

NOT THIS:

The trend in the industry is toward self-generation by some companies of their own websites, and Internet technology is changing the nature of training necessary to acquire the skill of website development at an acceptable level of sophistication, so that this activity can more and more be handled in-house.

[49 words]

We are unable to fill your order at this point in time because there is an ongoing dock strike that affects our operations.

[23 words]

I am writing in response to a number of issues that have arisen with regard to the recent announcement that there will be an increase in the charge for the use of our lobby computers.

[35 words]

The greater number of these problems can readily be dealt with in such a way as to bring about satisfactory solutions.

[21 words]

BUT THIS:

Since Internet technology makes it easier than ever to develop sophisticated websites, some companies now develop their own in-house.

[19 words]

We cannot fill your order right now because of the dock strike.

[12 words]

You may have heard that we're raising the fees for using our lobby computers.

[14 words]

Most of these problems can be readily solved.

[8 words]

To trim extra words from your documents, try:

- Deleting every preposition that you can, especially *of*: change *April of 2013* to *April 2013* and *point of view* to *viewpoint*.

- Replacing every *-ion* word with a verb if you can. Change *was in violation of* to *violated* and *provided protection to* to *protected*.
- Replacing *is, are, was, and were* with stronger verbs where you can. Change *was hanging* to *hung* and *is indicative of* to *indicates*.

You'll see all three tricks at work here:

NOT THIS:	BUT THIS:
The manufacturers of tools for gardening have been the victims of a compression factor that has resulted in an increase in units on the market accompanied by a negative disproportionate rise of prices. [36 words]	The garden-tool industry has suffered from an oversupply of units coupled with rising prices. [14 words]
For the near and intermediate future in terms of growth goals, Bromodrotics, Inc., is evaluating its corporate design needs. The purpose of this short-term and intermediate-term evaluation is to make a determination as to how the image of the company might best be positioned to be of assistance to the sales force in meeting its growth goals. [57 words]	To increase sales, Bromodrotics needs to improve its image. [9 words]

Ruthlessly cut words from your first draft, so long as you remain faithful to the sounds and rhythms of normal, down-to-earth English. Don't compress words to the point of sounding curt or unnatural.

One other trick in that last example: eliminating padding such as *in terms of* and *the purpose of*. Sometimes you'll find even worse phrases:

in this connection it might be observed that

it is important to bear in mind that

it is interesting that

it is notable that

it is worthwhile to note that

it should be pointed out that

it will be remembered that

Leave all these things unsaid—without saying *it goes without saying that . . .*

Recap

- Never use more words than necessary: If you can say it in two words instead of three, do so—as long as the result still sounds natural.
- Tighten your prose by removing inessential prepositions, replacing abstract *-ion* nouns with action verbs where possible, and replacing wordy *be*-verb phrases with more direct simple verbs.
- Eliminate padding that doesn't contribute to your meaning.

Chapter 11

Be plain-spoken: Avoid bizspeak

It's mission-critical to be plain-spoken, whether you're trying to be best-of-breed at outside-the-box thinking or simply incentivizing colleagues to achieve a paradigm shift in core-performance value-adds. Leading-edge leveraging of your plain-English skill set will ensure that your actionable items synergize future-proof assets with your global-knowledge repository.

Just kidding. Seriously, though, it's important to write plainly. You want to sound like a person, not an institution. But it's hard to do, especially if you work with people who are addicted to buzzwords. It takes a lot of practice.

Back when journalists were somewhat more fastidious with the language than they are today, newspaper editors often kept an “index expurgatorius”: a roster of words and phrases that under no circumstances (except perhaps in a damning quote) would find their way into print. Here's such a list for the business writer. Of course,

it's just a starting point—add to it as you come across other examples of bizspeak that hinder communication by substituting clichés for actual thought.

Bizspeak Blacklist

actionable (apart from legal action)

agreeance

as per

at the end of the day

back of the envelope

bandwidth (outside electronics)

bring our A game

client-centered

come-to-Jesus

core competency

CYA

drill down

ducks in a row

forward initiative

going forward

go rogue

guesstimate

harvesting efficiencies

hit the ground running

impact (as verb)

incent

incentivize

impactful

kick the can down the road

Let's do lunch.

Let's take this offline.

level the playing field

leverage (as verb)

liaise

mission-critical

monetize

net-net

on the same page

operationalize

optimize

out of pocket (except in reference to expenses)

paradigm shift

parameters

Developing Your Skills

per

planful

pursuant to

push the envelope

putting lipstick on a pig

recontextualize

repurpose

rightsized

sacred cow

scalable

seamless integration

seismic shift (outside earthquake references)

smartsized

strategic alliance

strategic dynamism

synergize; synergy

think outside the box

throw it against the wall and see if it sticks

throw under the bus

turnkey

under the radar

utilization; utilize

value-added

verbage (the correct term is *verbiage*—in reference only to verbose phrasings)

where the rubber meets the road

win-win

These phrases have become voguish in business—abstain if you can. Sometimes people use them to enhance their own sense of belonging or to sound “in the know.” Or they’ve been taught that good writing is hyperformal, so they stiffen up when they use a keyboard or pick up a pen, and they pile on the clichés.

It takes experience to bring your written voice into line with your spoken voice and to polish it so well that no one notices the polish.

NOT THIS:

BUT THIS:

The reduction in monthly assessments which will occur beginning next month has been made financially feasible *as a result of leveraging* our substantial reductions in expenditures.

We’ll be cutting your assessments beginning next month because we’ve saved on expenses.

It is to be noted that a considerable amount of savings has been made possible *by reason of our planful initiation of* more efficient and effective purchasing procedures.

We’ve saved considerable sums by streamlining our purchases.

Hunt for offending phrases

Start looking for bizspeak in all kinds of documents, from memos to marketing plans, and you'll find it everywhere. You'll eventually learn to spot it—and avoid it—in your own writing. You'll omit canned language such as *Attached please find* and other phrases that only clutter your message.

Bizspeak may seem like a convenient shorthand, but it suggests to readers that you're on autopilot, thoughtlessly using boilerplate phrases that people have heard over and over. Brief, readable documents, by contrast, show care and thought. *Attached please find* is just one example among many:

NOT THIS:	BUT THIS:
at your earliest convenience	as soon as you can
in light of the fact that	because
we are in receipt of	we've received
as per our telephone conversation on today's date	as we discussed this morning
Pursuant to your instructions, I met with Roger Smith today regarding the above-mentioned.	As you asked, I met with Roger Smith today.
Please be advised that the deadline for the above-mentioned competition is Monday, April 2, 2012.	The deadline is April 2, 2012.
Thank you for your courtesy and cooperation regarding this matter.	Thank you.
Thank you in advance for your courtesy and cooperation in this regard. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions regarding this request.	Thank you. If you have any questions, please call.

Writing plainly means expressing ideas as straightforwardly as you can—without sacrificing meaning or tone.

Take Warren Buffett again, one of the smartest business leaders on the planet—and someone, by the way, who cares a lot about good business writing. Consider how he rewrote a short passage that he found in a financial-services firm's business prospectus. Read through the first excerpt before you read Buffett's translation below it, and note the bizspeak phrases that landed on the cutting-room floor as Buffett tightened and translated:

NOT THIS:

Maturity and duration management decisions are made *in the context of* an intermediate maturity orientation. The maturity structure of the portfolio is adjusted *in the anticipation of* cyclical interest-rate changes. Such adjustments are not made *in an effort to* capture short-term, day-to-day movements in the market, but instead *are implemented in anticipation of* longer-term, secular shifts in the interest rates (*i.e.*, shifts transcending *and/or* not inherent to the business cycle). Adjustments made to shorten portfolio maturity and duration are made to limit capital losses during periods when interest rates are expected to rise. Conversely, adjustments made to lengthen maturation for the portfolio's maturity and duration strategy lies *in the analysis of* the U.S. and global economies, focusing on levels of real interest rates, monetary and fiscal policy actions, and cyclical indicators.

Words: 136

Sentences: 5 (All passive voice)

Average sentence length: 27.2

Flesch Reading Ease: 8.2

BUT THIS:

We will try to profit by correctly predicting future interest rates. When we have no strong opinion, we will generally hold intermediate-term bonds. But when we expect a major and sustained increase in rates, we will concentrate on short-term

Developing Your Skills

issues. And conversely, if we expect a major shift to lower rates, we will buy long bonds. We will focus on the big picture and won't make moves based on short-term considerations.

Words: 74

Sentences: 5 (None passive voice)

Average sentence length: 14.8

Flesch Reading Ease: 60.1

If you analyze the before-and-after prospectuses under the Flesch Reading Ease (FRE) scale—a test developed by readability expert Rudolf Flesch to measure the comprehensibility of written passages using word and sentence length—you can quantify the difference. The higher the score, the easier the passage is to read and comprehend. On a scale of 0–100, the original 136-word prospectus on top scores an 8.2. In contrast, Warren Buffett's revision below it scores a 60.1. To give some perspective, *Reader's Digest* scores 65 on the FRE scale, *Time* magazine around 52, and the *Harvard Law Review* in the low 30s. Increasing a passage's readability is not the same as “dumbing it down.” The revised passage above gives the reader the same information—but more clearly.

Here's a shorter example, this time from a community college's mission statement:

NOT THIS:

The object of this enterprise is to *facilitate the development of greater capacities* for community colleges and not-for-profit neighborhood organizations to *engage in heightened collaboration in regard to the provision of* community services that would *maximize the available resources* from a number of community stakeholders and to *provide a greater level of* communication about local prioritization of educational needs with the particular community.

[63 words]

BUT THIS:

This project seeks to help community colleges and nonprofit neighborhood groups work more efficiently together.

[15 words]

In both the Buffett example and the community-college example, the original versions seem to be aiming at something other than getting the point across. Perhaps the writers wanted to sound impressive, or wanted to obscure what they were actually up to, or wanted to cover up the fact that they weren't entirely sure what they were up to. Whatever the answer, the original styles won't work on any target audience.

Recap

- Aim to write as naturally as you speak: Sound like a human being, not a corporation.
- Avoid boilerplate phrases that weigh down your language and suggest lazy thinking.
- Increase readability by expressing your ideas as directly as possible.

Chapter 12

Use chronology when giving a factual account

Stories are inherently chronological. One thing happens, then another, then another. That structure works well not only in books and films but also in business writing. It's more likely to be clear and efficient, and to keep readers interested. So include “just the facts, ma'am,” as Joe Friday on the old TV series *Dragnet* used to say. Just the facts that *matter*, and in the right order.

In theory this point seems obvious, but in practice writers find storytelling difficult. They often dive straight into the middle without orienting their readers, and the inevitable result is confusion on the receiving end. You're familiar with this phenomenon. It happens all the time in conversations with friends or family members: “Wait a minute. Back up. When was this? Where were you? And why were you talking to this guy? And where'd he come from?”

Suppose you're sending an e-mail message to give the status of an ongoing project, and it's been some time since the last update. The recipient isn't as immersed in the project as you are and probably has many other things going on. So remind your reader where things stood when you last communicated about the subject, and describe what's happened since then:

NOT THIS:

Sarah—

It was hard making headway with Jim Martinez, but finally we're looking (in the best-case scenario) at a demonstration of what our software can do by mid-May, as I established in my first telephone conference with Jim last Monday at 9:00 a.m. He was out Wednesday and Thursday (I didn't see any reason to try calling on Tuesday), but on Friday he told me that we'd need a sample app. But prior to that, Magnabilify requires an NDA. Tuesday's meeting should clarify things. Let me know what you think.

Frank

BUT THIS:

Sarah—

Last week you asked me to approach Magnabilify Corporation, the software developers, to see whether they might have any interest in our customizing some security applications for their computer systems. I finally got through to Jim Martinez, corporate vice president in charge of software, and we have planned a face-to-face meeting at his office next Tuesday.

The next steps, as I understand them under Magnabilify's protocol, will be to enter into a nondisclosure agreement, to develop a sample application (in less than two weeks), and to schedule a demonstration shortly after.

Can you and I chat before Tuesday's meeting?

Frank

The version on the left reads like stream-of-consciousness. The writer didn't take the time to step back, think of the message from the reader's perspective, and then lay out the important points chronologically. A story, even a short one like the narrative on the right, holds the

reader's interest more effectively than jumbled facts interspersed with opinions.

Plot out what happened, and when

When a serious dispute arises within a company, the lawyers will typically ask their clients to produce a “chronology of relevant events,” detailing the most important incidents leading up to the dispute. This document helps everyone involved think more clearly about how things unfolded. Try taking a similar approach when writing a document that walks the reader through a series of events—whether you're sending someone a project update or preparing an employee's performance evaluation. Create a chronology of relevant events to organize the narrative. Say you did that before drafting your e-mail message to Sarah in the right-hand example. Here's how it might look:

Chronology of relevant events

Last week	Sarah asked me to gauge Magnabilify's interest in having us build customized security applications.
Today	I spoke with Jim Martinez.
Next Tuesday	Jim and I will meet at his office to discuss.
In two weeks	If Magnabilify is interested, we'll do an NDA, develop a sample app, and schedule a demo.

Once you've laid out the chronology like this, drafting the e-mail message becomes a lot easier—just a matter of stringing the events together and asking to meet with Sarah before next Tuesday's meeting.

Recap

- Include only the relevant facts.
- Provide them in chronological order to make it easy for your readers to follow you.
- Organize your narrative by creating a chronology of relevant events before you write; then string the events together in your draft. But avoid the rote recitation of unnecessary dates.

Chapter 13

Be a stickler for continuity

Smooth writing consists of a sequence of well-joined sentences and paragraphs, not a mere collection of them. This smooth sequencing requires good planning and skill in handling transitions, or links that help readers follow your train of thought.

Watch how a good writer on business ethics, Manuel G. Velasquez, does it with a series of paragraph openers (the links are indicated here by italics):

*A Series of Paragraph Openers from
Manuel G. Velasquez's Business Ethics (2011)*

1. *How well* does a free monopoly market succeed in achieving the moral values that characterize perfectly competitive free markets? Not well.
2. The *most obvious failure* of monopoly markets lies in the high prices they enable the

monopolist to charge and the high profits they enable him to reap, a failure that violates capitalist justice.

3. A monopoly market *also* results in a decline in the efficiency with which it allocates and distributes goods.
4. *First*, the monopoly market allows resources to be used in ways that will produce shortages of those things buyers want and cause them to be sold at higher prices than necessary.
5. *Second*, monopoly markets do not encourage suppliers to use resources in ways that will minimize the resources consumed to produce a certain amount of a commodity.
6. *Third*, a monopoly market allows the seller to introduce price differentials that block consumers from putting together the most satisfying bundle of commodities they can purchase given the commodities available and the money they can spend.
7. Monopoly markets *also* embody restrictions on the negative rights that perfectly free markets respect.
8. A monopoly market, *then*, is one that deviates from the ideals of capitalist justice, economic utility, and negative rights.

The italicized transitional phrases steer us from one idea to the next. Normally, we wouldn't even notice them. The

transitions in really good writing are almost subliminal—but they're carefully placed where readers will need them. These connections take readers forward in different ways. They can:

- **Establish a time sequence:** *then, at that point, afterward, as soon as, at last, before, after, first, initially, meanwhile, later, next, now, once, originally, since, then, until, finally*
- **Establish place:** *there, in that place, at the front, in back, farther back, in the rear, at the center, to the left (right), up front, way back*
- **Add a point:** *and, or, further, also, in fact, moreover, not only . . . but also*
- **Underscore a point:** *above all, after all, and so, chiefly, equally important, more so, indeed, more important*
- **Concede a point:** *although, and yet, admittedly, at the same time, certainly, even though, doubtless, granted, no doubt, of course, still, though, to be sure, whereas, yet, while*
- **Return to a point:** *even so, nevertheless, nonetheless, still*
- **Give an example:** *for example, for instance, in particular*
- **Provide a reason:** *because, hence, thus, for, it follows, since, so, then, therefore*

- **Set up a contrast:** *but, yet, and yet, conversely, despite, by contrast, instead, on the other hand, still, then, while*
- **Set up a conclusion:** *so, as a result, finally, in conclusion, in short, in sum, on the whole, therefore, thus, to sum up*

Use subheads as transitions

No matter how smooth your transitions are between sentences and paragraphs, time-pressed readers will zone out if you place a solid wall of text in front of them. Break up your documents (even e-mails that are longer than a paragraph) with some signposts to lead people from section to section and help them quickly locate the parts they're particularly interested in. A "summary" subhead, for example, tells readers where to find just the highlights. And subheads that concisely yet clearly lay out your key points allow people to skim and still get the gist of your message.

Make your subheads as consistent as you can. For instance, if you're leading a task force that's recommending ways to forge direct customer relationships through social media, you might write each subhead in your body text as a directive, along these lines:

Use LinkedIn to Get Feedback on Current Products

Use Facebook to Test New Concepts

Use Twitter to Facilitate Chats About Live Events

The parallelism will help your document hang together both rhetorically and logically.

Recap

- Use well-placed transitional phrases to guide the reader to your next idea and indicate its relationship to what came before.
- Break up documents with concise, descriptive subheads to increase readability and help readers quickly locate the information most important to them.
- Use a “summary” subhead to point your readers to the document’s highlights.
- Use consistent style and parallel syntax in your subheads to reinforce the document’s logical and rhetorical cohesion.

Chapter 14

Learn the basics of correct grammar

Why nitpick about grammar? Because readers may see your language—especially your use of your native language—as a reflection of your competence. Make lots of mistakes and you’ll come across as uneducated and uninformed. People will hesitate to trust your recommendation to launch a resource-intensive project, for example, or to buy goods or services. They may think you don’t know what you’re talking about.

Telltale indicators

Consider pronouns. If you don’t know how to handle *I* and *me*, many of your colleagues, partners, and customers won’t take you seriously. Some errors will predictably get you in trouble:

- “She placed an order *with Megan and I.” (CORRECT: She placed an order with Megan and me.)
- (On the phone:) “*This is him.” (CORRECT: This is he.)

- “Just keep this matter *between you and I.” (CORRECT: Just keep this matter between you and me.)
- “*Whom may I say is calling?” (CORRECT: Who may I say is calling?)

The rule, very simply, is that *I*, *we*, *he*, and *she* are subjects of clauses <Leslie and I were delighted to work with you>; *me*, *us*, *him*, and *her* are objects of either verbs or prepositions <Please call either Leslie or me> <You might want to consult with Leslie and me>. In the compound phrasings, try leaving out *Leslie and*—and you’ll know the correct form immediately.

Besides pronoun problems, here are the main types of grammatical errors to watch out for. As for dozens of other wording issues that can torpedo your credibility, see Appendixes D and F.

Subject-verb disagreement

A verb must agree in person and number with its subject <I am aware of that> <You are aware of that> <Pat is aware of that> <We are all aware of that>. But syntax can make things tricky.

There is poses a problem because *There* appears to be the subject. It’s not. It’s what grammarians call an expletive—not a bad-word expletive (as in “expletive deleted”), but a word that stands in for the subject in an inverted sentence. In these sentences, *there* is just means “exists.” Take, for example, *There is a vacancy on the hiring committee*. The uninverted sentence would be *A vacancy (exists) on the hiring committee*. Because *there* seems to some people to resemble a singular subject, they tend to

use a singular verb. But *there* inverts the word order, and the true subject follows the verb <There are several reasons for approving the plan>. And, of course, when the subject is plural, a plural verb is needed.

NOT THIS:	BUT THIS:
There <i>is</i> always risk and liability <i>considerations</i> to take into account.	There <i>are</i> always risk and liability <i>considerations</i> to take into account.
There <i>is</i> many <i>options</i> to avoid a takeover.	There <i>are</i> many <i>options</i> to avoid a takeover.

Another troublesome area for subject-verb disagreement involves prepositional phrases that follow the subject. By “false attraction,” they often mislead writers to choose the wrong verb (singular for plural or vice versa). The object of a prepositional phrase is never the subject of a sentence. It may be nearer the verb, but the number of the subject controls the number of the verb:

NOT THIS:	BUT THIS:
The <i>details</i> of the customized work <i>is delaying</i> the project.	The <i>details</i> of the customized work <i>are delaying</i> the project.
The <i>source</i> of our replacement parts and maintenance <i>have not been selected</i> yet.	The <i>source</i> for our replacement parts and maintenance supplies <i>has not been selected</i> yet.

In the first example, *work* is the object of the preposition *of*, so the plural subject *details* controls the verb. In the second, *source* takes the singular *has not been selected*.

Disagreements can also arise with compound subjects connected by *or*, *either . . . or*, or *neither . . . nor*. If the subjects are all singular then the verb is singular as well. But

when one or more are plural, the number of the verb must match the number of the noun that follows the *or* or *nor*:

NOT THIS:

Special services *or* a new product *target* a niche market.

Neither the education fund *nor* the training costs *is* without budget constraints.

BUT THIS:

Special services *or* a new product *targets* a niche market.

Neither the education fund *nor* the training costs *are* without budget constraints.

In the first example, the singular subject *a new product* after the *or* mandates a singular verb. In the second example, the plural subject after *nor* makes the verb plural as well. Notice that it's more idiomatic to use the *singular subject or plural subject + plural verb* form.

Noun-pronoun disagreement

Strictly speaking, a pronoun must have the same gender and number as the subject.

NOT THIS:

A shareholder may cast *their* vote for only one member of the board.

BUT THIS:

A shareholder may cast *his or her* vote for only one member of the board.

Although *their* is colloquially used as a genderless singular pronoun, this usage is not yet widely accepted in formal writing. And unless you know the sex of the subject, try to avoid using a masculine or feminine pronoun. If you wish to make a political statement with pronoun gender (by always choosing the generic feminine, for example), do so: Just know that some of your readers may be distracted by it or may discount your credibility. The

safest course is to use some ingenuity to write in an invisibly gender-neutral way.

NOT THIS:

Either the receptionist or the sales assistant will have to change *their* lunch hour so that at least one will be in the office at all times.

Three candidates responded to the advertisement for the financial-officer position. *Each* submitted *their* résumé.

BUT THIS:

Either the receptionist or the sales assistant will have to start taking lunch earlier or later so that at least one will be in the office at all times.

Three candidates responded to the advertisement for the financial-officer position. *Each* submitted a résumé.

But back to grammar. When the subject of a sentence is a singular pronoun such as *either*, *neither*, *each*, or *every*, other nouns that accompany it have no effect on the number of the verb:

NOT THIS:

Have either of our clients arrived yet?

Neither of the new products have sold spectacularly this year.

Each of us *are* responsible for the tasks assigned.

BUT THIS:

Has either of our clients arrived yet?

Neither of the new products *has* sold spectacularly this year.

Each of us *is* responsible for the tasks assigned.

Double negatives

A double negative occurs when back-to-back negatives are meant to intensify, not cancel, each other. It's easy to recognize in dialect (for example, *we didn't have no choice* or *it didn't hardly matter*), but the problems can be more subtle in formal writing. Watch for the word *not* plus another word with a negative sense.

NOT THIS:

We *couldn't scarcely* manage to keep up with the demand.

BUT THIS:

We *could scarcely* manage to keep up with the demand.

Another subtle double-negative combination is *not . . . but*.

NOT THIS:

The clerk *couldn't help but* call the manager for advice.

BUT THIS:

The clerk *couldn't help* calling the manager for advice.

But indicates a negative or contradiction, so *not . . . but* may be ambiguous. The first sentence could mean the clerk had some other option. The second sentence clearly states there was no alternative.

Nonstandard vocabulary

In business writing, always use standard English—unless you're writing specifically for a niche audience of non-standard speakers. Broadly speaking, standard English is characterized by attention to accepted conventions for grammar, vocabulary, spelling, and punctuation.

You needn't always be strictly formal—in appropriate situations, use less formal English. But your prose and speech must always be professional and respectful.

Dialect is always nonstandard. Avoid using it in business:

NOT THIS:

Where's the meeting *at*?
Me and Kim will handle the Brewster account.

BUT THIS:

Where's the meeting?
Kim and I will handle the Brewster account.

Nonstandard language may also creep in when writers rely on the spoken sounds of words:

NOT THIS:

They *shouldn't of* submitted those incomplete reports.

BUT THIS:

They *shouldn't have* submitted those incomplete reports.

Irregular verbs are also fertile ground for nonstandard language.

NOT THIS:

We *drug* our heels getting into the mid-Atlantic market.

Our late entry almost *sunk* our chances against established competitors.

BUT THIS:

We *dragged* our heels getting into the mid-Atlantic market.

Our late entry almost *sank* our chances against established competitors.

How to correct yourself

Here are three good ways to brush up: (1) Read first-rate nonfiction; (2) have knowledgeable colleagues proof your material and explain their corrections; and (3) browse through guides on grammar and usage, consulting them whenever questions arise.

This last method will help you distinguish between the real rules and the artificial ones that plague so much writing. For example, were you told in school never to begin a sentence with a conjunction? So was I. But look at all the *ands* and *buts* that begin sentences in first-rate prose. They're everywhere. These words, as sentence-starters, keep readers going smoothly with the train of thought. They don't break any real rules—and they never have.

Grammatically, there's nothing wrong with using *additionally* and *however* as sentence-starters. But

stylistically, they're inferior. The multisyllable connectors don't join as cleanly and as tightly as monosyllables do.

Do you worry that your readers will *think* a sentence-starting conjunction is wrong? They won't even notice it, just as you never do. Good style gets readers focused on your clear, concise message. Bad style, by contrast, draws attention to itself.

For a handy collection of grammar guidelines, see Appendix B, "A Dozen Grammatical Rules You Absolutely Need to Know." And be sure to spend some quality time with Appendix F, "A Primer of Good Usage." Fall in love with the language, and it will love you back.

Recap

- When considering verb number, watch for compound subjects, inverted syntax, and prepositional phrases that follow the subject.
- Never mistake the object of a preposition for the subject of a sentence.
- Avoid using *they/them/their* as genderless singular pronouns in formal writing.
- Avoid double negatives.
- Follow the conventions of standard English.
- Improve your grasp of standard English by reading quality nonfiction, having colleagues review your writing, and referring to grammar and usage guides when you have questions.

Chapter 15

Get feedback on your drafts from colleagues

Say you've drafted a budget request. Ask people on your team to read it and make sure you've explained clearly, concisely, and persuasively why you should receive the funding, for example, to hire two more staff members. And if possible, get constructive feedback from an objective peer in a different department—preferably someone who is good at lobbying for resources.

Pay attention to what your colleagues say: Their reactions will probably be quite close to those of your intended readers.

Accept suggestions graciously

A good writer welcomes good edits—yearns for them, in fact. A bad writer resents them, seeing them only as personal attacks. A good writer has many ideas and tends to value them cheaply. A bad writer has few ideas and

values them too dearly. So share your material while it's still rough—the feedback will help you make it shipshape much faster than if you were toiling in isolation.

Try to avoid having your colleagues explain their edits in person. You may get defensive and have a hard time recognizing good advice. Invite them to mark up your document, and thank them for their help.

If you have the people you supervise tightening and brightening your prose regularly, you'll benefit in two ways: Your documents will be more polished, and the people you manage will, with practice, become better editors and writers. Give them direction, though: Ask them to look not just for outright errors but also for passages that are verbose, unclear, or awkwardly expressed. Ideally, you'll get to the point where you're accepting 80 percent of their suggestions.

Create a culture where editing flourishes

At my company, everyone who edits or proofreads must suggest at least two changes per page. No one is allowed to hand something back—even a short letter—and say, “It looks good to me!” People can always make improvements by asking, “What did the writer not say that should have been said? How could the tone be improved? Isn't there a better, shorter way of phrasing one of the ideas?” And so on.

If each reader suggests at least two edits per page, your typos will get caught—believe me. Typos are generally the easiest things to catch, so readers will usually mark those before trying the more difficult task of suggesting stylistic improvements. In the end, awkwardness will disappear. You and your team will look better because you'll

perform better. You'll make stronger, clearer arguments. You'll put together more persuasive pitches.

Does this seem like overkill? Consider that every communication you send is a commentary on your team or company and its level of professionalism. If it's a printed brochure or a commercial e-mail with wide distribution, the more feedback the better. You simply cannot have too many sets of knowledgeable eyes review the copy.

A dumb mistake can be disastrous—as a major university discovered after printing thousands of commencement brochures with “School of Pubic Affairs” in large type on the front cover. A photo of this embarrassing gaffe almost instantly popped up on the Internet, of course, and the university became the target of many jokes.

When it comes to writing, you want a culture of un-neurotic helpfulness. There's no shame in needing edits from others. People should freely seek them and freely give them—without any unpleasant overtones of one-upmanship. Everyone in an organization, regardless of rank, can benefit from good editing.

Recap

- Routinely ask your colleagues and those you supervise to read your drafts and suggest edits.
- Have them mark up the document and submit their edits in writing, rather than explaining them in person, to avoid reacting defensively. Always thank them for their help.
- Foster an environment where edits are freely sought and offered—without overtones of petty one-upmanship.

Section 3

Avoiding the Quirks That Turn Readers Off

Chapter 16

Don't anesthetize your readers

It seems obvious that you shouldn't put your audience to sleep, doesn't it? It should also be obvious to people who talk in circles at dinner parties or deliver dull lectures, but consider how many boring speakers you've had to listen to. It doesn't have to be that way—whether in conversation or in writing.

Ponder the best conversationalists and the best lecturers you've ever heard. No matter how obscure the topic, they make it fascinating through their technique. They avoid trite expressions. They use strong, simple words. Think of Winston Churchill's famous phrase "blood, toil, tears, and sweat." And remember what George Washington reputedly said when questioned about the fallen cherry tree: not "It was accomplished by utilizing a small sharp-edged implement," but "I used my little hatchet."

Effective writers use the same techniques. Why do you read some books all the way through but set others aside?

It's their style: the way they explain things, the way they tell the story.

Here are several tips for writing business documents that hold readers' attention.

Use personal pronouns skillfully

Don't overuse *I* (try not to begin paragraphs or successive sentences with it), but do lean heavily on *we*, *our*, *you*, and *your*. Those are personal, friendly words that add human interest and pull readers into a document. Rudolf Flesch, a leading figure in plain-English circles and the author of *How to Be Brief*, was one of the first to explain the need for *you*:

Keep a running conversation with your reader. Use the second-person pronoun whenever you can. Translate everything into *you* language. *This applies to citizens over 65* = *if you're over 65, this applies to you*. *It must be remembered that* = *you must remember*. *Many people don't realize* = *perhaps you don't realize*. Always write directly to *you*, the person you're trying to reach with your message.

Likewise, the words *we* and *our*—in reference to your firm or company—make corporations and other legal entities sound as if they have collective personalities (as they should and typically do). People usually appreciate this down-to-earth approach over the sterile, distancing effect of third-person prose. Compare the following examples:

NOT THIS:

Whether or not *a stockholder* plans to attend a meeting, *he or she* should take the time to vote by completing and mailing the enclosed proxy card to *the Company*. If a *stockholder* signs, dates, and mails a proxy card without indicating how *he or she* wants to vote, *that stockholder's* proxy will be counted as a vote in favor of the merger. If a *stockholder* fails to return a proxy card, the effect in most cases will be a vote against the merger.

BUT THIS:

Whether or not *you* plan to attend a meeting, please take the time to vote by completing and mailing the enclosed proxy card to *us*. If *you* sign, date, and mail *your* proxy card without indicating how *you* want to vote, *your* proxy will count as a vote in favor of the merger. If *you* don't return *your* card, in most cases *you'll* be counted as voting against the merger.

Use contractions

Many writers have a morbid fear of contractions, having been taught in school to avoid them. But you won't be breaking any real rules if you use them—and they counteract stuffiness, a major cause of poor writing.

This doesn't mean that you should become breezy or use much slang—just that it's good to be relaxed. If you would say something as a contraction, then write it that way. If you wouldn't, then don't.

NOT THIS:

For those customers who do not participate in West Bank's online banking program, and do not wish to consider doing so, West Bank will continue sending them statements by U.S. Mail.

We would like to remind you that it is not necessary to be present to win. We will inform all winners by telephone subsequent to the drawing.

BUT THIS:

If you prefer not to use our online banking program, we'll continue mailing your statements to you.

Remember: You needn't be present to win the drawing. We'll call you if you win.

Stick to simple language

I know I repeat this again and again—but it bears repeating. Readers who can't follow you will stop trying.

Avoid passive voice

Don't say "The closing documents were prepared by Sue," but instead "Sue prepared the closing documents"; not "The message was sent by George," but either "George sent the message" or "The message came from George." This guideline is hardly absolute—sometimes passive voice is the most natural way to say what you're saying. Sometimes it can't be avoided. (See?) But if you develop a strong habit of using active voice, you'll largely prevent convoluted, backward-sounding sentences in your writing.

How do you identify passive voice? Remember that it's invariably a *be*-verb (typically *is*, *are*, *was*, *were*) or *get*, plus a past-tense verb. There are eight *be*-verbs and countless past participles.

Examples of Passive Voice

is + delivered

are + finished

was + awarded

were + praised

been + adjusted

being + flown

be + served

am + relieved

got + promoted

You will improve your writing if you minimize passive voice. (Not: Your writing will be improved if passive voice is minimized by you.)

Vary the length and structure of your sentences

Monotony, as Cicero once said, is in all things the mother of boredom. It's true of syntax no less than it's true of eating or anything else. Sameness cloy. So you want short sentences and long; main clauses and subordinate ones. You want variety.

NOT THIS:

Over a significant period of time, we have gained experience helping our clients improve operational performance and maximize both the efficiency of their human resources and the economical utilization of their capital. Ours is an integrated approach that both diagnoses and streamlines operating practices and procedures using lean maintenance and optimization tools, while at the same time implementing change-management techniques involving mind-sets and behaviors of those involved in managerial positions within a given organization.

BUT THIS:

For many years, we have helped clients better use their resources and improve performance. How? By streamlining operations and changing managers' mind-sets and behaviors.

NOT THIS:

In order to provide you, the user of our products, the option of obtaining free replacements for defective products from the nearest office, we offer a simplified processing without acknowledgment of the statutory duty (“goodwill”) regardless of whether the product has been purchased there or has reached the user by another route.

BUT THIS:

What should you do if you need a free replacement for a defective product? Go to the nearest office. Any of our offices can help even if you did not purchase the item there.

Avoid alphabet soup

Readers find acronyms tiresome, especially ones they’re not familiar with. So use them judiciously. It might be convenient to refer to COGS instead of spelling out “cost of goods sold.” If you also throw in acronyms such as ABC (“activity-based costing”), EBITDA (“earnings before interest, tax, depreciation, and amortization”), and VBM (“value-based management”), the accountants in your audience will follow you—but you’ll lose everyone else. Small wonder, too. People don’t want to master your arcane vocabulary to get what you’re saying.

Surely you’ve had this experience as a reader: You encounter an acronym (a long one if you’re particularly unlucky) and can’t connect it with anything you’ve read in the article or document so far. You find yourself scanning backward through the text, hoping to find the first appearance of that acronym or words that might fit it. By the time you find it (or give up trying), you’ve completely lost the writer’s train of thought. Never put your own readers through that.

Stick to words when you can. Acronyms make writing easier but reading harder. Your shortcut is the reader's hindrance.

Recap

- Don't overuse *I*. Use *we*, *our*, *you*, and *your* instead to add a personal touch and appeal to your reader.
- Avoid stuffiness by overcoming any fear you might have of contractions.
- For clearer, more straightforward writing, prefer active voice—unless the passive in a particular context sounds more natural.
- Vary the length and structure of your sentences.
- Make the reader's job easier by avoiding acronyms when you can.

Chapter 17

Watch your tone

Striking the right tone takes work—but it's critical to the success of your business documents. If you sound likable and professional, people will want to work with you and respond to you. So adopt a relaxed tone, as if speaking directly to the recipient of your document.

Avoid hyperformality

What do you think of colleagues who say or write “How may I be of assistance?” instead of “How may I help you?” Or “subsequent to our conversation” instead of “after we spoke”? When they choose overblown words over everyday equivalents, don't they strike you as pompous?

Too much formality will spoil your style. Keep your writing down to earth and achieve a personal touch by:

- Writing your message more or less as you'd say it, but without all the casualisms (*likes* and *you knows*).
- Including courtesies such as *thank you*, *we're happy to*, and *we appreciate*.

- Using the names of the people you're writing about (*David Green*, not *the above-mentioned patient*).
- Using personal pronouns (*you, he, she*—not *the reader, the decedent, the applicant; we understand*—not *it is understood; we recommend*—not *it is recommended by the undersigned*).

Be collegial

You'll have better luck delivering most kinds of messages, even tough ones, if you approach people collegially. Imagine that everything you write will be paraded before a jury in a contentious lawsuit. You'll want that jury to think you've behaved admirably. Of course, sometimes you'll need to take an aggressive stance—for example, when you're at the last stage before litigation. But do this *only* as a last resort, and preferably on advice of counsel.

Be yourself. Just be your most careful, circumspect self. People have gotten their companies into terrible trouble—and have lost their jobs—by writing ill-considered letters, memos, and e-mails. So always summon your best judgment.

Even if you're collegial and fairly relaxed, your language will vary somewhat depending on your relationship with the recipient. You'll be okay if you ask yourself, "How would I say this to so-and-so if he were right here with me?" You don't want a distant tone with your closest colleagues, and you don't want a chummy tone with someone you don't know all that well.

Never try to make your readers admit that they're in the wrong. It's unwise to say that they *labor under a delusion*, or *claim to understand*, or *fail to understand*, or *complain*, or *erroneously assert*, or *distort*. These expressions, and others like them, breed ill will. Instead, treat your readers with integrity and fairness—and show your willingness to meet them halfway.

Drop the sarcasm

Sarcasm expresses contempt and superiority. It doesn't shame people into compliance. Rather, it's a surefire way of irritating and alienating them. Compare:

NOT THIS:

Given that Monday was a bank holiday, as declared by federal statute no less, your e-mail of the 17th of the present month did not come to my attention until yesterday. It is with no small degree of regret that we note that you deemed it necessary to send a follow-up e-mail to us regarding this matter, since we are desirous of establishing a relationship of mutual trust and respect.

BUT THIS:

Because Monday was a bank holiday, I didn't receive your e-mail message of the 17th until yesterday. Naturally I was chagrined that you had to write a second time. But of course I want you to call on me whenever I might help.

In the left-hand column, note the deadly combination of hyperformality and sarcasm, and the annoying subtext: "You wrote on a holiday, you DOPE. Of course you had to wait for a response." The chance of "establishing a relationship of mutual trust and respect" is very likely diminished.

Recap

- Arrive at a relaxed but professional tone by writing your message as if you were speaking to the recipient in person.
- Refer to people by name, use personal pronouns as you naturally would, and shun fancy substitutes for everyday words.
- Always use your best judgment and a collegial tone in composing your messages, even if the content isn't positive. You'll get better responses from your recipients and keep yourself—and your company—out of trouble.
- Adopt a tone appropriate to your relationship with the recipient.
- Never use sarcasm in professional messages. It will result in a step away from—not toward—your desired outcome.

Section 4

Common Forms of Business Writing

Chapter 18

E-mails

When you send e-mails, do you usually receive a useful, friendly, timely response? Or one that falls short of that ideal? Or no response at all? If you're struggling to get your recipients to focus on your messages, it's because you're competing with a lot of senders—in some cases, hundreds per day.

Here's how to write e-mails that people will actually read, answer, and act on:

- **Get straight to the point—politely, of course—in your first few sentences.** Be direct when making a request. Don't fulsomely butter up the recipient first—although a brief compliment may help (“Great interview. Thanks for sending it. May I ask a favor?”). Spell out deadlines and other details the recipient will need to get the job done right and on time.
- **Copy people judiciously.** Include only those who will immediately grasp why they're on the thread.

And avoid “Reply All.” Your correspondent may have been overinclusive with the “Copy” list, and if you repeat that mistake, you’ll continue to annoy the recipients who shouldn’t be there.

- **Keep your message brief.** People find long e-mails irksome and energy-sapping. The more they have to scroll or swipe, the less receptive they’ll be to your message. They’ll probably just skim it and miss important details. Many people immediately close long e-mails to read the shorter ones. So rarely compose more than a single screen of reading. Focus your content and tighten your language.
- **Write a short but informative subject line.** With a generic—or blank—subject line, your message will get buried in your recipient’s overstuffed inbox. (Not “Program,” but “The Nov. 15 Leadership Program.”) If you’re asking someone to take action, highlight that in the subject line. By making your request easy to find, you’ll improve your chances of getting it fulfilled.
- **Stick to standard capitalization and punctuation.** Good writing conventions may seem like a waste of time for e-mail, especially when you’re tapping out messages on a handheld device. But it’s a matter of getting things right—the little things. Even if people in your group don’t capitalize or punctuate in their messages, stand out as someone who does. Rushed e-mails that violate the basic norms of written language bespeak carelessness. And their abbreviated style can be confusing. It takes

less time to write a clear message the first time around than it does to follow up to explain what you meant to say.

- **Use a signature that displays your title and contact information.** It should look professional (not too long or ornate) and make it convenient for others to choose how to reach you.

These tips are pretty commonsensical—but they're not common practice. To show you how well they work, let's compare some sample e-mails.

Say you're trying to help a young friend of yours, a budding journalist, land an internship. You happen to know the editor of a metropolitan newspaper, and you send him a message. Consider these two approaches:

NOT THIS:

Subject: Hello there!

Hal—

It's been ages, I know, but I've been meaning to tell you just how effective I think you've been as the editor of the *Daily Metropolitan* these past seven years. Although I canceled my subscription a few years back (LOL)—the papers kept cluttering the driveway—I buy a copy at the coffee shop almost every day, and I always tell people there just how good the paper is. Who knows, I may have won you some subscribers with all my gushing praise! Believe me, I'm *always* touting the good old *DM*.

Anyhoo, I have a mentee I'd like you to meet. You'll soon be thanking me for introducing you to her. She would like an internship, and I know she'll be the best intern you've ever had. Her name is Glenda Jones, and she is A-1 in every way. May I tell her you will contact her? (With good news, I hope!) It can be unpaid. I know your paper has fallen on tough times—but she wants to get into the business anyway! Silly girl. Ah, well, what can you do when journalism seems like it's just in the blood?

Expectantly yours,
Myra

P.S. You'll thank me for this!

BUT THIS:

Subject: Request for an Interview

Hal—

May I ask a favor of you? Glenda Jones, a really sharp mentee in the township's Young Leaders program, wants to pursue a career in journalism, and she's eager to learn how commercial news organizations work. Would you spend 15 minutes chatting with her at your office sometime this month, before school lets out? I know it would be a meaningful introduction for her. You'll find that she is a poised, mature, smart, and incredibly self-possessed young woman.

She tells me that she's looking for an unpaid internship. After a brief interview, perhaps you'd consider giving her a one-week tryout as your assistant. I know you've been a mentor to many aspiring journalists over the years, but here you have a real standout: editor of her college newspaper, Phi Beta Kappa member, state debate champion.

No pressure here. If it's a bad summer for you to take on an intern, I'll completely understand. But please meet with her if you can. I've asked her to write to you independently, enclosing her résumé, to give you a sense of her writing skills.

Thanks very much. Hope you and your family are doing well.

Myra

The first version is colossally ineffective—and if Glenda gets an internship it will be very much *despite* the message from her mentor. The writer is inconsiderate (suggesting that journalism is a thankless career), insensitive (confessing to having canceled her subscription), and horribly presumptuous (acting as if the recipient owes her for “always touting” the newspaper and for suggesting this “A-1” intern—as well as assuming that Glenda must get the job).

The second version is effective because it's humble, *you*-centered, considerate (“No pressure here”), and mildly flattering (“I know you've been a mentor to many”). Though it's a little longer than the first one, it gets to the point sooner, and it provides only helpful information. If

Glenda has any real potential, she stands a decent chance of getting that interview and possibly landing an internship with this version.

You may occasionally need to reprimand someone in an e-mail—to clearly explain a misstep, to make a record of it, or both. Compare these two examples, which show the right and wrong way to deal with an employee who sent an offensive e-mail to the whole team:

NOT THIS:

Subject: You Are in Trouble

Ted—

What on earth were you thinking when you sent that “joke”? Your coworkers sure didn’t appreciate it one bit, and neither did I. Don’t tell me it was “just a joke.” Haven’t you cracked your employee handbook and read our company’s policies? You’ve never done this before, that I am aware of. Don’t ever send an e-mail like this one again.

Bill Morton
Office Manager

BUT THIS:

Subject: Disruption Caused by Your E-mail

Ted—

What one person considers funny, another may find offensive and insulting. Several people have complained to me about the e-mail headed “Have You Heard This One” that you sent everyone yesterday. I was as upset as they were by the foul language, which is inappropriate for an e-mail sent at work. Our company’s policy does not make an exception for offensive language, even when used in jest. Please think about how future e-mails will affect your coworkers. If I receive complaints again, HR will have to get involved. But I trust that won’t be necessary.

Bill

In the first version, the writer’s anger is clear—and that’s about all that’s clear. Ted will certainly feel stupid (“What

on earth were you thinking” and “Haven’t you cracked your employee handbook”) and scared (“Don’t ever”). But the writer doesn’t detail what Ted did wrong and why. And Ted isn’t likely to ask (“Don’t tell me it was ‘just a joke’”).

The tone of the second version won’t immediately put the recipient on the defensive. This time, the writer explicitly identifies the source of the problem (“the e-mail headed ‘Have You Heard This One’ that you sent everyone yesterday”) and explains the effects, the policy violated, and the consequences. Ted is much more likely to understand his mistake.

Recap

- Be as direct as possible while maintaining a polite tone. Come to the point of your e-mail within the first two or three sentences.
- Never click “Reply All” without first checking the recipient list. Send your e-mail only to people who need to know its contents.
- Keep e-mails brief. Restrict yourself to one screen’s worth of text and keep the message tight and focused so your readers get the point fast.
- Write a concise subject line that tells your recipients why you’re writing and what it means to them. If they need to act on your message, make that clear in the subject line.
- Diligently adhere to standard writing conventions—even when typing with your thumbs on a handheld device.

Chapter 19

Business Letters

Business letters aren't a quaint thing of the past. They're necessary in all sorts of situations—from correcting a vendor's error to recommending a job candidate to announcing a new service. Effective ones can increase your profitability—by getting key customers to renew large orders, for example, or persuading service providers to charge you less for repeat business. They can also create goodwill, which may eventually yield financial returns.

The pointers in this chapter will help you get those kinds of results.

Use direct, personal language

You see canned phrases like *enclosed please find* and *as per* all the time in letters. They're high-sounding but low-performing. Your letters will be much clearer and more engaging without them.

TIPS FOR WRITING CLEAR, PERSUASIVE LETTERS

- ***Focus on the reader.*** Try not to begin with the word *I*; make it *you*, if possible (“You were so kind to . . .,” “You might be interested . . .,” etc.). Keep your recipient in the forefront because—let’s face it—that’s what will hold the reader’s interest. Not: “I just thought I’d drop you a note to say that I really enjoyed my time as your guest last week.” But instead: “What a wonderful host you were last week.”
- ***Say something that matters.*** Make your message pointed but substantive—not just airy filler. Not: “I trust this finds you prospering in business, thriving in your personal life, and continuing to seek the wisdom that will bring lasting satisfaction in all your dealings.” But instead: “I hope you and your family and friends all dodged the fires last week in Maniton Springs—which sounded devastating.”
- ***Avoid hedging and equivocating.*** Not: “It is with regret that we acknowledge that we do not appear at this time to be in a position to extend an offer of employment.” But instead: “We’re sorry to say that we aren’t now hiring.”

NOT THIS:**BUT THIS:**

Enclosed please find . . .

Here are . . .; Enclosed are . . .

As per your request . . .

As you requested . . .

We are in receipt of . . .

We've received . . .

We shall advise you . . .

We'll let you know . . .

As per your letter . . .

As your letter notes . . .

We have your order and will
transmit same . . .We'll forward your order
promptly . . .

We take pleasure . . .

We're glad . . .

Due to the fact that . . .

Because . . .

At an early date . . .

Soon . . .

In respect of the matter of . . .

Regarding . . .

People often overwrite their letters—studding their language with stiff, wordy expressions—when they're uncomfortable with the message. Consider the difference between the two examples that follow. The first letter is a greeting to customers from a hotel manager; the second is my revision.

NOT THIS:

Dear Valued Guest:

Welcome to the Milford Hotel Santa Clara. We are delighted that you have selected our hotel during the time when you will be here in the Silicon Valley area. Our staff is ready to assist you in any way and ensure that your stay here is an enjoyable and excellent one in every way.

During your time here at the Milford Hotel Santa Clara, we would like to inform you that the hotel is installing new toilet facilities in all guest rooms. This project will begin on Tuesday, May 8 until Tuesday, May 29. The project engineers will begin at 9:00 a.m. and conclude for the day at 5:30 p.m. The team of associates will begin work on the 14th floor and will work in descending order until completion. During these hours, you may see the new or old toilets in the guest room corridors during the exchange process, and we will ensure that a high level

Common Forms of Business Writing

of cleanliness standards will be upheld. We think you'll soon appreciate fresh toilet seats. Should you be in your guest room during the toilet exchange and/or wish not to be disturbed, we recommend that you please utilize your Do Not Disturb sign by placing it on the handle of your guest room door.

The vending area should remain sanitary, so feel free to have a candy bar or beverage of your preference. For your convenience, there are safes located in the bottom nightstand drawer in your guest room to safely store your valuables. There may also be available to you utilization of our safe deposit boxes located at the Front Desk.

We appreciate your cooperation and understanding while we continue to improve the delivery system and appearance of our guest room product. Our goal is to minimize any inconvenience related to the toilet-exchange project. Please contact our Manager on Duty should you have any questions or concerns. Once again, please be assured of our utmost devotion to the total quality of your stay within the confines of the Milford Hotel Santa Clara. On behalf of myself and all the other management personnel and staff of employees here, we wish to reiterate our thanks for your selection and confidence that each and every factor of your stay here will be more than satisfactory.

Sincerely,

[386 words]

BUT THIS:

Dear Valued Guest:

Welcome to the Milford Hotel Santa Clara. We're delighted you're staying here, and we're ready to help make your stay both enjoyable and productive.

This month, we're renovating the bathrooms, starting with the 14th floor and working our way down. Although you may have occasion to see or hear workers (during the day), we're striving to minimize disruptions.

Always feel free to use your "Do Not Disturb" sign while you're in your room to ensure that our staff will respect your privacy. And if the renovations ever become a nuisance, please call me (extension 4505): I'll see what I can do. The renovations are but one example of our commitment to providing first-rate lodging.

Thank you again for joining us.

Sincerely,

[125 words]

The original is verbose (*guest room product*), perversely repetitious (the word *toilet* appears five times), hyper-

bolic (*excellent . . . in every way*), bureaucratic-sounding (*there may also be available to you utilization*), unpleasantly vivid (*you may see the new or old toilets*), and even gross (*have a candy bar right after you may see the new or old toilets*). It seems destined to arouse ill-feeling and to drive away customers who bother to read it. The revised version, by contrast, conveys warmth and consideration with its “you” focus.

Start fast, and say what you need to say in the simplest way you can. Think of Olympic diving: neatly in, no splash, soon out. And if you’re writing on behalf of your firm, use *we*. It’s much warmer and friendlier than the passive voice (*It has been decided* vs. *We have decided*) or the impersonal third person (*this organization* vs. *we*). Consider the difference:

NOT THIS:

The Mercantile Association of Greater Gotham is delighted to count you among its newest members. The Mercantile Association will provide not only networking opportunities but also advantageous insurance rates, concierge services, and Internet advertising to its members. If you ever confront business issues with which the Mercantile Association might be able to devote its resources, it stands ready to be of assistance.

BUT THIS:

Here at the Mercantile Association of Greater Gotham, we’re delighted to count you among our newest members. We provide not only networking opportunities but also advantageous insurance rates, concierge services, and Internet advertising. If you ever confront business issues we can help with, we’ll do whatever we can. Just let us know.

In the left-hand example, passive voice (*is delighted*) and repetition of the organization’s name (it appears in every sentence) put distance between the writer and the reader. They make the communication sound like a

commercial or promotion. But the *yous* and *wes* in the version on the right create a sense of belonging, a personal connection.

Motivate readers to act

Business letters get results when they meet readers' needs. To get people to do something, give them reasons they'll care about.

Consider one of the most challenging kinds of letters to write: a fund-raising appeal for a nonprofit group. The key is to understand why people give money to charitable organizations. Although marketers often cite seven "fundamental motivators" to explain responses—fear, guilt, exclusivity, greed, anger, salvation, and flattery—the reality is a bit more nuanced. Some combination of eight major reasons might motivate donors to send money in response to your appeal:

- They believe their gifts will make a difference.
- They believe in the value of organizations like yours.
- They will receive favorable recognition for the gift.
- They will be associated with a famous or respected person.
- They will enhance their sense of belonging to a worthy group.
- They will be able to relieve emotional burdens such as fear and guilt.

- They feel a sense of duty.
- They will receive tax benefits.

Certain principles follow from these reasons for giving. A successful fund-raising letter must (1) appeal directly from one person to another; (2) depict an opportunity for the recipient to satisfy personal needs by supporting a worthwhile aim; and (3) prompt the recipient to take a specific, decisive action. (These principles apply to other types of business letters as well.)

Note how all this theory plays out in an actual fund-raising letter:

Dear Marion:

May I count you in as a table sponsor at the Annual Dinner of the Tascosa Children's Home of North Texas? Your sponsorship will pay a month's room and board for one of the 50 orphaned teenagers that we care for.

The event will be held at 6:00 p.m. on July 1 at Snowdon Country Club, and the emcee will be the nationally syndicated television host Spooner Hudson—our longtime national spokesperson. Celebrity chef Margrit Lafleur promises to serve up one of his memorable dinners, and the wines will be personally selected by master sommelier Peter Brunswick. Most excitingly, two mystery guests from Beverly Hills will be there that evening—among the best-known philanthropists in the world.

As a table sponsor, you'll be credited as one of our Patron Angels—and, believe me, the tangible gratitude

of our kids will bring you the lasting satisfaction that you have vastly improved their lives and well-being. Our kids are reachable and teachable, but only through the generosity of our community's philanthropic leaders.

Many people, of course, can't help us in our mission. We count on our Patron Angels. I hope you'll spend a few minutes browsing through the Home's brochure (enclosed) and that you'll fill out the card committing to fill ten seats at your table (a \$1,500 tax-deductible gift).

I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

Now look again at the bulleted list that precedes the letter to Marion (our fictitious recipient): The writer deals with every item on the list. With a letter like that, you can hope to elicit prompt action from an acceptable percentage of recipients.

Ease into bad news

If you have a rejection to deliver in your letter, sandwich it between happier elements. Don't start with a direct "no." Your readers can bear disappointment more easily if you begin on a genuine positive note and then explain the reason for the negative decision. They'll also be more likely to grant your wishes—make a purchase, sign up for your webinar, renew a membership—despite your denying theirs.

NOT THIS:

We regret to inform you that we cannot supply the 500 copies of *Negotiate It Now!* at the 60% discount that you have requested. No one—not even one of our authors, and not even the biggest bookselling chains—receives such a hefty discount. If you would care to resubmit your order at the more modest figure of 30%, we will gladly consider the order at that time. But I can offer no guarantees.

BUT THIS:

How rewarding to hear that you intend to use *Negotiate It Now!* as part of your business summit. You've chosen the best book on the subject, and we'd be delighted to supply it.

Although you've requested a 60% discount off list price, the most we can offer is 30%. That's the largest discount available to anyone, and we're happy to extend it to you with a purchase of 500 copies.

Recipients of bad news will probably be unhappy no matter what. But to some extent you can control just how unhappy they'll be. Some tips:

- Adopt the reader's perspective—and be your best self. If your correspondent is rude, be polite; if anxious, be sympathetic; if confused, be lucid; if stubborn, be patient; if helpful, show gratitude; if accusatory, be reasonable and just in admitting any faults.
- Answer questions directly.
- Don't overexplain. Say only as much as necessary to get your point across.
- Put things in the simplest possible terms—never use “insider talk” or bizspeak.
- Use the voice of a thoughtful human being, not a robot.

Even if your letter grants a benefit or request, it may irk the recipient if it does so in a way that puzzles, sounds grudging, or seems indifferent to the reader's predicament.

NOT THIS:

Joan—

In response to your request for a travel subsidy to the conference where your award will be given, Jonathan has reminded me of our current discretionary-spending freeze. He has decided, however, to make an exception in this instance so long as your flight is no more than \$400 and you stick to a \$50 per diem. Please submit your fully documented expenses upon your return.

Sincerely,
Rebekah

Brandy—

At this time you have now used up all your available sick-leave days and vacation days for the year. A sister-in-law does not qualify for the closeness of relation required for an employee to be eligible for compensated bereavement leave, so you will be docked for any days you choose to be absent next week around the time of the funeral. I'm afraid that policy is simply inflexible, and I checked with Jane to confirm this.

Sincerely,
Pamela

BUT THIS:

Joan—

Congratulations on your Spivey Award! We're delighted for you. Jonathan hastened to tell me that despite our current discretionary-spending freeze, he wants to support your travel to accept your award. We can manage a \$400 flight reimbursement and a \$50 per diem for on-the-ground expenses. You'll be a great company representative, I know, and I only wish I could be there myself to see you honored.

Sincerely,
Rebekah

Brandy—

Once again I want to extend my condolences for your family's loss. Take the time you need next week to be with your family. I'm sorry to report that the days will be uncompensated, according to our policies for bereavement leave, but I hope you'll call on me if I can do anything else for you in this time of need. Jane joins me in sending our heartfelt sympathies.

Sincerely,
Pamela

ENCLOSED PLEASE FIND

See what business-writing authors have long said about this wooden phrase and others like it:

Richard Grant White (1880): “[*Please find enclosed:*] A more ridiculous use of words, it seems to me, there could not be.”

Sherwin Cody (1908): “All stereotyped words [that] are not used in talking should be avoided in letter writing. There is an idea that a certain peculiar commercial jargon is appropriate in business letters. The fact is, nothing injures business more than this system of words found only in business letters. The test of a word or phrase or method of expression should be, ‘Is it what I would say to my customer if I were talking to him instead of writing to him?’”

Wallace E. Bartholomew & Floyd Hurlbut (1924): “*Inclosed herewith please find. Inclosed and herewith* mean the same thing. How foolish to tell your reader twice exactly where the check is, and then to suggest that he look around to see if he can find it anywhere. Say, ‘We are inclosing our check for \$25.50.’”

A. Charles Babenroth (1942): “*Enclosed please find.* Needless and faulty phraseology. The word *please*

has little meaning in this instance, and the word *find* is improperly used. POOR: Enclosed please find sample of our #1939 black elastic ribbon. BETTER: We are enclosing (or We enclose) a sample of our #1939 black elastic ribbon.”

L. E. Frailey (1965): “So much for the worn-out, hackneyed expressions [*enclosed herewith, enclosed please find, herewith please find*] so often seen in business letters—whiskers, rubber-stamps, chestnuts, call them what you please. They are sleeping pills [that] defeat the aim of making every letter a warm, personal contact with the reader.”

Gerald J. Alred, Charles T. Brusaw, & Walter E. Oliu (1993): “Using unnecessarily formal words (such as *herewith*) and outdated phrases (such as *please find enclosed*) is another cause of affectation.”

Kelly Cannon (2004): “[I]n any business letter, certain principles are universal. ‘Inure to the benefit of’ is four words too long, ‘enclosed please find’ sounds pompous and silly, and ‘I am writing this letter to inform you that . . .’ is a thoughtless statement of the obvious.”

Don't write in anger

Be kind and diplomatic, and say *please* and *thank you*. Courtesy is necessary to all business transactions—even letters of complaint. Omit it, and you'll be dismissed as a crank. You can be courteous while still being direct.

NOT THIS:

We are astonished at your complaint. The brochures that we printed were exactly as you specified. You okayed the sample paper, the typesetting, and the proofreading (we gave you an extra three hours). You chose the hot-pink borders with the fine-screen halftones in the body type against our advice. You insisted on drop-shipping by the 18th, and as you know, a rushed job does not allow for first-rate press work. Moreover, we quoted you a bargain-basement price. Under the circumstances we believe that any unbiased observer would say that we performed remarkably well under the impossible conditions you imposed.

BUT THIS:

We agree with you that the brochures did not match the high standards you have a right to expect from us. But we believed, in this instance, that you considered the color quality less crucial than a low price and a quick turnaround. So we pushed the work through production in three days' less time than we usually require. We advised against your using hot-pink borders and fine-screen halftones on the grade of paper you chose. Still, we exercised some ingenuity to achieve better results than are ordinarily possible. I mention this not to avoid responsibility but merely to suggest that we did the best that could be done under difficult circumstances. If you'll allow us a few more days next time, as you ordinarily do, the results will be better.

As you can see, a combative, superior tone irritates and alienates the reader—and probably loses a customer. A more diplomatic approach still gets the point across (rush jobs always take a hit on quality), but without souring the relationship.

When you receive unreasonable letters, don't ever respond in kind. That just starts a negative chain reaction. Approach complaints with a dedication to first-rate service. Write with the same warmth and friendliness you'd use in face-to-face conversations. If you or your company made a mistake, avoid the temptation to ignore it, cover it up, or shift the blame. Instead of deceiving readers, you'll provoke more ire. When you blunder, admit error and say what you've done (or will be doing) to correct it. Stress the desire to improve service.

Recap

- Keep your language simple, personal, and direct. Avoid canned phrases that add little but pomposity and verbiage to your letter.
- Motivate your readers to act on your letter by giving them reasons that matter to them.
- When conveying bad news, soften the blow by opening on a positive note. Follow up by explaining the reason for the unfavorable outcome—without overexplaining.
- Consider the reader: Be polite, sympathetic, and professional.
- Remain courteous and diplomatic. Accept responsibility for any mistakes you may have made.

Chapter 20

Memos and Reports

Memos and reports are often used to get people up to speed on an issue, to induce action, or both. So make it immediately clear in each element—your title, summary, body, and conclusion—what you want readers to learn about or do.

Pick a short, clear title

Whether you're writing a memo's subject line or a report title, choose concise, sure-footed language that says exactly what the document is about.

NOT THIS:	BUT THIS:
Subject: Siegelson	Subject: Approval of Siegelson Acquisition
Subject: Settlement	Subject: Why We Should Reject Frost's Settlement Offer
Subject: Print Run	Subject: Ginsburg Autobiography Print Run

The titles on the left hint at the topics covered but don't let readers know what they're supposed to do with the information. Those on the right are more pointed (without being wordy): The first and third titles promise status updates; the second asks readers to follow a recommendation.

Summarize key specifics up front

Figure out how many main issues you're addressing—preferably no more than three (see chapter 4)—and then for each one state: (1) the issue in a way that *anyone* can understand, (2) your solution, and (3) the reason for your solution. Here's an example:

Summary

Issue: Arnold Paper Supply has consistently failed to meet our deadlines for delivery of multicolor, printed cardstock.

Proposed Solution: Switch to National Paper and Plastics Company, which has a higher fixed fee.

Reason: Though National Paper and Plastics Company has a higher rate per delivery, its turnaround is quicker. This will increase efficiency in the warehouse, allow us to fill more orders, and help us to establish goodwill with retailers who have been angry with us for not meeting their deadlines.

By sharing everything important at the beginning of the document, you'll end up repeating yourself—but in a way that's reinforcing, not redundant. Readers will get a quick orientation with your very short version up front;

the fully elaborated version in the body will unpack each point, providing details and data for support. I recommend going back and forth between the summary and the body when writing your first draft: Start by stating the problem and offering your best shot at the answer in your summary. As you do more work on the body of the memo or report, you'll go back and refine the problem and the answer.

Write your summary for three types of readers:

- A primary audience of one or more executives interested only in a quick status update, your findings and conclusions about a problem, or your recommendations.
- A line of readers who may be called in (with or without your knowledge) to assess the soundness of your document, judging its merits according to their own fact-checking and critical analysis.
- Future readers (including those in the first category two years from now) who will be required to quarry information from your document some time after you've written it. (After all, memos and reports are rarely acted on quickly: They may be laid aside for weeks or months or even years before anyone has the resources—or a mandate—to act.)

All three types of readers have a legitimate claim to your attention. More important, you need to win them all over if you want your recommendations to go anywhere.

Even if someone else has assigned you the question you're exploring, you must define it in your summary.

WHEN WRITING A REPORT . . .

- Make sure you understand why you're writing and what you're reporting on.
- Do your best, in light of your background knowledge and initial research, to write a summary that concisely states the problem, your solution, and why your solution will work or why it's preferable to alternatives.
- Discern sources of relevant information.
- From those sources, gather all the data and explanations that you can.
- Synthesize relevant observations and inferences and throw out the rest.
- Put your findings into report form.
- Revise your summary to match your body text.

You, the writer, are in the best position to limit its scope: The person who did the assigning may not know enough about the problem to raise the right question—or to understand that it actually contains three subquestions.

In fact, you won't know these things until you do your research, which may involve digging up data that reveal where the problem lurks, reading about how other organizations have tried to solve it, talking with people who have discovered some helpful workarounds, and so on.

You should do enough research to understand the problem. *Then* you state the problem so clearly that anyone could understand why it's worth solving.

If you're making a recommendation, say (1) what needs to be done, (2) who should do it, (3) when and where it should be done, (4) why it should be done, and (5) how it should be done.

A brief marketing report might look like this:

Marketing Strategy for Skinny Mini Line of Chocolates

Summary

Issue: Within the last fiscal year, Pantheon Chocolate's sales have dropped from \$13,320,000 to \$10,730,000, but its market share remains unchanged at 37%.

Proposed Solution: Increase promotion of the Skinny Mini line of chocolates. These chocolates contain less sugar and fat than the regular line.

Reason: Health-conscious consumers want low-calorie options but don't want to sacrifice full flavor. The Skinny Mini chocolates have fewer calories than Pantheon's regular chocolates but the same flavor.

Consumers are buying more "healthy alternative" chocolates

Because consumers increasingly regard sugar and fat as unhealthy, they are not buying as much high-end gourmet chocolate as they were a year ago. This has led to a decline in sales for all high-end chocolate makers, including Pantheon. But for candies marketed as "healthy alternatives" with less sugar and fat and fewer calories,

sales have increased 42% in the same period. Marketing studies show that consumers of “healthy alternative” candies are most attracted to low-calorie chocolates that are packaged in specific-calorie portions rather than by weight.

These consumers also complain that low-calorie candies lack the rich flavor that they are used to, and they are willing to pay more for quality. Pantheon already produces a line of low-calorie gourmet chocolates, Skinny Minis, that have fewer calories than Pantheon’s regular candies but the same flavor. They’re currently sold by the pound or in gift boxes in high-end chocolate boutiques and as elegantly wrapped bars in coffee shops.

Recommendations

- To reach more health-conscious consumers, Pantheon should package Skinny Mini chocolates in a variety of portion-controlled sizes and make them available in health-food stores and supermarkets as well as the chocolate and coffee shops.
- The marketing campaign should stress the controlled portion and limited calories of each Skinny Mini bar or gift box, and the packaging should boldly display the low calorie count.

Recap

- Choose a concise title or subject line that tells readers what topics the memo or report covers

and what they should do about it (or why they should care).

- Begin your document by addressing your main points and outlining the issue, your solution, and the reason for it.
- Work from this summary when elaborating the body of your first draft.
- Modify the summary as you go to ensure that it accurately reflects what's in the body.

Chapter 21

Performance Appraisals

Writing performance appraisals, sometimes called employee reviews, needn't be a dreaded responsibility. As long as you have gathered your facts in advance—reviewed the notes you've taken throughout the year, asked others for feedback on the people you supervise, and carefully read people's self-assessments—the drafting isn't onerous if you have an ample evaluative vocabulary. I've written this chapter so you'll have some helpful phrases at the ready.

The sample phrases that follow address seven aspects of work: attitude, efficiency, human relations, judgment, knowledge, reliability, and communication skills. But you can adapt the wording to suit whatever qualities you'd like to focus on. Then it's a matter of pairing the phrases with specifics that support them. For example: “When we had several layoffs last June, Lauren *remained utterly calm and collected* while *demonstrating keen sensitivity* to those who lost their jobs. She [fill in whatever particular action was noteworthy].”

Common Forms of Business Writing

Attitude

Superb	• shows unwavering commitment • always gives maximal effort • is always friendly and happy to help • always brings out the best in others
Good	• shows strong commitment • usually makes a strong effort • is usually friendly and happy to help • usually brings out the best in others
Acceptable	• shows adequate commitment • makes an effort • is often friendly and happy to help • is often a positive influence on the group
Needs Improvement	• could show more commitment • doesn't always make an effort • is sometimes quarrelsome • sometimes creates tension within the group
Poor	• lacks commitment • rarely makes a real effort • is quarrelsome and sometimes even hostile • often creates tension within the group

Efficiency

Superb	• never wastes time or effort • delegates effectively • always completes tasks on time • can manage many projects at a time
Good	• rarely wastes time or effort • usually delegates appropriately • almost always completes tasks on time • can manage several projects at a time
Acceptable	• usually doesn't waste time or effort • delegates pretty well • usually completes tasks on time • can manage more than one project at a time
Needs Improvement	• sometimes wastes time and effort • tries to do too much without delegating • fails to complete tasks on time • cannot manage more than one project at a time
Poor	• often wastes time and effort • usually fails to delegate when appropriate • can't be counted on to complete tasks on time • struggles to manage even one project at a time

Human relations

Superb	• demonstrates keen sensitivity to others and an uncanny ability to understand their needs • participates actively and collegially in meetings • works exceptionally well on teams • relates to customers extremely well

Good	• usually demonstrates sensitivity to others • participates effectively in meetings • works effectively on teams • relates to customers well
Acceptable	• often demonstrates sensitivity to others • participates adequately in meetings • gets along with fellow team members • relates to customers competently
Needs Improvement	• does not always pick up on interpersonal cues • sometimes wastes others' time in meetings • is sometimes motivated more by personal goals than by team goals • sometimes alienates customers through inattention
Poor	• rarely pays attention to others' reactions • often wastes others' time in meetings • does not work well on teams • often alienates customers with impoliteness and sarcasm

Judgment

Superb	• makes excellent choices and informed decisions • remains utterly calm and collected even in times of crisis • knows precisely which problems need immediate attention and which ones can wait • behaves professionally and appropriately in every situation
Good	• makes sound choices and reasonable decisions • remains relatively calm and collected even in times of crisis • generally knows which problems need immediate attention and which ones can wait • behaves professionally and appropriately
Acceptable	• generally makes sound choices and informed decisions • remains mostly calm and collected except in times of crisis • does a pretty good job distinguishing between problems that need immediate attention and those that can wait • generally behaves professionally and appropriately
Needs Improvement	• sometimes makes poor choices and ill-informed decisions • sometimes lacks the calm and collected demeanor required in high-pressure circumstances • often doesn't distinguish between problems that need immediate attention and those that can wait • sometimes behaves unprofessionally and inappropriately

Common Forms of Business Writing

Judgment (*continued*)

Poor	• often makes poor choices and ill-informed decisions • often lacks the calm and collected demeanor required in high-pressure circumstances • typically fails to distinguish between problems that need immediate attention and those that can wait • often behaves unprofessionally and inappropriately

Knowledge

Superb	• is exceptionally well informed about all aspects of the job • demonstrates extraordinarily comprehensive knowledge • skillfully handles complex assignments without supervision • has a comprehensive knowledge of the industry
Good	• is well informed about key aspects of the job • demonstrates thorough knowledge • can handle complex assignments with some supervision • has strong knowledge of the industry
Acceptable	• understands the job • demonstrates adequate knowledge • can handle moderately complex assignments with supervision • has an acceptable degree of knowledge of the industry
Needs Improvement	• doesn't fully understand the job • demonstrates less than satisfactory knowledge • sometimes mishandles assignments of moderate complexity, even with supervision • has insufficient knowledge of the industry
Poor	• is ill-informed about many aspects of the job • demonstrates inadequate knowledge • mishandles basic assignments • has little knowledge of the industry

Reliability

Superb	• always meets deadlines • is unfailingly dependable • achieves excellent results in urgent situations • always delivers on promises
Good	• meets deadlines • is highly dependable • achieves good results in urgent situations • almost always delivers on promises
Acceptable	• meets most deadlines • is dependable • achieves acceptable results in urgent situations • delivers pretty consistently on promises

Needs Improvement	• sometimes fails to meet important deadlines • is sometimes undependable • sometimes fails to achieve acceptable results in urgent situations • sometimes fails to deliver on promises
Poor	• often fails to meet important deadlines • is rarely dependable • often fails to achieve acceptable results in urgent situations • can't be counted on to deliver on promises

Communication skills

Superb	• writes and speaks with remarkable clarity • never gets bogged down in unnecessary details • has superior communication skills in person and over the phone • develops and delivers imaginative, clear, and concise presentations
Good	• writes and speaks clearly • rarely gets bogged down in unnecessary details • has sound communication skills in person and over the phone • develops and delivers clear, concise presentations
Acceptable	• generally writes and speaks clearly • usually avoids getting bogged down in unnecessary details • has adequate communication skills in person and over the phone • develops and delivers acceptable presentations
Needs Improvement	• sometimes writes and speaks unclearly and with undue complexity • sometimes gets bogged down in unnecessary details • sometimes struggles to communicate in person and over the phone • develops and delivers presentations in need of further work and polish
Poor	• writes and speaks unclearly and with undue complexity • gets bogged down in unnecessary details • fails to communicate effectively in person and over the phone • develops and delivers presentations that ramble and lack clarity

Recap

- Prepare by gathering your facts in advance: Keep performance notes throughout the year and review them before writing. Ask other colleagues for feedback on those you're evaluating. Carefully review the employees' self-assessments.
- Use the sample phrases provided here to help articulate your impressions.
- Always pair your general statements with specific examples that support them.

Appendix A

A Checklist for the Four Stages of Writing

- Madman**
- ☐ Consider why you're writing: What's moved you to write? What's the assignment? What do you hope to achieve?
 - ☐ Think about who your readers are and what they need to know.
 - ☐ Figure out how much time you have, and work out a rough schedule for gathering ideas and material, outlining, preparing a draft, and revising.
 - ☐ Research with imagination and gusto. Take notes on relevant information.
 - ☐ Push yourself to be creative. Don't be content with obvious ideas that just anyone would think of.

- Architect**
- ☐ Jot down your three main points in complete sentences—with as much specificity as you can.
 - ☐ Consider the best order of the three points and reorganize them if necessary.
 - ☐ Decide how to open and conclude the document.
 - ☐ Think about what visual aids might be helpful in conveying your ideas.
- Carpenter**
- ☐ If possible, turn away from all distractions. Silence your phone and your computer alerts, and find an hour or so of solitude. You'll be writing.
 - ☐ Use your three-point outline as a guide.
 - ☐ Start writing paragraphs that support the point you find easiest to start with—then move to the other points.
 - ☐ Write swiftly without stopping to edit or polish.
 - ☐ Try to write a full section in one sitting. If you must get up in the middle of a section, start the next sentence with a few words and then leave. (When you come back, you'll find it easier to resume a half-completed sentence than to start a new one.)

Judge

- ☐ Immediately after completing your draft, read it through with the idea of amplifying ideas here and there.
- ☐ Then let it cool off—overnight, if you can, or for a few minutes if you're working under an urgent deadline.
- ☐ When you return to your draft, consider it from the audience's perspective. Will it be clear to everyone who looks at it, or does it require inside knowledge? Is it concise, or does it waste words and time?
- ☐ Identify the draft's two biggest flaws and try to fix them.
- ☐ Ask yourself:
 - Is anything essential missing?
 - Are important points stressed?
 - Is the meaning of each sentence clear and accurate?
 - Are my transitions smooth?
 - What can I trim without sacrificing important content?
 - Are there any vague passages I can sharpen with specific facts?
 - Are there boring passages I can word more vividly?
 - Can I improve the phrasing?
 - Can I improve the punctuation?
 - Are there any typos?

Appendix B

A Dozen Grammatical Rules You Absolutely Need to Know

1. It is perfectly acceptable to start a sentence with *And* or *But*.

The single most important element in fluid writing is the use of effective transitions between sentences and paragraphs. And no transition is more effective than the plain single-syllable words *and* and *but*.

The notion that it's ungrammatical to start a sentence with a conjunction has long been ignored by the best writers and debunked by reputable grammarians. Look at the op-ed page of any major newspaper or scan through some pages of any well-edited magazine and you'll see plenty of examples. Why? Because

conjunctions are excellent transition tools, signaling how the sentence to follow fits in with what came before—and because they're short, sharp, and fleet. *And* and *but* are usually more effective than clunky conjunctive adverbs such as *additionally* and *however*, which add syllables and demand a comma after them.

2. It is perfectly acceptable to end a sentence with a preposition.

The “rule” that you should not end a sentence with a preposition is a misbegotten notion based on Latin syntax and expounded by a few (a very few) 19th-century writers. Grammarians have long since dismissed it as ill-founded and unnecessary.

Often a sentence that ends with a preposition sounds far more natural than the same sentence forced into avoiding the terminal preposition. Consider: *What will the new product be used for?* versus *For what purpose will the new product be used?*

That said, a strong sentence should end forcefully because the end of a sentence is the most emphatic position. A preposition is rarely a powerful sentence-ender, but it is not an ungrammatical one.

3. The adverb corresponding to the adjective *good* is *well*.

When describing performance, manner, action, and the like, use the adverb *well* <The intern

works well under pressure> <The research and development stage is going well> <We wish them well in the future>. Though becoming more widespread, the adverbial use of *good* is nonstandard English <The vice presidents *worked good as a team> <The new water pump *is running good>. The question whether to use *good* or *well* frequently arises when someone asks “How are you doing?” The best answer—assuming a positive response—is “I’m doing well” (or “I’m fine, thank you”). Saying “I’m good” is common but unrefined. The response “I’m *doing good” is substandard because *good* is there being used as an adverb. An exception to the rule against using *good* as an adverb applies with certain set phrases <a good many more> <did it but good>.

4. The subject of the sentence determines the number of the verb.

A subject and its verb must both be either singular or plural. Grammar Girl says so. (*Grammar Girl* and *says* are both singular.) All grammarians say so. (*Grammarians* and *say* are both plural.) The rule seems so elementary as to be trivial. But a lot can go wrong. A prepositional phrase modifying the subject is a common source of trouble: Should *an oversupply of foreign imports* take a singular or plural verb? The answer is singular, to match the subject *oversupply*. Although compound

subjects generally take plural verbs, sometimes a subject really expresses a single (and singular) idea <The company's bread and butter is still shipping>. The subject, *bread and butter*, is plural in form but singular in sense, so it takes the singular verb *is*.

There (in its use as a subject stand-in, as in *There is another way*) presents a special problem, one that some authorities call the most common grammatical error today. In inverted sentences, the true subject follows the verb <There go our fourth-quarter profits>. The subject *profits* is after the verb *go*. Yet people seem to want singular verbs with *there* regardless of what follows, and errors result <*There is still market capacity and established competition to be considered>. The compound subject *capacity and competition* should take the plural verb *are*, not the singular verb *is*.

Illusory compounds can also cause trouble. These occur with constructions such as *together with*, *as well as*, and the like, none of which forms a plural. <The board, along with the president and CFO, endorses the stock split>. The subject is the singular *board*, which takes the singular verb *endorses*.

5. Both *either* and *neither*, as subjects, take singular verbs.

Beware of distractions caused by prepositional phrases containing plural objects: The sub-

ject—*either* or *neither*—is still singular <Either of the marketing plans *involves* [not *involve*] capital investment> <Neither of our expansion options *provides* [not *provide*] a total solution>.

6. With *neither/nor* and *either/or* in the subject position, the second element controls the number of the verb.

When the correlative conjunctions *either/or* or *neither/nor* frame alternatives in the singular, the verb is singular <Either phone or fax *is* acceptable for your response>. When the alternatives are plural, the verb is plural <Neither our accountants nor our lawyers *are* concerned about the merger>. But when one element is singular and the other is plural, match the verb to the second element <Neither the regional managers nor the vice-president for sales *likes* [not *like*] the proposed campaign's theme> <Either the home office or the branch managers *are* [not *is*] largely responsible for employee morale>.

7. A flat adverb like *thus* or *doubtless* takes no *-ly* ending.

Most adverbs are formed by adding the *-ly* suffix to adjectives (*large* makes *largely*, *quick* makes *quickly*) or changing the *-able* suffix to *-ably* (*amicable* makes *amicably*, *capable* makes *capably*). But the English language also contains a fair number of adverbs that do not

end in *-ly* (such as *fast*, *ill*, and *seldom*). With these, it is unnecessary—and unidiomatic—to add the suffix *-ly*. The two most common examples are **doubtlessly* and **thusly*.

8. The words *however*, *therefore*, and *otherwise* cannot join independent clauses without additional punctuation.

An independent clause (1) contains a subject and a verb and (2) expresses a complete thought. It can stand alone as a sentence, or it can be connected with another clause by a comma and a conjunction (such as *and*, *but*, or) <The new advertising campaign is ready, but the CEO has yet to approve it>. When two independent clauses are joined with a conjunctive adverb like *however*, a semicolon must go in front of the connector and a comma after <Mr. Bingham can't attend the meeting; however, he hopes to call before we adjourn>. Omitting the semicolon or replacing it with a comma creates what is known as a "comma splice" <*We were supposed to arrive at 4:00 p.m., however, we didn't arrive until 5:00>.

9. With a verb phrase, the adverb usually goes after the first auxiliary verb.

Writing authorities have long agreed that midphrase is the strongest and most natural place for an adverb <Industry experts *have long agreed* on the product's effectiveness>. The alternatives are awkward <Industry experts

long have agreed on the product's effectiveness> or nonsensical <Industry experts *have agreed long* on the product's effectiveness>.

Resistance to this guidance may be due to the old superstition that it's ungrammatical to split an infinitive (it isn't), since that is one type of split verb <We expect the new product line and expanded territory *to almost double* our sales in the next two years>.

When the phrase has more than one auxiliary verb, the most natural placement is usually after the first one (as in *has long been assumed*).

10. Relative pronouns (*that*, *which*, and *who*) must appear alongside their antecedents.

A relative pronoun (*that*, *which*, *who*, *whom*, and various forms with the *-ever* suffix) serves one of two purposes. First, it can link a dependent clause to an independent one <Whoever wants to participate is welcome>. The dependent clause (*whoever wants to participate*) serves as the subject of the main clause. Second, it can join a clause with its antecedent <Those who want to participate are welcome>. Here, the dependent clause (*who want to participate*) adds crucial information about its antecedent, *those*.

The second type of relative pronoun should be close to its antecedent—preferably immediately after it. The link must be clear because

trouble can occur when the reference becomes uncertain <*Please discuss the customer-service position in the accounting department that is being eliminated>. Which is being eliminated, the position or the department? Restating the sentence clarifies it <Please discuss the customer-service position that is being eliminated in the accounting department>. The relative pronoun *that* immediately follows its antecedent, *customer-service position*.

11. **An appositive is set off by commas when it is not essential to the sentence (when it is nonrestrictive), but is not set off by commas when it is essential (restrictive).**

An appositive is a noun or noun phrase that follows another noun (or pronoun) and identifies or depicts it more fully <My colleague Pat agrees> <The customer, a tall man in an oversized suit, left his keys on the counter>.

In the first example, the appositive *Pat* is not set off by commas from the rest of the sentence. In the second, *a tall man in an oversized suit* is set off. The reason is that appositives, like relative clauses (those introduced by *which*, *who*, and *whom*), may or may not be essential to the meaning of the sentence. *Pat*, in the first sentence, is essential—it specifies which colleague (presumably out of several) is being referred to. In the second sentence, the appositive merely adds description. We could

also say that *Pat*, in the first sentence, defines or restricts its referent, *colleague*, while the appositive in the second sense is indefinite or nonrestrictive. Current stylebooks use the terms *restrictive* and *nonrestrictive* to label these qualities.

Appositives may also be set off by em-dashes (typically for emphasis) or parentheses (typically for deemphasis) instead of commas.

12. Correlative conjunctions (those used in pairs) require parallel phrasing.

Correlative conjunctions (such as *both . . . and*, *neither . . . nor*, and *not only . . . but also*) work in pairs, joining related constructions that match in syntax. Each conjunction should immediately precede the part of speech it describes. Parallelism is rarely a problem with simple nouns <neither time nor money>, but it becomes tricky with phrases and clauses, as in the erroneous phrasing **We not only raised our regional market share but also our profit margin*, which should read: *We raised not only our regional market share but also our profit margin*. The verb *raised* must be outside the first correlative conjunction (*not only*) to apply to both possessive phrases (*our regional market share* and *our profit margin*).

Appendix C

A Dozen Punctuation Rules You Absolutely Need to Know

1. Hyphenate your phrasal adjectives.

A small-business incentive is different from a *small business incentive*. A *limited-liability clause* is different from a *limited liability clause*. When two or more words as a unit modify a noun, they must be hyphenated (unless certain exceptions apply). So a hotel's door sign advising the staff not to disturb the guests would be a *do-not-disturb sign*. A company that is 25 years old is a *25-year-old company*.

There are some exceptions: (1) Don't hyphenate simple phrases formed by an *-ly* adverb and a past-participial adjective <a greatly

exaggerated claim>. (2) Don't hyphenate phrases formed with proper nouns <New Zealand exports> or foreign words <a post facto rationalization>. (3) Generally, don't hyphenate phrasal adjectives used after the noun they modify <a job well done>, but there are exceptions based solely on conventions of usage <our HR manager is risk-averse by nature> <the information is time-sensitive>.

2. Use a comma before *and* or *or* when listing three or more items.

Although simple series <*red, white, and blue*> might not require the so-called serial comma before the conjunction to be perfectly clear, clarity fades fast as series become longer and more complex <We hope to boost sales in the target area, to build the company's name-recognition statewide and beyond, and to attract investors for possible franchise opportunities>. So what is the rule?

The Chicago Manual of Style and other authorities on professional, technical, and scholarly writing almost universally endorse using the serial comma in *all* series for one good reason: It is sometimes wrong (ambiguous or worse) to omit it, but never wrong to include it.

3. Don't use a comma to separate two compound predicates. Do use punctuation—usually a comma but a semicolon if needed for clarity—to separate a series of three or more compound predicates.

When two predicates share the same subject, it's common not to repeat the subject. If the second clause repeats the subject, then the comma is proper before the conjunction <I stopped by yesterday, and I will call today>. But if the subject isn't repeated (is shared by both predicates), there should be no comma before the conjunction <I stopped by yesterday and will call today>. When three or more such clauses are combined (sharing the same subject), the predicates become a series and do require at least a comma to separate them <I wrote him yesterday, stopped by yesterday, and will call today>.

When one or more of the parts in the series contain commas, use semicolons instead to separate the predicates <I wrote him last week; I stopped by yesterday with the paperwork, the deposit check, and the keys; and I will call him today>. The same principle holds for a compound predicate <I wrote him last week; stopped by yesterday with the paperwork, the deposit check, and the keys; and will call him today>.

4. Don't use an apostrophe to form plural nouns.

The use of apostrophes to form plurals (rather than possessives or contractions) is almost always incorrect. Most proper nouns take a simple *-s*, while those ending in *-s*, *-x*, *-z*, and sibilant *-ch* or *-sh* take *-es*. The exceptions to the no-apostrophe rule are for lowercase

letters <Mind your p's and q's> and capital letters when an apostrophe might prevent a miscue <all A's on the audit report>. Don't use apostrophes to pluralize numbers or capitalized abbreviations without periods <ATMs became ubiquitous in the 1990s>. The usual way to pluralize words and letters is to italicize the word or letter and append -s in roman type <Please delete the first two *ors* in the sentence>.

The incorrect use of apostrophes is especially common when pluralizing names. Mr. and Mrs. Smith are *the Smiths*, not **the Smith's* (or **the Smiths'*). Mr. and Mrs. Stevens are *the Stevenses* (not **the Steven's* or **the Stevens'*).

5. Don't separate the grammatical subject from the verb, unless there's a set-off intervening phrase. As a rule, words and phrases that *go* together should *be* together, not unduly separated. So an appositive, for example, is next to the noun or pronoun it elaborates <Maevae Peterson, the new CEO, is . . .> and a pronoun should not be so far from its antecedent as to make the connection unclear. On the same principle, the subject and verb in a sentence are best kept close together so that the sentence does not wander off on tangents.

That's not to say that an intervening phrase or clause between the subject and verb is

always wrong. It can be an effective way to modify the sense or add information <Ms. Peterson, whose leadership at McLaughlin Enterprises has been credited with that firm's turnaround, will take the reins here on June 1>. Although this technique adds emphasis to the modifying matter, it's often clearer to make the phrase or clause introductory so that the subject and verb remain close <Credited with turning around McLaughlin Enterprises during her four years as CEO, Ms. Peterson starts work here on June 1>.

6. Use bullets as attention-getting devices, but don't overuse them.

Bullets draw the reader's eye to a list of points without signaling that they're presented in a certain order. The best lists follow these rules:

- Set up the list with an explanatory sentence in the form of an introduction that ends with a colon.
- Keep all the items parallel in grammatical form (all noun phrases, say, or all predicates starting with verbs) and somewhat similar in length.
- Present the items with a hanging indent so the bullets stand out to the left and all the lines of type align.
- Typeset the items single-spaced, perhaps with a bit of extra spacing between items.

- Keep the bullets simple in appearance, eschewing whimsical artwork in favor of solid bullet dots about the size of a lowercase *o*.

As with any other design device aimed at signaling emphasis or attracting the reader's attention, the overuse of bulleted lists dilutes their impact.

7. Avoid quotation marks as a way of emphasizing words.

Quotation marks can send mixed signals. Most often they signal their traditional function: to set off a quotation. Sometimes they suggest a snide attitude <an “expert” in negotiation>, or perhaps imply that what they contain is not what it purports to be at all <Here's the “final” schedule>. They can be the equivalent of introducing the words with “so-called.” Given all these different possible meanings, quotation marks are a poor choice for emphasizing words and phrases. That is traditionally the role of italic type, an unambiguous signal.

Also avoid (1) underlining, the italic font's uglier equivalent from the typewriter era; (2) overuse of boldface type, which is best reserved for titles and headings; and (3) all caps, which is irritating and hard to read if longer than a word or two.

8. Don't hyphenate most prefixed terms.

American English is generally averse to hyphenating its prefixes (*anteroom*, *biennial*,

deselect, proactive, quarterfinal, semisweet).

Avoid the practice of inserting a hyphen, even when it results in a doubled letter (*cooperate, reelect, misspeak*). But there are a few exceptions: (1) when it's needed to avoid a miscue or an ambiguity (*re-create, re-lease, re-sign*); (2) when the root word is a proper noun (*pre-Halloween sales*); and (3) when using certain prefixes such as *all-* (*all-inclusive*), *ex-* (*ex-partner*), and *self-* (*self-correcting*).

9. Use a colon or a comma—never a semicolon—after a salutation.

Colons are standard in business correspondence <Dear Ms. Wilson:>, commas in personal letters <Dear Barbara,>. Commas may also be permissible for business letters, depending on the personal relationship between the sender and the recipient. But to use a semicolon (**Dear Mr. Jones;*) is always incorrect.

10. Long dashes have two defensible—and valuable—uses: to frame and to emphasize.

First, long dashes—called *em-dashes*—frame what is basically parenthetical matter and make it stand out. Notice in the first sentence how “called *em-dashes*” stands out. It could just as easily have been set off from the rest of the sentence by commas or placed inside parentheses. But the dashes give an interruptive phrase special emphasis (while parentheses

almost beg to be skipped over). It's a strong technique that should be used but, like all effective writing devices, not overused. Second, em-dashes are handy for short tags that sit apart from the main sentence. The em-dash replaces the colon but adds emphasis. The setoff can come at the beginning of the sentence <Customer service—it's our top priority> or at the end <No matter what the field, an able workforce starts with and continues with one thing—professional training>.

11. Don't use a comma when writing a month and year.

Stylebooks have long agreed that no comma should appear between the month and year <February 2012>. With the standard American format of month-day-year, do use a comma after the day <February 23, 2012>. No comma is necessary with the day-month-year format <23 February 2012>. Use a comma after the year <Groundbreaking was held February 23, 2012, in Menomonee Falls> unless the date is used adjectivally <the February 23, 2012 groundbreaking ceremonies>.

12. For singular possessives, add 's even if the word ends with an -s, -z, -x, or -ss.

This is the first rule in Strunk & White's famous book *The Elements of Style*: A singular possessive takes 's <Kansas's business climate> <Holtz's contract> <Xerox's patents> <the

actress's endorsement>. But note that personal pronouns and *who* have their own form without the 's (*mine, our, ours, your, yours, his, her, hers, its, their, theirs, whose*). Also, if the name of a corporation or other entity is formed from a plural word, add only the apostrophe <United Airlines' quarterly report> <The United Arab Emirates' capital is Abu Dhabi>.

When forming a plural possessive, use the word's standard plural form and add an apostrophe to the final -s <caterers' fees> <the bosses' offices>. An exception applies to plural words that don't end in -s: they follow the same rule as singular possessives <a line of children's clothing> <the alumnae's reunion>.

Appendix D

Common Usage Gaffes

In this top-20 list of usage points that distinguish sloppy from refined language, an asterisk precedes erroneous words and phrases.

NOT THIS:	BUT THIS:
I *feel badly about the oversight.	I feel bad about the oversight.
I'm *feeling very well about the sales figures.	I feel good (contented). I feel well (healthy).
They're *doing good.	They're doing well.
Just *between you and I.	Just between you and me.
He expected *Helen and I to help him.	He expected Helen and me to help him.
She *could care less.	She couldn't care less.
He's *laying down on the couch.	He's lying down on the couch.
*Where are you at?	Where are you?
*If I would have been there	If I had been there

Appendix D

NOT THIS:	BUT THIS:
She serves on the board; *as such, she has fiduciary duties.	She's a board member; as such, she has fiduciary duties.
The letter was sent *on accident.	The letter was sent by accident.
I *wish he was faster.	I wish he were faster.
I *could of done it.	I could have done it.
*in regards to	in regard to, or regarding
*less items	fewer items
He was *undoubtably guilty.	He was undoubtedly guilty.
*preventative	preventive
*There's lots of reasons.	There are lots of reasons.
*as best as she can	as best she can
*irregardless	regardless, or irrespective

For more on usage, see Appendix F.

Appendix E

Some Dos and Don'ts of Business-Writing Etiquette

Dos:

1. Proofread all documents before sending them out to make sure the spelling and grammar are correct.
2. Double-check that the recipient's name is spelled correctly and that the form of address is proper (Ms., Mrs., Miss, Mr., Dr., Judge, Justice, Honorable, etc.). Double-check the envelope, too, if there is one.
3. Sign business letters with your full name unless you're friends with the recipient. If the salutation is "Dear Mr. Smith," sign your full name; if it's "Dear George," sign your first name only.

4. Sign your letters with an ink pen and not with a stamp of your signature.
5. Always include your contact information so that the recipient will know how to respond to you.
6. If you're sending a handwritten note to a business contact or friend, use a stamp to mail the letter rather than meter-stamping the envelope.
7. Before sending an e-mail, make sure that you have (a) included everyone you need in the address block and (b) incorporated any attachments you refer to in the e-mail.
8. Use white space effectively so that the document reads well and is not a strain on people's eyes. Create generous margins, leave spaces between paragraphs, break up text with subheads if appropriate, and indent appropriately.
9. Date your communications (except e-mails, which will date themselves) so that they give the reader a reference time.
10. Write distinctive thank-you notes if you're writing them to several people in the same office. It's counterproductive if recipients compare their notes and realize you mass-produced them.

Don'ts:

1. Don't use all caps. It amounts to shouting at the reader.
2. Don't return a letter to its sender by writing on it to save time or paper. A reply should be on a separate piece of paper, even if it's a short note. Contracts and other agreements are a separate issue.
3. Don't write "Thank you in advance." If you want to thank people in a request, simply make the request and then write "Thank you." Also, be sure to say thanks (perhaps in person) again when the task has been completed.
4. Don't use BCC on an e-mail unless you are quite sure that it is necessary. It could get you a bad reputation as being indiscreet.
5. Don't use tiny or unusual fonts that make your writing hard to read or that make you seem flippant.
6. Don't write a very long topic in the subject line of an e-mail.
7. Don't write a thank-you note on a card with a preprinted "Thank you!" or "Merci" (it's not considered good manners).
8. Don't let the passage of time stop you from writing to express congratulations, gratitude,

condolences, or whatever other sentiment your instincts say you *ought* to express.

9. Don't write a letter in anger or frustration.
Step back, take some time, and detach yourself from the situation. Come back to writing when you have had time to reflect on the matter and can express yourself calmly.
10. Don't put anything in writing that you would be ashamed to see reported on the front page of the *Wall Street Journal*.

Appendix F

A Primer of Good Usage

abstruse. See **obtuse**.

accede; exceed. *Accede* = to agree or yield <We acceded to your request>. *Exceed* = to surpass, to be greater than <Your needs exceeded our capacity for production>.

access; excess. Both are traditionally nouns. *Access* = the act or opportunity of approaching or entering. *Excess* = an amount beyond what is required. Of course, *access* is also common today as a verb meaning “to gain entry to; to penetrate” <I couldn’t access those files> <I accessed the storage unit>.

accord; accordance. *Accord* = agreement <The partners are in accord about expanding plant capacity>. *Accordance* = conformance <The materials weren’t in accordance with our specs>.

administer; administrate. The first is standard. Avoid **administrate*, a back-formation from *administration*.

admission; admittance. *Admission* = permission or authority to enter <The price of admission is steep>. *Admittance* = physical entry <No admittance after 6 p.m.>.

adopt; adapt. *Adopt* = take up as one's own <Adopt this cause>. *Adapt* = modify <Adapt your leadership style>. Note that the nouns are *adoption* and *adaptation*.

adverse; averse. *Adverse* = unfavorable or contrary to <The expansion plan was postponed in face of adverse market conditions>. *Averse* = reluctant or unwilling; having distaste of, fear of, or hostility toward <The company is risk-averse>.

advise; advice. *Advise* is the verb <Our CFO advised against the merger>. *Advice* is the noun <We took the consultant's advice>.

affect; effect. *Affect* is usually a verb meaning "to have an influence" <The ordinance may affect our sales>. *Effect* is usually a noun denoting a result or outcome <It may be a positive effect>. *Effect* may also be a verb meaning "to bring about" <The new manager effected several changes>.

aggravate; irritate. *Aggravate* = to make worse <This news aggravates an already-bad situation>. *Irritate* = to

annoy. Using *aggravate* to mean “irritate” is a common colloquialism, but it will still annoy some readers.

aide; aid. *Aide* is an assistant. *Aid* is assistance.

allusion; illusion. *Allusion* = an indirect reference, as to a cultural work, historical event, or other form of shared knowledge <“Sage of Omaha” is an allusion to Warren Buffett>. *Illusion* = a misperception or a mistaken belief <Their profitability turned out to be an illusion>.

a lot. Always two words.

already; all ready. *Already* = previously, by this time <She was already taking notes>. *All ready* = completely prepared <The corporate minutes were all ready for the secretary’s sign-off>.

alternative; alternate. As a noun, *alternative* = one option (among one or more others) <We came up with an alternative design>; *alternate* = a substitute <The delegate’s alternate attended>.

altogether; all together. *Altogether* = entirely or completely <This trip was altogether useless>. *All together* = collectively or in a group <That day we reported to him all together>.

ambiguous; ambivalent. *Ambiguous* = inviting more than one reasonable interpretation <Please clarify the

ambiguous policy>. *Ambivalent* = having mixed emotions about something <The CFO has ambivalent feelings about the trade-off>.

amend; emend. *Amend* = to add to a document, esp. a law or other legal document <Amend the contract>. *Emend* = to make corrections or edits to a piece of writing <Emend the proposal before you circulate it>.

among. See **between.**

amuse; bemuse. *Amuse* = to entertain or delight. *Bemuse* = to befuddle.

antidote; anecdote. *Antidote* = anything that counteracts a bad situation <Preparation is the antidote for nervousness>. *Anecdote* = an amusing, illustrative story <She told an anecdote about her first day on the job>.

anxious; eager. *Anxious* = anticipating with unease or worry <We grew anxious about the IPO>. *Eager* = anticipating with enthusiasm <Customers were eager for the retail stores to open>.

appraise; apprise. *Appraise* = to assess in value <Appraise the property at \$1 million>. *Apprise* = to keep someone informed <Apprise me of any changes>.

arbiter; arbitrator. *Arbiter* = a person with final say over a matter <You're the arbiter of company policy>. *Arbitrator* = a person who conducts an arbitration to settle

a dispute <The arbitrator decided the dispute in our favor>.

as. See **like**.

assure; ensure; insure. *Assure* = to try to satisfy someone of something <He assured me he'd attend>. *Ensure* = to make certain that something will happen or that things will be as expected <We made a schedule to ensure that we'd meet our deadline>. *Insure* = to indemnify against loss or damage <The warehouse was insured for less than market value>.

attain; obtain. *Attain* = to achieve or accomplish something <The regional division attained its quarterly sales target>. *Obtain* = to get something <We had no trouble obtaining raw materials>.

averse. See **adverse**.

avocation. See **vocation**.

awhile; a while. *Awhile* is an adverb meaning “for a short time” <Let's talk awhile before deciding>. *A while* is a noun phrase meaning “a period of time” <Let's talk for a while before deciding>.

bear; born; borne. *Bear* = (1) to carry or support <Corporate suitors come bearing gifts> or (2) to give birth <bear a child>. *Borne* refers to sense 1 <Airborne particulates make the product unsafe>, and *born* to sense 2 <You're a born leader>.

bemuse. See **amuse**.

beside; besides. *Beside* = (1) next to or at the side of <The seat beside the window is taken> or (2) outside of <That's beside the point> <she was beside herself with joy>. *Besides* = in addition to <Besides coffee, we sell tea and baked goods>.

between; among. *Between* shows one-to-one connections <Between payroll and health care, our costs are up>, even when more than two things are involved <Talks began between the firm and its various suitors>. *Among* connotes a looser relationship with three or more <There was one standout among applicants>.

blatant; flagrant. *Blatant* = obvious, overt <That's a blatant lie>. *Flagrant* = conspicuously rude or abusive <Refusing to shake hands was a flagrant break of protocol>.

bombastic = pompous, pretentious <Bombastic speeches stretched out the meeting>. The word has nothing to do with violence.

born; borne. See **bear**.

breach; broach. *Breach* = to break <That's a breach of contract> or break through <Expansion plans will breach the market's boundaries>. *Broach* = to bring up <I hate to broach the subject>.

can; may. Most properly, *can* expresses power or ability <We can ship your order next week>. *May* expresses

permission or possibility <May we ship your order by UPS?>.

canvas; canvass. *Canvas* = coarse cloth <We ordered a canvas awning>. *Canvass* = a noun meaning “a poll or survey” or a verb meaning “to conduct a poll or survey” <Canvass your customers before you brainstorm new products>.

capital; Capitol. *Capitol* = the building where the U.S. Congress or a state legislature meets. In all other senses, the spelling is *capital* <capital expenses> <capital letter> <a capital crime> <the capital city>.

censor; censure. *Censor* = to inspect and possibly restrict the release of matter judged to be objectionable. *Censure* = to reprimand someone.

clench; clinch. *Clench* = to tighten, esp. in anger or determination <clenched fist>. *Clinch* = to secure or fasten <clinch the sale>.

climatic; climactic. *Climatic* = of the weather, esp. climate <climatic change>. *Climactic* = dramatic, riveting, moving toward a climax <climactic tension>.

clinch. See **clench**.

closure; cloture. *Closure* = the act or fact of concluding or resolving. *Cloture* = the parliamentary procedure for ending debate and calling for a vote.

collaborate; corroborate. *Collaborate* = to cooperate in an enterprise <We once collaborated in a joint venture>. *Corroborate* = to lend support, esp. by confirming information <Two studies corroborate the claims>.

common. See **mutual**.

compare to; compare with. To compare something *to* something else is to liken the two things; to compare it *with* something else is to note both similarities and differences.

compel; impel. *Compel* = to force, esp. by dint of authority or necessity <I felt compelled to report the error>. *Impel* = to drive forward, as by circumstances or weight of argument <Better opportunities impelled her to relocate>.

compendious; voluminous. *Compendious* = concise, condensed. *Voluminous* = large, roomy.

complementary; complimentary. *Complementary* = (1) making complete or perfect or (2) matching or harmonious <a bundle of complementary products>. *Complimentary* = (1) free <complimentary tickets> or (2) flattering <complimentary reviews>.

comprise; compose. *Comprise* = to include <The company comprises three business units>. *Compose* = to make up <The company is composed of three business units>. The phrase **is comprised of* is always faulty.

compulsive; compulsory. *Compulsive* = prone to or caused by uncontrollable urges <compulsive behavior>. *Compulsory* = mandatory <compulsory training>.

connote. See **denote**.

consequent; subsequent. *Consequent* = following as a result (consequence) <Our supplier took responsibility for consequent costs>. *Subsequent* = following in time <Subsequent ads included a disclaimer>.

continual; continuous. *Continual* = recurring, intermittent <continual calls for tech support>. *Continuous* = ceaseless, uninterrupted <continuous efforts to meet our goals>.

convince; persuade. *Convince . . . of* = to win over, to prove a point <convince the board of the need to expand>. *Persuade . . . to* = convince and cause to take action <persuade the board to fund the building program>.

corroborate. See **collaborate**.

council; counsel. *Council* = a board <the city council>. *Counsel* = (1) adviser <corporate counsel>, (2) advice <She heeded the counsel of her CFO>, or (3) to advise <My mentor counseled patience>.

credible; credulous; incredulous; creditable. *Credible* = believable, trustworthy <a credible argument>. *Credulous* = gullible <credulous acceptance>. *Incredulous* =

unbelieving <an incredulous audience>. *Creditable* = respectable but not outstanding <a creditable performance>.

damage; damages. *Damage* = harm <damage caused by the false rumor>. *Damages* = judicial compensation for harm <judgment for \$2 million in damages>.

declaim. See **disclaim.**

definite; definitive. *Definite* = clear, explicit, unmistakable <a definite asset to the department>. *Definitive* = authoritative <the definitive source of information>.

delegate. See **relegate.**

deliberate; deliberative. *Deliberate* = purposeful <a deliberate affront>. *Deliberative* = of or relating to debate or discussion <a deliberative decision-making process>.

denote; connote. *Denote* = to signify; to be the name of <*Mortgagee* denotes the lender, not the borrower>. *Connote* = to imply; to suggest something beyond the literal sense of a term <An open workspace connotes collaboration>.

depreciate; deprecate. *Depreciate* = to fall in value <The car will depreciate by 40% when you drive it away>. *Deprecate* = to disapprove of, to plead against <The manager deprecated the use of company meal allowances for those working solo>.

detract; distract. *Detract* = take away (some quality) <His abrupt manner detracted from his effectiveness>. *Distract* = divert <An accomplice distracted the cashier>.

device; devise. *Device* = a tool or apparatus <a handy device>. *Devise* = to create or invent <devise a better system>.

different. Prefer *different from* over *different than*.

differ from; differ with. To *differ from* is simply to be different <Gross profits differ from net profits>; to *differ with* is to disagree <I differ with you on that point>.

disburse. See **disperse**.

disclaim; declaim. *Disclaim* = deny or disavow <disclaim any knowledge of the report>. *Declaim* = to orate <declaim against corruption>.

discrete; discreet. *Discrete* = distinct <three discrete sources of funding>. *Discreet* = circumspect, tactful <a discreet phone call>.

disinterested; uninterested. *Disinterested* = unbiased; lacking any financial or emotional stake in a dispute <The arbitrator must be a disinterested third party>. *Uninterested* = uncaring <The audience was uninterested>.

disperse; disburse. *Disperse* = to scatter <disperse an unruly crowd>. *Disburse* = to distribute funds <disburse grants>.

distinct; distinctive. *Distinct* = clear, well-defined <We set three distinct goals this quarter>. *Distinctive* = marking a difference, characteristic <her distinctive management style is unlike any we've ever seen>.

distract. See **detract.**

dominant; dominate. *Dominant* = supreme <the dominant player>. *Dominate* = to control <dominate the market>.

eager. See **anxious.**

effect. See **affect.**

e.g.; i.e. *E.g.* = for example <big-ticket items (e.g., cars, refrigerators, and furnaces)>. *I.e.* = that is <numismatics (i.e., coin-collecting)>.

elicit; illicit. *Elicit* = to draw a response <The verbal gaffe elicited laughter>. *Illicit* = forbidden, illegal <illicit behavior>.

eligible; illegible. *Eligible* = fit to be chosen; suitable. *Illegible* = incapable of being read because of bad handwriting, poor printing, etc.

embarrass. So spelled.

emend. See **amend.**

eminent. See **imminent.**

empathy; sympathy. *Empathy* = understanding <empathy for a kindred spirit>. *Sympathy* = compassion <sympathy for the displaced survivors>.

ensure. See **assure.**

equally. Avoid **equally as*. Good usage dictates *equally profitable*, not **equally as profitable*.

evoke; invoke. *Evoke* = to draw out <evoke memories>. *Invoke* = to call on, esp. for authority or assistance <invoke the right to counsel>.

explicit; implicit. *Explicit* = (1) unambiguous <an explicit disclaimer> or (2) graphic, lurid <explicit photos>. *Implicit* = (1) implied <an implicit warranty> or (2) absolute <implicit trust>.

farther; further. *Farther* = physically more distant <Drive three miles farther>. *Further* = more advanced <Further study is needed>.

faze; phase. *Faze* = to agitate <not fazed by the rude caller>. *Phase* = a stage of development <a growing phase>.

fewer. See **less.**

first, second, third. So written—preferably not **firstly*, **secondly*, **thirdly*.

flagrant. See **blatant**.

flair; flare. *Flair* = (1) an innate talent <a flair for pitching ideas> or (2) stylishness <write with flair>. *Flare* = a burst, as of light, activity, etc. <an emotional flare-up>.

flaunt; flout. *Flaunt* = to show off something <flaunting new jewelry>. *Flout* = to openly disobey or disregard <flouting the rules>.

flounder; founder. *Flounder* = to struggle or thrash about <The campaign was floundering>. *Founder* = (1) to sink <The stock foundered when profits fell> or (2) to fail <The company foundered after the scandal>.

forbear; forebear. *Forbear* = to refrain from an impulse <We must forbear any thoughts of retaliating>. *Forebear* = an ancestor <My grandmother and other forebears were mostly Irish>.

forgo; forego. *Forgo* = to do without <forgo help>. *Forego* = to precede <the foregoing events>.

formally; formerly. *Formally* = properly <We haven't been formally introduced>. *Formerly* = previously <He was formerly with Hastings>.

founder. See **flounder**.

further. See **farther**.

gibe; jibe. *Gibe* = a taunt or tease <The manager's talk was interrupted by good-natured gibes>. *Jibe* = agree <That jibes with what I expected>.

harass. So spelled.

horde; hoard. *Horde* = large group of people <hordes of customers>. *Hoard* = a cache, esp. of valuable things <a hoard of cash>. As a verb, to *hoard* is to accumulate to an excessive degree.

i.e. See **e.g.**

if; whether. A fine but useful distinction: *If* = on the condition that. So, e.g., *Let me know if you need a catalog* means most rigorously not to call if you don't want a catalog. *Whether* = which way you decide about. So *Let me know whether you need a catalog* means, again most rigorously, to please call either way.

illegible. See **eligible**.

illicit. See **elicit**.

illusion. See **allusion**.

imminent; eminent. *Imminent* = looming and inevitable <an imminent announcement>. *Eminent* = prominent and respected <an eminent authority on the subject>.

impel. See **compel**.

implicit. See **explicit**.

imply; infer. *Imply* = to suggest something without saying it expressly <There's an implied threat>. *Infer* = to read into <Can we infer from the announcement that they will build stores close to ours?>.

in behalf of. See **on behalf of**.

incredulous. See **credible**.

infer. See **imply**.

ingenious; ingenuous. *Ingenious* = clever, skillful <That is an ingenious solution>. *Ingenuous* = frank, innocent, free of ulterior motive <Security released the child, who they said was open and ingenuous under questioning>.

in order to. Usually you can shorten this expression to *to*. Do so whenever you can with no loss in clarity.

insure. See **assure**.

invoke. See **evoke**.

irritate. See **aggravate**.

it's; its. *It's* = it is <it's no mistake>. *Its* = the possessive form of *it* <each branch has its responsibilities>.

jibe. See **gibe**.

just deserts (what one deserves) is so spelled—not **just desserts*. *Deserve* and *desert* [pronounced /di-ZURT/] are related words.

lay > laid > laid. To *lay* is to put down or arrange <I'll lay it on his desk> <I laid it on his desk yesterday> <if only I'd laid it there>.

lend; loan. *Lend* = to provide, to grant the temporary use of <Could you lend me that calculator?>. *Loan* = a sum of money that has been lent <We're paying back the loan>. Though traditionally a noun, *loan* is also acceptable as a verb when the object is money <We asked the bank to loan us \$50,000>.

less; fewer. *Less* = a smaller amount <less waste>. *Fewer* = a smaller number <fewer losses>.

lie > lay > lain. To *lie* is to recline <I should lie down> <I lay down earlier this afternoon> <if I'd lain down this afternoon, I'd have more energy now>.

like; as. *Like* precedes a noun or pronoun <like a rock>. *As* precedes a subject and verb <as you said>.

loan. See **lend**.

loathe; loath. *Loathe* is the verb meaning “to abhor” <He loathes broccoli>. *Loath* is the adjective meaning “reluctant” <He's loath to admit that he loves spinach>.

loose; lose. *Loose* is an adjective meaning “not tight” or “not constrained” <loose lips> or a verb meaning “to free” <loose the dogs of war>. *Lose*, the verb <lose customers>, is often misspelled *loose*.

make do = to get by with <We’ll have to make do with what’s available>. The phrase is often mistakenly rendered **make due*.

marshal. Both the noun <the fire marshal> and the verb <marshal our arguments> are so spelled.

may. See **can**.

mete out = to allocate. So rendered, not **meet out*.

militate. See **mitigate**.

minuscule = tiny <a minuscule amount>. So spelled, not **miniscule*.

mitigate; militate. *Mitigate* = to make less harsh <I normally would have filed a complaint, but there were mitigating circumstances>. *Militate* = to weight heavily in one direction <A long history of conflict militated against the agreement>.

mutual; common. *Mutual* = reciprocal <mutual admiration>. *Common* = shared <common interests>.

nonplussed = frozen by surprise, perplexed <nonplussed by the shocking news>.

number. See **quantity.**

obtain. See **attain.**

obtuse; abstruse. *Obtuse* = dull, dim-witted <I was too obtuse to catch the allusion>. *Abstruse* = obscure, arcane <But it turns out that no one caught the abstruse allusion>.

on behalf of; in behalf of. *On behalf of* = representing <accepting the award on behalf of>. *In behalf of* = in support of <speaking in behalf of the motion>.

orient; *orientate. *Orient* = to get one's bearings <spend the first day getting oriented>. **Orientate* is an ostentatious variant to be avoided.

past; passed. *Past* is the noun <in the past>, adjective <past efforts>, adverb <walk on past>, and preposition <past the park>. *Passed* is the past tense and past participle of the verb *pass* <time passed slowly>.

peak; peek; pique. *Peak* = a high point, esp. a pointed one such as a mountaintop or a spike on a chart <reach the peak>. *Peek* = a quick, furtive look <take a peek at this file>. *Pique* = (1) indignation <a fit of pique> or (2) to arouse <piqued her interest>.

peddle; pedal. *Peddle* = to sell <peddle hot dogs>. *Pedal* = to operate a foot lever <pedal a bike>.

peek. See **peak.**

pejorative = having negative implications; tending to belittle. So spelled, not **perjorative*.

pendant; pendent. *Pendant* = a piece of dangling jewelry <a silver pendant>. *Pendent* = pending, unsettled <a pendent lawsuit>.

people. See **persons**.

percent. This word (meaning “by the hundred”) was formerly spelled as two words. Today it is one.

perquisite; prerequisite. *Perquisite* = a privilege or benefit, esp. one attached to a position; usually shortened to *perk* <Perks included a company car>. *Prerequisite* = a necessary condition <This position has job-training prerequisites>.

persecute; prosecute. *Persecute* = treat harshly, esp. as a group <a persecuted minority>. *Prosecute* = pursue legal action <prosecuted for embezzlement >.

personal; personnel. *Personal* = an adjective meaning “private, individual.” *Personnel* = a noun meaning “the whole group of persons employed in a business.”

persuade. See **convince**.

persons; people. In most contexts, the plural *persons* sounds stilted. Except for set phrases <missing-persons report>, reserve *person* for singular use <Only one person showed up> and use *people* for the plural.

perspicuous; perspicacious. *Perspicuous* = lucid <a perspicuous argument>. *Perspicacious* = insightful, shrewd <a perspicacious observer of the market>.

phase. See **faze**.

pique. See **peak**.

populace; populous. *Populace* = the inhabitants of a place, collectively <the Swiss populace>. *Populous* = heavily populated <populous northeastern cities>.

pore; pour. To *pore* is to read intently <poring over the financial statements>. To *pour* is to make (a liquid) flow downward.

practical; practicable. *Practical* = pertaining to experience or actual use; adapted to useful action instead of to contemplation <There must be a practical way of shipping these goods>. *Practicable* = capable of being done or used <Scientists have long known that a perpetual-motion machine is impracticable>.

precede; proceed. *Precede* = to occur before something else <An extensive campaign preceded the launch>. **Preceed* is a common misspelling. *Proceed* = (1) to start <Proceed with your report> or (2) to continue <From St. Louis, proceed to Chicago>.

precipitate; precipitous. *Precipitate* is most commonly a verb meaning “to cause suddenly or recklessly” <precipitate a riot>. As an adjective, it means “sudden, rash, or

violent” <a precipitate run on the banks>. *Precipitous* = steep <a precipitous decline in demand>.

prerequisite. See **perquisite**.

prescribe; proscribe. *Prescribe* = to direct a course of action <The consultants prescribed a plan>. *Proscribe* = to forbid or outlaw <Insider trading is proscribed>.

presumptive; presumptuous. *Presumptive* = assumed to be <the presumptive nominee>. *Presumptuous* = arrogant, impudent <making presumptuous demands>.

preventive; *preventative. *Preventive* = intended to ward off harm <preventive measures>. **Preventative* is a corrupt form.

principal; principle. *Principal* = main, first <the principal reason>. As a noun, it refers to the main person <a principal at a consulting firm> or, in finance, the original sum of money lent or invested <the principal continues to earn interest>. *Principle* = a belief, tenet, or law <stand on principle> <the principles of economics>.

proceed. See **precede**.

prophesy; prophecy. *Prophesy* = to predict <prophesy great success>. *Prophecy* = the prediction <another doomsday prophecy>.

proposition; proposal. *Proposition* = something that is offered for consideration <We reject the proposition that

plants should be located only on rivers>. *Proposal* = a formal offer <His proposal was silent on the personnel required to make it work>.

proscribe. See **prescribe**.

prosecute. See **persecute**.

prostrate; prostate. *Prostrate* = lying face down. *Prostate* = a gland in male mammals.

proved; proven. *Proved* = the long-preferred past participle of *prove* <last year's projections have proved accurate>. An exception is the set phrase *innocent until proven guilty*. *Proven* is an adjective <Our new line is already a proven seller>.

purpose. See **intention**.

quandary = state of confusion <in a quandary about how to proceed>, not the cause of that confusion.

quantity; number. *Quantity* = an unspecified mass <The farm produces large quantities of grain>. *Number* = a collection of individually countable objects <The number of units we sold last year exceeded that of any previous year>.

rack. See **wrack**.

rebut; refute. *Rebut* = to answer a charge or argument. *Refute* = to disprove a charge or argument.

reek; wreak. *Reek* = (1) to stink <The stagnant water reeks> or (2) the bad odor <We could smell the reek of an open sewer>. *Wreak* = to cause a specified type of harm <wreak havoc>.

refute. See **rebut**.

regrettable; regretful. *Regrettable* = unfortunate <a regrettable decision>. *Regretful* = sorry about <regretful about not calling>.

rein; reign. *Rein* = a bridle strap. Figuratively, the means of control <give free rein> <to rein in>. The homophone *reign* (= to rule over) is sometimes mistakenly used in those and similar idioms.

relegate; delegate. *Relegate* = to reassign to a lower position or task <relegated to traffic control>. *Delegate* = to entrust (a person) to act on one's behalf <delegated the research to Terry>.

reluctant. See **reticent**.

respectfully; respectively. *Respectfully* = in a polite manner <May I respectfully ask you to wait another five minutes>. *Respectively* = in regular order <So \$500,000 and \$600,000 are the benchmarks, respectively, for Ted and Carol>.

reticent; reluctant. *Reticent* = taciturn, not open about one's thought; reluctant to talk <Veterans can be reticent

about their experiences>. Avoid using it as a substitute for being *reluctant* to act.

role; roll. *Role* (in the sense “a part in an organization, a movie, etc.”) and *roll* (in the sense “a list of participants, actors, etc.”) are often confounded.

sanction = (1) a penalty <The commission imposed sanctions for the incident> or (2) an endorsement <The board gave its sanction for continued talks>.

species; specie. *Species* = a type of plant or animal. The word is both singular and plural. *Specie* = coined money.

stanch. See **staunch.**

stationary; stationery. *Stationary* = unmoving <The gym has five stationary bikes>. *Stationery* = writing paper <We received 12 boxes of stationery>.

staunch; stanch. *Staunch* = loyal and devoted <He’s a staunch supporter>. *Stanch* = to stop or control the actual or figurative loss of liquid <stanch the red ink>.

strait; straight. *Strait* = a tight spot <Strait of Magellan> <in dire straits>. *Straight* often displaces *strait* in *straitjacket* and *straitlaced*.

strategy; tactics. *Strategy* = big-picture planning <competitive strategy>. *Tactics* = actions and techniques that

support your strategy <flash mobs and other guerrilla-marketing tactics>.

subsequent. See **consequent**.

supersede = to take the place of <It supersedes last year's employee handbook>. The word is often misspelled **supercede*.

sympathy. See **empathy**.

tactics. See **strategy**.

than. See **then**.

that; which. Use *that* to introduce a clause that's essential to meaning (a restrictive clause), and don't set it off with commas. If you write, "The departments that made their numbers last quarter received budget increases," readers will infer that some departments didn't receive increases. Use *which* with a clause that isn't essential (a nonrestrictive clause). If you write, "The departments, which made their numbers last quarter, received budget increases," you're saying that all departments received increases. You can leave out a *which* clause set off by commas and still convey the gist of the sentence.

their. See **there**.

then; than. *Then* = at that time; in that case; therefore. *Than* expresses comparison <more successful than any other start-up>.

there; their; they're. *There* refers to direction <over there> or place <where there is life>; *their* is the possessive of *they* <all their worldly belongings>; and *they're* is the contraction of *they are* <they're on the way>.

torpid. See **turgid**.

toward; towards. *Toward* dominates in American English, *towards* in British English.

try and. Make it **try to**.

turgid; torpid. *Turgid* = (1) swollen <the turgid river after Friday's rain>, or (2) bombastic <a turgid harangue>. *Torpid* = dormant or sluggish <Demand is usually torpid after the holidays>.

uninterested. See **disinterested**.

unique; unusual. *Unique* = one of a kind, unmatched <a unique handmade quilt>. As an absolute term, *unique* should not take modifiers such as *very*. It is not a synonym of *unusual*.

use; utilize. Prefer the simple term.

venal; venial. *Venal* = corrupt, susceptible to bribery <a venal border guard>. *Venial* = pardonable <a venial mistake>.

veracity; voracity. *Veracity* = truthfulness <Veracity earns trust>. *Voracity* = gluttony <His voracity was his downfall>.

verbiage = wordiness, not the words in a message. *Excess verbiage* is redundant. Avoid the misspelling **verbage*.

vocation; avocation. *Vocation* = career <His vocation is nursing>. *Avocation* = (1) hobby or (2) second occupation <On weekends he works on his avocation, flint-knapping>.

voluminous. See **compendious**.

voracity. See **veracity**.

wangle. See **wrangle**.

whether. See **if**.

whether; whether or not. In most instances *whether* can stand alone; *or not* adds nothing. But when the sense is “regardless of whether,” the additional words are needed <We’re going whether or not you can make it>.

which. See **that**.

who’s; whose. *Who’s* = who is. *Whose* = the possessive form of *who* or *whom*.

whosever; whoever’s. *Whosever* is the standard possessive form of *whoever*. *Whoever’s* is a contraction for *whoever is*.

workers’ compensation. This gender-neutral phrase has replaced *workmen’s compensation* as standard.

wrack; rack. *Wrack* = (1) to destroy <wracked by fraud> or (2) wreckage <go to wrack and ruin>. *Rack* = to torture as on a rack <rack my brains>.

wrangle; wangle. *Wrangle* = to argue noisily <wrangling over licensing rights>. *Wangle* = to obtain by manipulation <wangle an invitation>.

wreak. See **reek**.

your; you're. *Your* = possessive form of *you*. *You're* = contraction of *you are*.

Desk References

Writing well is not just one skill but a combination of many—and it's something you must constantly work at. In addition to this guide you might want to keep the following desk references handy.

The Basic Writer's Bookshelf

- *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*. 5th ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011.
- Garner, Bryan A. *Garner's Dictionary of Modern American Usage*. 3d ed. New York: Oxford, 2009.
- *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*. 11th ed. Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 2008.
- *Roget's Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases*. George Davidson, ed. Avon, MA: Adams Media, 2011.
- Trimble, John R. *Writing with Style*. 3d ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2010.

The Connoisseur's Bookshelf

- Flesch, Rudolf. *The Art of Plain Talk*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1946.
- Flesch, Rudolf. *How to Write Plain English: A Book for Lawyers and Consumers*. New York: Harper & Row, 1979.
- Fowler, H. W. *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*. 2d ed. Edited by Ernest Gowers. New York: Oxford University Press, 1965.
- Garner, Bryan A. *Legal Writing in Plain English*. 2d ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012.
- Gowers, Ernest. *The Complete Plain Words*. 3d ed. Edited by Sidney Greenbaum and Janet Whitcut. Boston: David R. Godine, 1986.
- Graves, Robert, and Alan Hodge. *The Reader over Your Shoulder*. 2d ed. London: Cape, 1947.
- Partridge, Eric. *Usage and Abusage: A Guide to Good English*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1942.
- Strunk, William, and E. B. White. *The Elements of Style*. 4th ed. Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1999.
- Tufte, Edward R. *Beautiful Evidence*. Cheshire, Conn.: Graphics Press, 2006.
- Tufte, Edward R. *Envisioning Information*. Cheshire, Conn.: Graphics Press, 1990.

- Wallace, David Foster. *Consider the Lobster*. New York: Little, Brown & Co., 2005.
- Zinsser, William. *On Writing Well*. New York: HarperCollins, 30th Ann. ed., 2006.

Index

- acronyms, 96–97
- adverbs, 144–145, 147–148
- all caps, 158, 167
- Alred, Gerald J., 122
- and*, starting a sentence with, 83–84, 143–144
- apostrophes, improper use of, 155–156, 160–161
- appositives, 150–151, 156
- Architect phase, 13–14, 16, 21–26, 140
- articles, (*a*, *an*, *the*), don't drop, 53
- as per*, 62, 111, 113
- attached please find*, 62
- audience
 - connecting with, 9–10
 - consideration for, 111–116, 123–124
 - for letters, 4–6
 - holding readers' attention, 91–97
 - motivating to act, 116–118
 - nonspecialists, 44–45
 - perspective of, 43–44
 - understanding readers, 7–11
 - who you're writing for, 8
- Babenroth, A. Charles, 121–122
- Bartholomew, Wallace E., 121
- Beautiful Evidence* (Tufte), 37–38, 200
- be* verbs, 55, 94–95
- bizspeak, 57–65
- boilerplate, 62
- boldface type, 158
- brainstorming, 14–15, 20–21
- brevity and clarity, xvi–xvii, 44–45, 49–51, 53–56, 106, 110
- Brusaw, Charles T., 122
- Buffett, Warren, 9, 63–65
- bullets, as attention-getting device, 157–158
- but*, starting a sentence with, 83–84, 143–144
- buzzwords, 57–61
- Cannon, Kelly, 122
- Carpenter phase, 13–14, 16, 23–25, 27–29, 140
- Chicago Manual of Style*, *The*, 15, 154
- chronology, 67–70
- Churchill, Winston, 91
- clarity, 43–48, 53
- clichés, 58–61
- closing text, 32
- Cody, Sherwin, 121
- collegiality, 100–101

Index

- colons, 157, 159
- commas, 148, 150–151, 154–155, 159–160
- conclusions, leading readers to, 45
- concrete writing, 47
- conjunctions
 - correlative, 147, 151
 - starting sentences with, 83–84, 143–144
- connecting with large audiences, 9–10
- continuity and transitions, 71–75, 143–144
- contractions, 93
- courtesy, 123–124
- credibility, 47, 50, 77–78, 80–81
- dates, 160, 166
- definitions, 44–45
- delivering bad news, 118–120
- dialect, 81–82
- diplomacy, 123–124
- double negatives, 81–82
- drafts
 - e-mail, 107–110
 - feedback, 85–87
 - first, 16, 27–29, 32–35, 55
 - revising, 31–35
 - writing rapidly, 27–29
- Drucker, Peter, 28
- dumbing it down, 64–65
- editing, 16–17, 28, 31–35
- efficiency, 14–17
- either*, 79, 81, 146–147
- Elements of Style, The* (Strunk and White), 160, 200
- e-mails
 - BCC, 167
 - check before sending, 166
 - compared to letters, 46
 - general guidelines for, 105–110
 - storytelling, 67–70
 - subject line, 106, 167
- em-dashes. See long dashes.
- emphasis, adding, 37–39, 157–160
- empty words, 9–10
- enclosed please find*, 111, 113, 121–122
- Envisioning Information* (Tufte), 37–38, 200
- etiquette, business writing, 165–168
- feedback from colleagues, 85–87
- Flesch Reading Ease (FRE) scale, 63–64
- Flesch, Rudolf, 64, 92, 200
- Flowers, Betty Sue, 13
- focus
 - finding it, 19–25
 - “you” focus, 92–93, 108, 112, 115–116
- fonts, 158, 167
- forms of address, 165
- Frailey, L.E., 122
- FRE scale, 64
- fund-raising, 118–119
- genderless pronouns, 80–81
- getting to the point, 7–8
- good and well*, 144–145, 163
- grammar
 - generally, 77–84
 - mistakes creating bad impressions, 163–164
 - passive voice, 94–95, 115–116
 - phrasal adjectives, 153–154
 - rules to know, 77–84, 143–151
- granting a benefit or request, 122
- graphics, 37–39

- Harvard Law Review*, 64
however, 83–84, 144, 148
 Hurlbut, Floyd, 121
 hyperformality compared to
 polished plain speech, 61,
 99–100
 hyphens, 153–54, 158–159
- impressions, bad, 163–164
 “index expurgatorius,” 57–61
 inspiration, 28
 -ion words, 55
 issues, stating plainly, 3, 49–50,
 126–27, 129
 italic type, for emphasis, 156, 158
- Judge phase, 13–14, 16–17, 28,
 141
- letters
 as a tool for sharpening writing
 skills, 46
 chronology in, 67–70
 form and purpose, 3–6
 general guidelines for, 111–124
 replying to, 167
 salutations, 159, 165
 signature, 165–166
 when to write and when not to
 write, 167–168
 logic, 16, 19–20
 long dashes, uses for, 159–160
- MACJ, 13–14, 28
 Madman phase, 13–16, 20–21, 139
 Madman–Architect–Carpenter–
 Judge, 13–14
 main points, 19–25
 marketing reports, 129–130
 memos, 8, 20–25, 32–35, 125–130
 middle, 32
- mistakes, admitting, 124
 motivating readers, 116–118
- neither*, 79–81, 146–147, 151
 nonstandard language, 82–84
 notes, making, 15
- nouns
 disagreement with pronouns,
 80–81
 plural, 155–156
- of*, 54–55
 Olin, Walter E., 122
 opening text, 32, 49–50, 71–74
 opinions, unsupported, 45, 47
 organizing
 chronology, 67–70
 main points/issues and logic,
 19–25
 outlining, 16, 50
 sets of three, 19–25
 subheads, 74
otherwise, 148
 outlining, 16, 50
- padding, recognizing and elimi-
 nating, 53–56
 paragraph openers, 71–72
 passive voice, 94–95, 115–116
 performance appraisals, 133–138
 persuasiveness, xviii–xix, 47, 112
 phrasal adjectives, hyphenating,
 153–154
- phrases
 canned, 62, 111, 113, 121–122
 creating bad impressions,
 163–164
 overused, 58–61
 for performance reviews,
 133–137
 plagiarism, 15

- plain-spoken language, importance of, 57–65
- planning your writing project, 13–16, 19–25
- polishing your writing, 14, 16–17, 61, 86
- possessives, 160–161
- predicates, compound, 154–155
- prefixes, hyphenating, 158–159
- prepositions, 54, 79, 144, 145, 146–147
- prior to*, 53
- process of writing, 13–17, 19–25, 27–29
- procrastination, 28–29
- pronouns
 - errors in using, 77–78, 80–81
 - personal, 92–93
 - relative, 149–150
- punctuation, basic rules of, 148, 150, 153–161
- purpose for writing, 3–6
- quotation marks, for emphasis, 158
- readers. *See also* audience
 - nonspecialist, 9, 44–45
 - perspective, 43–44, 51, 68–69, 119
 - three types for memos, 127
 - time constraints, 7–8
 - understanding, 7–10
- Reader's Digest*, 64
- reason for writing. *See* purpose for writing
- recommendations, 129–130
- rejection, 118–119
- relative pronouns, 149–150
- reports, tips on writing, 125–131
- reprimand by e-mail, 109–110
- requests for proposal, 8
- research, 14–16, 128–129
- reviews, employee. *See* performance appraisals
- revising
 - general guidelines for, 31–35
 - continuity and transitions, 71–75
- salutations, punctuation following, 159
- sarcasm, 101
- semicolons, 148, 154–155, 159
- sentences
 - compound subjects, 79–80, 145–146
 - conjunctions at beginning of, 83–84, 143–144
 - length of, 44–45, 63–65, 95–96
 - noun–pronoun disagreement, 80–81
 - prepositions at end of, 144
 - pronouns, 77–78, 80–81, 92–93
 - starters, 83–84, 143–144
 - structure, 95–96
 - subject–verb disagreement, 78–80, 81, 145–147
- “show, don’t tell,” 45, 47
- signature, 107, 165–166
- simplicity and clarity in language, 43–48, 53–55, 57–65, 91, 94
- sources, 15
- speed writing, 27
- split infinitives, 149
- standard English, 82–83
- starting to write, 13–17, 19–25
- storytelling and chronology, 67–70
- Strunk, William, Jr., 160–161, 200
- style, how to acquire good, xviii–xix
- subheads, 74

- subject lines, 106, 125–126, 167
- subject–verb agreement, 78–80, 81, 145–147
- summarizing, 49–51, 74, 126–128
- thank you in advance*, 167
- thank-you notes, 166, 167
- that*, 53, 149–150, 194
- there*, 78–79, 195
- their*, 80–81, 195
- therefore*, 73, 74, 148
- third person, 92–93, 115–116
- Time* (magazine), 64
- time management, 27–29, 31
- titles, 125–126
- tone
 - collegial, 100–101
 - combative, 123
 - courteous and direct, 123–124
 - in e-mails, 107–110
 - friendly, 4, 8
 - hyperformality, 99–100
 - purpose and content, 4–6, 8
 - relaxed, 99–100
 - sarcasm, 101
 - stern, 5–6
 - urgent, 4–5
- transitions and continuity, 71–75
- Tufte, Edward, 37–38, 200
- underlining, 158
- U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission's *Plain English Handbook*, 9
- usage
 - bad examples of, 163–164
 - good, 169–197
- vagueness, 43–47, 49–50
- verbs
 - buried, 55
 - irregular, 83
 - past-tense, 94
 - separating the grammatical subject from, 156–157
 - split infinitives, 149
 - strong, 55
 - verb phrases, 148–149
- visual aids, 37–39, 140
- vocabulary, 82
- Washington, George, 91
- we*, 78, 92, 100, 115–116
- well*, 144–145, 163
- which*, 149–151, 194
- White, E. B., 160–161, 200
- White, Richard Grant, 121
- white space in document design, 166
- who*, 149–51, 161, 196
- “who, what, when, where, and why,” 38, 50
- wordiness, controlling, 53–56
- wording, problems with, 77–84
- words, wasting of, 53–56
- writer's block, 16, 25, 28
- writing
 - anxiety about, 13–15
 - benefits of good writing, xv–xx
 - etiquette in, 165–168
 - four stages checklist for, 139–141
 - how to begin, 13–17, 19–25
 - muddy, 43
 - process of, 13–17, 19–25, 27–29
 - purpose of, 3–6
 - rapidly, 27–29
 - style, 91–97, 99–100
 - timing, 27
- “you” focus, 92–93, 108, 112, 115–116

Acknowledgments

My profound gratitude goes to Lisa Burrell of HBR, who suggested and edited the book through several revisions; to the LawProse employees Heather C. Haines, Becky R. McDaniel, Tiger Jackson, Jeff Newman, David Zheng, and Ryden McComas Anderson—all of whom helped in developing and refining the text; my Twitter followers (I'm @bryanagarner) who suggested examples of bizspeak to be avoided; my mother-in-law Sandra W. Cheng, her brother Daniel Wu, and my sister-in-law Linda Garner, all of whom suggested lines of inquiry from their many years in business; and most of all my wife, Karolyne H.C. Garner, who cheered and goaded and inspired me in the months when this book was being written—as she has before and since.

The book is dedicated to J.P. Allen, the filmmaker, who has been my close friend from childhood (I was 5, he was 3): We developed our interest in language and writing as teenagers, while also reading intensively about entrepreneurship and business management—never worrying that we might be considered nerds or eggheads. We

Acknowledgments

always thought learning was cool, and ignorance uncool.
Nothing has changed.

B.A.G.
August 2012

About the Author

Bryan A. Garner is a noted lexicographer, grammarian, lawyer, and business owner. Since founding LawProse Inc. in 1991, he has trained more than 150,000 lawyers in the techniques of written persuasion and effective contract drafting. His clients include the legal departments of dozens of *Fortune* 500 companies.

Garner is the author of *Garner's Modern American Usage*, *The Elements of Legal Style*, and *The Winning Brief*, and the editor in chief of all in-print editions of *Black's Law Dictionary*. He has coauthored two best-selling books about judicial decision-making with Justice Antonin Scalia.

Notes

Notes

Notes

Notes

Notes

Notes

Notes

Notes

Smart advice and inspiration from a source you trust.



Whether you need help tackling today's most urgent work challenge or shaping your organization's strategy for the future, *Harvard Business Review* has got you covered.

HBR Guides Series

HOW-TO ESSENTIALS FROM LEADING EXPERTS

HBR Guide to Better Business Writing
HBR Guide to Finance Basics for Managers
HBR Guide to Getting the Right Work Done
HBR Guide to Managing Up and Across
HBR Guide to Persuasive Presentations
HBR Guide to Project Management



HBR's 10 Must Reads Series

IF YOU READ NOTHING ELSE, READ THESE DEFINITIVE ARTICLES FROM HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW

HBR's 10 Must Reads on Change Management
HBR's 10 Must Reads on Leadership
HBR's 10 Must Reads on Managing People
HBR's 10 Must Reads on Managing Yourself
HBR's 10 Must Reads on Strategy
HBR's 10 Must Reads: The Essentials

SAVE

**Buy for your team, clients, or event.
Visit our site for quantity discount rates.**

hbr.org/books/direct-and-bulk-sales



**Harvard
Business
Review**
Press

HBR Guide to
**Persuasive
Presentations**

Harvard Business Review Guides

Arm yourself with the advice you need to succeed on the job, from the most trusted brand in business. Packed with how-to essentials from leading experts, the HBR Guides provide smart answers to your most pressing work challenges.

The titles include:

HBR Guide to Better Business Writing

HBR Guide to Finance Basics for Managers

HBR Guide to Getting a Job

HBR Guide to Getting the Mentoring You Need

HBR Guide to Getting the Right Work Done

HBR Guide to Giving Effective Feedback

HBR Guide to Making Every Meeting Matter

HBR Guide to Managing Stress

HBR Guide to Managing Up and Across

HBR Guide to Persuasive Presentations

HBR Guide to Project Management

HBR Guide to **Persuasive Presentations**

Nancy Duarte

HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW PRESS

Boston, Massachusetts

Copyright 2012 Harvard Business School Publishing Corporation

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise), without the prior permission of the publisher. Requests for permission should be directed to permissions@hbsp.harvard.edu, or mailed to Permissions, Harvard Business School Publishing, 60 Harvard Way, Boston, Massachusetts 02163.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Duarte, Nancy.

HBR guide to persuasive presentations / Nancy Duarte.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-1-4221-8710-4 (alk. paper)

1. Business presentations. 2. Persuasion (Psychology) I. Title.

HF5718.22.D817 2012

658.4'52—dc23

2012019634

The paper used in this publication meets the requirements of the American National Standard for Permanence of Paper for Publications and Documents in Libraries and Archives Z39.48-1992.

What You'll Learn

Do you dread giving presentations? Maybe your mind goes blank when you sit down to generate ideas, or you struggle to organize your fragmented thoughts and data into a coherent, persuasive message. Is it tough to connect with customers you're wooing, senior executives you're hitting up for funding, or employees you're training? Do you fumble for the right words, get lost in your slide deck, run out of time before you've hit your main points—and leave the room uncertain you've gotten through to *anyone*?

This guide will give you the confidence and tools you need to engage your audience, sell your ideas, and inspire people to act. You'll get better at:

- Showing people why your ideas matter to *them*
- Winning over tough crowds
- Balancing analytical and emotional appeal
- Crafting memorable messages
- Creating powerful visuals

What You'll Learn

- Striking the right tone
- Holding your audience's attention
- Measuring your impact

Contents

Introduction	xv
<i>Plan well.</i>	

Section 1: AUDIENCE

Know your audience and build empathy.

Understand the Audience's Power	3
<i>Your idea's fate is in their hands.</i>	
Segment the Audience	7
<i>Focus on who matters most.</i>	
Present Clearly and Concisely to Senior Executives	11
<i>Help them make big decisions on a tight schedule.</i>	
Get to Know Your Audience	15
<i>It's easier to convince someone you know.</i>	
Define How You'll Change the Audience	19
<i>What do you want people to believe? How do you want them to behave?</i>	

Find Common Ground	21
<i>Resonate through empathy.</i>	

Section 2: MESSAGE

Develop persuasive content.

Define Your Big Idea	27
<i>Clearly state your point of view—and what's at stake.</i>	
Generate Content to Support the Big Idea	29
<i>When you're brainstorming, more is more.</i>	
Anticipate Resistance	33
<i>Think through opposing perspectives.</i>	
Amplify Your Message Through Contrast	37
<i>Create and resolve tension.</i>	
Build an Effective Call to Action	39
<i>Get things done!</i>	
Choose Your Best Ideas	43
<i>Sort and filter.</i>	
Organize Your Thoughts	47
<i>Outline your presentation by writing clear, active slide titles that hang together.</i>	
Balance Analytical and Emotional Appeal	51
<i>Stay credible while you reel people in.</i>	
Lose the Jargon	55
<i>Is your language clear enough to pass the "grandmother test"?</i>	

Craft Sound Bites	59

*Good ones get repeated, tweeted,
and heeded.*

Section 3: STORY

**Use storytelling principles and
structure to engage your audience.**

Apply Storytelling Principles	63

Make your presentation stick.

Create a Solid Structure	65

Storytelling principles provide a framework.

Craft the Beginning	67

*Establish the gap between what is and what
could be.*

Develop the Middle	71

*Build tension between what is and what
could be.*

Make the Ending Powerful	73

Describe the new bliss.

Add Emotional Texture	75

Decisions are not made by facts alone.

Use Metaphors as Your Glue	81

Memorable themes help rally an audience.

Create Something They'll Always Remember	83

Drive your big idea home.

Section 4: MEDIA

Identify the best modes for
communicating your message.

Choose the Right Vehicle for Your Message 91

Slide decks aren't always the answer.

Make the Most of Slide Software 95

It's not just for slides.

**Determine the Right Length for Your
Presentation** 99

*Keep your audience engaged by budgeting
your time.*

Persuade Beyond the Stage 103

*Communicate before, during, and
after your presentation.*

Share the Stage 107

Mixing in experts and media holds interest.

Section 5: SLIDES

Conceptualize and simplify
the display of information.

Think Like a Designer 111

Visuals should convey meaning.

**Create Slides People Can "Get" in
Three Seconds** 113

Do they pass the glance test?

Choose the Right Type of Slide 117

Bullets aren't the only tool.

Storyboard One Idea per Slide	123
<i>Plan before you create.</i>	
Avoid Visual Clichés	127
<i>Make your slides stand out.</i>	
Arrange Slide Elements with Care	129
<i>Make your visuals easier to process.</i>	
Clarify the Data	137
<i>Emphasize what's important, remove the rest.</i>	
Turn Words into Diagrams	143
<i>Use shapes to show relationships.</i>	
Use the Right Number of Slides	149
<i>Size up your situation before building your deck.</i>	
Know When to Animate	151
<i>. . . and when it's overkill.</i>	

Section 6: DELIVERY

Deliver your presentation authentically.

Rehearse Your Material Well	155
<i>Roll with the unexpected and fully engage with the audience.</i>	
Know the Venue and Schedule	159
<i>Control them when you can.</i>	
Anticipate Technology Glitches	163
<i>Odds of malfunction are high.</i>	

Manage Your Stage Fright	167
<i>Exercises to calm your nerves.</i>	
Set the Right Tone for Your Talk	169
<i>You never get a second chance to make a first impression.</i>	
Be Yourself	171
<i>Authenticity connects you to others.</i>	
Communicate with Your Body	175
<i>Physical expression is a powerful tool.</i>	
Communicate with Your Voice	179
<i>Create contrast and emphasis.</i>	
Make Your Stories Come to Life	181
<i>Re-experience them in the telling.</i>	
Work Effectively with Your Interpreter	183
<i>Pay attention to chemistry, pacing, and cultural resonance.</i>	
Get the Most out of Your Q&A	187
<i>Plan, plan, plan.</i>	
Build Trust with a Remote Audience	191
<i>Get past technology's barriers.</i>	
Keep Remote Listeners Interested	195
<i>You're fighting for the attention of multitaskers.</i>	
Keep Your Remote Presentation Running Smoothly	199
<i>Use this checklist to minimize annoyances.</i>	

Section 7: IMPACT

Measure—and increase—your presentation’s impact on your audience.

Build Relationships Through Social Media 205

Engage with users so they’ll engage fully and fairly with your ideas.

Spread Your Ideas with Social Media 211

Facilitate the online conversation.

Gauge Whether You’ve Connected with People 215

Gather feedback in real time and after your talk.

Follow Up After Your Talk 219

Make it easier for people to put your ideas into action.

Index 223

About the Author 229

Introduction

If I am to speak for ten minutes, I need a week for preparation; if fifteen minutes, three days; if half an hour, two days; if an hour, I am ready now.

—Woodrow T. Wilson

We work in a first-draft culture. Type an e-mail. Send. Write a blog entry. Post. Whip up some slides. Speak.

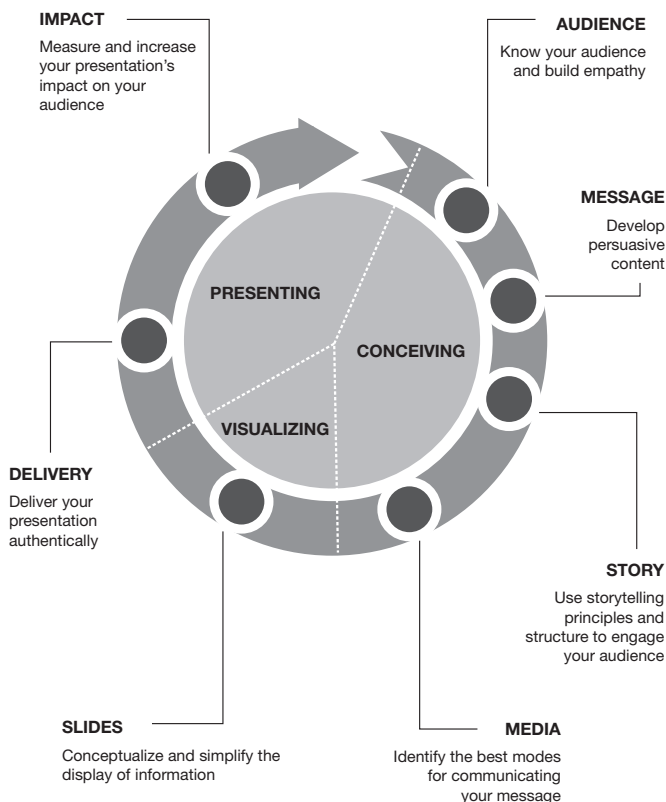
But it's in crafting and recrafting—in iteration and rehearsal—that excellence emerges.

Why worry about being an excellent communicator when you have so many other pressing things to do? Because it will help you *get those things done*.

So as you conceive, visualize, and present your message, don't skimp on preparation, even if you're giving a short talk. It actually takes more careful planning to distill your ideas into a few key takeaways than it does to create an hour-long presentation (see figure I-1). And gather lots of feedback so you'll be all the more effective when you start the process again.

FIGURE I-1

Planning a presentation



Since 1990, I've run a firm that specializes in writing and producing presentations—and then I became a presenter myself. This book is loaded with insights learned from supporting other presenters and giving my own talks. But, trust me, I've had my share of embarrassing moments, many of which could have been avoided with a little planning. Loading the wrong presentation onto

my laptop. Walking onstage with my skirt tucked into my underwear. Botching my delivery to executives at an \$8 billion company because I hadn't rehearsed enough—and getting cut from their continuing series of meetings. Experience is a powerful teacher.

I've also learned a lot from success. When audiences can see that you've prepared—that you care about their needs and value their time—they'll want to connect with you and support you. You'll get people to adopt your ideas, and you'll win the resources to carry them out. You'll close more deals. You'll earn the backing of decision makers. You'll gain influence. In short, you'll go farther in your organization—and your career.

Special thanks to:

- The wonderful Lisa Burrell, who edited my mess into coherence
- The entire team at Duarte, who supported me with case studies
- Members of the Twitterverse who answered my questions: @annzerega, @caddguru, @carolmquig, @catiehargrove, @charlesgreene3, @ckallaos, @conniewinch, @iamanshul, @karlparry, @managebetternow, @matthewmccull, @moniquemaley, @mpacc, @speakingtall, and @zupermik

Section 1

Audience

Designing a presentation without an audience in mind is like writing a love letter and addressing it “to whom it may concern.”

—Ken Haemer,
Presentation Research Manager, AT&T

Understand the Audience's Power

When you walk into a room as a presenter, it's easy to feel as if you're in a position of power: You're up front, perhaps even elevated on a stage, and people came to hear you speak. In reality, though, you're not the star of the show. The audience is.

Why? The people you're addressing will determine whether your idea spreads or dies, simply by embracing or rejecting it. You need them more than they need you. Since they have that control, it's crucial to be humble in your approach. Use their desires and goals as a filter for everything you present.

Presenters tend to be self-focused. They have a lot to say, they want to say it well, and they have little time to prepare. These pressures make them forget what's important to the audience. A self-focused presenter might just describe a new initiative and explain what needs to get done—outlining how to do it, when to do it, and the budget required. Then maybe, if the audience is lucky, he'll have a slide at the very end about “why it matters.”

This format screams, “I pay you to do this, so just do it!” The presenter is so consumed by the mission that he forgets to say why people would want or need to be involved.

Spend a moment in your audience’s shoes. Walk people through why the initiative matters to them and to the organization, what internal and external factors are driving it, and why their support will make it successful. Yes, get through the nitty-gritty details, but set up the valuable role they’ll play in the scenario rather than dictate a laundry list of to-do’s.

Though presentations and audiences vary, one important fact remains constant: The people in your audience came to see what you can do for them, not what they must do for you. So look at the audience as the “hero” of your idea—and yourself as the mentor who helps people see themselves in that role so they’ll want to get behind your idea and propel it forward.

Think of Yoda—a classic example of a wise, humble mentor. In the *Star Wars* movies, he gives the hero, Luke Skywalker, a special gift (a deeper understanding of the “Force”), trains him to use a magical tool (the lightsaber), and helps him in his fight against the Empire.

Like Yoda and other mentors in mythology, presenters should:

- **Give the hero a special gift:** Give people insights that will improve their lives. Perhaps you introduce senior managers at your company to an exciting new way to compete in the marketplace. Or maybe you show a roomful of potential clients that you can save them money and time.

- **Teach the hero to use a “magical” tool:** This is where the people in your audience pick up a new skill or mind-set from you—something that enables them to reach their objectives *and* yours.
- **Help the hero get “unstuck”:** Ideally, you’ll come with an idea or a solution that gets the audience out of a difficult or painful situation.

So if you’re gearing up to launch a new service offering, for example, give your team a clear roadmap (tool) and a promise to bring in consultants for training and support (gift)—and describe how these will help everyone rise to the challenge ahead.

Segment the Audience

If you see your audience as a homogenous, faceless clump of people, you'll have a hard time making a connection and moving them to action. Instead, think of them as a line of individuals waiting to have a conversation with you.

Your audience will usually include a mix of people—individuals in diverse roles, with various levels of decision-making authority, from different parts of the organization—each needing to hear your message for different reasons. Decide which subgroup is the most important to you, and zero in on that subgroup's needs when you develop your presentation.

When you're segmenting your audience, take a look at:

- **Politics:** Power, influence, decision process
- **Demographics:** Age, education, ethnicity, gender, and geography
- **Psychographics:** Personality, values, attitudes, interests, communities, and lifestyle

Audience

- **Firmographics:** Number of employees, revenue size, industry, number of locations, location of headquarters
- **Ethnographics:** Social and cultural needs

After you've segmented the group, figure out which members will have the greatest impact on the adoption of your idea. Is there a layer of management you need to appeal to? Is there a type of customer in the room with a lot of sway over the industry?

Then view yourself as a curator of content for your most valuable and powerful stakeholders. Pick the one type of person in the room with the most influence, and write your presentation as if just to that subgroup. The presentation can't be so specialized that it will alienate everyone else—you'll need some content that appeals to the greater group. But tailor most of your specifics to the subgroup you've targeted.

Say you're presenting a new product concept to the executive team, and you know you won't get their buy-in unless Trent, the president of the enterprise division, gets excited about the idea, because they always defer to his instincts on new initiatives. Appeal first to Trent's entrepreneurial nature by describing how exciting the new market is—while keeping in mind what the other executives will care about. Here's where your segmentation work will come in handy (table 1-1).

Draw on your understanding of the team members as you prepare your talk. In addition to fanning the flames of Trent's entrepreneurship, for example, have data in your pocket to respond to Marco, the analytical and

TABLE 1-1

Segmenting your audience

Executive team member	Qualities
Bert, CEO	Hierarchical, micromanager, dominant, fear-driven, needs to be liked
Carol, president of Consumer division	Visionary, creative, disruptive, scattered, wants to stand on own feet
Trent, president of Enterprise division	Entrepreneurial, design thinker, systematic, found self after near-death experience
Martin, CMO	CEO's favorite, empirically minded, arrogant, sabotages projects
Marco, CTO	Political, risk-averse, analytical, introverted, has self-doubt

risk-averse CTO, when he inevitably balks. And try to work with, not against, your CMO's arrogance: Ask for his counsel on a key marketing point or two before the group meets, and he'll be less likely to lash out during the presentation or sit there quietly plotting a coup, as is his wont.

What if some audience members are already familiar with your idea and others need to be brought up to speed? (This is most likely to happen when you're presenting within your organization.) Consider evening things out by giving the newbies a crash course before you conduct the larger presentation. Or you may decide just to do two separate presentations.

Present Clearly and Concisely to Senior Executives

Senior executives are a tough segment to reach. They usually have very little time in their schedules to give you. Though that's true of many audiences, what sets this crowd apart is that they need to make huge decisions based on accurate information delivered quickly. Long presentations with a big reveal at the end do not work for them. They'll want you to get to the bottom line right away—and they often won't let you finish your shtick without interrupting. (Never mind that you would have answered their questions if they'd just let you get through the next three slides.)

When presenting to an audience of senior executives, do everything you can to make their decision making easier and more efficient:

- **Get to the point:** Take less time than you were allocated. If you were given 30 minutes, create your talk within that timeframe but then pretend that

your slot got cut to 5 minutes. That'll force you to be succinct and lead with the things they care about—high-level findings, conclusions, recommendations, your call to action. Hit those points clearly and simply before you venture into supporting data or tangential areas of importance to you.

- **Give them what they asked for:** Stay on topic. If you were invited to give an update about the flooding of the manufacturing plant in Indonesia, do that before covering anything else. They've invited you because they felt you could supply a missing piece of information, so answer that specific request quickly.
- **Set expectations:** At the beginning, let the audience know you will spend the first 5 of your 30 minutes presenting your summary and the remaining time on discussion. Most executives will be patient for 5 minutes and let you present your main points well if they know they'll be able to ask questions fairly soon.
- **Create executive summary slides:** Develop a clear, short overview of your key points, and place it in a set of executive summary slides at the front of the deck; have the rest of your slides serve as an appendix. Follow a 10% rule of thumb: If your appendix is 50 slides, devote about 5 slides to your summary at the beginning. After you present the summary, let the group drive the conversation.

Often, executives will want to go deeper on the points that will aid their decision making. You can quickly pull up any slides in the appendix that speak to those points.

- **Rehearse:** Before presenting, run your slides by someone who has success getting ideas adopted at the executive level and who will serve as an honest coach. Is your message coming through clearly and quickly? Do your summary slides boil everything down into skimmable key insights? Are you missing anything your audience is likely to expect?

Sounds like a lot of work, right? It is, but presenting to an executive team is a great honor and can open tremendous doors. If you nail this, people with a lot of influence will become strong advocates for your ideas.

Get to Know Your Audience

Segmenting your audience members politically, demographically, psychographically, and so on is a great start, but connecting with people means understanding them on a more personal level. To develop resonant content for them, dig for deeper insights about them. Ask yourself:

- **What are they like?** Think through a day in their lives. Describe what that looks like so they'll know you "get" them.
- **Why are they here?** What do they think they're going to get out of this presentation? Are they willing participants or mandatory attendees? Highlight what's in it for them.
- **What keeps them up at night?** Everyone has a fear, a pain point, a thorn in the side. Let your audience know that you empathize—and that you're here to help.

Audience

- **How can you solve their problems?** How are you going to make their lives better? Point to benefits you know they'll care about.
- **What do you want them to do?** What's their part in your plan? Make sure there's a clear action for your audience to take. (See "Build an Effective Call to Action" in the Message section of this guide.)
- **How might they resist?** What will keep them from adopting your message and carrying out your call to action? Remove any obstacles you can.
- **How can you best reach them?** How do they prefer to receive information? Do they like the room to be set up a certain way? Do they want materials to review before the presentation? Afterward? What atmosphere or type of media will best help them see your point of view? Give them what they want, how they want it.

When getting ready to present to an audience you've never met, do some research online. If you know the names of stakeholders in your audience, look up their bios. If you know only generalities about the audience, find the event on social media feeds and read what's on the minds of those who'll be attending. If you'll be presenting to a company, find recent press mentions, look at how the company positions itself against competitors, read its annual report, and have Google Alerts send new articles about the company to your e-mail.

One time, I was preparing to present to beer executives, and I don't like beer or know anything about the

industry. So I hosted a beer-tasting event at my shop, read their annual report, read recent press, studied key influencers, and looked up each attendee online. During the Q&A, a question came from one of the top executives (I knew he was at the top because I'd looked him up)—and I answered his question with timely examples.

When your audience is familiar—say, a group of your direct reports or colleagues—think through the pressures they are under and find ways to create an empathic connection.

Knowing people—*really* knowing them—makes it easier to influence them. You engage in a conversation, exchange insights, tell stories. Usually, both you and they change a bit in the process.

People don't fall asleep during conversations, but they often do during presentations—and that's because many presentations don't *feel conversational*. Knowing your audience well helps you feel warmly toward the people in the room and take on a more conversational tone. Speak sincerely to your audience, and people will want to listen to your message and root for and contribute to the success of your idea.

Define How You'll Change the Audience

When you present, you're asking the people in the room to change their behavior or beliefs in some way, big or small. Before you begin writing your presentation, map out that transformation—where your audience is starting, and where you want people to end up. This is the most critical step in planning your presentation, because that desired endpoint is the whole reason you're presenting in the first place, and people won't get there on their own.

Ask yourself, “What new beliefs do I want them to adopt? How do I want them to behave differently? How must their attitudes or emotions change before their behavior can change?”

By thinking through who they are before they enter the room and who you want them to be when they leave, you'll define their transformation arc, much as a screenwriter plans the protagonist's transformation in a film.

Audience

Let's say you work in the development office at a university and you're delivering a presentation to potential donors. The audience transformation might look like the one shown in table 1-2.

TABLE 1-2

Transforming your audience

Move audience from:	Move audience to:
Skepticism that the school will make good use of the money	Excitement about innovative research by faculty, students, and alumni—and an impulse to give

Change typically doesn't happen without a struggle. It's hard to convince people to move away from a view that is comfortable or widely held as true, or change a behavioral pattern that has become their norm. You are persuading members of your audience to let go of old beliefs or habits and adopt new ones. Once you understand their transformation, you can demonstrate empathy for the sacrifices they may need to make to move your idea forward.

Find Common Ground

Whether you evoke frenzied enthusiasm or puzzled stares or glassy-eyed boredom depends largely on how well your message resonates with the audience.

Resonance is a physics phenomenon. If you tap into an object's natural rate of vibration, or *resonant frequency*, it will move: It may vibrate, shudder, or even play a sympathetic musical note—think tuning forks. The same is true, metaphorically, when you present to an audience. If you tap into the group's resonant frequency, you can *move* the people listening to you.

But how do you resonate deeply enough to move them toward your objective? Figure out where you have common ground, and communicate on that frequency. Think about what's inside them that's also inside you. That way, you're not pushing or pulling them; they're moving because you tapped into something they already believe.

All this may sound highly unscientific and touchy-feely, but you can find your audience's resonant frequency by doing a little research. You'll want to examine:

Audience

- **Shared experiences:** What from your past do you have in common. Do you share memories, historical events, interests?
- **Common goals:** Where are you all headed in the future? What types of outcomes are mutually desired?
- **Qualifications:** Why are you uniquely qualified to be the audience's guiding expert? What did you learn when you faced similar challenges of your own, and how will your audience benefit from that insight?

The amount of common ground you discover will depend on the depth of your relationship with the group.

Lots of common ground

If you are presenting to family, friends, club members, or a religious group, it's easy to find common ground because you know the people well and tend to share many experiences, interests, and values.

Moderate common ground

With your colleagues, the challenge is a bit tougher. You know them a bit, but not as much as close friends or relatives. You share some interests but possibly only around one or two things. Examine those points of intersection for a way in.

Let's say you're a scientist working for a biotech company and you've been asked to speak at an all-hands meeting. Most of the audience members will be scien-

tists, but you'll also be addressing executives and administrative employees. To find common ground with them, think about why you decided to work for this company and what motivates you to do your job day to day. Maybe you wanted to use your research and problem-solving skills to help people stay healthy—a mission the others in the room will share or at least support. Finding such commonalities will help you connect with them.

Minimal common ground

With a broad audience—for instance, a group of seminar participants from a variety of organizations and industries—you'll have many types of people to think about. The overlap won't be immediately evident, because there are so many perspectives and backgrounds to consider. You'll need to work hard to find or create it, but that work will pay off.

Before I went to China on a book tour, for example, I researched communication and storytelling in modern and ancient Chinese culture. I identified three great communicators in Chinese history and analyzed their speeches. When I shared my analysis with audiences, it was clear to them that I understood the historical context surrounding the speeches—I could even provide detailed answers to their questions about it. I got feedback multiple times on that trip that people could see I cared enough to really study and understand their perspective.

Section 2

Message

Are ideas born interesting or made interesting?

—Chip and Dan Heath,
authors of *Switch: How to Change Things When
Change Is Hard*

Define Your Big Idea

Your big idea is that one key message you *must* communicate. It's what compels the audience to change course. (Screenwriters call this the "controlling idea.") It has two components:

- **Your point of view:** The big idea needs to express *your* perspective on a subject, not a generalization like "Q4 financials." Otherwise, why present? You may as well e-mail your stakeholders a spreadsheet and be done with it.
- **What's at stake:** You'll also want to convey why the audience should care about your perspective. This helps people recognize their need to participate rather than continue with the status quo.

Express your big idea in a complete sentence. It needs a subject (often some version of "you," to highlight the audience's role) and a verb (to convey action and elicit emotion).

When asked, “What’s your presentation about?” most people answer with a phrase like “Software updates.” That’s not a big idea; it’s a topic—no point of view, no stakes. Change it to “Your department needs to update its workflow management software,” and you’re getting closer. You’ve added your point of view, but the stakes still aren’t clear. So try this instead: “Your department will struggle to meet key production deadlines until we update the workflow management software.”

Another example: If you say your presentation is about “the Florida wetlands,” that’s also just a topic. Add your point of view and what’s at stake. For instance: “We need to restrict commercial and residential development in Florida’s wetlands, because we’re destroying the fragile ecosystem there and killing off endangered species.”

People will move away from pain and toward pleasure. Prod them (with words like “struggle” from the first example; “destroying” and “killing” from the second) so they feel uncomfortable staying in their current position. Lure them toward your idea with encouragement and rewards (the promise of meeting deadlines; protection of endangered species).

Generate Content to Support the Big Idea

Now that you've articulated your big idea, it's time to create your content, but don't fire up your presentation software quite yet. Software forces linear thinking—one slide after another—so it's not the best tool for early brainstorming.

Instead, change up your usual environment. Move to a new room, turn off your e-mail and cell phone, maybe play some music. Use tactile tools like paper, whiteboards, and sticky notes.

Generate as many ideas as possible by:

- **Gathering existing content:** You don't have to start from scratch. Dig up other presentations, industry studies, news articles, reports, surveys—anything that's relevant to your big idea.
- **Building on existing content:** Push on the ideas in the content you've gathered. Challenge them,

or consider them from a new angle. Draw new connections.

- **Creating new content:** Be curious, take risks, and let your intuition guide you. Experiment and dream.

For brainstorming to be successful, you have to suspend judgment and stay receptive to seemingly unrelated ideas—they may lead to something great. Increase your creative yield by moving back and forth between brainstorming alone and brainstorming in a group.

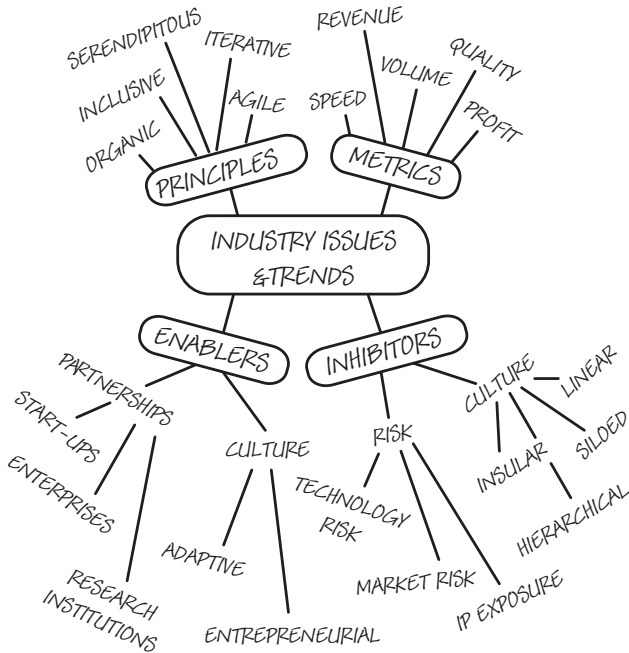
Brainstorm alone

It's intimidating to approach a blank piece of paper or whiteboard, but you have to start somewhere. Write down a key word and riff off that. Let your mind move in random directions. Then draw connections with lines. Keep brainstorming until you have a messy web of concepts and relationships to explore. This is called *mind mapping* (see figure 2-1). You can get special software to do it, but paper or sticky notes will work just as well.

Brainstorm in a group

When you work with others, you get more gems to choose from—and someone else's idea may spark even more creative ones in you. Be extra kind to the folks with enough guts to put half-baked or embarrassing ideas out there. Treat every idea as valuable. Have someone facilitate and capture the ideas so the discussion can move at a fast clip (if it slows down, people will start to question and censor themselves). Or ask brainstormers to scribble ideas on

FIGURE 2-1

Mind map

sticky notes and post them on a wall. Sticky notes are the perfect brainstorming tool. They're small, convenient, and moveable—great for collecting and organizing material. Limit yourselves to one idea per sticky note so it's easier to sort and cluster thoughts.

Brainstorm alone again

Take the seeds of ideas that came from the rapid-fire group session and do another round of quiet brainstorming on your own. This will give those latent ideas a chance to develop.

Message

Go for quantity, not quality. You may work your way through five, ten, twenty ideas until you find ones that are distinctive and memorable. This is not the time to edit yourself. Even if an idea has been expressed or used before, add it to the mix. You may later find a unique way of incorporating it.

Anticipate Resistance

As a presenter, you're asking people to change their beliefs or behavior. That's not something they'll enjoy or find easy, so every audience will resist in some way. People will adamantly defend their own perspectives to avoid adopting yours. While listening to you, they'll catalog what they hear. Having come into the room with their own knowledge and biases, they'll constantly evaluate whether what you say fits within or falls outside their views.

So think through why and how they might resist, and plan accordingly. Here are the most common types of resistance, and how to get ready for them:

Logical resistance: Can you find logical arguments against your perspective? Dig up articles, blog posts, and reports that challenge your stance to familiarize yourself with alternate lines of reasoning. This kind of research prepares you for skeptical questions and comments you may have to field—and it helps you

develop a deeper understanding of the topic and a more nuanced point of view.

Emotional resistance: Do the people you're addressing hold fast to a bias, dogma, or moral code—and does your idea violate that in some way? Hitting raw nerves will set off an audience, so proceed carefully. For example, if you're at a medical conference launching a new HPV vaccination for kids, also emphasize the importance of abstinence in youth.

Practical resistance: Is it physically or geographically difficult for the audience to do what you're asking? Will it take more financial means than people have? Be sensitive if you're asking employees to hang in there as you temporarily freeze salaries to weather a recession, for instance, or giving your team a deadline that will take nights and weekends to meet. Acknowledge the sacrifices people are making—and show that you're shouldering some of the burden yourself. Say that your salary will be frozen, too. Or explain that you'll be in 24/7 mode right along with your team until the big project is wrapped up—and that everyone will get comp time afterward.

Prepare for these types of resistance, and you'll stand a much better chance of winning over an entrenched audience. You can raise and address concerns before they become mental roadblocks—for example, by sharing at the beginning of your talk that you too were skeptical until you'd looked more closely at the data, or by meeting with particularly tough critics in advance to “pre-sell”

your ideas. By showing that you've considered opposing points of view, you demonstrate an open mind—and invite your audience to respond in kind.

If you're struggling to come up with opposing viewpoints, share your big idea with others and ask them to pressure-test it. You may be so deeply connected to your perspective that you're having a hard time anticipating the most simple and obvious forms of resistance. Use your boss as a sounding board as you prepare to speak to the executive committee, for example. Or ask a key stakeholder for a reality check before you present to other managers in her group.

Amplify Your Message Through Contrast

People are naturally drawn to contrast because life is filled with it: Day and night. Male and female. Love and hate.

A skilled communicator captures an audience's interest by creating tension between contrasting elements—and then provides relief by resolving that tension. It's how you build a bridge between others' views and yours.

Try brainstorming ideas around polar opposites such as the ones in table 2-1.

TABLE 2-1

Dynamic opposites

Past/present	Future
Need	Fulfillment
Speed	Endurance
Ambition	Humility
Stagnation	Growth
Roadblocks	Clear passage
Sacrifice	Reward
Budget	Quality

Message

Suppose you manage an airline's maintenance division, and you're asking for money to invest in analytics. Table 2-2 shows pairs of opposites you might explore as you figure out how to make your case.

TABLE 2-2

Using the tension of extremes

Customer complaints	Customer satisfaction
We're getting low ratings on customer surveys because of flight delays and missed connections caused by simple maintenance issues.	What if we could better schedule our planes' maintenance by digging into our repair data?
We currently follow the manufacturer's recommended maintenance schedule—and it's not sufficient. Planes get held up at the gate while mechanics do routine repairs.	By tracking and studying how often we actually perform certain kinds of repairs, we can create a schedule that's more realistic. We'll be able to prevent problems instead of fixing them when they pop up.

By embracing the tension between the extremes, you can propel your message—and the movement will feel natural.

The familiar will comfort people; the new will stimulate them and keep them interested. Generate plenty of content on both sides of the contrast or you'll lose momentum—and your audience.

Build an Effective Call to Action

Presentations move people to act—but only if you explicitly state what actions you want them to take, and when. Are you asking them to be doers, suppliers, influencers, or innovators (see table 2-3)?

To get to this list of four things an audience can do for you, I read hundreds of speeches and classified their calls to action. Whether your audience is corporate, political, scientific, or academic, the people you're addressing should fall into one of these categories.

Make it clear what you need to accomplish together and break that down into discrete tasks and deadlines that feel manageable to the audience. Let's consider an example where the call to action is to “innovate”—since that can be tough to pull off. Suppose you have an aging product that needs reinvention. Not all great ideas have to come from engineering. So after you say that the

Message

organization is open to ideas from all departments, you might break down the tasks like this:

- Identify enthusiastic brainstormers from all departments.
- Have engineers facilitate a cross-departmental brainstorming session that week.
- Assign a team member to take notes.
- Filter ideas at the engineering summit the following week.

You might ask everyone to take just one action, or you might provide a few actions people can choose from. Either way, be explicit in your request—and about how it will benefit the audience.

TABLE 2-3

What your audience can do for you				
	Doers	Suppliers	Influencers	Innovators
What they do for you	Instigate activities	Get resources	Change perceptions	Generate ideas
How they do it	Doers are the worker bees. Once they know what needs to get done, they'll take on the tasks. They also recruit and motivate others to complete important activities.	Suppliers are the people with resources—financial, human, or material. They have the means to get you what you need to move forward.	Influencers can sway individuals or groups, large or small, mobilizing them to adopt and evangelize your idea.	Innovators think outside the box for new ways to add value to and spread your idea. They create strategies, perspectives, and products.

Choose Your Best Ideas

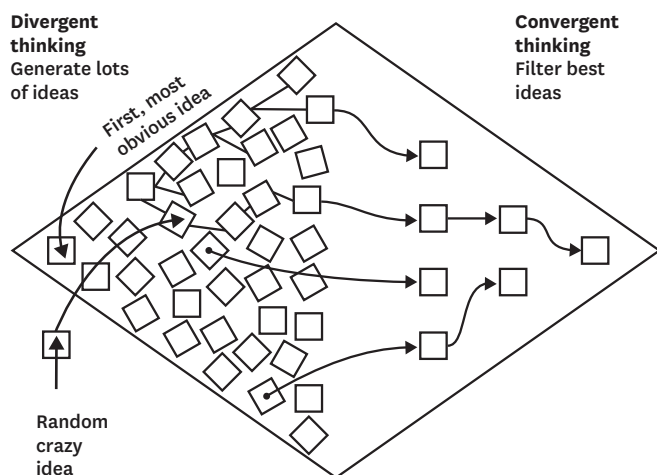
Up to this point, we've been focusing on how to generate presentation ideas and content. That's actually the easy part. It's much harder to trim everything down so only the most effective messages remain. But the quality of your presentation depends as much on what you choose to remove as on what you choose to include.

Many of your ideas may be fascinating and clever, but you can't fit them all in—and no one wants to hear them all, anyway. Connect, analyze, sort, and filter the ideas so you use only the ones that will yield the best outcomes. Designers call this part of the process *convergent thinking*, and they refer to its opposite, idea generation, as *divergent thinking* (see figure 2-2). As Tim Brown, the CEO of IDEO, explains: “In the divergent phase, new options emerge. In the convergent phase, it is just the reverse. Now it's time to eliminate options and make choices.”

Your primary filter should be your big idea (see “Define Your Big Idea” at the beginning of the Message section). Everything you keep in your talk must support it.

FIGURE 2-2

Filter your best ideas



If you don't filter your presentation, the audience will have to—and people will resent you for making them work too hard to identify the most important points. Cut mercilessly on their behalf. Say you're presenting a business case for acquiring a company. You might brainstorm things to cover, like:

- The competencies your company would gain
- Estimated return on investment
- Lessons learned from the last acquisition
- Threat R&D might perceive
- Bringing in culture consultants

- Receivables are at net 45 days
- Need to retool the factory floor

All these ideas fit into the big idea except the fact that receivables are at net 45 days. Though that may be important, it would be a distraction during this meeting. Save it for another meeting.

Even if all you do is sort and filter the ideas you've generated, you're technically ready to present. You can place your sticky notes on the inside of a file folder and use those as your speaking notes, as I did at a launch party for my book *Resonate*. I had only to glance down once in a while.

Or you can begin to put your ideas into the presentation software of your choice.

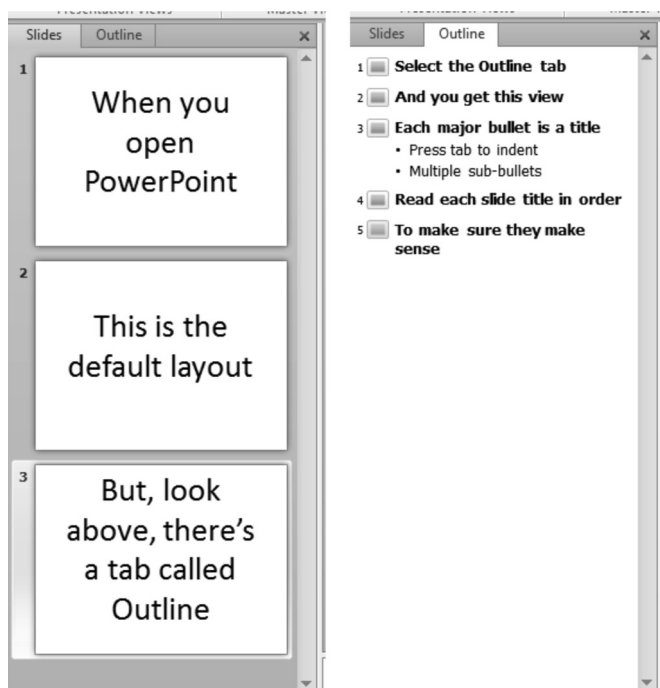
Organize Your Thoughts

Because presentation programs such as PowerPoint are visual tools, we often jump too quickly into visually expressing our ideas when we use them—before we’ve spent enough time arranging our thoughts and crafting our words. When moving ideas from sticky notes to software, enter each point you plan to cover as a clearly worded title in outline or slide-sorter mode rather than going straight to slide-creation mode (figure 2-3). That allows you to read the titles in sequence, without the distractions of supporting details or graphics, to make sure your presentation flows from point to point.

Ask yourself, “If people read just the titles, will they get what I’m saying?” That’s not just an academic exercise. You really want to know the answer, because your audience members often won’t read past your slide titles when you present. They’ll scan them the way they do headlines of news articles—and make snap decisions

FIGURE 2-3

Convey a clear message with each title



about whether they'd like to learn more. So convey a clear message with each title, arrange them in an order that will make sense to your audience, and infuse them with personality where you can. You'll want to come across as a real person, not an automaton. Include verbs to show action.

Compare the examples shown in table 2-4.

TABLE 2-4

Convey clear meaning with titles

Vague, passive	Clear, active
Market overview	We're neck-and-neck with an aggressive rival.
Productivity gains	Production time shrank from 21 days to 8.

Agonize over your titles as marketing copywriters do in their campaigns to get more click-throughs and sales. You, too, are selling something—your big idea—and the more quickly you grab people's attention, the higher your “conversion rate” will be.

Balance Analytical and Emotional Appeal

Now that you've outlined your message, consider how you'll appeal to people's minds and hearts.

Strike the wrong balance of analytical and emotional content in your presentation, and you risk alienating the audience and diminishing your credibility. But how do you get it right? Take your cues from the topic and the audience.

Certain topics—like layoffs and product launches—are inherently charged and naturally lend themselves to emotional appeal. Others—like science, engineering, and finance—invite more analytic treatment.

Weigh the subject against the group you're addressing. Suppose you're making a case for personnel cuts to a group of managers who'll soon have to decide which direct reports to let go. They may see you as cold and inhumane if you focus primarily on cost savings, with nary a word about people losing jobs. A numbers-based

approach will probably go over better with a group of executives charged with improving the bottom line—though even they will expect you to at least acknowledge that layoffs are difficult.

No presentation should be devoid of emotional content, no matter how cerebral the topic or the audience. In a business setting, it may feel more comfortable to just “state the facts,” but look through your deck and see if you can add emotional texture to any content that’s purely analytical (see figure 2-4).

FIGURE 2-4

Strike a balance

Analytical	Emotional
Features	Benefits illustrated through stories (personal, true, fictional)
Data/evidence	Metaphors and analogies that make data meaningful
Exhibits	Thought-provoking questions
Logical arguments	Slow reveal (builds suspense)
Proofs	
Examples	
Case studies	

There are two basic classes of emotion: pain and pleasure. Determine how you’d like people to feel at various points in your presentation. Where would you like them to feel happy? To cringe? To be inspired?

Ask “why” questions to unearth your big idea’s emotional appeal. For example, if you’re requesting funding to pay for cloud storage, start by asking, “Why do we need to buy cloud storage?” Your answer may be “to facilitate

data sharing with colleagues in remote locations.” So then ask, “Why do we need to facilitate data sharing with colleagues in remote locations?” Eventually you’ll get to the human beings whose lives will be affected by your idea, and that’s where you’ll discover your emotional appeal: Maybe you need cloud storage “to help those remote colleagues coordinate disaster relief efforts and save lives.”

Once you know what that hook is, use words or phrases that have emotional weight to them—like “save lives” in the cloud example above. Tell personal stories with conviction and describe not just what people did, but how they felt. (See “Add Emotional Texture” in the Story section of this guide.)

Lose the Jargon

Have you ever listened to a presenter who sounded supersmart—without having any idea what she *really* said?

Each field has its own lexicon, filled with words that are familiar to experts but foreign to everyone else. Even different departments within the same organization use niche language and acronyms that mean nothing to other groups. And the more companies and individuals innovate within their areas of expertise, the bigger and gnarlier their vocabularies get.

Unless you're presenting to a roomful of specialists cut from the same cloth, don't assume that everyone will understand your jargon. Modify your language so it resonates with the people whose support and influence you need. If they can't follow your ideas, they won't adopt them.

What's more, delivering abstruse presentations can hurt your career. As communications coach Carmine Gallo puts it, "Speaking over people's heads may cost you a job or prevent you from advancing as far as your capabilities might take you otherwise."

So lose the jargon. If a specialized term is central to your message, translate it. Would your grandmother

Message

understand what you’re talking about? Rework your message until it’s *that clear*.

The presenter in the following example (figure 2-5) spoke to an audience of 800 people who could fund his

FIGURE 2-5

Drop the jargon

Before: Developed from a scientific perspective	After: Reworked for a lay audience
I am currently the lead researcher developing a microbially induced brine-mining technology, where bacteria are employed to accumulate selected minerals from desalination brine, producing a minable sediment, which may indirectly reduce the cost of desalinated water and the environmental impact of the desalination process. Initial experiments have shown how certain bacterial cultures are able to mine selected metals from desalination brine. I am now hoping to prove the economic viability of the process through qualitative and quantitative studies of the metals produced. Conventional mechanical and chemical mining technologies are restrictive due to technological and economic constraints. Biological processes, however, present an efficient and environmentally benign alternative, which must be seen in the context of a future where urban ecological systems are in harmony with the ecological cycles of our planet.	Desalination is a process that removes salt from water so it can be used for drinking and irrigation. Removing salt from water—in particular sea water—via reverse osmosis requires energy to produce clean water. This process also creates a toxic saltwater solution, or brine, that is generally dumped back out at sea and is harmful for the ecology of the receiving water body. This is where my collaboration with bacteria comes in. Introducing bacteria into the brine draws out metals such as calcium, potassium, and magnesium from desalination brine. The value of magnesium alone in the volume of brine potentially needed for Singapore represents 4.5 billion U.S. dollars—indirectly lowering the cost of the desalinated water produced, while reducing the environmental impact of the process. Imagine a mining industry in a way it hasn’t existed before. Imagine a mining industry that doesn’t mean defiling the earth. Imagine bacteria helping us achieve this industry, as they accumulate and sediment minerals out of desalination brine. In other words, imagine a mining industry in harmony with nature.

idea but didn't have deep knowledge of the science behind it. The first column shows what he said during rehearsal; the second shows what he said at the presentation, after he got feedback and reworked his talk for an intelligent lay audience.

Craft Sound Bites

Your words are now clear—but are they memorable? Will people share them with others?

Great quotes get picked up and repeated—whether at the water cooler, in blog posts, or on social networking sites. Brilliant ones end up on the front pages of newspapers. So embed well-crafted sound bites into every talk.

Steve Jobs made this an art form. He relied on rhetorical devices to drive his messages home and get pickup from audiences and press alike. Here are a few that he used to great effect:

***Rhythmic repetition:* Repeated phrase at beginning, middle, or end of a sentence.**

In 2010, Jobs had to deliver an emergency press conference about the performance of the antenna in the iPhone 4. If users held the phone a certain way, it dropped calls. As social media scientist Dan Zarrella, at HubSpot, points out, Jobs repeated the phrase “We want to make all our users happy” several times during his talk. Midway through, Jobs flashed a slide showing that the antenna issue affected only a fraction of users. Soon,

Message

a message appeared at the bottom: “We care about *every* user.” A few slides later: “We love our users.” Then “We love our users” appeared again on the next slide. And the next. And the next. “We love our users, we love them,” Jobs concluded. “We do this [provide a free phone case that will solve the problem] because we love our users.” That “love” was the message the press took away from his piece of “crisis communication.”

Concrete comparison: Simile or metaphor.

In his iPhone keynote speech at MacWorld 2007, Jobs likened Apple’s switch to Intel processors to a “huge *heart transplant*.”

Slogan: A concise statement that’s easy to remember.

At the iPhone launch, Jobs said “reinvent the phone” several times—and the slogan was all over the press release Apple sent out before his keynote. “Reinvent the phone” ended up in *PCWorld*’s headlines the next day.

As Jobs did, take time to create repeatable sound bites. But don’t deliver them with a lot of fanfare. Make them appear spontaneous, so people will *want* to repeat them.

Section 3

Story

[Stories] are the currency of human contact.

—Robert McKee,
author of *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the
Principles of Screenwriting*

Apply Storytelling Principles

Stories have the power to win customers, align colleagues, and motivate employees. They're the most compelling platform we have for managing imaginations. Those who master this art form can gain great influence and an enduring legacy.

If you use stories in your presentation, the audience can recall what they've learned from you and even spread the word. Just as the plot of a compelling play, movie, or novel makes a writer's themes more vivid and memorable, well-crafted stories can give your message real staying power, for two key reasons:

- **Stories feature transformation:** When people hear a story, they root for the protagonist as she overcomes obstacles and emerges changed in some important way (perhaps a new outlook helps her complete a difficult physical journey). It's doubly powerful to incorporate stories that demonstrate how others have adopted the same beliefs and

behaviors you're proposing—that is, show others going through a similar transformation that your audience will go through. This will help you get people to cross over from their everyday world into the world of your ideas—and come back to their world transformed, with new insights and tools from your presentation.

- **Stories have a clear structure:** All effective stories adhere to the same basic three-part structure that Aristotle pointed out ages ago: They have a beginning, a middle, and an end. It makes them easy to digest and retell—and it's how audiences have been conditioned for centuries to receive information. Make sure your presentation—and any story you tell within it—has all three parts, with clear transitions between them.

In this section of the guide, you'll learn how to use storytelling principles to structure your presentation and incorporate anecdotes that add emotional appeal.

Create a Solid Structure

All good presentations—like all good stories—convey and resolve some kind of conflict or imbalance. The sense of discord is what makes audiences care enough to get on board.

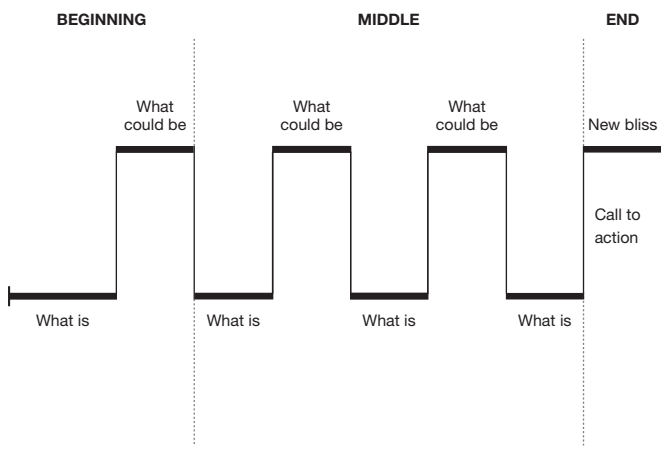
After gleaning story insights from films and books, studying hundreds of speeches, and spending 22 years creating customized presentations for companies and thought leaders, I've found that the most persuasive communicators create conflict by juxtaposing *what is* with *what could be*. That is, they alternately build tension and provide release by toggling back and forth between the status quo and a better way—finally arriving at the “new bliss” people will discover by adopting the proposed beliefs and behaviors. That conflict resolution plays out within the basic beginning-middle-end storytelling structure we all know and love (figure 3-1).

The tips in this section will help you weave conflict and resolution throughout the beginning, middle, and end of your presentation.

Story

FIGURE 3-1

Persuasive story pattern



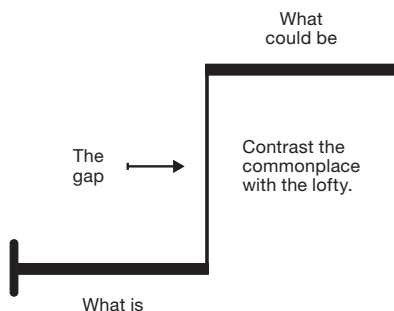
Craft the Beginning

Begin by describing life as the audience knows it. People should be nodding their heads in recognition because you're articulating what they already understand. This creates a bond between you and them and opens them up to hear your ideas for change.

After you set that baseline of *what is*, introduce your ideas of *what could be*. The gap between the two will throw the audience a bit off balance, and that's a good thing—because it creates tension that needs to be resolved (figure 3-2).

FIGURE 3-2

Create dramatic tension



If you proposed what could be without first establishing what is, you'd fail to connect with the audience before swooping in with your ideas, and your message would lose momentum.

The gap shouldn't feel contrived—you wouldn't say "Okay, I've described what is. Now let's move to what could be." Present it naturally so people will feel moved, not manipulated. For instance:

What is: We're fell short of our Q3 financial goals partly because we're understaffed and everyone's spread too thin.

What could be: But what if we could solve the worst of our problems by bringing in a couple of powerhouse clients? Well, we can.

Here's another example:

What is: Analysts have been placing our products at the top of three out of five categories. One competitor just shook up the industry with the launch of its T3xR—heralded as the most innovative product in our space. Analysts predict that firms like ours will have no future unless we license this technology from our rival.

What could be: But we will not concede! In fact, we will retain our lead. I'm pleased to tell you that five years ago we had the same product idea, but after rapid prototyping we discovered a way to leapfrog that generation of technology. So today, we're launch-

ing a product so revolutionary that we'll gain a ten-year lead in our industry.

Once you establish the gap between what is and what could be, use the remainder of the presentation to bridge it.

Develop the Middle

The middle is, in many ways, the most compelling part of your presentation, because that's where most of the “action” takes place.

People in your audience now realize their world is off-kilter—you've brought that to their attention and at least hinted at a solution at the beginning of your presentation. Now continue to emphasize the contrast between what is and what could be, moving back and forth between them, and the audience will start to find the former unappealing and the latter alluring.

Let's go back to that Q3 financial update example from “Craft the Beginning.” Revenues are down, but you want to motivate employees to make up for it. Table 3-1 shows one way you could approach the middle of your presentation.

Earlier, you brainstormed around pairs of contrasting themes (see “Amplify Your Message Through Contrast” in the Message section). Try using one of those pairs—for instance, sacrifice versus reward—to drum up material to flesh out this structure.

TABLE 3-1

Creating “action” in the middle of your story

What is	What could be
We missed our Q3 forecast by 15%.	Q4 numbers must be strong for us to pay out bonuses.
We have six new clients on our roster.	Two of them have the potential to bring in more revenue than our best clients do now.
The new clients will require extensive retooling in manufacturing.	We'll be bringing in experts from Germany to help.

Make the Ending Powerful

Your ending should leave people with a heightened sense of what could be—and willingness to believe or do something new. Here's where you describe how blissful their world will be when they adopt your ideas.

Let's return to our Q3 example from “Craft the Beginning” and “Develop the Middle” in this section. You might wrap up your presentation along the lines of figure 3-3.

FIGURE 3-3

Making the ending powerful

Call to action	New bliss
It will take extra work from all departments to make Q4 numbers, but we can deliver products to our important new clients on time and with no errors.	I know everyone's running on fumes—but hang in there. This is our chance to pull together like a championship team, and things will get easier if we make this work. The reward if we meet our Q4 targets? Bonuses, plus days off at the end of the year.

Many presentations simply end with a list of action items, but that isn't exactly inspiring. You want the last thing you say to move your audience to tackle those items. You want people to feel ready to right the wrong, to conquer the problem.

By skillfully defining future rewards, you compel people to get on board with your ideas. Show them that taking action will be worth their effort. Highlight:

- **Benefits to them:** What needs of theirs will your ideas meet? What freedoms will the audience gain? How will your ideas give the audience greater influence or status?
- **Benefits to their “sphere”:** How will your ideas help the audience's peers, direct reports, customers, students, or friends?
- **Benefits to the world:** How will your ideas help the masses? How will they improve public health, for instance, or help the environment?

In the example above, we've called out a key benefit to the organization (making up for Q3 revenue shortfall), plus three benefits to employees (bonuses, time off, and—probably most important—the promise of a saner workload).

Add Emotional Texture

Now step back and review all your content so far. Do you have the right mix of analysis and emotion? (See “Balance Analytical and Emotional Appeal” in the Message section.) If you need more emotional impact, you can add it with storytelling.

A message matters to people when it hits them in the gut. Visceral response, not pure analysis, is what will push your audience away from the status quo and toward your perspective. Stories elicit that kind of response. When we hear stories, our eyes dilate, our hearts race, we feel chills. We laugh, clap, lean forward or back. These reactions are mostly involuntary, because they’re grounded in emotion.

While you’re describing what is, tell a story that makes people shudder, or guffaw at the ridiculousness of their situation, or feel disappointment. While you’re describing what could be, tell a story that strikes a little awe or fear into their hearts—something that inspires them to change.

Table 3-2 shows a template (with an example plugged in) that can help you transform supporting information into a story with emotional impact.

You may be thinking that people don't go to work to feel; they go to get stuff done. But by making them feel, you move them to action—and help them get stuff done. It's not about issuing a gushing, weepy plea. It's about

TABLE 3-2

Making an emotional impact with data

Point you want to make	Every cross-divisional function could benefit from a steering committee.	
STORY ABOUT ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE		
Beginning	When, who, where	A few years ago, the sales team tackled a cross-divisional problem with the help of a steering committee.
Middle	Context	At the time, all sales groups were independent.
	Conflict	This means we were confusing customers with many different rules, processes, and formats.
	Proposed resolution	So we decided to create a sales steering committee.
	Complication	You can imagine how hard it was to reach agreement on anything.
End	Actual resolution	But we agreed to meet every two weeks to find common ground. Over the next year, we standardized all our processes and learned a lot from each other. The customers became much happier with our service.

Source: Glenn Hughes, SMART as Hell.

adding emotional texture to the logical case you've built with data, case studies, and other supporting evidence.

Personal stories told with conviction are the most effective ones in your arsenal. You can repeat stories you've heard, but audiences feel more affection for presenters who reveal their own challenges and vulnerability.

Use relevant stories that are appropriately dramatic, or you may come across as manipulative or out of touch with reality. When giving an update at a small staff meeting on a project you're leading, you wouldn't tell a melodramatic story about the "just-in-time delivery" of multiple vendors you managed at your daughter's wedding. It would waste everyone's time.

But one U.S. government official *did* effectively tell a story about his daughter's wedding—to get new remote-communication technology adopted in his organization. Many of his relatives couldn't travel to the wedding, so he used a commercial version of the technology to push the wedding pictures quickly to the remote family members, helping all feel more included in the event. He argued that adopting the enterprise version of this technology would similarly include distant employees in the development of important agency initiatives. The senior executives not only understood this with their minds but felt it in their hearts. They could relate this story about a father doing his best to serve his family to their agency doing its best to serve the citizenry.

Take out a notepad and start cataloging personal stories and the emotions they summon. This exercise takes time, but it will yield material you can draw on again and again. Do your first pass when you have an

uninterrupted hour or so to reflect. You can use the checklist that follows to trigger your memory. As you recall past events, jot down how you felt when you experienced them.

Inventory of Personal Stories

- ☐ ***Important times in your life:*** Childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, later years
- ☐ ***Relatives:*** Parents, grandparents, siblings, children, in-laws
- ☐ ***Authority figures:*** Teachers, bosses, coaches, mentors, leaders, political figures, other influencers
- ☐ ***Peers:*** Colleagues, social networks, club members, friends, neighbors, teammates
- ☐ ***Subordinates:*** Employees, mentees, trainees, interns, volunteers, students
- ☐ ***Enemies:*** Competitors, bullies, people with challenging personalities, people you've been hurt by, people you've hurt
- ☐ ***Important places:*** Offices, homes, schools, places of worship, local hangouts, camps, vacation spots, foreign lands
- ☐ ***Things you cherish:*** Gifts, photos, certificates/awards, keepsakes
- ☐ ***Things that have injured you:*** Sharp objects, animal bites, spoiled food, allergens

Spending time with each item on this list, you'll unearth many stories you've forgotten. Even after you've selected stories for whatever presentation you're currently working on, save your notes and continue adding to them here and there, as you find time. They'll come in handy when you're creating future presentations.

Use Metaphors as Your Glue

Metaphors are a powerful literary device. In Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, about 20% of what he said was metaphorical. For example, he likened his lack of freedom to a bad check that "America has given the Negro people . . . a check which has come back marked 'insufficient funds.'" King introduced this metaphor three minutes into his 16-minute talk, and it was the first time the audience roared and clapped.

Presenters tend to overrely on tired visual metaphors instead of using powerful words to stir hearts. King's speech would not have been nearly as beautiful if he'd used slides with pictures of bad checks and piles of gold symbolizing "freedom and the security of justice."

For each point you make in your presentation, try to come up with a metaphor to connect people's minds to the concept. You might even weave it like a thread throughout the presentation.

When developing metaphors, reject overused themes like racecars and sporting events—and avoid stock pho-

Story

tos along those lines. If you want to tell a story of triumph, dig into one of your own stories for the right metaphor: Describe, for instance, how it felt to struggle to the top of Yosemite's Half Dome, run your first marathon, or win the citywide Boy Scout trophy. Identify metaphors that will be meaningful to the audience.

Create Something They'll Always Remember

Place *Something They'll Always Remember*—a climactic S.T.A.R. moment—in your presentation to drive your big idea home. That moment is what the audience will chat (or tweet) about after your talk. It can also help your message go viral through social media and news coverage. Use it to make people uncomfortable with what is or to draw them toward what could be. Here are four ways to create a S.T.A.R. moment that captivates your audience and generates buzz.

Shocking statistics

If statistics are shocking, don't glide over them—amplify them. For example, in his 2010 Consumer Electronics Show presentation, Intel CEO Paul Otellini used startling numbers to convey the speed and impact of the company's newest technology. “Today we have the industry's first-shipping 32-nanometer process technology. A

32-nanometer microprocessor is 5,000 times faster; its transistors are 100,000 times cheaper than the 4004 processor that we began with. With all respect to our friends in the auto industry, if their products had produced the same kind of innovation, cars today would go 470,000 miles per hour. They'd get 100,000 miles per gallon, and they'd cost three cents."

Evocative visuals

Audiences connect with emotionally potent visuals. When asking donors to help raise \$1.7 million, Conservation International contrasted dreamy, glistening, surreal under-ocean images (captioned with phrases like "90% of our oxygen" describing how dependent we are on the ocean) with photos of grimy rubbish that washes up on the beach (where "14 billion pounds of trash" roll in on the waves). That approach tapped the power of evocative visuals and shocking stats—and people responded by getting out their wallets.

Memorable dramatization

Bring your message to life by dramatizing it. As Bill Gates spoke about the importance of malaria eradication at a TED conference in 2009, he released a jar of mosquitoes into the auditorium and said, "There is no reason only poor people should be infected." It got the audience's attention—and effectively made the point that we don't spend nearly enough money on fighting the disease. The mosquitoes were malaria-free, but he let people squirm a minute or two before he let them know that.

Consider another example. When Mirran Raphaely, CEO of Dr. Hauschka Skin Care, presented to the cos-

metics industry, she wanted to draw a sharp contrast between industrial agriculture and biodynamic farming practices. She showed two photos side by side—a container of chemicals and an herb called horsetail—and compared the toxicity of the two substances. In industrial agriculture, farmers rely on glyphosate, a synthetic chemical linked to cancer in animals and humans. In biodynamic agriculture, farmers treat crops with an extract made from horsetail. Holding up two glasses—one filled with the chemical weed killer, the other with the horsetail extract—she asked the audience, “Which one of these would you want on the crops you consume?” After the audience finished laughing, she took a sip of the biodynamic solution.

Emotive anecdote

Sometimes S.T.A.R. moments are gripping personal stories (see “Add Emotional Texture” earlier in this section).

Here’s one such story, told by Symantec.cloud group president Rowan Trollope in May 2012, to encourage his organization to innovate:

I went mountain climbing at Mount Laurel, in the eastern Sierras, with two of my friends. I’m not very experienced, but both of them were even less experienced. We’d been climbing for about 19 hours. We were up at 11,000 feet, and it was getting dark. Fast.

We needed to get down the side of this mountain . . . and we needed to do it fast. Descending first, I got to a ledge and started to get our line ready.

Climbers carry two emergency pitons with them for just this purpose. I’d never used them before, but I knew

how they worked. I took out my hammer and started hammering one into the rock. The books tell you that you'll hear the tone of the hammer strike change when it's "in." I heard a loud ping with each strike of the hammer and decided it was in "good enough."

The books also tell you, though, to always use two, so I used two. As I hammered in the second one, I heard a sharp, high-pitched ping at the end, so I tied the knots and got our line ready. By this time, my buddies had reached the ledge, and I started to hook us in.

Something was bugging me. I looked at the knot between the two pitons and it looked like this [prop: climbing rope with two pitons]. The problem with a knot like that is that if one piton fails, you'll fall. You need to tie it instead like this [prop: retie knot].

My buddies were all clipped in and wanted to get going. It was getting darker. The way I tied the knot seemed good enough, but something in the back of my head told me to stop. So I did.

We all unclipped, and I retied the knot, and then we clipped in again and started the climb down.

The moment I put weight on my line, the first piton popped out and hit me smack in the middle of the helmet. Had I not unclipped and retied the knot, I would have died on that ledge. My life rushed through my mind. And I suddenly and irrevocably got the danger of "good enough."

When I pounded in that first piton, I decided it was good enough.

When I tied the knot that first time, I decided that it wasn't, so I did it again.

I still have that piton that popped out. I brought it with me today because I thought you might like to see it [prop: piton]. The other one? The one that saved my life? It's still in a crack on the Laurel Cliffs. Still doing its job.

I came back to work, and everything had new meaning for me. Retying my knots became a sort of metaphor. I realized that in every job I did, every project I touched, I was making piton decisions every time. I was deciding, with every one of those moves, whether good enough was good enough for me.

I picked that story for today because I think we're facing a similar climb as a company. And we're making piton decisions every day. For my buddies and me, there was nothing but sky beneath us. When you and I look down, we see the PC business changing dramatically. We can see physical things being driven into the cloud, and we can agree that the Internet is not yet a secure place.

Unfortunately, it will take more than one piton to address these dangers. But I think it starts by reawakening in our company some of the qualities that made us great in the first place. And to do that, I think we need to change how we approach our work.

Section 4

Media

People who know what they're talking about don't need PowerPoint.

—Steve Jobs

Choose the Right Vehicle for Your Message

Now that you've carefully considered your audience's needs and tailored your message and content accordingly, it's time to determine how the people you're addressing prefer to process information so you can select the best vehicle for reaching them. Just because you have something to communicate and a time slot to fill doesn't mean a formal presentation with slides is the right choice. Some audiences—a group of analysts, for example—may find a thoughtfully written memo more persuasive. Others, such as young professionals, might prefer a video.

It's your job to determine the best way to connect with your audience. Presentations aren't limited to a single time or place anymore. They can be broadcasted, streamed, downloaded, and distributed. Slides aren't a must-have, either. You can use props, handouts, sketches, tablets, videos, flipcharts—pretty much anything that will help people receive your message.

Before opening your presentation software, think about your audience and venue. Will you be speaking to a few team members in an intimate setting? A big crowd in an auditorium? A small group who will be connecting remotely? The size of your audience and the level of interaction that your setting allows should determine which media you choose.

See figure 4-1 for a sampling of ideas on how to deliver your message to one person or many, in a staged or more spontaneous setting.

There's also an element of common sense. Delivering a stand-up formal presentation in a small conference room just doesn't make sense if you're speaking to two of your direct reports—but it does if you're speaking to a couple of venture capitalists who may invest in your business.

Although technology has opened up new ways of communicating, a low-tech approach is sometimes your best bet. If you show up with a slick slide deck, everything seems final. But sketching out ideas while people watch and listen signals that your thinking is in the formative stages and that the audience can still weigh in.

Maybe the “presentation” you're developing should really be a carefully mapped-out conversation with a planned whiteboard drawing. When my firm was buying a new digital storage system, we met with two potential vendors: One brought a deck of slides and didn't deviate from its spiel. The other, which won our business, whiteboarded out a full storage and network plan. That rep came across as having listened to our needs and understood what we wanted. Her presentation felt collaborative, not canned.

FIGURE 4--1

Choosing your delivery style

Casual	staged		Formal
	Carefully planned but informally delivered	Programmed, staged, and formally rehearsed	
(1:1) Small audience (1:few)	• Deliver short presentation, then discuss • Lead conversation with planned whiteboard sketches • Lead conference call with document or slides posted (earnings call)	• Deliver formal presentation with polished visuals • Host panel discussion • Host formal webinar (audience is muted)	(1:many) Large audience (few:many)
	Facilitated by presenter or audience • Distribute printed document or slides, then meet to discuss • Host conversational webinar (audience is unmuted) • Use flipchart or whiteboard spontaneously	Distributed for audience to access on own time • Package or stream on-demand presentation • Post slides with audio voice-over or recorded webinar • Post curated content (slides, videos, articles, white papers)	
Interactive	spontaneous		Canned

Make the Most of Slide Software

Presentation software is widely reviled. The press has called PowerPoint evil, and corporations have cried for its banishment. The software isn't at fault. It's an empty shell, a container for our ideas. It's not a bad communication tool unless it's in the hands of a bad communicator.

So how do you use it without abusing it—and your audience? Know exactly what you're trying to accomplish and rely on the software to achieve that—and nothing more.

You can use presentation software to create documents, compose teleprompter notes, and visualize ideas. But keep those tasks *separate* to avoid the most common PowerPoint pitfalls. The trick is to show audience members only what they want to see, when they want to see it.

Create documents

Presentation software is great for laying out dense material in easy-to-read documents. In fact, that functionality is built right in—the default setting is a document template, not a slide template. You can swiftly compose and

format your text and move sections around—and best of all, when it's time to derive a presentation from that document, you don't have to copy and paste from Word.

That said, don't *project* your entire document when you speak. No one wants to attend a plodding read-along. It's boring, and people can read more efficiently on their own, anyway. Circulate your document before or after the presentation so you won't need to project text-heavy slides—which Garr Reynolds, author of *Presentation Zen*, aptly calls *slideuments*. If your content can be distributed and clearly understood without a presenter, you've created a document, not a presentation—and that's fine as long as you treat it as such. That might be all you need if you're giving a status update, for instance.

If you step back and realize you've created a slide-ument, it may be a sign that you need to distribute a document. Make some adjustments so it looks and feels more like a document before you circulate it. Try dividing the content into clear sections, creating a table of contents that links to each one, adding page numbers, converting fragments and phrases into complete sentences, and distributing the file as a PDF rather than a slide deck. Nolan Haims, the presentation director at the global PR firm Edelman, sets up slideuments in portrait layout instead of landscape so it's very clear to staff members that they're documents in the making, not visual aids to be projected.

Compose teleprompter notes

What if you have to deliver several presentations per month, each customized for a different audience? (Think

of sales pitches tailored to corporate clients, for example.) In situations like that, it's impossible to memorize what you'll say every time—and you shouldn't have to.

For decades, great orators have relied on note cards, notepaper, even full scripts. You can use bulleted slides as teleprompter material—but again, *don't project them*. You'll run into the same read-along problems (boredom and inefficiency) you encounter when you project slide-uments. Sheryl Sandberg, the COO of Facebook, didn't show any slides at her eloquent TEDWomen presentation “Why We Have Too Few Women Leaders.” But when the camera panned to her view of the audience, you could see her bulleted slides on the comfort monitor. Those slides were her teleprompter notes, and she was the only person in the room viewing them.

If you're using PowerPoint to compose teleprompter notes, write them in “Notes” view, and then go to “Set Up Show.” After you attach your projector, select “Presenter View.” Everything in your notes will appear on your laptop screen or comfort monitor, and only your slides will project behind you. Bring printouts of your teleprompter notes in case anything technical goes wrong.

Visualize ideas

The only things you should actually project are images, graphics, and phrases that move your ideas along—and cement them in the audience's memory long after your presentation is over. Strip everything off your slides that's there to remind you what to say; keep only elements that will help the audience understand and retain what you're

saying. Developing clear visuals that add emotion, emphasis, or nuance to your delivery is no easy task—but when you do this well, your ideas will resonate with your audience. (See the Slides section in this guide for detailed tips on creating powerful visual aids.)

Determine the Right Length for Your Presentation

If you ask around, “What do great presentations have in common?” you’ll get one consistent answer: “They’re short.” It’s no secret that people value their time.

But many presenters don’t realize that it costs *them* time to save the audience time. It’s easier to blather on for an hour than to craft a tight, succinct presentation. Some of the magic of TED is in the 18-minute limit. A great talk goes by quickly. A bad one—well, people can endure it if it’s only 18 minutes.

People in your audience won’t scold you for ending early, but they will for ending late. Out of consideration for them and the day’s agenda, treat the time slot assigned to you as sacred. And keep in mind that people have a 30- to 40-minute presentation tolerance (they’re conditioned by TV shows with creatively produced commercial breaks). Go longer than that, and they’ll begin to squirm.

Here are five ways to tighten your talk and keep your audience engaged:

1. **Plan content for 60% of your time slot:** If you're given a full hour, take no more than 40 minutes. That will leave time for Q&A, a panel, or some other form of discussion. It's hard to keep people's attention for much longer than 40 minutes unless you've built in interesting guest speakers, video clips, interactive exercises, and such. As Thomas Jefferson put it, "Speeches that are measured by the hour will die with the hour."
2. **Trim your slide deck:** If you created an hour-long presentation and want to deliver it in 40 minutes, cut your slides by a third. You can work in slide-sorter mode in PowerPoint, dragging slides to a "slide cemetery" at the very end of the file. Don't delete them, because you might have to resurrect one or more at the last minute, when you're answering questions.
3. **Practice with the clock counting up:** As you're cutting material, rehearse with a clock counting up, not with a timer counting down. If you go over, you need to know how much you're over. Give critical content the most stage time; cut sections that are more important to you than to the audience. Keep trimming and practicing until you're consistently within your desired time frame.

4. **Practice with a timer counting down:** Once you're within the time frame, begin practicing with a timer counting down. Divide your content into quarters and calculate a time stamp for the end of each quarter. For example, if you're giving a 40-minute talk, know the exact slide you should be on at the 10-, 20-, and 30-minute marks so you can gauge throughout the talk if you're on time or running over. That way you can trim more easily on the fly.

5. **Have two natural ending points:** Create a false ending (a summary of the ideas covered, for example) and a real ending—perhaps a rousing, inspirational story that drives the message home. If you're running long, you can drop the second ending and still get your message across. Once at a TED event in India, I was given a 15-minute time slot and had rehearsed it to a T. Two days before the talk, I caught a severe chest cold, so I was heavily medicated when I walked on stage. Before I knew it, the “time's up” light was blinking, and I wasn't done. Fortunately, I'd planned two natural places to end my talk, so I wrapped things up with my first ending, citing a beautiful salutation to the land of India from a famous Indian speech. As far as the people in the audience knew, that was the real ending—and they responded warmly.

Persuade Beyond the Stage

Your presentation doesn't start the moment you enter the room; it starts the moment you've committed to speak—and it continues after the actual talk, as you follow up with the audience. If you take advantage of opportunities to reinforce your message at all three stages, you're much more likely to change people's thinking and behavior.

Before

How you position the talk before you even deliver it will have a big impact on the audience's level of interest. Consider the most effective forms of communication to send out in advance. If you're presenting to colleagues, you might e-mail them a summary of your message and a rough list of points you plan to cover, for example, or send a meeting request with a detailed agenda. If you're going to speak to people from outside your organization—conference attendees, for instance—you may post your biography and talking points online and provide links

to prereading material (published articles, abstracts of white papers, and so on).

Preparing strong supporting material may take as long as developing the presentation itself. However you choose to orient your audience members, make it clear how they will benefit from this talk.

During

If you need to distribute handouts during your talk, bring more than enough copies and recruit volunteers to pass them out at the right time. You can also tape secret messages under people's chairs for retrieval at a key moment during your talk, have audience members hold up color-coded cards to give you feedback in real time, or give them all a prop to interact with, such as a product prototype.

And if you're trying to create external buzz—about a launch, for example—post your slides online along with any videos or photos that support your presentation. Downloadable assets like these will make it easier for journalists, bloggers, and fans in social media circles to write about your talk. If appropriate, use webinar or streaming technology to further increase your audience reach.

After

Follow up with a thank-you note, a survey, or supplementary reading or viewing material to keep your message fresh in people's minds. But don't overtly solicit your audience. People should feel they're getting additional insights and value—not doing extra work that benefits

you more than it does them. For example, if you send a survey to find out what they think about a new service you're offering, make it worth their time: Explain how their feedback will lead to benefits they'll care about, and offer a relevant, attractive free product in exchange for their participation. When I wrap up a webinar on presentations, I set up a URL where the audience can access free digital content from my books on the topic. Attendees love getting free, useful tools like this. More than a quarter of them download the files.

By adding points of contact before, during, and after your presentation, you'll make a lasting impression and increase the likelihood that your ideas will gain traction.

Share the Stage

Audiences find monologues boring. Thanks to advances in entertainment, they've become accustomed to quick action, rapid scene changes, intense visual stimulation, and soundtracks that make the heart race. They're no longer willing to sit attentively for an hour while a single speaker drones on.

The key to getting and holding their attention is having new things continually happen. You can do that by:

- **Bringing in other presenters:** Invite others to join you on the stage or by video. Consider which experts or analysts in your organization or industry would add meat and credibility to your presentation. And look for ways your team members can play to their strengths. If your colleague Sam is quick on his feet, for example, have him lead the Q&A.
- **Mixing up your media:** Try alternating between slides and other media. Hang posters and exhibits on the wall, place tchotchkes on the table that tie into the theme of your talk, or have a helper unveil

a prop or new product while you speak. Add video to inject humor, boost credibility through testimonials, or clarify concepts with animated infographics. If you're talking about a product, demo it—hold it, display it, allow people to interact with it. If you're explaining a concept, try drawing on a flipchart or a whiteboard—it varies the pace and audiences often find it endearing because it makes all but the most artistic presenters vulnerable and thus accessible. Or you can hire a graphic recorder to capture your message visually on a large strip of butcher paper while you talk. She can synthesize what's being said in real time, creating a mural that memorializes the talk. Display it somewhere prominent in your department as a reminder of the goals everyone agreed on at the last vision meeting.

You can reengage your audience several times during your talk by alternating presenters and changing up your media. Of course, all those moving parts require planning and rehearsal—but they'll also keep people tuned in.

Section 5

Slides

At our studio we don't write our stories,
we draw them.

—Walt Disney

Think Like a Designer

To make the point that design thinking goes “hand-in-hand with financial success” in business, *Fast Company* cited an intriguing Design Council study in its October 2007 letter from the editor: “A portfolio of 63 design-driven British companies . . . trounced the FTSE 100 index over 13 years.”

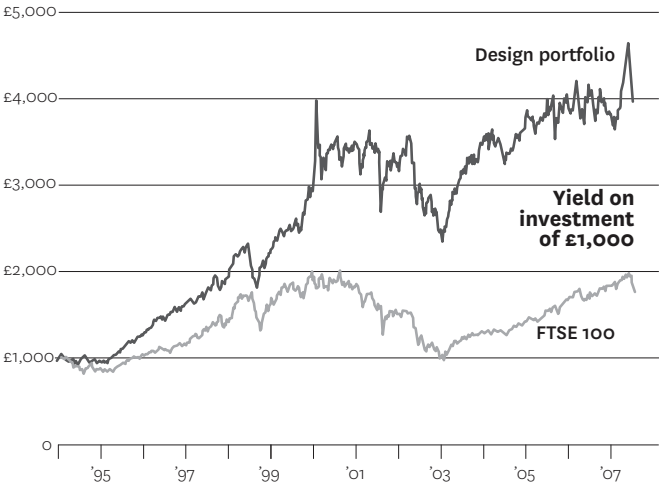
A chart like the one in figure 5-1 accompanied the letter. What does this have to do with presentations? A lot.

Presentations are one of the most popular business communication tools, second only to e-mail. They attract clients and keep employees on track. And the most effective presenters think like designers. Good presenters display data clearly, simply, and compellingly, as in the chart in figure 5-1. They select visuals that convey meaning and brand value. They create and arrange slides that persuade audiences and help them solve problems.

After reading the tips in the Slides section of this guide, you won’t be a master designer—but you’ll make better choices when confronted by the empty expanse of a virgin slide.

FIGURE 5-1

Design contributes to the bottom line



Source: Fast Company, Design Council, and FTSE.

Create Slides People Can “Get” in Three Seconds

Audiences can process only one stream of information at a time. They’ll either listen to you speak or read your slides—they won’t do both simultaneously (not without missing key parts of your message, anyway). So make sure they can quickly comprehend your visuals and then turn their attention back to what you’re saying.

Let’s say you’re using the default template in PowerPoint, and you completely fill in the field that says “Click to Add Text” each time you create a slide. That field holds about 80 words, and the average reading speed is 250 words per minute. So, if you develop 40 text-heavy slides for a 40-minute presentation, people will miss about 13 minutes (one-third!) of your talk just because they’re too busy reading your slides to listen.

Another important reason to keep your slides simple: Research shows that people learn more effectively from multimedia messages when they’re stripped of extrane-

ous words, graphics, animation, and sounds. The extras actually *take away* meaning because they become a distraction. They overtax the audience's cognitive resources.

Each slide should pass what I call the *glance test*: People should be able to comprehend it in three seconds. Think of your slides as billboards. When people drive, they only briefly take their eyes off their main focus—the road—to process billboard information. Similarly, your audience should focus intently on what you're saying, looking only briefly at your slides when you display them.

To create slides that pass the glance test:

- **Start with a clean surface:** Instead of using the default “Click to Add Title” and “Click to Add Text” slide master, turn off all the master prompts and start with a blank slide. And when you add elements, make sure you have a good reason. Does the audience need to see your logo on each slide to remember who you work for? Does that blue swoosh add meaning? If not, leave it off.
- **Limit your text:** Keep the text short and easy to skim. Scale the type as large as possible so the people in the back of the room can see it.
- **Coordinate visual elements:** Select one typeface—two at most—for the entire slide deck. Use a consistent color palette throughout (limit yourself to three complementary colors, plus a couple of neutral shades, like gray or pale blue). Photos should be taken by the same photographer or look as if they are. Illustrations should be done in the same style.

- **Arrange elements with care:** When you project your slides, they’ll be many times larger than they are on your laptop screen—so they need to be tidy. (Blown up, unkempt slides look downright chaotic.) Align your graphics and text blocks. Size objects appropriately. If one element is larger than another, the audience will interpret that to mean the larger object is more important.

Take a look at the “before” slide (figure 5-2). It fails the glance test because it’s packed with text.

But when you streamline the text and incorporate simple visual elements—as in figure 5-3—you help the audience process the information much more quickly.

Presentation software gives us many shiny, seductive elements to work with. But there’s beauty and clarity in

FIGURE 5-2

Before

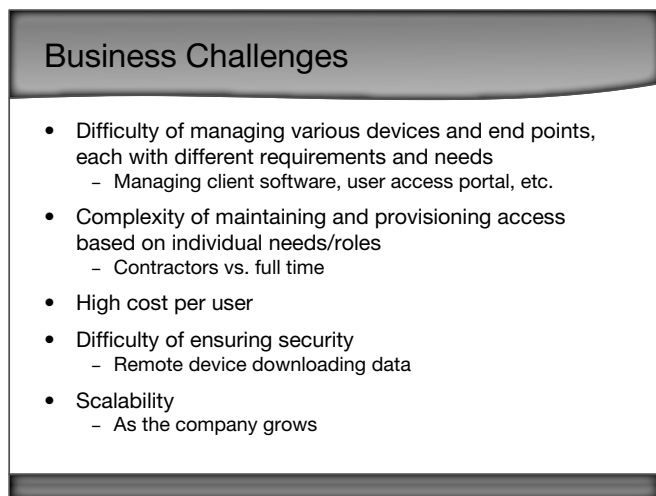
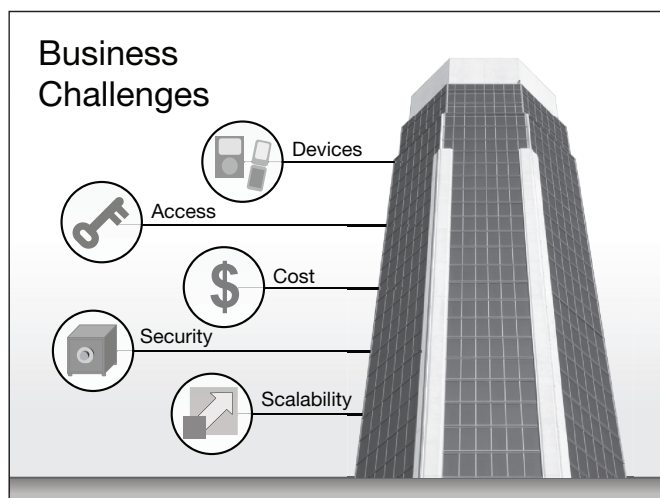


FIGURE 5-3

After



restraint. Though you can develop your visual sensibility by studying well-designed publications, you may also want to ask a professional designer to customize a template for you so you'll have a solid foundation to build from.

Choose the Right Type of Slide

If you're feeling overwhelmed by endless possibilities as you're creating slides, rest assured—all slides can be boiled down to the following types. Here's how they work, and when you'll use them.

Walk-in slide

This slide is already up when people enter the room. It creates the first impression. You may want it to display your company's branding, for example, or an image that sets the tone for your presentation.

Title slide

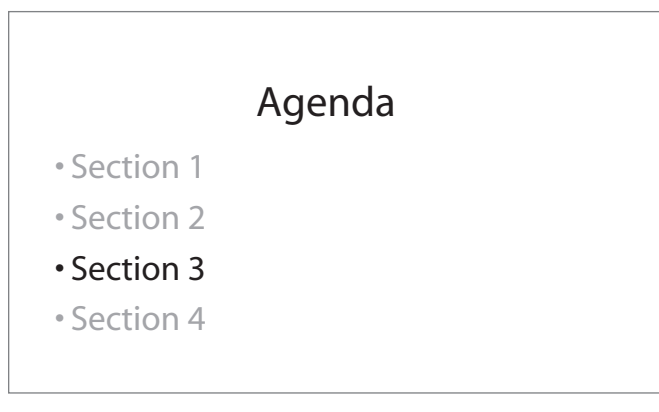
Here's where you show the title of your talk and (if you're addressing an external crowd) your name, title, and company. Include a title slide even if you don't state the title when you speak; it helps orient and focus the audience.

Navigation slide

This type of slide helps the audience see where you are in the presentation. You can, for example, show section

FIGURE 5-4

Navigation slide



titles as you move from point to point or periodically show an agenda slide that highlights where you are in your talk (see figure 5-4).

Bullet slide

Use bullets to cluster related ideas into a list, but don't display them all at once. If you do, your audience will get ahead of you—and get bored. Instead, control your pacing with a “build” (have each bullet appear as you cover it by animating each one). If the bullets on your slide don't have to be associated together, give each point its own slide.

Big-word slide

This type of slide shows a single word or short phrase in large type—the one message or idea you want to convey at that moment. Sometimes I use a single word to set up a visual surprise on the next slide. When I was speaking at a high-tech company's annual sales meeting, for

instance, I told a story about my first sales job: selling candy for the Camp Fire Girls as a kid. I had clipped a newspaper photo of my troop with a trophy for selling the most candy—but I wanted that part to be a surprise. So first, I slipped in a slide that said, “Victory is sweet.” This text not only explained an important reason *why* people sell but also teed up the photo showing our goofy fifth-grade smiles and our skinny arms holding up a trophy that was bigger than we were.

Quote slide

Project quotes by experts or from important documents to add credibility or factual support to your message, but clearly show where the material came from. Use quotation marks and include a source line. Project only one quote at a time—more than one will muddy the focus. And try not to exceed 30 words. That allows you to fit in attribution without sacrificing readability. You can also borrow a technique that I’ve seen several TED presenters use effectively: Supplement the visual with a recording of the person you’re quoting or (if that’s not available) add voice-over so the audience feels as if it’s reading along with the author of the quote.

Data slide

You may need to display data when explaining your research, for example, or reporting on your business unit’s performance, or making a controversial argument that requires proof. Be judicious, though, so you don’t overwhelm people with numbers they don’t really need to know. Visually emphasize what part of the data you want people to look at by rendering everything else in the chart

Slides

in gray (see “Clarify the Data” later in this section of the guide).

Diagram slide

Diagrams translate abstract, invisible concepts into something people can see. Use them to show connections between ideas or to illustrate processes. You may want to transform some of your bullet slides into diagrams to clarify the type of relationship your points and subpoints have with each other (see “Turn Words into Diagrams” later in this section).

Conceptual image slide

Sometimes showing is more powerful than telling. Project photos or illustrations to convey concepts or even

FIGURE 5-5

Conceptual image slide



combine them. Slaveryfootprint.org used the familiar image of a clothing tag with provocative wording to open consumers' eyes to the realities of slave labor in supply chains (figure 5-5).

Video slide

A video slide provides a nice break from a series of static slides. Use videos of talking heads to endorse your concept, for example, or animated infographics to explain it. Many images from stock photography houses also come in video versions.

Walk-out slide

Leave people with something useful as they exit the room. You may want to re-project a rousing call to action, show your contact information, or display a nicely branded slide and play music that reinforces the mood you've created.

Storyboard One Idea per Slide

Filmmakers sketch out their shots *before* production begins to make sure they'll hang together structurally, conceptually, and visually. Good presenters use a similar planning process before they sweat over their slides.

Sure, you're not Steven Spielberg, but don't be intimidated. Basic storyboarding isn't hard, and it saves you more time than it takes.

When you're storyboarding a presentation:

- **Keep it simple:** Draw small visual representations of your ideas on 1.5" × 2" sticky notes (see figure 5-6). Constraining your ideas to a small sketch space forces you to use simple, clear words and pictures as proof of concept before creating slides in presentation software. Don't be embarrassed by rudimentary sketches. This is an ideation phase; doodles work fine as long as you understand them (and if you don't, the concept is probably too complex anyway).

FIGURE 5-6

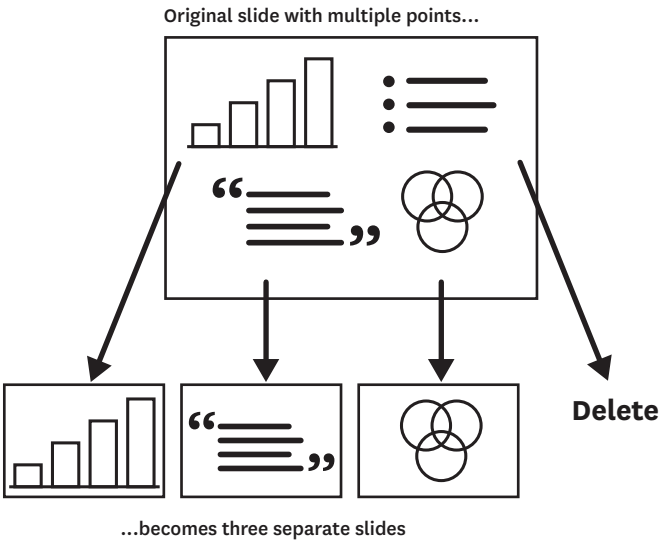
Use stickies to keep it simple



- **Limit yourself to one idea per slide:** There's no reason to crowd several ideas onto one slide. Slides are free. Make as many as you need to give each idea its own moment onstage (as in figure 5-7).

The sketching process helps you clarify what you want to say and how you want to say it. As Dan Roam, author of *The Back of the Napkin*, points out, “All the real problems of today are multidimensional. . . . There is no way to fully understand them—thus no way to effectively begin solving them—without at some point literally drawing them out.”

FIGURE 5-7

One idea per slide

As you storyboard, you'll be able to tell immediately which concepts are clunky or overly complex (you'll run out of space on your sticky notes). Eliminate them, and brainstorm new ways to communicate those messages.

Chances are good you can develop at least a couple of your storyboarding doodles into graphics or diagrams you'll actually use in the presentation. If they'll help the audience understand or remember your verbal message, they're worth including. But even if you don't display any images when you present, nice big type on the screen is better than dense prose.

Avoid Visual Clichés

When your CFO announces at an all-staff meeting that the company's financials are "right on target," does he treat you and your colleagues to the all-too-familiar image of a bull's-eye?

Nothing gets eyes a-glazing like a visual cliché. If you want your presentation to stand out (in a good way) from the others your audience has seen, throw out the first visual concepts that come to mind. They're the ones that occur to everyone else, too. Brainstorm several ideas for

TABLE 5-1

Find new visual metaphors

Concept	Cliché	Unique
Goal	Bull's-eye	Maze; threshold
Partnership	Handshake in front of globe	Reef ecosystem; Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers
Security	Lock and key	Doberman pinscher; pepper spray

Slides

each concept you want to illustrate—and you'll work your way toward fresh, surprising images.

Table 5-1 gives some examples of visual clichés and more-creative ways to illustrate the same concepts.

Arrange Slide Elements with Care

By carefully arranging your slide elements, you can help your audience process the information more easily—and that, as we’ve discussed, frees up people to hear what you’re saying.

Follow these five design principles when arranging elements to simplify your slides.

Flow

Placement governs flow—that is, how the eye travels across a space. You can direct people’s eyes to certain areas of a slide and help your audience get to the important points quickly. People should be able to move their eyes across your slide in one back-and-forth motion and be done processing the information.

In figure 5-8, your eye takes in the cluster of grapes, then moves to the text, then focuses on one individual grape.

FIGURE 5-8

Flow—Part 1



The next example (figure 5-9) shows one of a series of five points made. Your eye moves from left to right: You see the number 5 and the title, then your eye follows the path to the ridgeline.

Contrast

Our eyes are drawn to things that stand out, so designers use contrast to focus attention. Create contrast through your elements' size, shape, color, and proximity.

Look at figure 5-10, where the presenter compared cross-sections of skin and soil to show that tending to both requires an understanding of the microbiological activity beneath the surface. Notice how the blurred

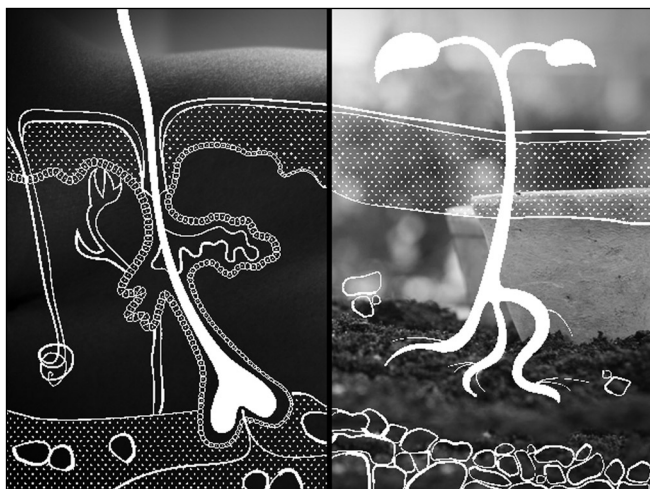
FIGURE 5-9

Flow—Part 2



FIGURE 5-10

Contrast



background images set off the stark white illustrations in high relief so they can be processed quickly.

White space

White space is the open space surrounding items of interest. Presenters are often tempted to fill it up with additional content that competes for attention. But including a healthy amount of white space imparts a feeling of luxury (advertisers have discovered that it creates higher perceived value) and sharpens viewers' focus by isolating elements.

That doesn't necessarily mean that everything is literally "white"—just that the design feels spacious. See the example in figure 5-11:

FIGURE 5-11

White space



If we'd paired the quote with a larger or more detailed image, your eye wouldn't know where to begin. Buried, the quote's message would have lost its power.

Hierarchy

A clear visual hierarchy allows viewers to quickly ascertain a slide's most important elements.

The sample slide in figure 5-12, citing a statistic from a recent McKinsey study, has a top-down hierarchy: You process the picture, and then the large percentage, and then the supporting copy.

Unity

Slides with visual unity look as though the same person created them and make your message feel cohesive. You

FIGURE 5-12

Hierarchy

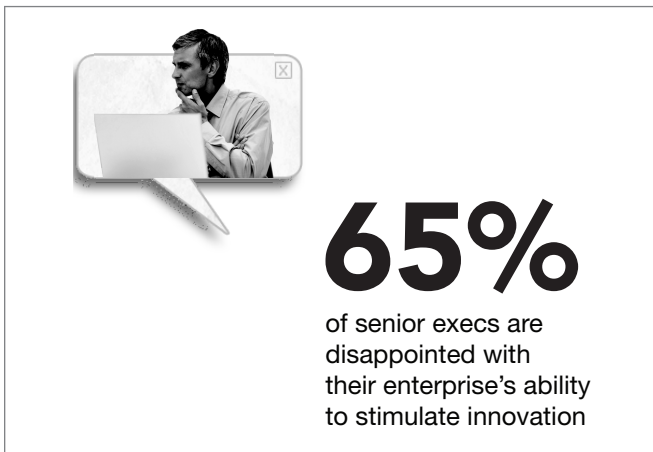


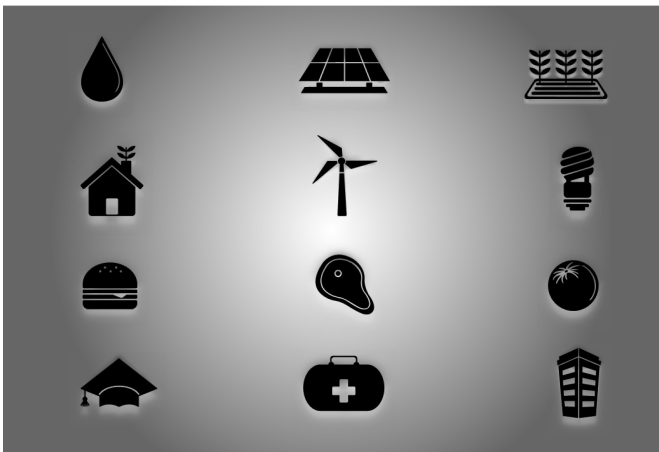
FIGURE 5-13

Unity—Part 1



FIGURE 5-14

Unity—Part 2



can achieve this through consistent type styles, color, image treatment, and element placement throughout the slide deck.

The slides in figures 5-13 and 5-14 feel united for a couple of reasons: Both of their backgrounds are dark around the edges and lighter in the middle. Also, all the type and the images are black.

Clarify the Data

When displaying data in a presentation, pursue clarity above all else. The people in your audience can't spend extra time with your projected charts or pull them closer to examine them, as they do with charts in print. They have to get meaning from your numbers at a distance, before you click away.

People will interpret your data slides first by reading the titles, then by looking at the shapes the data make, and then by reading the axes. It's a multistep process, complex to begin with. So if the information you're displaying is *visually complex*, the audience won't have time to comprehend it.

These rules of thumb will help you clarify—and simplify—your data.

Highlight what's important

Start by asking, “What would I like people to remember about the data?”—and give that point visual emphasis. If you're projecting a chart about sales trends over five years but talking specifically about how sales are consistently low in the first quarter, show the first-quarter bar of each year in a rich color and other bars in a neutral

color, like gray. Deemphasize grid lines, borders, axes, and labels—you'll provide that kind of context when you speak, so your visuals don't have to—and use contrast (color, size, or position) to draw the viewer's eye to where the meaning is.

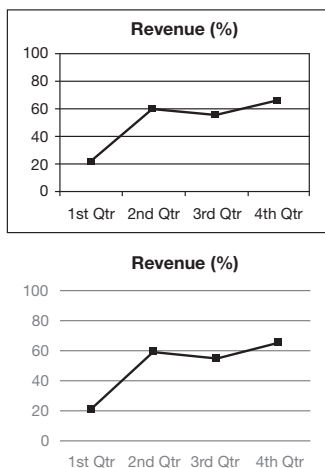
Notice in figure 5-15 (top) how the grid lines and borders all have the same weight as the data, so the eye doesn't know where to go first. But the bottom image—borderless, with muted axes and gridlines—takes viewers right to the point: They see immediately that revenue leveled off after a spike early in the year.

Tell the truth

This may seem obvious, but many presenters play fast and loose with their charts. If you don't have a *z*-axis in

FIGURE 5-15

Highlight what's important



your data, omit 3-D effects—the depth can make your numbers look larger than they are. In a 3-D pie chart, for example, the pie piece in the foreground appears deceptively larger than the rest. Also, don't alter the proportions of your axes. Doing so can make a change in the numbers look more significant (figure 5-16a) or less so (figure 5-16b). Square grid lines (figure 5-16c) will keep your data true.

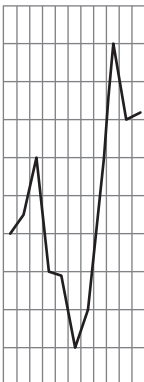
Pick the right chart for the job

The most common charts in business are pies, bars, matrices, and line graphs. They serve different purposes, though. Use a line graph instead of a bar chart if the shape of the line will draw attention to your most impor-

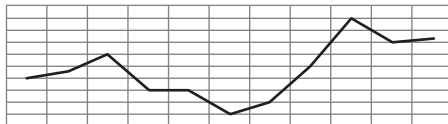
FIGURE 5-16

Tell the truth

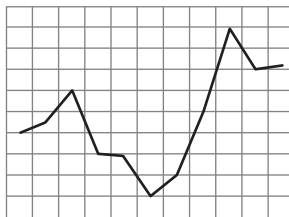
a. Exaggerated vertical scale



b. Exaggerated horizontal scale



c. Accurate scale



tant point. Use a matrix instead of multiple pie charts if you want to show relationships between the data points.

For example, the slide in figure 5-17 uses pie charts to show how airline ticket sales break down between three different sales channels: online, agents, and direct sales. But there's not much you can deduce from these charts, because they're visually similar.

Lay out the data in a matrix, however, and suddenly it's clear that total sales for Airline 3 are almost double the others (figure 5-18).

Sometimes the best chart is no chart at all. If a number conveys your key message most clearly on its own, show just that number—huge—on the slide.

FIGURE 5-17

The wrong chart for the job

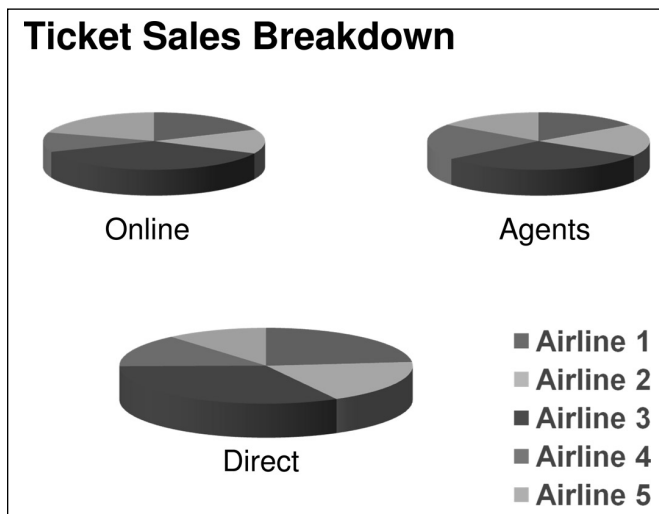


FIGURE 5-18

The right chart for the job

Ticket Sales Breakdown					
	Airline 1	Airline 2	Airline 3	Airline 4	Airline 5
Online	20	15	40	12	22
Agents	15	18	30	20	15
Direct	25	20	35	15	12
Total	60	53	105	47	49

Find the narrative in the data

Explain not just the “what,” but the “why” and the “how” of your data. Maybe the numbers went up, but what *made* them go up? What impact did people have on them? How will people be affected *by* them?

Use concrete comparisons to express magnitude

The bigger a number is, the tougher it is to grasp. Millions, billions, and trillions sound a lot alike, but they’re nowhere near each other in magnitude. Help your audience understand scale by communicating large numbers

Slides

in concrete terms. For example, if you're trying to get an audience to visualize a billion square feet, hold up a carpet square that's $12'' \times 12''$ and tell them it would take a billion of those squares to cover Manhattan.

Turn Words into Diagrams

Diagrams are great tools for illustrating relationships. They clarify concepts so an audience can see at a glance how parts of a whole work together. For example, if your organization is merging with two others, you can use a diagram of three overlapping circles to signify redundancies between departments. Or if you want to encourage your team members to innovate iteratively, try using a flow diagram that loops back on itself in several places to illustrate the process of working out kinks in a prototype.

When you're creating your presentation visuals, try turning some of your words into diagrams that *reinforce* your speech. It's easy to translate words into diagrams when you have a visual taxonomy at your disposal—and I'm providing one here.

Because my firm has visualized concepts for companies and brands for more than 20 years, my designers' notebooks are filled with great business diagrams. Looking for patterns, I clipped thousands of sketches from those notebooks and sorted them into the following commonly used (and universally understood) types of diagrams.

FIGURE 5-19

Types of diagrams

A Network

HUB AND
SPOKES



SPOKES



FLARE



RING



B Segment

DONUT

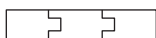


PIE



C Join

HOOK



OVERLAP



D Flow

LOOP



PARALLEL



LINEAR



MERGE
AND
DIVIDE



E Stack

VERTICAL



HORIZONTAL



CONCENTRIC



The diagrams in figure 5-19 illustrate these kinds of relationships:

- **Network**

Example: A hub-and-spokes diagram can illustrate the stakeholders from various departments who come together to make an initiative successful.

- **Segment**

Example: A donut can show how separate products fit into a suite of offerings.

- **Join**

Example: A hook diagram can depict a relationship between supply chain partners.

- **Flow**

Example: Parallel arrows can show two teams working in concert toward a goal.

- **Stack**

Example: Vertical layers can illustrate discrete fiscal-year goals as building blocks that will lead to profitability.

So, how can you use these diagrams in your presentation? Look through your slides and find a list of bullets. Those bullets should “feel” related—that’s why you grouped them together in the first place. Circle the verbs or nouns on the slide and consider *how* they’re related.

That relationship will most likely fall into one of the categories in figure 5-19. Now see if you can use one of the diagrams in that category to replace your bullet slide. Repeat the process with other text slides.

Consider two sets of slides (figures 5-20a and 5-20b; figures 5-21a and 5-21b) showing how a list of bullet points (“Before”) can be turned into a diagram (“After”).

The taxonomy in figure 5-19 isn’t exhaustive, and there’s room for creativity within each category. You can use different shapes and styles for the nodes and connectors, and so on (go to diagrammer.com for thousands of choices). But it covers most of the bases, so it takes some of the pressure off as you’re working to meet your deadline.

FIGURE 5-20a

Before

We follow the same basic process every time

- We start with the invention. We take early stage ideas and turn them into demos—not technical demos but conceptual ones, like the rough version of Flare you saw.
- Then our team takes this seed of an idea to customers, in conferences and forums, to get feedback that helps us shape it into something even more useful.
- We improve it and build a prototype that we give to a set of early adopters, who use it and give us more feedback.
- Eventually, after a few quick cycles of this process, we standardize the product features.
- Only then is it ready to go out to our larger group of customers, like the finished version of Flare you saw.

FIGURE 5-20b

After

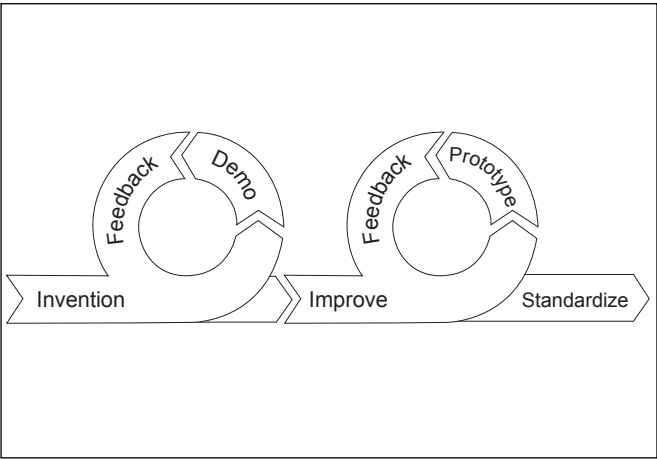


FIGURE 5-21a

Before

Research Programs

Concentrate on four research programs

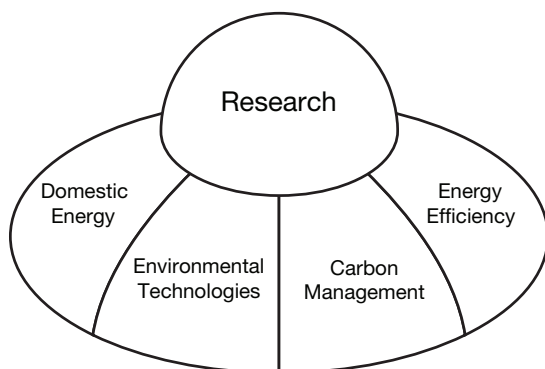
- Domestic Energy Development
- Environmental Technologies
- Carbon Management
- Energy Efficiency

The potential impact of all of our programs will extend beyond policy makers to corporations and citizens around the world.

FIGURE 5-21b

After

Concentrate on Four Programs



Use the Right Number of Slides

How many slides should you have? That depends on your audience, the technology you're using, the setting you're in, your own sense of pacing, and how comfortable you are with a clicker. Some presenters could spend an hour on three slides; others could go through 200 or more and you'd never know it.

Consider these slide-count variables as you're creating your presentation.

No slides

If you need to make a very personal connection with your audience or you're delivering a short talk in a casual environment, go without slides. They don't work in every situation. As Andrew Dlugan says in his "Six Minutes" blog about public speaking, presenters shouldn't use slides in a commencement speech, a eulogy, a wedding toast, or a layoff announcement. If you're unsure whether they're appropriate, bring them with you but also carry a print-out of your slide notes in case you decide when you arrive that it's best to leave your laptop off.

Moderate slide count

Some experts recommend 1 to 2 slides per minute, or 30 to 60 slides for an hour-long talk. That's about the average count in corporate presentations—but most of them cram too much information on each slide. If you've broken your content down to one idea per slide (see “Storyboard One Idea per Slide” earlier in the Slides section), you may end up with more than 60.

High slide count

Some presenters use 5 slides per minute. This rapid-fire style keeps the audience extra alert because people will visually reengage with each click—but it requires a lot of rehearsal and careful pacing. In a 40-minute talk, I typically use 145 slides. (If you count “builds” within each slide—where I reveal bullets one at a time, and so forth—I click up to 300 times.) But when I ask audiences how many slides they think I used, they usually say between 30 and 50.

Social media slide count

The most popular presentations on social media sites like slideshare.com have more than 75 slides that you can read in 2 to 3 minutes. They also tend to be built like children's books—sentence, visual, sentence, visual—to facilitate quick clicking.

Don't worry about slide count. Just make your *slides* count.

Know When to Animate

When things move, eyes are drawn to them. So animation is a powerful communication tool—but only when applied judiciously and in a way that enhances your message.

It's tempting to include every feature and flashy effect that's available—but that would be like adding rhinestones to every outfit in your closet. You'd be blinded by all the bling when you opened the door, and you wouldn't know what to pick.

Effective animation:

- **Shows how things work:** Use animation and motion to control eye movement as you reveal how things are put together, explain changes, show direction, or illustrate sequence. If, for example, you've got a stack of boxes showing how parts of your software application fit together, you can provide information on one part at a time, without crowding the visual: When you click on a box,

have a “drawer” slide out from behind it to reveal details.

- **Creates contrast:** Show many slides with no animation so that when you do use it, it stands out.
- **Looks natural:** Just like actors on a stage, elements can enter your slide, interact, and then leave the scene. But the movement should seem natural and controlled, not busy and frenetic.
- **Does not annoy:** Most content isn't any clearer if you make it spin, twitch, or twirl. Gratuitous features like these just get on people's nerves, so don't waste time on them.

Section 6

Delivery

Golden Rule: Never deliver a presentation you wouldn't want to sit through.

—Motto at Duarte, Inc.

Rehearse Your Material Well

There's no such thing as overrehearsing your delivery. Not that you should memorize your talk—if you do, you'll come across as stiff and struggle to connect with the audience. But know your material inside and out. That way, you can adapt more easily if the environment, audience, or technology suddenly changes on you (something often does). Also, audiences can tell if you try to wing it—and they feel slighted. It sends the message that you don't value them or their time. Perhaps most important, rehearsing frees you up to be more *present* in your talk and fully engage with the people in front of you.

When you rehearse, leave plenty of time to:

- **Get honest feedback from a skilled presenter:** As the presenter, you're so familiar with (and probably attached to) your ideas that you may think you're making each point more clearly and persuasively than you are. So ask a skilled presenter to give you honest feedback. Give her a printout

of your slides and have her jot down what you say well, what you don't, what's essential to keep, and what's distracting. She might say things like: "When you put it that way, people won't follow you," and "That term sounds derogatory to me," and "I thought you expressed it better last time, when you said . . ." The extra set of eyes and ears helps you see and hear yourself as the audience will.

- **Prepare a short version:** Many variables in a presentation can go wrong, leaving you with less time than you expected. The technology doesn't always work. Other speakers might cut into your time slot by running long. An impatient executive may interrupt you with lots of questions. Prepare a presentation that fits your scheduled time, but also craft and rehearse a version that's much shorter, just in case.
- **Fiddle with your slides:** Continue to tweak your slides until the day you present. Refining a bit of text here and adding an image there is a form of rehearsal. You become more deeply familiar with the content as you engage with your slides—so when you present, they feel seamlessly integrated with your message, not tacked-on or disruptive.
- **Rehearse a few times in slide-show mode:** Because slide-show mode doesn't allow you to peek at the notes view, it forces you into an even greater familiarity with the material and allows you to focus

on pacing and visualize the flow. Look for choppy transitions from slide to slide, inconsistent graphics, and awkward builds as you reveal new bullets, so you can smooth things out.

- **Practice on camera:** Record some of your final rehearsals on video. You don't need a professional setup. Use a webcam or the camera on your cell phone or tablet. Pretend you are in front of an audience, and address the camera as if it's a person. When you're done, review the video to assess not just your content but also your stage presence, eye contact, facial expressions, gestures, and ease of movement. Identify where you don't appear natural, relaxed, or in command of your material—and work on those areas.

Know the Venue and Schedule

Scoping out the room in advance will help you navigate it. If you can't check it out in person, look for details online or ask the host to describe it. Sometimes, if you get this information early enough, you can change the setup to meet your preferences. If you're leading an off-site meeting for a team of six, for example, and you've been assigned a large conference space, see if you can get a cozier room—or at least a smaller table to encourage discussion.

Don't make any assumptions about the space. When I was invited to speak to 70 people at Google, in my head I pictured rows of chairs. But when I got there, I was taken to a tiny conference room with 20 people crammed in—and 50 small faces of webcam participants projected on the wall. If I'd known what the room would be like, I would have prepared to facilitate a conversation instead of delivering a formal presentation. Instead, I found myself making lots of last-minute mental adjustments, like

figuring out where to stand and where to focus my eye contact, and that threw me off my stride.

Avoid such surprises by getting information about:

- **Floor and seating plan:** How is the room arranged? Does it have classroom seating? Round tables? Is the size of the room appropriate for the number of attendees you expect? It's better for people to sit close together, feeding off one another's energy, than to feel lost and disconnected in a cavernous space. Will you be elevated on a stage? Will the audience be able to see you if you stand on the same level as everyone else to make your talk feel less like a lecture? Do you have room to walk around and connect with people? If you'll be on stage, where will the lights hit the floor? Mark any pockets of darkness with tape so you can avoid them (important for talks recorded on video). Does the room have any poles that will obstruct the audience's view? Do what you can to work around them. Is there a podium? Remove it—it's a visual barrier that puts distance between you and the audience—unless you need a place to put your notes.
- **Food plan:** Are you presenting near a mealtime? Find out whether food will be provided. If not, build in time for people—including yourself—to grab a bite. Or if you're presenting within your organization, bring some snacks. A hungry audience won't focus on your message. Will you be speak-

ing during a sit-down meal? You'll need adequate amplification so people can hear you above the sounds of forks and knives. Or see if you can wait until the food service crew clears the dishes before you speak.

- **Show flow:** What will the order of events be? Check with the organizer. Will you be introduced, or do you need to prepare your own introduction? Who will speak before you and after you? What messages will others present? It's nice to reference things others are saying. If you're toward the end of a long list of speakers, keep your message short and simple—the audience will already be tired and overloaded with information. And if you're following a presenter with a contrary view, you can prepare to address any seeds of resistance he might plant in the audience. Speaking at a conference? Look at sessions in the same time slot as yours to find out if you'll be competing with a popular workshop, for example, or a famous author doing a book signing. That'll help you gauge whether the room will fill up.
- **Recording:** Will your talk be recorded? If so, locate the cameras and look at them often to connect with remote viewers or listeners. Do you want to restrict distribution of your recorded presentation? Make that clear to the organizers. Once, when I spoke to a group of 250 professional women about overcoming obstacles, I knew I was being

Delivery

recorded but thought only attendees could access the recording, via a password-protected website. A local TV channel ended up broadcasting my entire presentation. My talk was very raw. I wouldn't have gotten so personal if I'd known it would go beyond the room.

Anticipate Technology Glitches

Equipment often malfunctions—even for people who aren't as technologically challenged as I am. So arrange a tech walkthrough or, if that's not possible, give yourself *at least* 30 minutes to set up.

Here's a checklist I've developed after years of trial by fire to avoid last-minute frenzy from tech glitches:

- **Get to know the AV person:** Learn his name and treat him well. He'll work extra hard and extra fast for you if he likes you.
- **Test all the equipment:** Do a dry run using the projector, the clicker, and any audio equipment beforehand. Make sure it all works.
- **Bring backups:** If a piece of technology is critical to the success of your talk, request that it be provided—but also bring your own. That goes

for the projector, the cables needed to connect it, the clicker, and any audio equipment you'll need. I travel with my own speakers because at-venue audio often doesn't work. Venture capitalist and former Apple marketer Guy Kawasaki even brings his own in-ear microphone when he presents. Also, back up the content of your presentation on drives and in the cloud—and make printouts of your slides and notes.

- **Prerecord your demos:** If you're planning to demonstrate software, an app, or a website, have a recorded version of your demo on your machine in case the Internet connection is slow or down at the time of your talk.
- **Test your slide deck:** Click through every single slide. This is your last time to see what the slides look like projected in the room. You want to confirm that you've grabbed the right version, that everything is legible from the back of the room, and that each time you click, the slides advance to the right content. Sometimes the distance between the clicker and the computer backstage is too far for the signal to reach, and the AV team has to make adjustments.
- **Try out the comfort monitors:** Confirm that your comfort monitors (teleprompters) work and you can read from them. At a technical walkthrough the day before a presentation, I discovered that my comfort monitors were so small I couldn't read

anything from the stage. I wanted to use monitors rather than rely solely on printouts because I'd be quoting lengthy excerpts from famous speeches. So that night, I doubled the font size and saved myself a lot of embarrassment.

- **Play all media:** When transferring files to a venue's machines, it's easy to forget to grab video and audio files. Double-check that you have all your media in one folder and that the file types will play on the machines you'll be using.
- **Confirm type of projection:** Check the screen's aspect ratio (usually 16:9 or 4:3), and make sure your slides are the right dimensions. Also consider whether they'll be front- or rear-projected—and mark the floor with tape so you won't walk through the light beam and have slides projected across your face when you're speaking.
- **Find out if people will attend remotely:** The odds of technical mishaps go way up in remote presentations—especially ones that involve last-minute equipment changes. Once I tested all my videos before walking onstage, only to discover moments before I began speaking that the AV crew switched machines to accommodate a large remote group. The crew forgot to copy over my video files—so I did my best to describe what people *would have seen* if we had those files.

Manage Your Stage Fright

Before you present, does your heart speed up? Do you sweat? Does your mouth go dry and your breathing become erratic? That's your fight-or-flight instinct kicking in. Your body is telling you to flee because your brain perceives the audience as a possible threat: People might judge, challenge, or resist you.

You may also fear the fact that presentation delivery can't be undone. It's live, and it's final.

A little bit of fear can be a good thing. I actually do a better job of presenting when I'm mildly nervous—it's like a shot of adrenaline. But don't let it overwhelm you.

Here are a few ways to manage your stage fright before you present:

- **Quiet your mind:** Stop the self-critical internal chatter and think instead about something that calms you. Take a short walk outside. Listen to soothing music.

- **Breathe:** Sit on a chair or the floor, breathe deeply, and hold it in. Then take in one more gasp of air to fill your lungs even more—and let it all out very slowly. By doing this four times in a row, I can calm my body down in less than a minute.
- **Laugh:** Read your favorite humor website or watch a funny video. Laughing doesn't just distract you from your fear—it releases tension.
- **Visualize:** Communication coach Nick Morgan, the author of *Trust Me*, suggests my favorite fear-busting technique: “Role-play in your mind a communication between you and your favorite person. . . . Form a memory of what that feels like physically, not about what you say. Notice everything you can about your behavior. . . . What are you doing with your hands? . . . How close are you? . . . Catalogue and remember the behavior, and then use that behavior.”
- **Remember your audience's flaws:** You've spent time thinking about how the people in your audience might resist your message—and rightly so. They do have that power. But, having studied them, you should also have insights into what makes *them* human and frail. Remembering that they're just as flawed as you are will help calm your nerves.

Set the Right Tone for Your Talk

Your audience will size you up before you utter a word—so it's critical to make a positive, message-appropriate first impression.

What's the first thing you want people to think or experience? What mood do you want to create? Set the right tone for your talk by attending to the following details.

Precommunication

When you invite others to your presentation, send a thoughtfully written agenda with a concise but telling subject line—and be explicit about what the audience will get out of it. All communication leading up to your talk will affect your credibility and impact—so put as much thought and care into it as into the presentation itself. (See “Persuade Beyond the Stage” in the Media section.)

Atmosphere

Special touches in the room let people know what to expect and prime them for the type of experience you

Delivery

want them to have. If you're giving a calculated, chilling speech, a cold, sparsely appointed room works. Use bright lighting for a casual talk; go a bit darker for a formal one. Provide refreshments (even for small, familiar groups) to make people feel welcome. Music, props, and projected images can also help set the tone.

Appearance

As much as you want the audience to like you for your mind, people will make quick judgments based on your appearance. Suit up to address potential clients, for example, or investors. Dress more casually when introducing yourself to a new group of direct reports, to signal that you're accessible. In *Enchantment: The Art of Changing Hearts, Minds, and Actions*, Guy Kawasaki suggests matching your audience (or dressing for a "tie"). If you underdress, you're saying, "I don't respect you"; and if you overdress, you're saying, "I'm better than you."

Disposition

The moment people see you, your disposition should prepare them for your message. For your content to ring true, do you need to come across as passionate? Humbled by the challenges ahead? If you're announcing a layoff, be somber, not smiley. If your talk is upbeat, chat with individuals as the group gathers; shake hands if you're meeting for the first time. No matter what tone you're trying to establish, be available and sincere.

Be Yourself

Transparency wins people over. Though you'll want to come across as smart and articulate, it's even more important to be open and sincere so people will trust you and your ideas.

It's OK if you're nervous. Audiences are gracious. As business communication expert Victoria Labalme points out, they'll "forgive a stumble, an 'um,' or a section where you backtrack as long as they know that your heart is in the right place."

She adds: "Your audience wants you to be real. So avoid sounding like a corporate spokesperson—but don't portray false humility, either. Playing small and meek when inside you know (and the audience knows) you're a giant will not win you any fans. Authenticity means claiming who you are."

If you love what you do, for instance, let your enthusiasm show.

Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer explodes with so much passion when he presents that his sweaty, breathless dancing became a YouTube phenomenon (figure 6-1).

FIGURE 6-1

Steve Ballmer's famous "monkey boy" dance



In a January 2012 article about Ballmer, *BusinessWeek* mused, “He plays the cheerleader in public appearances in an apparent effort to prove that no one can top his love of Microsoft—and he succeeds cringingly well.” It’s over-the-top, but it’s all him. No one questions his authenticity, and the man can rally his troops.

And then there’s Susan Cain, who took the opposite tack when she gave one of the most buzzed-about talks at TED 2012. Cain spoke quietly and convincingly about being an introvert in a world that rewards extroverts. Her style suited her—and her subject matter—perfectly. She seemed comfortable onstage, but she certainly wasn’t dramatic or even passionate. That wouldn’t have been natural, given her personality and her topic. Instead, she delivered her message in a way that would resonate with fellow introverts: “The world needs you, and it needs the things you carry. So I wish you the best of all possible journeys and the courage to speak softly.”

Communicate with Your Body

People will read your body language to decide if they can trust you and your expertise. Constricted and contrived gestures will make you seem insecure. Larger movement conveys confidence and openness.

Use your physical expression to its fullest with the following techniques:

- **Project emotion with your face:** Connect with the audience by using your face to convey your feelings. Smile, laugh, open your mouth in disbelief. Before you begin your talk, try moving every facial muscle you can—it'll help you warm up.
- **Peel yourself away from your slides:** If you turn your back to the audience to look at your slides, you put up a barrier. As much as you can, keep your eyes on the people who have come to hear you.
- **Open up your posture:** Avoid a “closed” stance, such as folding your arms, standing with legs

crossed, putting your hands in your pockets, or clasping your hands behind or in front of you. It signals discomfort.

- **Exaggerate your movements:** Fill the space around you, especially if you're speaking in a large room. Use the same types of gestures you would if you were having a personal conversation—but make them bigger and more deliberate. Before your presentation, stretch your arms as wide as you can and as tall as you can (even stand on your toes). This helps you open up your chest cavity and practice exaggerating your gestures.
- **Match gestures with content:** Gestures should complement or amplify what you're saying. If you're presenting a record year in sales, go “big” with your arms and your smile. If your team barely missed its targets, bring everything in, perhaps showing a tiny little gap between your thumb and forefinger.

Brain scientist Jill Bolte Taylor coordinated her gestures and content beautifully when she described in her 2008 TED talk what it was like to have a massive stroke. She threw her arms upward to convey the unexpected rush of euphoria she'd felt as the left side of her brain shut down (figure 6-2a); she brought them back down when she described how she'd surrendered her spirit, ready to transition out of this world (figure 6-2b).

When you tape yourself in rehearsal, you may identify gestures, movements, or facial expressions that look

FIGURE 6-2a

Jill Bolte Taylor, arms up



FIGURE 6-2b

Jill Bolte Taylor, arms down



Delivery

lackluster or unnatural. Re-create those gestures so you can physically feel them, and then practice new ones that would be appropriate replacements. As with golf, focus on how it feels as you do it so you can create “muscle memory” of what works.

Communicate with Your Voice

Your voice is multitalented. It can sound:

- **Assertive:** Firm, unyielding, significant, focused
- **Cautious:** Measured, enunciated, understated
- **Critical:** Harsh, angry, upset, pointed, caustic
- **Humorous:** Comedic, light, novel, irreverent
- **Motivational:** Uplifting, encouraging, friendly
- **Sympathetic:** Emotional, moving, personal, delicate
- **Neutral:** Casual, technical, dispassionate, informative

And it does all this through pitch, tone, volume, pacing, and enunciation.

Many business presenters have a dispassionate vocal style, assuming that it makes them sound objective or authoritative. But a flat delivery will bore your audience.

Instead, create contrast—and emphasis—through vocal variation. You can do this on your own or by tag-teaming with someone else. When my husband and I copresent our company's vision each year, our contrasting styles come through: He's soft-spoken and charmingly funny, whereas I'm dramatic and passionate. That mix works well for our content. He gets everyone to reflect on the firm's success, and I talk about the future with bold enthusiasm.

To ensure that your content comes through clearly, identify and remove verbal tics. Because silence makes most speakers uncomfortable, they tend to use words such as “um,” “uh,” “you know,” “like,” and “anyway” to fill up space between points. They'd almost always be better served by a pause, which gives the audience a chance to reflect.

I didn't think I had any verbal tics until I watched myself on video. After each key point, I said, “Right?” with an annoying lilt in my tone. It didn't take me long to remove that from my repertoire. I watched the video several times to cement it in my mind. At my very next speaking gig, I said it. Once. This word I didn't even know I used suddenly sounded like fingernails on a chalkboard. I caught myself two more times about to say it—and stopped. Becoming self-aware and really hearing how bad it sounded helped me correct myself in the moment.

Make Your Stories Come to Life

The beauty of an honest story—whether comedic or dramatic—is that it touches people. (See the Story section for details on how to apply storytelling principles when crafting and structuring your content.) But even the most compelling stories lose their power if they're not told well. How do you make yours come to life? Try the following two tips from business communication expert Victoria Labalme.

Reexperience your stories

Broadway actors relive stories each time they perform. It's how they keep their material fresh and engage audiences show after show. You can do the same. If you're talking about the time you got lost in a strange city at night to make a point about finding your way when there's no one around to guide you, re-create that scene. Don't be melodramatic or ridiculous. But narrate the story as if you're still in the moment, and you'll increase its impact

on your audience. Use evocative, descriptive words. Enhance them with your stance and gestures.

One CEO reenacts the moment when his CFO came into his office and recommended that they not invest in subprime mortgages. The story is riveting partly because audiences know, in hindsight, how high the stakes were—but also because the CEO brings people *into* the scene. He describes the wood-paneled room, the view out the window on a clear day, and the moment of his razor’s-edge decision—a decision that ultimately saved the company hundreds of millions of dollars. He then acknowledges his CFO for his sage advice at this critical juncture.

Rarely does someone approach a speaker weeks after a presentation to say, “I loved your third point on leadership.” What people do say, however, is “I still think of the story you told . . .”

Use sensory details to set the scene

The more you can invoke the senses when telling a story, the better. Paint a visual picture, or the audience is left with a blank canvas. Also describe sounds, tastes, smells, and how things feel to the touch. “I waited in a chilly, mildewed alcove the size of an elevator” says a lot more than “I waited in a small room.” By grounding yourself in such details, you’ll avoid flowery, empty language reminiscent of greeting cards and embroidery pillows. You’ll give your stories credibility and staying power.

Work Effectively with Your Interpreter

As companies do business farther and farther from home, presenters increasingly need translation. And working with an interpreter always complicates things. You can make it easier, though, with preparation.

Start by picking the right type of interpreter for your situation. Three types are available:

- **Simultaneous:** The interpreter sits in a soundproof booth while you present without disruption. Audience members who need translation wear earphones. When I spoke to a large group of business leaders in Taiwan, more than half the audience used earphones. As a result, I got through a lot of material with little time lost. Simultaneous interpretation requires more overhead than the other types do, since it involves technology.

- **Consecutive:** The interpreter shares the stage with you. After you make a point, you pause for her to relay what you've said. You can use this approach in less-formal settings or if you don't have the budget for simultaneous interpretation.
- **Whispering:** Here, the interpreter whispers translation to you when audience members make comments or raise questions. This approach works best if you are familiar enough with the language to understand most of what's said but need help here and there with specific words and phrases.

Once you've sorted out which kind you need, here's how to choose the right person and work effectively with her. If you can, allow up to a month to do the following:

- **Test your chemistry:** Some interpreters bring energy to the presentation; others can drain you. Spend time speaking with yours before you hire her. If you have time to interview a few candidates, all the better. You'll know someone's a good fit if she makes you laugh, for example, or calms you down. The interpreter shouldn't agitate you in any way—public speaking in a different culture is hard enough as it is. You should trust that she values your material and will represent it well.
- **Call in reinforcements:** If you can't find an excellent interpreter who's also a subject matter expert (a rare breed), use the professional interpreter as

your primary source of translation—but also enlist an expert who speaks both languages to help out. That way you'll have someone who can correct the interpreter if she makes content mistakes here and there, in real time, or who can simply step in at a point where the material gets highly specialized or technical.

- **Prepare half as much material:** If you are given an hour, prepare 30 minutes' worth of material. It takes twice as long to convey your message with a consecutive interpreter—and even with the other types, you'll need extra time to translate any Q&A discussion.
- **Send your notes:** A week ahead of time, send over your notes or a transcript of a similar talk so the interpreter can practice. Even if you don't deliver your presentation exactly the same way, she'll get a feel for your material and style.
- **Work through idioms and metaphors:** Many phrases and sayings have no direct corollaries in other languages. If you've sent your notes or a transcript in advance, your interpreter will have time to flag anything that doesn't translate clearly. She can then suggest regional stories and metaphors that would work in her culture.
- **Practice pacing:** Rehearse with your interpreter when you arrive to get a sense of how much material she can translate at a time. Have her coach you

on your speed of delivery, so she can keep up *and* audience members can process what you're saying.

- **Complete each thought:** Each burst of content should be a concise but complete thought. Otherwise, you'll leave people hanging midphrase while the interpreter translates the first half of your point. Keeping your statements short and sweet makes it easy for the audience to follow you and engage with you.

Get the Most out of Your Q&A

A Q&A is a powerful, interactive way to address your audience's concerns *and* drive your point home. Always allow time for Q&A in a business presentation—trim your talk if necessary. When people leave the room with burning, unanswered questions, they won't adopt your ideas.

Get the most out of your Q&A by:

- **Planning when you'll take questions:** Establish early on if you want to field questions throughout your talk or save them until the end. If you need to build a thorough case, ask people at the very beginning to hold questions until the end. But if you're making a series of points, you can take questions after each one, while they're fresh in people's minds.
- **Anticipating questions:** You can spend hours preparing a presentation and deliver it beautifully—and then undo all your hard work and undermine your credibility by fumbling a response to an un-

expected question. Think through *any* questions the audience might raise, from the mundane to the hostile. (See “Anticipate Resistance” in the Message section.) Prepare answers ahead of time so you won’t be thrown off your game when all eyes are on you. Rehearse those answers, but still be mentally prepared for curveballs. Some questioners may feel a need to publicly challenge your idea. When that happens, it’s important to keep your composure. Knowing your material inside-out will help immensely.

- **Listening empathetically for subtext:** Answer questions directly, but also try to identify and address any deeper ones behind them. (You’ll often find a larger issue or unspoken motive lurking in the shadows.) Say you’re in HR and you’re hosting an orientation for employees from a recently acquired company. If people ask why they don’t get to have monthly employee birthday parties anymore, you may be tempted to brush that off as silly—but the parties are probably a symbol of a bigger underlying problem. The question *behind* the question might be: “The culture we used to have isn’t valued here. How can we hang on to some of the traditions that made our organization feel like a family?”
- **Admitting when you don’t know something:** Don’t fake an answer. Ever. Your audience will see right through it. If you don’t know the answer to a question, say that—and offer to do some research after the presentation and get back to the group.

- **Keeping a tight rein on large or tough crowds:**

If you're presenting to a large group, ask a Q&A moderator to graciously take the microphone back after each question is asked. That way, one aggressive question won't turn into a barrage. Or, if you don't have a moderator, let the audience know up front that you're answering one question per person so more folks will have a chance to participate.

When I took delivery training classes, I learned to acknowledge questions from angry inquisitors—but to look at *other* audience members when answering them so it's easier to move on to the next person and keep the discussion constructive. If your topic is emotionally charged or you're addressing a crisis—a safety recall, for example—have a facilitator filter the questions. He can compile a mix of tough questions and lighter ones that might get a laugh, and omit those that stray off topic or seem to have a personal agenda behind them. He can also plant questions the audience might be too intimidated to ask—for instance, “Will people lose their jobs if we don't make our numbers this year?”

- **Leaving a strong final impression:** Don't end abruptly after the Q&A—it feels incomplete and unsatisfying to the audience, and you'll miss an opportunity to reinforce your message. Wrap up the discussion with a brief summary that recaps the “new bliss” you're helping the audience achieve. (See “Make the Ending Powerful” in the Story section.)

Build Trust with a Remote Audience

Thanks to easily accessible webinar and teleconference technology, about 80% of corporate presentations are delivered remotely, according to several live surveys I've conducted with audiences at large companies in a range of industries. That's a stunning percentage. Any time technology revolutionizes how we communicate, there's a trade-off: Communication theorist Marshall McLuhan pointed it out when he proposed his system for examining the impact of new media on society. Use his system to examine remote presenting (figure 6-3), and you'll see both positive and negative outcomes.

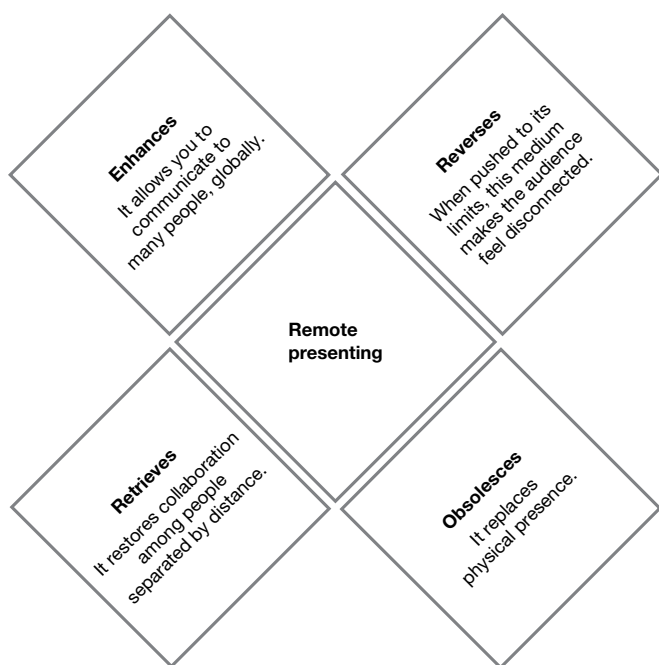
Even though it's designed to connect people remotely and even globally, the technology isolates participants from human contact. So how do you solve that problem? How do you build trust with your remote audience? That depends on whether you incorporate video streaming.

With video streaming

When you're visible to the audience, your body language—particularly eye contact and gestures—can help

FIGURE 6-3

Pros and cons of remote presenting



you connect with people (see “Communicate with Your Body” earlier in this section). If you glance at your notes or slides too often, your eyes will look shifty, so keep them trained on the camera as much as possible. Place the camera at eye level so you and the audience are on even ground. Looking down at it forces viewers to look up at you. Cinematographers use that trick to show a character’s superiority—but the last thing you want to do is appear condescending.

If you can, deliver your presentation standing rather than seated. This allows you to move naturally—use your hands freely, lean forward, step back—which puts viewers at ease. Overall, make your movements expansive to connect with the people in the room. But when you want remote viewers to see certain gestures, keep those hand motions closer to your chest so they'll stay in the video frame. Use a high-quality video recorder and light yourself well: A professional-looking setup makes the audience feel valued.

Without video streaming

Your voice is your most valuable tool for building trust when the audience can't see you. But again, stand up—you'll sound more open and relaxed than if you're hunched over your computer. Hold people's attention by varying your volume, pitch, and tone (see “Keep Remote Listeners Interested” in this section). But don't overdo it—melodrama doesn't earn anyone's trust.

You can also build trust through the visuals you post. Create slides that convey an “open” feel by using type that's easy to read and keeping the graphics simple and clean. Also, in the spirit of transparency, let your audience download your deck.

Keep Remote Listeners Interested

When people tune in to a webinar or dial in to a teleconference, you can't see them, so their temptation to multitask is great.

My firm recently surveyed almost 400 people who've attended a webinar within the last year, and it turns out that more of them checked e-mail than doing any other activity—including *watching the webinar* (figure 6-4). That makes people's in-boxes your biggest competitor.

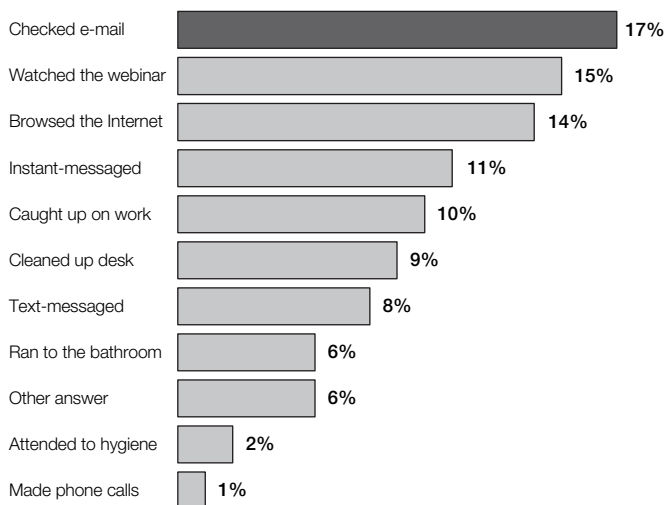
So what can you do to lure people away from their other tasks?

- **Break the content down into small bites:** Feed participants small, tasty morsels one by one so they stay tuned in. Move through your points quickly—don't spend a long time explaining concepts. And if you have slides, change them up about every 20 seconds.

FIGURE 6-4

E-mail is your biggest competitor

Webinar participants said they...



- **Make your presentation interactive:** Create useful activities for audience members to do, like spending a few minutes researching something and posting their findings in the chat window for everyone to see. If you ask people to take a survey, make sure the results will be of interest to them. And reward participants for paying close attention. When I was a guest on marketing consultant Chris Brogan's video blog, I placed a sign behind me that said, "First one who posts on Twitter that they saw this sign wins a free book."
- **Enjoy your own material:** Your enthusiasm needs to come through in your voice, especially if the

audience can't see you on video. Smile as you share your material—and your voice will automatically take on a more cheerful tone. And if you say something funny, laugh a bit even if no one's in the room with you—it invites listeners to laugh, too.

- **Vary the voices:** Bring in other voices for interest. Try cohosting your presentation with another subject matter expert and bantering like morning show hosts. The audience will reengage each time a new speaker talks.
- **Pause strategically:** When audiences tune out remote presenters, the presentations sound like white noise to them. Sprinkle in pauses before points you really want people to hear. That'll cut through the white noise. When you begin speaking again, people will notice. Sometimes pausing also makes the audience think there's a problem with the technology—and people reengage to fiddle with their computers.
- **Picture your listeners:** Remember that you're talking to people, not machines. Picture their faces in your mind and imagine that you're having a live conversation with them. When I first started to present remotely, I struggled with talking naturally to the camera. So I took photos of my smiley staff members, cut out their faces, and taped them above my monitor (figure 6-5). This served as a visual reminder that I was speaking to real people.

FIGURE 6-5

Visualizing real people



Keep Your Remote Presentation Running Smoothly

Since remote audiences are so susceptible to distraction, even minor annoyances can derail your presentation. Keep things running smoothly with the following checklist:

- **Provide clear instructions:** When you send out an invitation explaining what the presentation is about, spell out how to register and log in, and explain any technical requirements up front so people don't sign up only to discover later that they don't have the equipment to participate.
- **Plan for technology snafus:** Give the audience contact information for technical questions. E-mail handouts ahead of time, and have slides in a handy location online just in case the webinar technology fails.

- **Test your slides:** Some webinar software “breaks” your slides by not properly displaying animations, builds, and transitions. Many path-based animations don’t work or are so choppy they are ineffective. Color contrast can fade, and photos become pixilated. Test your slides on the exact same machine you’re presenting from, because different operating systems and software behave differently. Click through each slide in the software and fix any problems.
- **Start on time:** Set up at least 30 minutes in advance to make sure your audio and video are working properly. You don’t want attendees to think you’re ill prepared as they listen to you fuss with technology issues.
- **Reduce personal noise:** Remove loud jewelry like bangle bracelets or earrings that can bang loudly against a headset. Minimize fidgeting. Don’t drum your fingers, click pens, shuffle paper, or take sips of water near the microphone.
- **Reduce environmental noise:** Close your door and turn off fans and music. Close out of computer applications that have alert noises. Mute your microphone in the remote app when someone else is speaking so people won’t hear your breathing or throat clearing. Turn off your cell phone, and put your office phone on the “Do Not Disturb” setting. If people are dialing in for a teleconference, don’t

put your phone on hold—they'll hear your hold music. Mute it.

- **Reduce visual noise:** Hide unnecessary software application windows and icons on your computer desktop to help focus the audience's attention. Use your mouse as a pointing device; don't frantically zing the arrow around your slides.
- **Reduce communal noise:** Remote listeners can hear just one person at a time, so don't have multiple conversations going at once during a teleconference. If someone in your room asks a question, repeat it so the remote audience can hear it.
- **Use a facilitator:** Relieve some of your pre-presentation stress by asking a facilitator to manage many of the details, like wrangling the technology, setting up the room, sending out the agenda and slides ahead of time, monitoring chat rooms, conducting surveys, and making sure people in all locations get a chance to be heard.

Section 7

Impact

We are competing for relevance.

—Brian Solis,

principal analyst at Altimeter Group

Build Relationships Through Social Media

Social media channels give your audience a lot of control over your PR. People can broadcast bits of your content to their followers—quoting you, synthesizing your ideas, adding their own comments. Even if you have only 30 people in front of you when you speak, hundreds more—perhaps thousands, if your audience is highly networked—might catch a glimpse of what you’re saying and what others think of it.

When the comments are positive, your ideas gain traction. At one event, a group of new attendees came to my talk about 15 minutes after I started. I found out afterward that an audience member had tweeted about my session, so some of his followers came to check it out.

But sometimes the comments aren’t positive. Look at these sample tweets that went out during a higher-education conference presentation in Milwaukee:

Impact

@jroddgers

Starting to see the OMG I AM TRAPPED looks on faces.

#hewebog

@jShelk

We need a drinking game for every time he says “actually” and “actionable.” #hewebog

@stomer

We need a tshirt, “I survived the keynote disaster of og.” #hewebog

Within hours, someone created a shirt on CafePress and shared it with conference attendees (figure 7-1).

FIGURE 7-1

CafePress T-shirt



new phone? save 25% on custom iphone cases | new! iPad cases | got green? st. patrick's day gifts | create and sell t-shirts | read our blog

sign in | help | Cart: 0 items

t-shirts & clothing | drinkware | cool wall stuff | stickers & flair | home accents | stationery | see all | gift center | make your own

CafePress > T-Shirts > T-Shirt



\$22.00 \$20.00 T-Shirt

Light T-Shirt

Look cool without breaking the bank. Our durable, high-quality, pre-shrunk 100% cotton t-shirt is what to wear when you want to go comfortably casual. Freshrunk, durable and guaranteed.

- 5.6 oz. 100% cotton
- Standard fit

See size chart »

Select Color: **Light Blue**



Product ID: 419939505

Select Size: **M**

Quantity:

100% Satisfaction Guaranteed
Availability: In Stock.

Like Sign up to see what your friends like. Share

You may also like:

In *The Backchannel*, communication consultant Cliff Atkinson writes about social media's impact on presentations. He points out that the “backchannel”—the stream of chatter before, during, and after your talk—is constructive when it:

- Enriches your message as people take notes, add commentary, and suggest additional resources on the topic
- Provides a valuable archive of information to review after the presentation
- Connects people in the room, building a community around the ideas
- Allows people who can't attend your live talk to follow dispatches and engage in conversations about it
- Increases your reach to more people

It's destructive when it:

- Distracts audience members so they pay more attention to the backchannel than to you
- Steers the conversation to unrelated topics
- Excludes audience members who are unaware of the backchannel or unable to join
- Limits people's ability to convey nuance or context, because of the brevity of the posts
- Injects a rude or snarky tone, since people feel comfortable tweeting thoughts they wouldn't say out loud

Your goal is to avoid a backchannel revolt, where people rally one another to reject your message. How? By making the folks online feel *heard*.

With or without your involvement, they'll have conversations about you. So participate. Engage with people like a skilled conversationalist, and they'll engage more fully and fairly with your ideas.

Build relationships with them by:

- **Observing their behavior:** Pay attention to what else they're commenting on. Active social media users can point you to hot spots online—a LinkedIn discussion group, for instance, or a brand's fan page—where you can begin or join conversations with potential customers or advocates.
- **Providing a channel:** Create a Twitter hashtag for your presentation and invite audience members to use it to chat with you and one another about your message. (Of course, this is appropriate only for external presentations with broad audiences. You wouldn't broadcast content from confidential company meetings, for example, or client sales calls.) Encourage attendees to use the backchannel before, during, and after your presentation; display your hashtag on an introductory slide.
- **Asking for their input:** Try presenting a partially developed idea and asking people to help you refine it through social media. I do this all the time and get useful replies. When I don't know much

about an audience I'm preparing to address, I'll do some digging on my own—but I'll also ask my Twitter channel what might be on the minds of people attending a certain event, for instance, or working for a particular company or industry.

Spread Your Ideas with Social Media

Use social media content the way you use stories, visuals, and sound bites: to reinforce and spread your message.

You can write blog entries, post photos, commission infographics, and produce videos that enhance your ideas so your audience feels compelled to share them with others. If you want to get started but don't generate a lot of content yet, tweet links to other experts' articles and blog posts that support your talk.

Social media activity usually spikes during a presentation, with moderate chatter beforehand and afterward. Facilitate the conversation at its peak by:

- **Streaming your presentation:** Post a live video stream of your talk so people can attend remotely. This is the most direct way of extending your reach online, because the full message comes through, not just the chatter around it.
- **Time-releasing messages and slides:** Craft messages and slides expressly for social me-

dia channels, and use technology to automatically push them out at key moments during the presentation. You can download social media tools to program the time-release. Or you can add 140-character phrases to your notes field in PowerPoint and set them to auto-tweet when you advance the slides.

- **Selecting a moderator:** Assign someone—a colleague, a guest blogger, an audience member—to keep the social media thread constructive. Pick a person who's quick-witted, with a strong command of your material. Ask her to tweet key phrases as you say them, raise thought-provoking questions online, and bring the chatter back on topic when it starts to stray. Also have your moderator send out links to your slides (post them on slideshare.com or as pdfs on your website).
- **Repeating audience sentiment:** In addition to broadcasting your message, the moderator should repeat (and validate) what live audience members are saying. The currency of social media is reciprocity: If you don't spread the ideas of others, yours probably won't get anywhere.
- **Posting photos of your talk:** Enlist someone to photograph your presentation. To give social media users a sense of immediacy, he can work with your moderator to post the images while you're speaking.

- **Encouraging blogging:** Invite bloggers, journalists, and social media specialists to attend and cover your presentation. You'll increase your reach exponentially through their outlets and followers.

Social media guru Dan Zarrella studied what types of social media content people like to share during presentations. Here are a couple of tips from his research:

- **Don't be too overt:** People want to identify what's worth spreading on their own. So resist the temptation to use a little Twitter bird to flag sound bites you want the audience to spread. They'll actually get shared *less*.
- **Be novel:** Close to 30% of respondents in Zarrella's study said they were more likely to tweet or blog about a presentation if it was novel or newsworthy. For an idea to spread, it needs to be distinct and stand out.

After you present, post a video of your talk on your website and on LinkedIn, Facebook, and other social media sites. Though most backchannel activity typically happens during the talk, presentations sometimes go viral after the fact. (Great ones can get hundreds of thousands of views week after week.) Posting a video will also help you capture new audience members who didn't know about your presentation when you gave it or weren't able to tune in to the streamed version or the backchannel.

Gauge Whether You've Connected with People

Gathering feedback on your talk in real time and after you're done gives you different kinds of insights—all of them valuable.

Watch the backchannel

Have a moderator keep an eye on social media and send text messages to your cell phone if she thinks you should address any criticisms in a Q&A at the end of your talk. (She should pass along tough but fair comments—and filter out any chatter that would completely throw you off-kilter.) Or, if you're comfortable tweaking your message as you go, try putting your phone in silent mode, setting it on the podium or table in front of you, and glancing at it throughout the presentation. If the audience begins to revolt on the backchannel, you can change direction. Let people know you've monitored their sentiment because you want to address their concerns.

Watch the live audience

People in the room will show how they're feeling through their posture and facial expressions. Keep a keen eye out for physical cues that they're engaged in your material. One reason Steve Jobs could maintain a heightened sense of anticipation during a 90-minute keynote is because he had a gift for eliciting frequent physical reactions. In his 2007 iPhone launch presentation, the audience laughed 79 times and clapped 98 times—that's about one reaction every 30 seconds.

It's important to pick up on negative cues, too, so you can change course. Are audience members leaning back with their arms crossed? That could be a sign of resistance. Do they look tired? Are they fidgeting? Looking around? Checking e-mail? They may be bored or apathetic toward your ideas. If they're not demonstrating engagement by leaning forward, nodding, smiling, and taking notes, find a way of drawing them in.

One conference presenter could easily tell from body language that he was missing the mark with his audience—people clearly weren't into his message. Instead of dragging on, he stopped, admitted that he'd miscalculated when he'd prepared, and asked if he'd be given a chance to speak at the next conference if he promised to do a better job of understanding the group's needs. He got a standing ovation and an invitation to come back the next year.

Survey your audience

A survey isn't quite as immediate as backchannel chatter and other real-time feedback, but it gives you more

control over the kinds of insights you'll get from the audience—and the comments may be more thoughtful. Make it short and direct, and have people fill it out on paper, online, or by e-mail. Explicitly ask them to be candid. Project a slide at the end of your talk encouraging people to rate you either right away, with their phones or tablets, or at their leisure.

Organizers of large events often survey audiences at all the sessions. If you're speaking at such an event, ask for the results. Even if you're doing a much smaller, less-formal presentation, you can ask one or two audience members whose opinion you value to give you an honest read on how it went. Tell them you're trying to refine your skills, and they'll probably be glad to help.

Analyze sentiment

If you're giving a high-stakes talk to a large group—a keynote address, for example—it's probably worth analyzing social media data, such as how many people blogged about your talk, how much traffic was driven to the press announcement through social media, and whether the coverage and comments were negative or positive. This will give you an even finer-grained picture of how well you've connected with your audience.

But the data can be daunting if you don't know what you're doing. Hire an analytics specialist to really dig in and help you see where you did well and where you can improve. In the analysis, you may discover a rival you didn't know about, for instance, or a new key influencer who drives buying behavior.

Analyze your reach

You can also use analytics tools to measure how many people spread your message through social media, how many clicked on the shared links, and whether your message was picked up by the people you'd want to hear it. Again, work with a data specialist.

It takes an iron gut to digest critical feedback. But it will make you a better presenter. Look closely at what the audience is saying about you, and modify your message, visuals, and delivery so you'll resonate more deeply with people in the future.

I launched my speaking career at a small annual conference. The first survey I got back said that I delivered a fire hose of valuable information, but the audience felt no connection. The event organizer told me I should incorporate more personal stories. It was painful to hear, but true. I took the feedback very seriously. In fact, it sent me on a several-year journey studying story principles and structure, which I now apply to presentations.

I'm not suggesting that every piece of feedback you get will be useful or even true. Usually, though, if you put the audience's needs first when you create your content and you're sincere in your approach when you deliver it, people will want to help you succeed.

Follow Up After Your Talk

Your presentation is done, and the adrenaline has stopped pumping. Now what?

Once you've won people over to your point of view, help them implement your ideas. Encourage them. Bring them new insights. Remove roadblocks. Keep your message alive by:

- **Sending personal notes:** It's rare to get a nice handwritten note these days, and people appreciate it when they do. Send a note whenever you feel grateful—to a colleague who helped you set up your presentation, for example, or to a busy executive who made time to attend and voice her support. (I've sent a few "I'm sorry" notes, too—it works both ways.) It can be a formal branded thank-you note or a clever card that touches on a personal conversation you had with an audience member. In a world of digital communications, a human touch stands out.

- **E-mailing the audience:** Follow up with an e-mail thanking people for their time. If appropriate, summarize your big idea, key points, call to action, and “new bliss.” Many times, event organizers will share their attendees’ e-mail addresses with you in lieu of paying speaking fees.
- **Being accessible:** If you presented within your organization, being accessible can mean hosting a lunch immediately after your talk, for instance, or blocking off your calendar so you can have an open door to answer questions in more detail. If you spoke to a broader audience and don’t have people’s contact information, send out thank-yous and other follow-up messages through blog and social media posts. Respond to anyone who starts a thoughtful conversation with you.
- **Sending materials:** If you promised the audience any materials in your talk, get them out right away. You might want to offer thank-you gifts such as free books or access to secure content, but check with the audience first. Many people have contracts with their employers that don’t allow them to accept gifts from vendors or industry influencers.
- **Calling or meeting with individuals:** Suppose you presented a new initiative that’s going to be demanding on your team. Spend time listening to each member’s concerns. Pick up the phone if it’s not possible to talk to everyone in person. Insights

from these conversations can help shape your next piece of communication with the group. If you discover, for instance, that people are most worried about limited resources, describe your plans for shoring them up.

- **Booking “next steps” meetings:** Gather folks afterward to answer questions that require some research or analysis, and work together on a road-map for achieving your goals. Facilitate collaboration in any way you can—for instance, order in lunch and ask your project leaders to brainstorm ways of marketing your initiative internally.
- **Presenting again:** Though your presentation is done, you may need to do a few more like it to share your message with other groups and move your ideas along. If you’re selling a product or service, the purpose of the first presentation is usually to get a second presentation—that is, face-to-face time with a decision maker.

Think of each interaction as one moment in a larger relationship with your audience. That’s the mind-set it takes to persuade people to change their thinking and behavior—and their world of work.

Index

- accessibility, 220
- analytical appeal, 51–53
- anecdotes, 85–87
- animation, 151–152
- appearance, 170
- Atkinson, Cliff, 207
- atmosphere, 169–170
- audience
 - appealing to, 8
 - call to action for, 39–41
 - connecting with, 91–92, 215–218
 - creating value for, 4–5
 - cues from, 216
 - expectations of, 12
 - feedback from, 215–218
 - finding common ground with, 21–23
 - follow-up with, 219–221
 - knowing your, 15–17
 - power of the, 3–5
 - Q&A sessions with, 187–189
 - relationship building with, 205–209
 - remote, 165, 191–193, 195–201
 - resistance from, 33–35
 - segmentation, 7–9
 - of senior executives, 11–13
 - surveying, 104–105, 216–217
 - transforming, 19–20
- authenticity, 171–173
- backchannels, 215
- Ballmer, Steve, 171–173
- big idea
 - content to support, 29–32, 43–45
 - defining your, 27–28
- big-word slides, 118–119
- blogging, 213
- body language, 175–178
- Bolte Taylor, Jill, 176–177
- brainstorming, 29–32
- Brogan, Chris, 196
- Brown, Tim, 43
- bullet slides, 118
- buzz, 104
- Cain, Susan, 173
- call to action, 39–41
- change, 19–20
- charts, 137–141
- clarification, of data, 137–141
- clichés, visual, 127–128

Index

- comfort monitors, 164–165
- common ground, with audience,
 - 21–23
- communal noise, 201
- communication
 - nonverbal, 175–178
 - vocal style, 179–180
- comparisons, 60, 141
- conceptual image slides, 120–121
- consecutive interpreters, 184
- content. *See also* message
 - existing, 29–30
 - to support big idea, 29–32
- contrast, 37–38, 130–132, 138,
 - 152
- controlling idea, 27–28
- convergent thinking, 43, 44
- conversational tone, 17
- co-presenters, 107, 197
-
-
- data, displaying, 137–141
- data slides, 119–120
- delivery
 - authenticity in, 171–173
 - nonverbal communication
 - during, 175–178
 - rehearsing, 155–157
 - to remote audiences, 191–193
 - scoping out venue for, 159–162
 - setting tone for, 169–170
 - stage fright and, 167–168
 - of stories, 181–182
 - technology glitches during,
 - 163–165
 - voice for, 179–180
- delivery styles, 93
- demographics, 7
- design, 111–112, 129–135
- diagrams, 120, 143–148
- Disney, Walt, 109
- disposition, 170
- divergent thinking, 43, 44
- documents, creating, 95–96
- dramatizations, 84–85
- dress, 170
- dynamic opposites, 37
-
-
- e-mail, 195, 196, 220
- emotional appeal, 51–53, 75–79
- emotional resistance, 34
- enthusiasm, 196–197
- environmental noise, 200–201
- equipment malfunctions,
 - 163–165, 199
- ethnographics, 8
- executive summary slides, 12–13
- expectations, audience, 12
- eye contact, 175
-
-
- facial expressions, 175
- facilitators, 201
- feedback, 105, 155–156, 215–218
- final impressions, 189
- firmographics, 8
- first impressions, 169–170
- floor plan, 160
- flow, 129–130
- flow diagrams, 144, 145
- follow-up, 104–105, 219–221
- food plan, 160–161
-
-
- Gallo, Carmine, 55
- Gates, Bill, 84
- gestures, 176–178
- gifts, 220
- glance test, 114
- group brainstorming, 30–31
-
-
- Haemer, Ken, 1
- Haims, Nolan, 96

- handouts, 104
- Heath, Chip, 25
- Heath, Dan, 25
- hierarchy, visual, 133
- hook diagrams, 144
- hub-and-spoke diagrams, 144
- ideas
 - big idea, 27–32, 43–45
 - brainstorming, 29–32
 - choosing best, 43–45
 - contrasting, 37–38
 - one per slide, 123–125
 - organizing your, 47–49
 - spreading via social media, 211–213
 - visualizing, 97–98
- idioms, 185
- insights, 4
- interpreters, 183–186
- jargon, 55–57
- Jobs, Steve, 59–60, 89
- join diagrams, 144, 145
- King, Martin Luther, Jr., 81
- Labalme, Victoria, 171, 181
- length of presentation, 99–101
- logical resistance, 33–34
- McKee, Robert, 61
- McLuhan, Marshall, 191
- media
 - choosing right, 91–93
 - follow-up, 104–105
 - mixed, 107–108
 - online, 104
 - presentation software, 95–98
 - testing, 165
- memorable stories, 83–87
- message
 - amplifying, through contrast, 37–38
 - appeal of your, 51–53
 - call to action, 39–41
 - choosing best ideas for, 43–45
 - choosing medium for delivery of, 91–93
 - content to support, 29–32
 - defining your big idea, 27–28
 - emotional impact of, 75–79
 - memorable, 83–87
 - organizing your, 47–49
 - resistance to your, 33–35
 - sound bites, 59–60
- metaphors
 - translation of, 185
 - using, 60, 81–82
 - visual, 127–128
- mind mapping, 30, 31
- moderators, 212, 215
- Morgan, Nick, 168
- navigation slides, 117–118
- network diagrams, 144, 145
- noise
 - visual, 201
 - during webinars, 200–201
- nonverbal communication, 175–178
- opposites, 37–38
- order of events, 161
- organization, 47–49
- pacing, 185–186
- pauses, 197
- personal notes, 219
- personal stories, 77–79
- persuasion, off-stage, 103–105
- photographs, posting online, 212

Index

- planning, xvi
- politics, 7
- posture, 175–176
- PowerPoint, 95–98
- practical resistance, 34
- precommunication, 169
- preparation
 - rehearsals, 155–157
 - scoping out venue, 159–162
- presentations
 - audience for, 3–23
 - communication before,
 - 103–104
 - delivery of, 153–201
 - endings of, 189
 - follow-up after, 104–105,
 - 219–221
 - impact of, 203–221
 - length of, 99–101
 - media for, 89–108
 - message for, 27–60
 - planning, xvi
 - recorded, 161–162
 - remote, 191–193, 195–201
 - setting tone for, 169–170
 - short versions of, 156
 - slides for, 109–152
 - social media's impact on,
 - 205–209
 - stories in, 61–87
 - storyboarding, 123–125
 - streaming, 211
- presentation software, 95–98
- presenters
 - feedback from skilled, 155–156
 - multiple, 107, 197
 - self-focused, 3–4
- projection size, 165
- psychographics, 7
- punctuality, 200
- Q&A sessions, 187–189
- quote slides, 119
- Raphaely, Mirran, 84–85
- recordings, 161–162
- rehearsals, 13, 155–157
- relationship building, 205–209
- remote audience, 165, 191–193,
 - 195–201
- repetition, 59–60
- resistance, 33–35
- resonance, 21
- Reynolds, Garr, 96
- rhetorical devices, 59–60
- rhythmic repetition, 59–60
- Roam, Dan, 124
- Sandberg, Sheryl, 97
- scale, of charts, 138–139
- schedule, 161
- seating plan, 160
- segmentation, of audience, 7–9
- segment diagrams, 144, 145
- senior executives, 11–13
- sensory details, 182
- similes, 60
- simultaneous interpreters, 183
- slides
 - animated, 151–152
 - arrangement of, 115, 129–135
 - avoiding clichés in, 127–128
 - designing, 111–112, 129–135
 - diagrams on, 143–148
 - displaying data in, 137–141
 - executive summary, 12–13
 - notes for, 96–97
 - number of, 149–150
 - organizing, 47–49
 - posting online, 104
 - presentation software, 95–98

- refining, 156
- simplicity of, 113–116
- storyboarding, 123–125
- testing, 164, 200
- types of, 117–121
- when not to use, 149
- slide-show mode, 156–157
- slideuments, 96
- slogans, 60
- social media
 - monitoring, 215, 217
 - reach of, 218
 - relationship building with, 205–209
 - spreading ideas via, 211–213
- software, presentation, 95–98
- Solis, Brian, 203
- sound bites, 59–60
- stack diagrams, 144, 145
- stage fright, 167–168
- statistics, shocking, 83–84
- stories
 - beginnings of, 67–69
 - bringing to life, 181–182
 - for emotional impact, 75–79
 - endings of, 73–74
 - memorable, 83–87
 - metaphors in, 81–82
 - middles of, 71–72
 - personal, 77–79
 - principles of, 63–64
 - reexperiencing, 181–182
 - structure of, 64, 65–66
- storyboarding, 123–125
- summary slides, 12–13
- supporting material, 104
- surveys, 104–105, 216–217
- technology
 - glitches, 163–165, 199
 - new media, 191–193
- teleconferences, 195–201
- teleprompter notes, 96–97
- teleprompters, 164–165
- time
 - for presentation, 99–101
 - starting on, 200
- title slides, 117
- tone, setting the, 169–170
- transformation, 19–20, 63–64
- translations, 183–186
- transparency, 171
- Trollope, Rowan, 85–87
- Twitter, 208
- unity, 133–135
- value creation, 4–5
- venue, scoping out, 159–162
- verbal tics, 180
- video slides, 121
- video streaming, 191–193, 211
- visual hierarchy, 133
- visual noise, 201
- visuals. *See also* slides
 - avoiding clichés in, 127–128
 - coordination of, 114
 - design elements for, 129–135
 - emphasizing important elements in, 137–138
 - evocative, 84
 - of ideas, 97–98
- vocal style, 179–180
- walk-in slides, 117
- walk-out slides, 121
- webinars, 195–201
- whispering interpreters, 184
- white space, 132–133
- Zarella, Dan, 59, 213

About the Author

Communication expert Nancy Duarte has more than 20 years of experience working with global organizations and thought leaders from a wide range of industries and fields. Her company, Duarte, Inc., has created more than a quarter of a million presentations for its clients. Her team also teaches corporate and public workshops on writing and storyboarding effective presentations.

Duarte is the author of two award-winning books: *Resonate: Present Visual Stories That Transform Audiences*, which spent nearly a year on Amazon's top 100 business book bestsellers list; and *Slide:ology: The Art and Science of Creating Great Presentations*.

Duarte has been featured in *Fortune*, *Forbes*, *Fast Company*, *Wired*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Times*, and the *LA Times*, and on CNN.

Notes

Notes

Notes

Notes

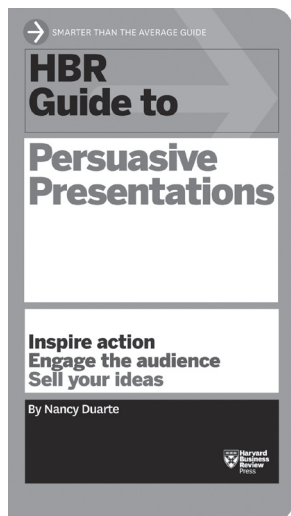
Notes

Notes

Notes

Notes

Smart advice and inspiration from a source you trust.

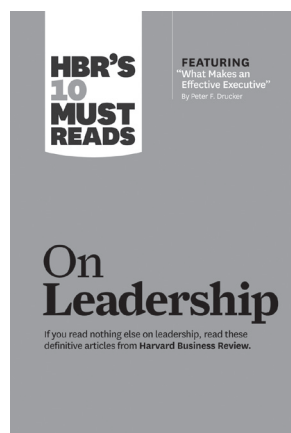


Whether you need help tackling today's most urgent work challenge or shaping your organization's strategy for the future, *Harvard Business Review* has got you covered.

HBR Guides Series

HOW-TO ESSENTIALS FROM LEADING EXPERTS

HBR Guide to Better Business Writing
HBR Guide to Finance Basics for Managers
HBR Guide to Getting the Right Work Done
HBR Guide to Managing Up and Across
HBR Guide to Persuasive Presentations
HBR Guide to Project Management



HBR's 10 Must Reads Series

IF YOU READ NOTHING ELSE, READ THESE DEFINITIVE ARTICLES FROM HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW

HBR's 10 Must Reads on Change Management
HBR's 10 Must Reads on Leadership
HBR's 10 Must Reads on Managing People
HBR's 10 Must Reads on Managing Yourself
HBR's 10 Must Reads on Strategy
HBR's 10 Must Reads: The Essentials

SAVE

**Buy for your team, clients, or event.
Visit our site for quantity discount rates.**

hbr.org/books/direct-and-bulk-sales



HBR Guide to
**Making Every
Meeting Matter**

Harvard Business Review Guides

Arm yourself with the advice you need to succeed on the job, from the most trusted brand in business. Packed with how-to essentials from leading experts, the HBR Guides provide smart answers to your most pressing work challenges.

The titles include:

HBR Guide to Better Business Writing

HBR Guide to Building Your Business Case

HBR Guide to Buying a Small Business

HBR Guide to Coaching Employees

HBR Guide to Dealing with Conflict

HBR Guide to Delivering Effective Feedback

HBR Guide to Finance Basics for Managers

HBR Guide to Getting the Mentoring You Need

HBR Guide to Getting the Right Job

HBR Guide to Getting the Right Work Done

HBR Guide to Leading Teams

HBR Guide to Making Every Meeting Matter

HBR Guide to Managing Stress at Work

HBR Guide to Managing Up and Across

HBR Guide to Negotiating

HBR Guide to Networking

HBR Guide to Office Politics

HBR Guide to Persuasive Presentations

HBR Guide to Project Management

HBR Guide to **Making Every Meeting Matter**

HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW PRESS

Boston, Massachusetts

HBR Press Quantity Sales Discounts

Harvard Business Review Press titles are available at significant quantity discounts when purchased in bulk for client gifts, sales promotions, and premiums. Special editions, including books with corporate logos, customized covers, and letters from the company or CEO printed in the front matter, as well as excerpts of existing books, can also be created in large quantities for special needs.

For details and discount information for both print and ebook formats, contact booksales@harvardbusiness.org, tel. 800-988-0886, or www.hbr.org/bulksales.

Copyright 2016 Harvard Business School Publishing Corporation

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise), without the prior permission of the publisher. Requests for permission should be directed to permissions@hbsp.harvard.edu, or mailed to Permissions, Harvard Business School Publishing, 60 Harvard Way, Boston, Massachusetts 02163.

The web addresses referenced in this book were live and correct at the time of the book's publication but may be subject to change.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Title: HBR guide to making every meeting matter.

Other titles: Harvard business review guides.

Description: Boston, Massachusetts : Harvard Business Review Press, [2016] |

Series: Harvard Business Review guides

Identifiers: LCCN 2016025614 | ISBN 9781633692176 (pbk.)

Subjects: LCSH: Business meetings—Handbooks, manuals, etc. | Business meetings—Planning—Handbooks, manuals, etc.

Classification: LCC HF5734.5 .H397 2016 | DDC 658.4/56—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2016025614>

ISBN: 9781633692176

The paper used in this publication meets the requirements of the American National Standard for Permanence of Paper for Publications and Documents in Libraries and Archives Z39.48-1992.

What You'll Learn

We all know what we're supposed to do to run meetings effectively, but we seldom do them well. Why? Perhaps we think it's just not worth the time to clarify what we hope to accomplish, craft an agenda, handpick participants, issue prework, and send out follow-up notes that detail key decisions and next steps. So we run meetings off the cuff or saddle participants with an overly ambitious agenda we have no hope of working through. Other meeting problems feel beyond our control. People nod their heads in our decision-making meeting but then show their true feelings with their lack of follow-through. Derailers. Latecomers. Blowhards. Nonparticipants. People who bring *their* agenda to *your* meeting.

The best way to prevent or overcome any of these obstacles is thoughtful and thorough preparation. This guide offers tips and scripts for curbing inappropriate behavior and making your meetings easier to prepare for, more efficient to conduct—and more productive.

You'll learn how to:

- Determine whether you even need to meet
- Prepare a realistic agenda

What You'll Learn

- Identify why you're meeting—and articulate your purpose to attendees
- Orchestrate group decision making
- Prevent implementation roadblocks by giving participants equal airtime
- Cope with chronic latecomers, windbags, and other people problems
- Turn around a bad meeting
- Run any type of meeting—from a status stand-up to a one-on-one walking check-in to a strategy off-site
- Get the most out of digital meeting tools
- Hold people accountable without hounding or micromanaging
- Keep the momentum going with prompt meeting follow-up

Contents

Preface: The Condensed Guide to Running Meetings 1

The 5-minute version of everything you need to know.

BY AMY GALLO

SECTION ONE

Prepare

1. Do You Really Need to Hold That Meeting? 11

A simple tool to help you decide.

BY ELIZABETH GRACE SAUNDERS

2. Stop Calling Every Conversation a “Meeting” 15

We need a more effective vocabulary.

BY AL PITTAMPALLI

3. If You Can’t Say What Your Meeting Will Accomplish, You Shouldn’t Have It 19

Set a purpose by answering two questions.

BY BOB FRISCH AND CARY GREENE

4. How to Design an Agenda for an Effective Meeting 25

A productive meeting begins here.

BY ROGER SCHWARZ

Contents

5. The Key to Shorter, Better Meetings	33
<i>A filter to help you articulate your purpose.</i>	
BY ANTHONY TJAN	
6. The 50-Minute Meeting	35
<i>Build in time for transition.</i>	
BY DAVID SILVERMAN	
7. The Magic of 30-Minute Meetings	37
<i>Give yourself less time, and you'll get more done.</i>	
BY PETER BREGMAN	
8. Meetings Need a Shot Clock	43
<i>Tackle your agenda by beating the buzzer.</i>	
BY BOB FRISCH AND CARY GREENE	
9. Are There Too Many People in Your Meeting?	47
<i>Probably. A rule of thumb.</i>	

SECTION TWO

Conduct

10. Before a Meeting, Tell Your Team That Silence Denotes Agreement	53
<i>Speak now or forever hold your peace.</i>	
BY BOB FRISCH AND CARY GREENE	
11. Establish Ground Rules	59
<i>Set expectations for participation.</i>	
12. Reach Group Decisions During Meetings	63
<i>You have options for gathering input and moving forward.</i>	

13. The Right Way to Cut People Off in Meetings	67
<i>“Jellyfish!”</i>	
BY BOB FRISCH AND CARY GREENE	
14. Dealing with People Who Derail Meetings	71
<i>Having an explicit purpose will get you back on track.</i>	
BY ROGER SCHWARZ	
15. Refocus a Meeting After Someone Interrupts	77
<i>Listen, validate, and redirect.</i>	
BY REBECCA KNIGHT	

SECTION THREE

Participate

16. Polite Ways to Decline a Meeting Invitation	87
<i>Preserve your time—and the relationship.</i>	
BY LIANE DAVEY	
17. How to Interject in a Meeting	93
<i>Useful phrases to introduce ideas, disagree, and express confusion.</i>	
BY JODI GLICKMAN	
18. Stuck in a Meeting from Hell?	
Here’s What to Do	97
<i>Don’t just sit there and suffer.</i>	
BY MELISSA RAFFONI	
19. 7 Ways to Stop a Meeting from Dragging On	101
<i>Break free from the silent majority.</i>	
BY JOSEPH GRENNY	

Contents

20. When Your Boss Is Terrible at Leading Meetings 107

Three tactics for turning things around.

BY PAUL AXTELL

SECTION FOUR

Close and Follow Up

21. The Right Way to End a Meeting 115

With closure.

BY PAUL AXTELL

22. Don't End a Meeting Without Doing These 3 Things 119

Make sure everyone's on the same page.

BY BOB FRISCH AND CARY GREENE

SECTION FIVE

Specific Types of Meetings

23. What Everyone Should Know About Running Virtual Meetings 127

Just three things.

BY PAUL AXTELL

24. How to Run a Great Virtual Meeting 135

Rules matter more.

BY KEITH FERRAZZI

25. Conduct a Meeting of People from Different Cultures 143

Help them step outside their comfort zones.

BY REBECCA KNIGHT

26. Making Global Meetings Work	151
<i>Inconvenience everybody equally.</i>	
BY JUNE DELANO	
27. Give Your Standing Meetings a Makeover	155
<i>Do away with the same old, same old.</i>	
BY MARTHA CRAUMER	
28. How to Do Walking Meetings Right	157
<i>Boost your creative thinking and engagement.</i>	
BY RUSSELL CLAYTON, CHRISTOPHER THOMAS, AND JACK SMOTHERS	
29. Stand-Up Meetings Don't Work for Everybody	163
<i>Are they speedy, or sexist, ageist, and height-ist?</i>	
BY BOB FRISCH	
30. Leadership Summits That Work	167
<i>Stop putting your top people to sleep.</i>	
BY BOB FRISCH AND CARY GREENE	
Appendix A: Meeting Preparation Checklist	197
Appendix B: Sample Agendas	199
Appendix C: Meeting Follow-Up Checklist	205
Appendix D: Sample Follow-Up Memo	207
Appendix E: Digital Tools to Make Your Next Meeting More Productive	211
<i>There's an app for that.</i>	
BY ALEXANDRA SAMUEL	
Index	219

PREFACE

The Condensed Guide to Running Meetings

by Amy Gallo

Editor's note: Here's where to start if you need to organize a meeting soon—and you don't have a ton of time to prepare, but you want to do it right. When you're not so pressed for time, take a look at the rest of the book, which expands on themes raised here.

We love to hate meetings. And with good reason—they clog up our days, making it hard to get work done in the gaps, and so many feel like a waste of time.

Adapted from content posted on hbr.org on July 6, 2015.

Paul Axtell, author of *Meetings Matter: 8 Powerful Strategies for Remarkable Conversations*, says that this is a major pain point for nearly every manager he works with. “People are absolutely resigned,” he says. “They have given up on the hope that it could be different.” Axtell and Francesca Gino, author of *Sidetracked: Why Our Decisions Get Derailed, and How We Can Stick to the Plan* and a professor at Harvard Business School, weigh in here on whether much of the conventional wisdom on meetings holds true.

***“Keep the meeting as small as possible.
No more than seven people.”***

Though research does not point to a precise number that’s ideal, “there is evidence to suggest that keeping the meeting small is beneficial,” says Gino. For one thing, you’re better able to notice body language when there are fewer people. “In a group of 20 or more, you can’t keep track of the subtle cues you need to pick up,” says Axtell. And if you want people to have the opportunity to contribute, limit attendance. In Axtell’s experience, limiting it to four or five people is the only way to make sure everyone has the chance to talk in a 60-minute meeting.

The challenge with large meetings isn’t just that everyone won’t have a chance to talk but that many of them won’t feel the need to. “When many hands are available, people work less hard than they ought to,” explains Gino. “Social psychology research has shown that when people perform group tasks (such as brainstorming or discussing information in a meeting), they show a sizable decrease in individual effort from when they

perform alone.” This is known as “social loafing” and tends to get worse as the size of the group increases.

That’s not to say that your 20-person meeting is doomed for failure. You just need to plan more carefully. “The degree of facilitation has to go up,” says Axtell. You have to be more thoughtful about getting input from the group and reading people in the room. “You need someone who is masterful at managing the conversation.”

“Ban devices.”

Both experts agree this is a good idea, for two reasons. First, we know devices distract us. Gino points out that many people think they can multitask—finish an e-mail or read through their Twitter feed while listening to someone in a meeting. But research shows they really can’t. “Recent neuroscience research makes the point quite clear on this issue. Multitasking is simply a mythical activity. We can do simple tasks like walking and talking at the same time, but the brain can’t handle multitasking,” says Gino. “In fact, studies show that a person who is attempting to multitask takes 50% longer to accomplish a task and makes up to 50% more mistakes.”

And those who pick up their devices during meetings may well be the worst multitaskers. “The research finds that the more time people spend using multiple forms of media simultaneously, the less likely they are to perform well on a standardized test of multitasking abilities,” explains Gino.

The second reason to ban devices is that they distract others. Gino recently conducted a simple survey that assessed whether people thought reaching for a phone,

posting a status on Facebook, or writing a tweet during a meeting was distracting or socially inappropriate. The subjects “found the same action to be much more problematic if their friend or colleague engaged in it but did not find it to be very problematic when they were the ones who were (arguably) being rude,” she says. These results suggest that we feel annoyed when others are on their devices during a meeting. “Yet we fail to realize that our actions will have the same effect on others when we are the ones engaging in them,” she says. This is what Axtell sees in practice: People feel insulted when someone reaches for their phone, especially if that person is a senior leader. “If you’re presenting or talking about an idea, and you see a senior manager on their phone, it hurts,” he says.

Still there are some good reasons to use technology in a meeting, says Axtell. You may want to take notes or retrieve reference material. “Perhaps they need to be available because something important is going on in their lives,” he says. But if these circumstances don’t apply to your participants, have everyone turn their devices off and pay attention.

***“Keep it as short as possible—
no longer than an hour.”***

Research shows that there are advantages to keeping meetings short. One reason is that people stay more focused during shorter time spans. “Classic studies have found that groups adjust both their rate of work and their style of interaction in response to deadlines and time constraints,” says Gino. For example, one study showed that “groups solving problems communicated at

a faster rate and used more autocratic decision-making processes under high time pressure than they did when time pressure was low.”

“Once people realize you’re tight on time, they stop asking questions or talking and focus on getting the work done,” says Axtell.

This doesn’t mean you should try to cram every meeting into a 30-minute slot. Axtell warns that there are conversations that necessitate more time, and you shouldn’t rush over certain topics. “If the purpose of your meeting is to talk through something, you need to give people enough time to voice their opinions, build on one another’s ideas, and reach a conclusion,” he says. Time pressure will make this more efficient, but you don’t want to make the time so short that you truncate important conversations (chapters 6 and 7 offer suggestions for ideal meeting length).

“Stand-up meetings are more productive.”

While some might feel that stand-up meetings are a gimmick, Gino points out that there is empirical data that proves they work. In one study (done in 1999 before stand-up meetings were a staple in most offices), Allen Bluedorn from the University of Missouri and his colleagues concluded that stand-up meetings were about 34% shorter than sit-down meetings, yet they produced the same solutions. (For a different take on stand-up meetings, see chapter 29.)

Axtell finds these types of solutions encouraging. “I like that people are trying to do something bold to change up meetings—going for a walk, standing up,” he

says. But, he warns, don't let the format distract you from doing what really matters: running an effective meeting. "I'd prefer people have the guts to say 'I'm going to run this meeting well.'"

"Make sure everyone participates, and call on those who don't."

Some people may want to speak up in your meeting but feel like they can't unless they're asked, says Axtell. This may be due to "cultural reasons, or language barriers, or general disposition." Axtell believes that people who hold back often have the best perspective on the conversation, and you need to draw them out.

Having everyone contribute isn't just good for the end result of your meeting, it's good for the participants as well. People like to know that their opinions are being heard and considered, says Gino. And "just by asking people in the meeting for their opinion, you're going to raise their commitment to the issues being discussed."

For people you know may feel too put on the spot, talk to them ahead of time and tell them that you're hoping they'll contribute. That way they'll have time to plan what they'll say. Then in the meeting, you may still need to prompt them by asking for their perspective, but they'll be primed to do so.

"Never hold a meeting just to update people."

"If you're already meeting for worthwhile topics, it's okay to give a quick update," says Axtell. You might ask at the end if there's anything the group needs to be aware of

or if there's something going on in the department that others need to know about. "But if you're only meeting to transfer information, rethink your approach," Axtell urges. "Why take up valuable time saying something you could just send in an email?"

Wasting time isn't the only problem with update meetings. Gino explains that research by Roy Baumeister, Kathleen Vohs, and their colleagues suggests that we have a limited amount of what they call "executive resources." "Once they get depleted, we make bad decisions or choices," says Gino. "Business meetings often require people to commit, focus, and make decisions with little or no attention paid to the depletion of the finite cognitive resources of the participants—particularly when the meetings are long or too frequent." She finds that in her own research, "depletion of our executive resources can even lead to poor judgment and unethical behavior." So if you can avoid scheduling yet another meeting, you should.

"Always set an agenda ahead of time, and be clear about the purpose of the meeting."

It's hard to imagine more sound advice about meetings. Axtell and Gino agree that designing the meeting and setting an agenda ahead of time is critical. "You should explain what's going to happen so participants come knowing what they're going to do," says Axtell. In her book, *Sidetacked*, Gino talks about how lacking a clear plan of action is often why groups get derailed in decision making. "Having a plan gives us the opportunity to clarify our intentions and think through the forces that

could make it difficult for us to accomplish our goals,” she says.

Following the advice given here will ensure that the next time you need to bring a group together, you’ll make it a good use of everyone’s time—including your own.

Amy Gallo is a contributing editor at *Harvard Business Review* and the author of the *HBR Guide to Dealing with Conflict*. She writes and speaks about workplace dynamics. Follow her on Twitter @amyegallo.

SECTION ONE

Prepare

CHAPTER 1

Do You Really Need to Hold That Meeting?

by Elizabeth Grace Saunders

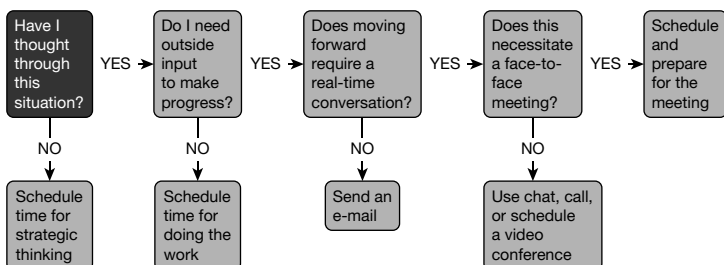
“Let’s schedule a meeting” has become the universal default response to most business issues. Not sure what to do on a project? Let’s schedule a meeting. Have a few ideas to share? Let’s schedule a meeting. Struggling to take action? Let’s schedule a meeting.

Although scheduling a meeting can be the right solution in many instances, it’s not always the best answer. Here’s a decision tree to help you quickly determine if holding a meeting makes the most sense (see figure 1-1).

Adapted from content posted on hbr.org on March 20, 2015.

FIGURE 1-1

Should I hold a meeting?



Copy this decision tree, and keep it handy. It makes it quick and easy to decide whether or not to hold a meeting. Here's what you should consider at each step.

Have I thought through this situation?

When you don't have clarity about what you're doing on a project, it's tempting to schedule a meeting to give you the feeling that you're making progress. But unless the meeting's intent is to structure the project, scheduling a meeting is probably an inefficient use of your time—and your colleagues'. Instead, do some strategic thinking. Evaluate the scope of the project, its current status, and the potential milestones, and lay out a plan of action for making meaningful progress. Once you've completed your own strategic thinking prep work you can consider if it makes sense to hold a meeting.

Do I need outside input to make progress?

You may be in a situation where you know what needs to be done, and you simply need to do the work. If so, don't

schedule a meeting; update your to-do list, and take action instead. However, if after clarifying what needs to be done you require outside input to answer questions or give feedback before you feel comfortable jumping into action, continue on.

Does moving forward require a real-time conversation?

If you have questions that need to be answered but don't require a two-way conversation, e-mail can be an excellent alternative to a meeting. This is particularly true when you're looking for feedback on your written plans or documents. It's much more efficient for everyone involved if you send over items that they can look at on their own (while you're not awkwardly watching them read during an in-person meeting) and then shoot you back feedback. If you feel your situation does require a real-time conversation, examine different communication channels.

Does this necessitate a face-to-face meeting?

When you need two-way communication but don't necessarily need to see the person, you have a variety of options. An online chat can help you answer questions quickly, or for more in-depth conversations, scheduling a phone call or video conference can work well. This not only saves you the transition time of going to and from a meeting place, it also allows you to continue working if someone is late, rather than having to sit somewhere and wait for them to show up.

Prepare

If in the end you decide that you need face-to-face, in-person communication, then schedule a meeting, and think through in advance how you can make it as efficient and effective as possible. That means considering your intent for the meeting, establishing your desired outcomes, and preparing any materials that should be sent out or reviewed in advance.

This decision-making process can help you radically reduce the number of meetings you attend and increase the amount of work that gets done.

Elizabeth Grace Saunders is the author of *How to Invest Your Time Like Money* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2015), a time coach, and the founder of Real Life E Time Coaching and Training. Find out more at the website www.RealLifeE.com.

CHAPTER 2

Stop Calling Every Conversation a “Meeting”

by Al Pittampalli

When both a 500-attendee event and a two-person discussion are referred to as “meetings,” it’s difficult to suss out a gathering’s true purpose and to know how to prepare to make it successful. In order to have fewer, more purposeful meetings, we need a more robust vocabulary to describe them. So let’s do some renaming, starting with three common “meetings” that you’ll soon realize aren’t really meetings at all.

Meetings with just two people are actually **conversations**. Whereas meetings with ample attendee lists

Adapted from content posted on hbr.org on November 3, 2015.

Prepare

require an agenda, plenty of preparation, and an articulable purpose, one-on-one discussions need not be as rigorous. They aren't weapons of mass interruption, and humans are naturally good at them. So keep conversations casual, and hold them as often as you'd like.

Another kind of meeting that needs to be renamed is one in which work actually gets done. Management expert Peter Drucker famously noted that a “working meeting” was impossible: “One either meets or one works. One cannot do both at the same time.” And, for the most part, he's right. Most meetings involve planning and coordinating the work, not executing it. But sometimes people—writers, programmers, mathematicians—do huddle around a laptop or whiteboard to do real work together. Let's call these **group work sessions** and make sure to disinvite the bureaucrats.

Then there are meetings where the primary goal is to generate ideas. If you want people to be truly imaginative and express themselves, don't dare call it a brainstorming meeting. Just call it a **brainstorm**. Since these sessions are designed to maximize creativity, it's a good idea to play a warm-up game, get people standing and active, and give people permission to have fun—free of judgment and criticism. If someone walks past the conference room and thinks you're having a “meeting,” you're probably not doing it right.

Now let's consider a few types of meetings that are difficult to justify if you name them correctly. Take, for example, meetings that are called primarily because managers have information to disseminate. Rather than distributing a memo or having several one-on-one con-

versations, these bosses decide to save time by wasting the time of their colleagues, disrupting work, and coralling the team into a room together. These are **convenience meetings** and almost always a bad idea. They’re typically convenient for the individual and inconvenient for everyone else.

Meetings called as a matter of tradition or habit—**formality meetings**—should also be banned. These gatherings may have served a purpose at one time but do so no longer. Rather than considering an issue and asking “Is a meeting the best way to address it?” we treat the event as a given and ask “What issues do we need to address at this meeting?” This ensures we always find things to discuss, no matter how trivial they are.

Some meetings are called under the guise of collaboration or alignment when it’s really connection we’re after. These are **social meetings**. Connection is a laudable goal, but meetings are a pretty lousy way to foster it. Instead, invite people to a team-building activity, a retreat, or a party. But make it optional. While the extroverts on the team might love the chance to socialize, the introverts may want to stay back and get some work done.

Finally, we come to the **decision-making meeting**, a total misnomer as it implies that the meeting itself is making the decision. But meetings don’t make decisions; leaders do. Group discussions can help support that process, of course, so let’s rename these types of gatherings **decision-supporting meetings** to remind the leader that it’s her job, and hers alone, to make sure action follows. It’s also helpful to distinguish between high-stakes, low-stakes, and no-stakes decision-supporting meetings.

Prepare

In a high-stakes meeting, you want to facilitate a real honest debate. Research shows that moderate task conflict leads to more accurate decisions, so demand candor from attendees, and encourage them to disagree. Identifying these meetings as high-stakes will remind you to let the best decision prevail, even if it's not yours.

When the decisions to be made are less consequential, the goal isn't to slow down, it's to speed up. Propose a plan for moving forward, and focus on generating buy-in. Of course you should allow for disagreement and be prepared to revise your plan if participants offer good reasons. But aim for quick resolution so you can spend most of the time coordinating implementation. As for meetings called to support inconsequential, no-stakes decisions? They should obviously never see the light of day.

Imagine a culture where people regularly talk about meetings using this kind of precise language. Picture someone pushing back on a meeting invitation by calling it a formality meeting. Envision the leader of a decision-supporting meeting asking whether her gathering qualifies as high stakes or low stakes. Think about someone canceling an upcoming staff meeting and requesting a few conversations instead. Better language isn't the only step you must take to transform your meeting culture, but it's a powerful start.

Al Pittampalli is the author of *Persuadable: How Great Leaders Change Their Minds to Change the World* (HarperBusiness, 2016).

CHAPTER 3

If You Can't Say What Your Meeting Will Accomplish, You Shouldn't Have It

by Bob Frisch and Cary Greene

How many times have you walked out of a theoretically important meeting—a leadership off-site, a C-suite pow-wow, a sit-down with the board—thinking, “That was a great discussion, but I’m not sure we really accomplished anything?” More often than not, the problem lies not in

Adapted from content posted on hbr.org on April 18, 2016.

Prepare

what did or didn't happen at the meeting itself but in the fact that you didn't get anything done because the goals for the meeting were never firmly established in the first place.

We see this happen all the time when clients hire us to help manage off-sites. Often, they start by handing us a pretty well-developed (and usually packed) agenda full of already-booked speakers and a finalized list of confirmed attendees. Beyond logistics, the actual substance of the off-site is nearly set. But then we always ask the meeting owner—the most senior executive hosting it—the same two questions:

- What do you want to have debated, decided, or discovered at the end of this session that you and the team haven't already debated, decided, or discovered?
- What do you want attendees to say when their team members ask, "What happened at the big meeting?"

In almost every case, the response is the same: "That's a good question—I hadn't actually thought about those things."

It doesn't matter if it's an 8-person board meeting, a 15-person executive team meeting, a 150-person leadership conference, or a regularly recurring status meeting: Your first step when planning an important meeting should be to draft an initial set of goals based on the answers to the two questions above. In the words of Stephen Covey, "Begin with the end in mind." These objec-

tives are not the activities you will be engaged in or the time slots on the agenda. They are more high level: your desired outcomes for the meeting.

The list needn't be very long or complicated. As a starting point, three to five short bullet points or sentences that articulate what you want to accomplish is more than enough.

But this process may take some time. You could go through two to three iterations before you have a straw-model set of objectives that are ready to be tested with other key meeting stakeholders, who should then be asked to review the list and identify any missing or unnecessary goals. Once everyone is aligned, agree and communicate to all other attendees that these objectives are locked in. This will help keep the agenda focused and give you cover if someone asks to add an unrelated presentation or discussion at the last minute.

Here are some sample objectives from different types of meetings we've facilitated recently.

Regularly recurring weekly meeting

- Share updates and review progress-to-date, including major milestones or upcoming activities (ask and answer "What did I do? What will I do?").
- Identify questions and concerns related to progress (ask and answer "What are the potential roadblocks?").
- Prioritize and resolve issues and address additional questions.

Prepare

- Agree on next steps (for example, escalation of issues, clear accountabilities, etc.).

Board meeting

- Provide board input as management formulates the new five-year strategy.
 - Agree on how much runway remains on the current core strategy.
 - Identify new strategies to potentially pursue.
- Finalize the operating model for strategic governance.
 - Launch annual strategic planning process.
 - Put in place long-term (five-plus-year) strategic oversight.
- Agree on the topics and timing for additional board input into the current planning cycle.

Executive team meeting

- Develop a list of growth opportunities for the team to assess further.
- Begin to define select growth opportunities, including the future-state description for each and potential measures of success.
- Confirm the accountable executive and team leader for each opportunity.
- Understand the time line and activities over the next three months.

Leadership conference

- Establish the purpose and positioning of the extended leadership team.
- Impart a meaningful understanding of the company's vision, mission, and strategy, including top priorities for the next three years.
- Understand priority issues raised by attendees, and develop potential solutions.
- Align around next steps.

Your list of objectives must also drive important decisions about aspects of the meeting.

Agenda. Draft an agenda, and map each activity to your stated goals. Do all of them help you achieve one or more of your objectives? Are there any objectives that can't be achieved through what you have planned?

Attendees. The number and identity of attendees should be based on the scope and objectives of the meeting. For example, if you need to make decisions, we recommend a smaller group. If your aim is to generate ideas or achieve broad organizational buy-in for an initiative, you should invite a larger group.

Pre-reads. Don't overload people with voluminous meeting pre-reads full of assorted plans, reports, and studies that aren't directly related to your objectives. Instead, use your list to organize, filter, and focus the content you send in advance.

Prepare

Location. The location of your meeting should reflect its objectives, too. For example, if your goals focus on a specific region, go there. If an explicit objective is for participants to get to know each other better, pick a venue designed for socializing.

When you set out and share your objectives in this way, it ensures that everyone is “coming to the same meeting.” Attendees will be energized and ready to accomplish those goals.

Bob Frisch is the managing partner of the Strategic Offsites Group, a Boston-based consultancy, and is the author of *Who's In The Room? How Great Leaders Structure and Manage the Teams Around Them* (Jossey-Bass, 2012). He is the author of four *Harvard Business Review* articles, including “Off-Sites That Work” (June 2006). **Cary Greene** is a partner of the Strategic Offsites Group. They are coauthors of *Simple Sabotage: A Modern Field Manual for Detecting & Rooting Out Everyday Behaviors That Undermine Your Workplace* (HarperOne, 2015) and are frequent contributors to hbr.org.

CHAPTER 4

How to Design an Agenda for an Effective Meeting

by Roger Schwarz

An effective agenda sets clear expectations for what needs to occur before and during a meeting. It helps team members prepare and allocate time wisely, quickly gets everyone focused on the same topic, and makes it clear when the discussion is complete. If problems occur during the meeting, a well-designed agenda promotes the team's ability to address them right away.

Here are some tips for designing an effective agenda for your next meeting. You'll find sample agendas and

Adapted from content posted on hbr.org on March 19, 2015.

Prepare

a blank template in appendix B. These suggestions will be helpful whether your meeting lasts one hour or three days or whether you're meeting with a group of five people or forty.

Seek input from team members. If you want your team to be engaged in meetings, make sure the agenda includes topics that reflect their needs. Ask team members to suggest agenda items and an explanation of why each area needs to be addressed in a team setting. If you ultimately decide not to include an item, be accountable: Explain your reasoning to the team member who suggested it.

Select topics that are relevant to the entire team. Team meeting time is expensive and difficult to schedule. It should mainly be used to discuss and make decisions on issues that affect the whole team—and that need the whole team to solve them. These are likely to be areas in which individuals must coordinate their actions because their parts of the organization are interdependent. They are also likely to be issues for which people have different information and needs. Examples might include: How do we best allocate shared resources? How do we reduce response time? If the team isn't spending most of the meeting talking about interdependent issues, members will disengage and ultimately not attend.

List agenda topics as questions the team needs to answer. Most agenda items are simply several words strung together to form a phrase, such as: "office space reallocation." This leaves meeting participants wondering, "What

about office space reallocation?” When you list a topic as a question (or questions) to be answered, it instead reads like this: “Under what conditions, if any, should we reallocate office space?”

A question enables team members to better prepare for the discussion and to monitor whether their own and others’ comments are on track. During the meeting, anyone who thinks a comment is off track can say something like, “I’m not seeing how your comment relates to the question we’re trying to answer. Can you help me understand the connection?” The team knows that when the question has been answered, the discussion is complete.

Note whether the purpose of the topic is to share information, seek input for a decision, or make a decision. It’s difficult for team members to participate effectively if they don’t know whether to simply listen, give their input, or be part of the decision-making process. If people think they are involved in making a decision, but you simply want their input, everyone is likely to feel frustrated by the end of the conversation. Updates are better distributed—and read—prior to the meeting, with a brief part of the meeting allocated to answering participants’ questions. If the purpose of the topic is to make a decision, state the decision-making rule. If you’re the formal leader, at the beginning of the agenda item you might say, “If possible, I want us to make this decision by consensus. That means that everyone can support and implement the decision given their roles on the team. If we’re not able to reach consensus after an hour of discussion, I reserve the right to make the decision based on

Prepare

the conversation we've had. I'll tell you my decision and my reasoning for making it." (For more on group decision making, see chapter 12.)

Estimate a realistic amount of time for each topic. This serves two purposes. First, it requires you to do the math: to calculate how much time the team will need for introducing the topic, answering questions, resolving different points of view, generating potential solutions, and agreeing on the action items that follow from discussion and decisions. Leaders typically underestimate the amount of time needed. If there are 10 people in your meeting and you have allocated 10 minutes to decide under what conditions, if any, you will reallocate office space, you have probably underestimated the time. By doing some simple math, you would realize that the team would have to reach a decision immediately after each of the ten members had spoken for a minute.

Second, the estimated time enables team members to either adapt their comments to fit within the allotted time frame or to suggest that more time may be needed. The purpose of listing the time is not to stop discussion when the time has elapsed; that simply contributes to poor decision making and frustration. The purpose is to get better at allocating enough time for the team to effectively and efficiently answer relevant questions.

Propose a process for addressing each agenda item. A defined process makes it possible to identify the steps the team should take to complete a discussion or make a decision. Agreeing on a process significantly increases

meeting effectiveness, yet leaders rarely do it. Unless a team has agreed on a process, members will, in good faith, participate based on their own process. You've probably seen this in action: Some team members are trying to define the problem, while other team members are wondering why the topic is on the agenda, and still other members are already identifying and evaluating solutions.

The process for addressing an item should appear on the written agenda. When you reach that item during the meeting, explain the process and seek agreement. For example: "I suggest we use the following process. First, let's take about 10 minutes to get all the relevant information on the table. Second, let's take 10 minutes to identify and agree on any assumptions we need to make. Third, let's take another 10 minutes to identify and agree on the interests that should be met for any solution. Finally, we'll use about 15 minutes to craft a solution that ideally takes into account all the interests and is consistent with our relevant information and assumptions. Any suggestions for improving this process?"

Specify how members should prepare for the meeting.

Distribute the agenda with sufficient time before the meeting so the team can read background materials and prepare their initial thoughts for each agenda item ahead of time.

Identify who is responsible for leading each topic. Someone other than the formal meeting leader can be responsible for leading the discussion of a particular agenda

Prepare

item. This person may provide context for the topic, explain data, or have organizational responsibility for that area. Identifying this person next to the agenda item ensures that anyone who is responsible for leading part of the agenda knows it—and prepares for it—before the meeting.

Make the first topic “review and modify agenda as needed.” Even if you and your team jointly developed the agenda before the meeting, take a minute to see if anything needs to be changed due to late-breaking events. I once had a meeting scheduled with a senior leadership team. As we reviewed the agenda, I asked if we needed to modify anything. The CEO stated that he had just told the board of directors that he planned to resign and that we probably needed to significantly change the agenda. Not all agenda modifications are that dramatic, but by checking in at the beginning of the meeting, you increase the chance that the team will use its meeting time most effectively.

End the meeting with a plus delta evaluation. If your team meets regularly, two questions should form a simple continuous improvement process: What did we do well? and What do we want to do differently for the next meeting? Investing 5 or 10 minutes will enable the team to improve performance, working relationships, and team member satisfaction. Here are some questions to consider when identifying what the team has done well and what it wants to do differently.

- Was the agenda distributed in time for everyone to prepare?
- How well did team members prepare for the meeting?
- How well did we estimate the time needed for each agenda item?
- How well did we allocate our time for decision making and discussion?
- How well did everyone stay on topic? Did team members speak up when they thought someone was off topic?
- How effective was the process for each agenda item?

To ensure that your team follows through, review the results of the plus delta evaluation at the beginning of the next meeting.

If you develop agendas using these tips, your team will have an easier time getting—and staying—focused in meetings.

Roger Schwarz is an organizational psychologist, speaker, leadership team consultant, and president and CEO of Roger Schwarz & Associates. He is the author of *Smart Leaders, Smarter Teams: How You and Your Team Get Unstuck to Get Results* (Jossey-Bass, 2013). For more, visit www.schwarzassociates.com or find him on Twitter @LeadSmarter.

CHAPTER 5

The Key to Shorter, Better Meetings

by Anthony Tjan

Your meetings may often cut across multiple objectives, but setting and articulating the purpose of your meeting will help participants prepare and contribute more effectively. Outside general relationship-building, consider that a business meeting has only three functional purposes:

1. To inform and bring people up to speed.
2. To seek input from people.
3. To ask for approval.

Adapted from content posted on hbr.org on June 23, 2009.

Prepare

Use this as a filter to determine why you're having a meeting, to clarify your agenda viewing items through this lens, and to explain your purpose to your audience.

Consider a meeting that sets its agenda goals along the lines of “I want to bring you up to speed on these two things,” or “I need input on this item,” or “I would like to get your approval on these outstanding issues.” That's it: a simple, three-purpose rule that frames the goals of the meeting from the perspective of each participant.

Anthony Tjan is CEO, managing partner, and founder of the venture capital firm Cue Ball. He is coauthor of *Heart, Smarts, Guts, and Luck: What It Takes to Be an Entrepreneur and Build a Great Business* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2012).

CHAPTER 6

The 50-Minute Meeting

by **David Silverman**

I have a life-changing proposal for businesspeople everywhere: 50-minute hours. Start a productivity revolution by scheduling business meetings that, by default, run 50 minutes long instead of 60.

How often do you find that by 11 a.m. you're running late, and by 3 p.m. you've either been forced to dump a meeting to reset your day or are 100 e-mails behind because you've gone straight from one appointment to another all day long? Either way, you're leaving someone (or many people) in the lurch. It's a stressful and unsatisfying existence.

Adapted from content posted on hbr.org on August 6, 2009.

There's another group of people who are scheduled in back-to-back sessions all day long, five days a week. I speak, of course, of students. All the way through school we're taught in 50-minute blocks, a schedule that lets us get to our next class on time. The buildings even have bells to remind the person running the meeting—er, class—to end on time.

Why is it, then, that when we graduate, they take away our bells, replace them with an irritating “doink” sound signaling “15 minutes until your next meeting,” and assume we can now teleport to the next location? What could cause such madness? In two words: Microsoft Outlook. (Not without blame would also be IBM Notes, Google Calendar, Apple's Calendar, and others.)

By default, Outlook sets up meetings that are 30, 60, 90, or 120 minutes long. There's no room for travel time, to compose yourself, to answer a couple of e-mails, or for a coffee or bathroom break.

Next time you're faced with scheduling a meeting, consider booking a 20-minute or 50-minute session. See what you can accomplish in that time, and if you can still get to your next meeting. You may just start a new trend in your organization.

David Silverman has been an entrepreneur, an executive, and a business-writing teacher. He is the author of *Typo: The Last American Typesetter or How I Made and Lost 4 Million Dollars* (Soft Skull Press, 2009).

CHAPTER 7

The Magic of 30-Minute Meetings

by Peter Bregman

Often we schedule one-hour time slots. Why? How did an hour become our standard time allotment for so many meetings, phone calls, and appointments? Recently I tried a new experiment: I cut the time I allot for many activities in half.

I started with something easy. I used to work out for an hour a day. Now it's down to 30 minutes. My results—weight and conditioning—improved.

Adapted from content posted on hbr.org on February 22, 2016.

Prepare

Here's why: My intensity is higher (I know I only have 30 minutes), I eat better (I don't rely on my workout to keep slim), I integrate movement more into my day (I don't rely on my workout to take care of all my fitness needs), and I never miss a workout (I can always find 30 minutes).

If you have half the time to accomplish something, you become hyperaware of how you're using that time. And hyperfocused during it. Most of my meetings are now 30 minutes or less. My podcast is 15 to 20 minutes. Even many of my conference calls, with multiple parties, are 30 minutes or less. People on the calls, aware of the time constraint, are more thoughtful about when they speak and more careful not to follow tangents that aren't useful.

People also listen better because when things are moving faster, we tend to be more alert. We know that a single distracted moment will leave us behind. And, since that keeps us more engaged, we end up having more fun in the process.

Nowhere has this impact been more transformational—and more evident—than in the leadership coaching we do at Bregman Partners. For the past several years, all of our coaching is accomplished in 30-minute sessions. The advantages are obvious: Everyone saves time and money. But here's what's less obvious: The coaching isn't simply as powerful as what we could do in a longer session, it's vastly more so. When the coach and the client both know they have only 30 minutes, they move into high gear.

- **People show up.** Just as with my workouts, clients are far less likely to skip a 30-minute session than they are an hour-long one.
- **Everyone is on time.** Every minute counts in a 30-minute conversation, and people know it. The session gets started more quickly, because everyone's aware that the relationship is built on doing good work, not on making small talk.
- **People are much more likely to come prepared.** There's no time wasted on off-topic items and going-nowhere conversations. Clients know what they want to cover and have put some thought into it beforehand.
- **The time pressure enhances focus and attention.** People don't focus on multiple issues; they tackle the single biggest opportunity or most persistent, intractable obstacle. And they move on it.
- **Coaches are more willing to be courageous, and clients are more willing to be prodded.** In a 30-minute session, coaches can't waste time beating around the bush. They get to the point faster and earlier, interrupt more bravely, and ask more provocative questions.

The compressed, focused coaching session hones the skill of getting to the point quickly, focusing on the most essential elements of a situation, and taking action. The downside? I haven't seen one yet. Try it yourself. Transition some of your hour-long meetings to

Prepare

30 minutes. As you do, consider these three steps as a way to make the 30 minutes most powerful:

1. Read what you need to beforehand, and tell everyone else to do the same. Think about your questions and concerns. Decide what's important to you and what you can let go of. Ask yourself the most important question: What outcome do you want?
2. Decide on the one thing that will make the biggest difference, and spend the 30 minutes on that issue, topic, or opportunity. Get started right on time, no matter who isn't there, and be bold and disciplined at keeping the conversation on track. Let go of anything that is less critical. Make decisions quickly, even if they are imperfect. Getting traction on a single thing is far more useful than touching on many issues without forward momentum on any.
3. Save at least the last five minutes to summarize what you learned, articulate what was valuable, commit to what you're going to do as a result of the meeting, and clarify how you'll assess the success of your next steps. The sign of a great meeting isn't the meeting itself—it's what happens after that meeting.

Like our coaches, you'll need these “get to the most critical point fast” skills—and the courage to use them—if you're going to make the most of your time. You need to be bold and even provocative. You need to be will-

ing to interrupt, thoughtfully and for the greater good of moving ambitiously toward what is most important. You need to let go of things that don't really matter.

And you need to be fully present. No multitasking. No texting under the table. No distractions. Which is also the upside: you get to be fully present in what you are doing.

There is a cost. While it's energizing, it also takes a lot of energy to be so focused, even for a short amount of time. It's a sprinter's tactic.

On the other hand, when you cut your meetings in half, you'll have a lot more time to relax at dinner, write, sleep, and spend unstructured time with people you love.

Peter Bregman is CEO of Bregman Partners, a company that strengthens leadership in people and in organizations through programs (including the Bregman Leadership Intensive), coaching, and by consulting with their CEOs and leadership teams. He is the best-selling author of *18 Minutes* (Business Plus, 2011), and his most recent book is *Four Seconds* (HarperOne, 2015).

CHAPTER 8

Meetings Need a Shot Clock

by Bob Frisch and Cary Greene

We've all been invited to meetings with agendas so long that it's impossible to cover every item. The early speakers run long. The early proposals get debated. But those at the end get short shrift or are tabled until the next gathering, even if they're equally important.

How can you avoid this problem? One option is to limit your ambitions, to be more realistic about what you can get done in the hour or hours you're meeting. Simply resign yourself to covering less. In our view, however, there's a better solution, one that allows you to accomplish more while still ensuring that each person or topic gets adequate time. As crazy as it sounds, the answer is

Adapted from content posted on hbr.org on March 16, 2016.

Prepare

a shot clock. Yes, an actual shot clock, like the ones they use in high school, college, and professional basketball games. The NBA and the NCAA put the shot clock in place years ago to quicken the pace of play, because some teams (especially when leading near the end) passed the ball endlessly without penalty. Now there's a limit on the time a team has to shoot—24 seconds in the NBA, 30 seconds in the NCAA—and if that time runs out, the ball goes to the opponent.

We've experimented with the same system in business meetings—especially when fair process is important to uphold—and had great success. Although most attendees tend to be a bit skeptical at first, they quickly recognize the purpose and value of the shot clock: It ensures that all agenda items are covered and each is allocated appropriate time.

Here's how it works: Before a meeting begins, explain that you want to devote a certain amount of time to each topic. For example, if you're leading an annual budget review and have 40 investment proposals on the table, you might say, "We're going to spend exactly 10 minutes on each topic. Speakers will have three minutes to present, followed by seven minutes of discussion."

Of course, sometimes different topics require different amounts of discussion time. A relatively straightforward issue might warrant five minutes, while a more contentious one merits 20. If you can identify the more time-consuming items in advance, great. If not, consider using a few minutes at the start of a meeting to determine how much time each agenda item deserves. One

organization we worked with listed topics on a wall chart and asked attendees to put a green, yellow, or red dot next to each one to signify whether it deserved 7, 10, or 15 minutes of discussion, respectively. To limit the number of 15-minute conversations, each person only had three red dots to dole out.

Once you've determined appropriate time allocations, set up the shot clock. A smartphone stopwatch works nicely. It should buzz—loudly—when time runs out and keep buzzing until the person stops talking.

When people are introduced to this tool, they usually both love it and hate it. They like the fact that it limits others from commandeering too much time, overanalyzing decisions, and beating dead horses in debates, but they don't enjoy getting cut off themselves. Still, we often find that by the end of that first meeting, everyone has grown more comfortable with it and even fond of it. The shot clock is impersonal—even obnoxious—but that's what makes it effective. It's fair. Everyone is guaranteed to get a turn, and each issue is given the attention it needs. No one gets to “buy” extra floor time because of their status. It grants no wiggle room.

The shot clock also keeps meetings lively, focused, and sharp. And it's a great training tool. At several meetings, we've observed that executives who are tasked with speaking on multiple agenda items progressively get better at managing the clock. The first time they might run a tad over. The second time they come in right at the buzzer. By the third or fourth time, they're expressing themselves much more succinctly and wrapping up

well before their minutes run out. They are more careful with their time because—just like the best basketball players—they know it’s fixed.

Bob Frisch is the managing partner of the Strategic Offsites Group, a Boston-based consultancy, and is the author of *Who’s In The Room? How Great Leaders Structure and Manage the Teams Around Them* (Jossey-Bass, 2012). He is the author of four *Harvard Business Review* articles, including “Off-Sites That Work” (June 2006).

Cary Greene is a partner of the Strategic Offsites Group. They are coauthors of *Simple Sabotage: A Modern Field Manual for Detecting & Rooting Out Everyday Behaviors That Undermine Your Workplace* (HarperOne, 2015) and are frequent contributors to hbr.org.

CHAPTER 9

Are There Too Many People in Your Meeting?

When you set up a meeting, the people you invite are just as important as what you need to get done.

It may be easy to default to inviting a crowd of people to a meeting—that way, you don't really have to identify the most critical participants, you can avoid any ruffled feathers, you'll have everyone involved on hand for a decision, and you won't have to repeat your communications separately afterward. Or maybe your tendency is to keep things small, to invite just a handful of people whose opinions you value most.

Adapted from content posted on hbr.org on March 18, 2015 and from *Running Meetings* (20-Minute Manager series; product#17003), Harvard Business Review Press, 2014.

Prepare

But for a meeting to be most useful, you have to have the right people—and only the right people—in the room. With too many attendees, you might have trouble focusing everyone's time and attention and not accomplish anything; with too few, you might not have the right decision makers or information providers in the room.

As you plan your attendee list, consider who will help you accomplish your meeting's goal and who will be most affected by its outcome. You'll likely want to include a combination of people who will offer a variety of perspectives. Take the time to methodically list each individual and place them into the following categories to make sure you include the right people:

- The key decision makers for the issues involved
- Those with information and knowledge about the topics under discussion
- People who have a commitment to or a stake in the issues
- Those who need to know about the information in order to do their jobs
- Anyone who will be required to implement decisions made

Consult with other stakeholders to make sure you've made the right list. Often another key stakeholder can remind you of a perspective you forgot to bring into the room.

Just because someone's name is on your list, however, doesn't mean they must be at the meeting. How many

people should you actually invite? There are no hard-and-fast rules, but in principle, a small meeting is best for deciding or accomplishing something, a medium-sized meeting is ideal for brainstorming, and a large meeting makes the most sense for communicating and rallying. Some people use what's known as the 8-18-1800 rule as a rough guideline:

- If you have to solve a problem or make a decision, invite no more than 8 people. If you have more participants, you may receive so much conflicting input that it's difficult to deal with the problem or make the decision at hand.
- If you want to brainstorm, then you can go as high as 18 people.
- If the purpose of the meeting is to provide updates, invite however many people need to receive the information. However, if everyone attending the meeting will be providing updates, limit the number of participants to no more than 18.
- If the purpose of the meeting is for you to rally the troops, go for 1,800—or more!

If you decide not to invite individuals you listed as likely to be affected by the meeting's outcome, have a plan to communicate the substance of the meeting to them afterward.

SECTION TWO

Conduct

CHAPTER 10

Before a Meeting, Tell Your Team That Silence Denotes Agreement

by Bob Frisch and Cary Greene

The meeting seemed to go smoothly. Bill, the executive vice president of sales at a global company, had gathered his extended leadership team—a group of more than 20 people—and outlined his latest plan to reconfigure the sales organization. When he asked if anyone had

Adapted from content posted on hbr.org on February 3, 2016.

concerns, there were a few questions, but no one raised any significant obstacles or issues, and some of the more senior team members spoke up in support of the plan. Bill felt that everyone was on board and ready to go.

But later that week, one of the meeting attendees came into Bill's office. "Do you remember when you were talking about reconfiguring the sales organization?" the attendee asked. "I'm not sure we've got Latin America quite right." Similar scenes played out with other direct reports and more-junior employees in the halls and cafeteria over the next few days. People had opinions they hadn't shared at the meeting. The plan, which had seemed unanimously popular, was now unraveling. What happened?

Most bosses assume that when they directly ask for feedback, people will offer their thoughts candidly. It's great when that happens. But it often doesn't, especially in public settings and high-stakes situations. If you get unanimous, but mostly unvoiced, support for a decision that you thought might be contentious, it should be a warning sign.

Why do people hold back from weighing in? In some cases, junior people may hesitate to disagree with bosses or senior colleagues. In others, the most powerful team members may be disinclined, for political or other reasons, to express candid opinions in front of the group because they know they can always get access to decision makers or launch a covert campaign to sway support their way after the fact.

How can you prevent this from happening? Set one key ground rule: Silence denotes agreement.

These three words do a great job of forcing people to open up, no matter how reluctant they may be feeling (or how passive-aggressive they are). Explain to people that if they don't say anything when given a proposal or plan, they're voting "yes" for it. Silence doesn't mean "I'm not voting" or "I reserve the right to weigh in later." It means "I'm completely on board with what's being discussed."

You must then commit to enforcing the rule. If someone—even a powerful team member or friend—comes up to you after a meeting to express reservations about what was said, the response should be "You should have spoken up at the meeting. Now everyone is on board and the ship has sailed. Next time, say something."

Sometimes the establishment and reinforcement of "silence denotes agreement" as a ground rule is enough to get the opinions flowing. But if you sense that some participants are still finding it difficult to express themselves freely, consider the following tactics, which allow perspectives to be aired in a way that focuses on the ideas rather than on the individuals voicing them.

- **Take anonymous polls.** Ask people to write down questions or concerns on index cards, put them into a bowl, and read them aloud without using names. Better yet, use a polling app or device to query meeting participants and see their answers in real time.
- **Heat map the topic.** Put poster-sized charts of the components of an idea or plan on the wall. Ask participants to place yellow dots on the charts where they have a question and red dots where

they have a significant concern. Use the dots to guide the conversation.

- **Break up a big group.** People are more likely to participate in small group discussions, so divide people into teams with specific instructions to discuss any challenges to the proposal at hand. Appoint a representative from each group to summarize everyone's thoughts.
- **Ask them to empathize.** People are often more willing to speak on others' behalf than on their own. So when you solicit opinions with a question like "What objections or concerns might your direct reports have?" it can open the floodgates of reaction. That's because it allows those in the room to externalize criticism. It's not what they don't like. It's what they think their *people* won't like.

When you enforce the discipline of "silence denotes agreement" and use the tactics described here, everyone is motivated to say what they really think immediately and discuss it openly, rather than flagging problems after the fact.

Bob Frisch is the managing partner of the Strategic Off-sites Group, a Boston-based consultancy, and is the author of *Who's In The Room? How Great Leaders Structure and Manage the Teams Around Them* (Jossey-Bass, 2012). He is the author of four *Harvard Business Review* articles, including "Off-Sites That Work" (June 2006).

Cary Greene is a partner of the Strategic Offsites Group. They are coauthors of *Simple Sabotage: A Modern Field Manual for Detecting & Rooting Out Everyday Behaviors That Undermine Your Workplace* (HarperOne, 2015) and are frequent contributors to hbr.org.

CHAPTER 11

Establish Ground Rules

Setting guidelines at the beginning of a meeting encourages everyone's participation and keeps the conversation on track. The guidelines don't have to be rigid or overly formal but should serve as a set of shared expectations for behavior that reflect your time constraints, the size of your group, and your meeting's intentions and goals. For example, your group may decide to let only one person speak at a time, not allow interruptions, set time limits on contributions, table issues that aren't easily resolved, limit conversations that stray from the topic at hand, and make sure that everyone is heard from.

Adapted from *Running Meetings* (20-Minute Manager series; product #17003), Harvard Business Review Press, 2014; and Martha Craumer, "How to Run an Effective Meeting: The Basics."

Conduct

If you're meeting with the same group of people on a regular basis, the group can develop these guidelines together. Otherwise, suggest some ground rules at the beginning of your meeting, and get buy-in from the attendees.

Specifying ground rules signals to participants that you intend to keep things moving efficiently.

- Reassert that you're committed to beginning and ending on time (and then really do it).
- Ask for everyone's participation and openness to new ideas.
- Agree to listen to each other and limit interruptions—and as the leader, enforce that rule.
- Clarify how decisions will be made. Let the group know right up front if this will be a group-decision meeting, a meeting that calls for participants' input, or a meeting that shares a decision that has already been made.
- Explain your policy on multitasking and device use.

You may also need to establish ground rules for specific agenda items:

- Clarify constraints that exist for any issue that will be under discussion—for example, upper-management decisions or policy or budget restrictions that may limit the group's range of options.

- Identify the final decision maker for each item—especially if it's not someone in the meeting (such as the CEO or department manager).
-

Martha Craumer is a senior writer at The Boston Consulting Group.

CHAPTER 12

Reach Group Decisions During Meetings

Facilitating group decisions in meetings is rarely easy. The following suggestions for choosing the right decision-making method will help ensure that everyone leaves your meetings with clear decisions and next steps for implementing those decisions.

You can use three common decision-making methods with groups: group consensus, majority vote, or leader's choice. Each has its own benefits and challenges.

Adapted from *Running Meetings* (20-Minute Manager series; product #17003), Harvard Business Review Press, 2014.

Group Consensus

Group consensus does not mean arguing and lobbying until everyone agrees. It means reaching a decision that everyone understands, supports, and is willing to help implement.

Advantages:

- Allows all meeting participants to share their expertise in order to arrive at the best decision.
- Results in all participants understanding the decision and its implications.
- Greatly enhances the chance for buy-in from all parties.

Disadvantages:

- Participants may not be familiar with this decision-making process: They may think that they all have to agree to and believe in the final outcome, so it may feel like people are spinning their wheels or heading in the wrong direction.
- May take more time than other decision-making approaches.
- May require that you have an alternative decision-making process (for example, leader's choice) in case consensus cannot be reached within given time constraints.

How do you know when you have a genuine consensus? You'll hear comments such as "Option A isn't

my first choice, but I believe it incorporates everyone's needs." Or "I don't think Option A satisfies all our criteria, but I'm prepared to implement it as fully as possible."

Majority Vote

The proposal or idea with the most votes wins.

Advantages:

- The group arrives at a decision relatively quickly.
- The group perceives the decision to be fair.
- You hear from everyone, even people who are usually quiet.

Disadvantages:

- Open voting requires taking public stands on issues and can result in perceived winners and losers.
- People may not feel comfortable voting according to their true feelings or voicing reservations they might have about decisions.
- Losers often feel their voices have not been heard.
- Not everyone buys into the decision.

Leader's Choice

In some ways, having the leader decide is similar to a majority rule because the leader needs to hear what the participants think and is most likely to agree with the majority view.

Advantages:

- It's the fastest approach to decision making and may be the best approach when time is short or when there is a crisis.
- If the meeting participants respect the leader and understand why they are making a certain decision, people are somewhat more likely to buy into the decision.

Disadvantages:

- Meeting participants may feel that the leader is ignoring their views, particularly if they haven't been given the chance to state their ideas.
- You may encounter resistance during implementation, as meeting participants may feel less ownership or may not have bought in completely.

CHAPTER 13

The Right Way to Cut People Off in Meetings

by Bob Frisch and Cary Greene

You've spent hours preparing for the meeting. The objectives are clear. The agenda is tight. Relevant material was distributed to attendees in advance. Smartphones are put away, and your team seems focused and ready to work.

The conversation begins, but after 10 minutes of good discussion on the first agenda item, someone goes off on a tangent that, while interesting, is only marginally related to the designated topic. Then another person jumps in to elaborate, and the two start talking in detail

Adapted from content posted on hbr.org on April 8, 2016.

about issues relevant only to them. Other attendees begin to tune out. Now 20 minutes have passed—and you haven't made any progress.

We've all seen scenes like this play out, whether in an hour-long meeting or at a multiday off-site. Participants veer off topic or take the conversation into the weeds, and because no one feels comfortable doing anything about it, critical agenda items are left untouched. In fact, research suggests that “getting off the subject” is the number one challenge to meeting productivity. When leaders or peers do try to intervene, it's often after too much time has passed (since they've waited for the perfect opportunity to interrupt), and the typical approach—“This is really interesting, but can I suggest we get back to the topic at hand?”—leaves everyone feeling awkward.

Thankfully, there is a simple solution to this predicament: the word “jellyfish.” Jellyfish are, of course, those funny-looking creatures with no brain, no blood, and no heart that have drifted along on ocean currents for millions of years. We use the word to prevent meetings from drifting.

Here's how it works. At the start of your gathering, introduce the jellyfish ground rule: If any attendee feels the conversation is heading off course or delving into an inappropriate level of detail, they can and should employ the word to indicate that opinion. Simply say “jellyfish” or “I think we're having a jellyfish moment” or “Gee, did I just see a jellyfish swim by?” It's a catchall for “Why don't you take this offline—the rest of us would like our meeting back.”

Of all things, why is “jellyfish” so effective?

It's safe. The word is both simple and funny, and if set up correctly at the start of a meeting, it carries the same effect as other, more traditional (and less comfortable) ways of interrupting and redirecting the conversation. Of course, you can pick another, similarly silly word, but we've been using this one for years and have found that people—indeed, entire organizations—quickly embrace it.

It's accessible. Anyone can invoke it. The meeting owner or facilitator may be the first to use it, but they don't have to be the only one. Any participant can ask, "This feels like jellyfish. Do you agree?" prompting the person or people on the tangent to ask themselves if they are using the group's time well.

It raises awareness. When meeting participants know that jellyfish will be used, they can't help but become more self-aware about staying on topic. In many cases we've even seen attendees call jellyfish on themselves.

In decades of helping clients conduct better meetings, we've found "jellyfish" to be one of the most effective ways of keeping the discussion on target.

Bob Frisch is the managing partner of the Strategic Offsites Group, a Boston-based consultancy, and is the author of *Who's In The Room? How Great Leaders Structure and Manage the Teams Around Them* (Jossey-Bass,

Conduct

2012). He is the author of four *Harvard Business Review* articles, including “Off-Sites That Work” (June 2006).

Cary Greene is a partner of the Strategic Offsites Group. They are coauthors of *Simple Sabotage: A Modern Field Manual for Detecting & Rooting Out Everyday Behaviors That Undermine Your Workplace* (HarperOne, 2015) and are frequent contributors to hbr.org.

CHAPTER 14

Dealing with People Who Derail Meetings

by Roger Schwarz

What does your team do when someone takes a meeting off track? If your team is like most, the leader says something like, “Lee, that’s not what we’re talking about now” or “Let’s get back on track” or the team simply ignores Lee’s comment and tries to bring the conversation back to the original topic.

But if your team responds in any of these ways, Lee may continue to press his off-topic point, the meeting may drag on with members getting more frustrated with

Adapted from content posted on hbr.org on September 20, 2013.

Conduct

Lee, and the team may not accomplish its meeting goals. Or Lee may stop participating for the rest of the meeting and the team, without realizing it, will lose Lee's critical input and support for implementing a team decision.

If you assume that Lee or others who derail a meeting are the problem and the solution is to get them back on track or stop them from talking, you may be off track. These team members' behaviors are often a symptom of larger team problems. People often make off-track comments when there isn't clear agreement on the meeting's purpose or process, or when the team doesn't provide time to hear everyone's thoughts on a topic. Sometimes the problem is that you think others are off track when they aren't. So what should you do?

Agree on the track before going down it.

If your team doesn't explicitly agree on the purpose and topic for each part of the meeting, then people will use their own understanding to decide what is appropriate. Because team members will naturally have different interpretations, one person's comments can easily seem off track to others.

Start your meeting by saying something like, "My understanding of the purpose of this meeting is X; does anyone have a different understanding or think we need to add anything?" This ensures that if people think other issues need to be addressed, they can say so and have them considered for the agenda, rather than raising them as off-track items. If it's not your meeting and there is no agenda, simply ask "Can we take a minute to

get clear on the purpose and topics for the meeting to make sure we accomplish what you need?”

**Check that others are ready to
move down the track.**

Rather than saying “Okay, let’s move on” or simply shifting to a new topic, say something like “I think we’re ready to move to topic *Y*. Anyone have anything else we haven’t fully addressed on *X*?” If some people aren’t ready to move on, find out what needs to happen before they can move forward. This reduces the chance that people will raise issues later that you thought had been fully discussed. If your team is staying focused but regularly runs out of time before completing its agenda, then you’re underestimating the amount of time necessary to make high-quality decisions that generate commitment. When you and the team agree on the goals and make sure everyone is ready to move on, you’re jointly designing next steps, and that builds commitment to decisions.

**Test your assumption that the meeting
is getting derailed.**

If the team has agreed on the topic to discuss and you still think that someone is off track, say something like, “Lee, I’m not seeing how your point about outsourcing is related to the topic of our planning process. Help me understand the connection.” When Lee responds, you and other team members might discover a link between the two topics that you hadn’t considered. For example, Lee might say that outsourcing will free up internal resources

so that the team can complete the planning process in less time. If there is a connection, the team can decide whether it makes more sense to explore Lee's idea now or later. If it turns out that Lee's comment isn't related but is still relevant for the team, you can suggest placing it on a future agenda. One caveat: There are times when it is critical to address team members' issues immediately, even if they're off track. If team members raise highly emotional issues about how the group is working together, it's important to acknowledge the issue's importance and then decide whether it's more essential to address it than the current agenda topic. Sometimes focusing on how the team works together is more critical than sticking with the team's substantive topics.

This is more than a polite way of dealing with people who get off track: It's a way to suspend your assumption that you understand the situation and others don't, to be curious about others' views, and to ask people to be accountable for their own contributions so that the team can make an informed choice about how best to move forward. For this approach to work, you can't just say the words; you have to believe that Lee's topic might be connected and that you don't see it.

By getting explicit agreement about the meeting's purpose and topics and by being genuinely curious when people seem off track, you and your team can move faster and accomplish more in your meetings.

Roger Schwarz is an organizational psychologist, speaker, leadership team consultant, and president and CEO of

Roger Schwarz & Associates. He is the author of *Smart Leaders, Smarter Teams: How You and Your Team Get Unstuck to Get Results* (Jossey-Bass, 2013). For more, visit www.schwarzassociates.com or find him on Twitter @LeadSmarter.

CHAPTER 15

Refocus a Meeting After Someone Interrupts

by Rebecca Knight

You did everything you were supposed to do: invited all the right people, sent out an agenda in advance, and got everyone's agreement on the process. But despite your diligence, your meeting is being hijacked. How should you handle a persistent interrupter? Will it work to just ignore the person? And how can you regain control of the meeting?

Adapted from content posted on hbr.org on April 16, 2015.

What the Experts Say

Whether it's a team member who disagrees with your approach, an employee from another department who brings up irrelevant information, or a colleague who wants to use your meeting as a soapbox for their own personal agenda, dealing with interrupters during a meeting is challenging. "When someone interrupts you, blocks you, or otherwise thwarts your intended action, it's natural to feel upset," says Judith White, visiting associate professor at Dartmouth's Tuck School of Business. "This is a basic instinct, and you will always have a flash of annoyance." The key to successfully dealing with interrupters is to quash your frustration and instead "operate from a mind-set of curiosity," says Roger Schwarz, an organizational psychologist and the author of *Smart Leaders, Smarter Teams*. Here's how to handle disruptors and regain control.

Gather Input Ahead of Time

"A well-designed agenda both provides a structure for the meeting and serves as a point of reference," Schwarz explains. People are less likely to disrupt a meeting if they feel like they had a hand in shaping it. So send out a proposed agenda ahead of time, and ask your team for input. Give them a time frame for making recommendations, and ask that they include a reason why they think an item is worthy of discussion. Everyone should have a say, but "the team leader gets the final decision about what to include." While an agenda does not entirely prevent interruptions, "it becomes the basis of your

intervention,” says Schwarz. Once you’re in the meeting, if someone interrupts with an off-topic remark, Schwarz suggests saying something like, “I don’t see how your comment connects to the issue we’re talking about now. Help me understand how the two relate.” If the speaker can’t draw a connection, “then you use the agenda to pick up where you left off,” he says.

Stay Calm

When someone interrupts or challenges you in a meeting, manage your response. “Don’t get emotional” says White. “If you look threatened or angry, you will lose the trust of everyone in the room.” Rather, your goal should be to “react with humor, kindness, inclusion, and assertiveness.” Modulate your tone of voice and inflection, too. When you respond to the person who is interrupting, Schwarz says, “Speak in a genuinely curious, not frustrated, way.”

Listen, Validate, Redirect

Don’t be tempted to ignore the interruption and move on. At the point of interruption, “you need to stop talking and listen to what the person has to say,” White explains. Then summarize his points “to let him know he’s been heard.” Let’s say, for instance, you’re leading a meeting about new corporate initiatives, and your colleague, Bob, interjects with, “Why are we bothering to discuss this? We don’t have money in the budget to execute these ideas.” You should then say, “Bob, your point is that we don’t have money in the budget for this. And that’s a good point.” After validating his comments,

Conduct

redirect the discussion. Start by restating the purpose of the meeting. In this instance, White suggests you could say something along the lines of, “We have great minds in this room, and the president of our company asked us to work together to come up with cost-efficient ideas. I am confident we can do it.”

Probe Further

Don’t always rush to redirect the conversation, however, warns Schwarz. It’s not necessarily your goal to move through the meeting agenda as quickly as possible. Rather, he says, your aim is to “address issues efficiently, but also in a way that leads to a sustainable solution. When a colleague interrupts you with a comment you think is off topic, that’s not a fact; it’s an inference.” Ask your colleague to elaborate on his point. If you’re still unsure how what he’s saying relates to the topic at hand, ask others at the meeting for help. Frame the interruption as “an opportunity for learning a new perspective,” he says. “Think: What does he know that I don’t know?” It may be that he has a perspective you haven’t thought of. Says Schwarz: “Take time to address legitimate issues, because they’re not going away.”

Be Resolute and Direct

When a colleague persists in interrupting, is off on a tangent, or keeps on making the same point over and over, be direct and firm, says White. She suggests saying something like “Rich, you’ve brought this issue up before, and we heard you. If you would like to stay after the meeting and talk with me, I’d be happy to discuss the matter

further, but now we need to get back on track.” Or you could directly address the colleague who keeps on interrupting. Schwarz recommends a script like this: “Bob, I’m seeing a pattern, and I’m trying to figure out what’s happening here. Is there something going on that’s leading you to bring up these items?” While some might contend that this strategy puts Bob on the spot, Schwarz says “you need to deal with the issue in the place where the data lies—within the team.” Handling situations in the open also allows you to model to your team how to have challenging conversations and provides a forum for others to add relevant information.

Use Body Language to Take Back Control

When your meeting is in danger of derailment because of insistent or hostile interrupters, regain control using body language and nonverbal communication. “If you’re already standing, take a step or two toward the person who’s interrupting you,” says White. “Face that person and hold his gaze for five seconds—it will feel like an eternity.” Never cross your arms. “You should appear open,” she says. Then, walk slowly around the table, “stand directly behind the person who’s disrupting the meeting, and address the rest of the room.” Proceed accordingly. This, of course, requires confidence and finesse. Even though it’s not always easy, “it’s a powerful way to exert influence,” she says.

Consider Having a One-on-One Conversation

After a meeting filled with tense and numerous interruptions, you might spend a little time alone reflecting on

WHEN A SIT-DOWN IS CALLED FOR

Sometimes nothing you do in a meeting will help break someone of their problematic behavior. If this is the case, sit down with that person and speak directly with them. Here are tips for approaching the encounter.

1. **Ask permission.** “May I talk to you about today’s meeting?”
2. **Clarify goals.** Ask the person what they hope to get out of the meeting. Discuss what you see as the meeting’s core goals.
3. **Describe the behavior.** “I see you doing X.” This way, you each have a common reference point.
4. **Describe the consequences.** Explain how the behavior is affecting the group’s performance,

whether you’re doing anything to contribute to the problem, says Schwarz. It might also be worth approaching the interrupter for a one-on-one conversation. “Don’t argue with him after the meeting, and never scold,” says White. “He wants to feel heard.” Instead, pose questions and listen. Ask: What is your thinking on this issue? What would you like done differently? What’s important to you? “It may turn out that you both want the same thing, in which case, propose that you become allies,” she says. On the other hand, “you can agree to disagree.” (See

and detail the consequences you see it having for the group.

5. ***Inquire about the root of the behavior.*** Ask, for example, if the person is upset about a particular issue.
6. ***Make a specific suggestion or request.*** “At the next meeting, please try not to dismiss an idea until others have had a chance to finish their thoughts.” Being unambiguous increases the likelihood that they will change their behavior.
7. ***Agree on next steps.*** Getting the person to commit to changing their behavior will help them actually do so.

Adapted from *Harvard Management Communication Letter* (product #CO5O4B), Spring 2005.

the sidebar “When a Sit-Down Is Called For” for more ideas on conducting this conversation.)

Rebecca Knight is a freelance journalist based in Boston and a lecturer at Wesleyan University. Her work has been published in the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and the *Financial Times*.

SECTION THREE

Participate

CHAPTER 16

Polite Ways to Decline a Meeting Invitation

by Liane Davey

There it is in your inbox: an invitation to a meeting you really don't want to attend. Maybe because it's shoe-horned into one of the few open spaces in your calendar. Or perhaps it's at a time that's already booked, and now you're left to decide whom to turn down. Sometimes you just need to click "decline."

Your first challenge is deciding which meetings to say no to. Establish a set of criteria for participation, and stick with it. Ask yourself the following questions.

Adapted from content posted on hbr.org on May 17, 2016.

What is the value of the meeting?

Start by assessing whether the meeting is about something important, timely, and worthwhile. Is it set up for success by having a clear purpose and an agenda? Is there background information available to inform participants in advance? Are the appropriate people invited so that meaningful progress can be made? If the value of the meeting isn't clear from the invitation, reply back with a few open-ended questions before making your decision:

- “Could you please provide some additional information on the agenda?”
- “What stage of decision making are we at on this topic?”
- “How should I prepare for the discussion?”

Am I the right person to attend?

If it's clear that the meeting is worthwhile, your next question is whether or not you should be there. Are the issues within the purview of your role? Do you have the expertise to contribute to the conversation? Are you underqualified or overqualified for the level of decision making on the table? If you're questioning why you were invited, reach out to the meeting organizer before responding:

- “What are you looking for me to contribute at this meeting?”
- “Who else will be there from my department?”
- “Who will I be representing?”

Is the meeting a priority for me right now?

If you believe the meeting will be valuable and that you would make a contribution to the discussion, consider how it aligns with your goals and work. How central is the meeting topic to your role? Where does the issue fit relative to your other immediate demands? How unique is your contribution, and could your seat be better filled by someone else?

If you ask yourself these questions and find that your participation isn't essential, then it's appropriate to decline the meeting. Even if you choose not to attend, the following options can help you demonstrate that you're a good team player and a positive contributor, even if you can't be in the room.

Can I stop the meeting altogether?

If the meeting failed your first criteria because you don't believe it's set up for success, talk with the organizer about your concerns. It's possible the person will dismiss your comments, but you could also trigger one of two positive outcomes: Either the meeting gets better positioned for success or gets cancelled. Try one of the following approaches:

- “This is an interesting topic. Based on our current-year priorities, I'm not sure we're ready for a productive conversation yet. Would it be possible to push this meeting back and let the working group make a little more progress before we meet?”

Participate

- “I’m looking forward to making some decisions on this issue. From the meeting invite, it doesn’t look like Production is involved. I would like to wait until someone from that team is willing to join. Otherwise, we won’t be able to make any decisions.”
- “Based on the information in the invitation, it looks like this meeting is for informational purposes. Would it be possible to get a summary sent out rather than hold a meeting?”

Can I recommend someone else?

If the meeting is important, but it failed your second criteria because you’re not the right person for the job, try nominating someone else. Invest some effort in finding the right person so you don’t appear to be shirking the responsibility. Try floating these options:

- “I’m glad that you’re interested in my input, but I don’t believe I’m the most qualified person on this topic. I did a little digging, and it looks like Pat would have the necessary context. Would you be comfortable inviting Pat rather than me?”
- “Given that this is a decision-making meeting, I think it’s more appropriate to have my manager represent our team.”
- “Thanks for the invite to this meeting. I don’t think I’m required at this point. If it’s okay with you, I’d like to send José as my delegate.”

Can I contribute in advance?

If the meeting failed your third criteria (you determined that it was an important topic on which you could add unique value, but attending the meeting doesn't fit with your schedule or priorities), consider adding value in advance. Take a few minutes to pull together some notes and to brief the chair or a suitable participant. That will be much more efficient than attending the entire meeting. You can respond to the organizer by saying:

- “This is going to be an important discussion. I’m not able to attend, but I will find some time to share my thoughts so you can include them in the conversation.”
- “I’m sorry that I can’t attend the meeting. If I prepare you in advance, could I ask that you represent my ideas at the meeting?”

Can I attend only part of the meeting?

If one or more agenda items meets all three of your criteria but others don't, you might have the option of attending only part of the meeting. Respond with one of the following approaches:

- “Thanks for the invite. I think it’s really important for me to be part of the discussion on rebranding. Given a few other priorities at the moment, I’m going to excuse myself once that item is complete.”
- “Would it be possible to cover the rebranding discussion as the first agenda item? I can’t stay for

the entire meeting but I'd really like to contribute on that one."

Regardless of which option you choose, you're trying to do three things. First, model deliberateness about the use of time. Second, share your rationale so that the meeting organizer has some context for why you're not participating. Third, make an effort to meet the organizer's needs, even if it's not in the way they had originally envisioned.

It might be a bit of a culture shock at first, but all the overwhelmed people with 35 hours a week of meetings will quickly admire your discipline, and you may find folks declining your invites based on similar criteria.

Liane Davey is the cofounder of 3COze Inc. She is the author of *You First: Inspire Your Team to Grow Up, Get Along, and Get Stuff Done* (Wiley, 2013) and a co-author of *Leadership Solutions: The Pathway to Bridge the Leadership Gap* (Jossey-Bass, 2007). Follow her on Twitter @LianeDavey.

CHAPTER 17

How to Interject in a Meeting

by Jodi Glickman

How many times have you sat through a meeting with something brilliant to say but without knowing quite when to say it? Or realized halfway through the meeting that your colleague said something completely erroneous? Or, worse yet, found yourself nodding and smiling in agreement while wondering what in the world the discussion was actually about?

Speaking up in meetings—to interject, correct someone else, or ask for clarification—can be extremely intimidating. Having a few useful phrases at hand can go a

Adapted from content posted on hbr.org on November 3, 2010.

long way toward giving you the confidence and tools you need to be able to introduce your thoughts and opinions effectively in meetings.

When You've Got an Idea

Often people don't speak up because they're afraid of going on the record as wrong, uninformed, or the proponent of a dumb idea. A great way to sidestep this inherent fear is to depersonalize your idea, putting a question to the group. When you think you might have a good idea but aren't overly confident about it, go ahead and lob in an offhanded caveat, such as:

- “*Have we thought about . . . getting Steve involved in the PR campaign directly?*”
- “*Did anyone mention . . . the Brealy report? I seem to recall it covered some of the same topics Andrew has raised here.*”
- “*Another option we may want to consider . . . is pushing back the timeline until early October.*”
- “*Is it worth revisiting . . . last week's minutes from the meeting to review the agreed-upon product specifications?*”

The subtext here is that you're contributing to the discussion and adding value to the group—but not taking ownership of an idea or commandeering the conversation. By using a more informal question or caveat, you'll make your voice and idea heard without overstating your commitment to that idea.

When You Disagree

It's hard to disagree without being disagreeable. When the conversation is heading in a direction that doesn't work for you, it may be difficult to keep your mouth shut. Of course, it's your right (and perhaps even your responsibility) to speak up when you've got something contrarian to say; the key, however, is knowing how to finesse your comments so you don't come off sounding like a jerk. Here are a few strategies and helpful phrases to use in those awkward or tense moments:

- **Be blunt.** "I respectfully disagree with that assessment, Jon." Or "My experience has actually been quite different. I found the team to be highly engaging."
- **Be cagey.** "I just want to play devil's advocate here for a moment. What if we were to go with the opposite approach and use direct-mail marketing instead of relying solely on social media efforts?"
- **Be provocative.** "I want to throw out a curveball here and challenge our assumption that we have to take the deal."

When You're Confused

What's worse than sitting in on a meeting and having no idea what's going on? You may have stumbled in late, tuned out at exactly the wrong moment, or simply never known much about the topic at hand—and found yourself falling further and further in the dark as the meeting

progressed. No matter the cause, the longer you wait to ask for clarification, the harder it is to meaningfully reinsert yourself into the conversation.

Here are some good phrases to use the next time you find yourself lost in a meeting:

- *“I’m not entirely sure I’m following you. Could you please recap what you just mentioned regarding . . . the August delivery?”*
- *“I’m sure I’m supposed to know this already, but . . . how many attendees are we expecting at the conference next week?”*
- *“I apologize if this is totally obvious to everyone here, but . . . what does CAFE stand for?”*
- *“This may be a dumb question, but I’m still not up to speed on why . . . we’re not using rail instead of truck.”*

It’s best if you speak up in meetings and make your case—whether to push a new idea, correct a misconception, or simply keep yourself up-to-date on what’s really going on. You owe it to yourself and your team to contribute to your fullest potential. It’s far less intimidating than you might think.

Jodi Glickman is a speaker, the founder of the communication training firm Great on the Job, and the author of *Great on the Job: What to Say, How to Say It. The Secrets of Getting Ahead* (St. Martin’s Griffin, 2011). Follow Jodi on Twitter @greatonthejob.

CHAPTER 18

Stuck in a Meeting from Hell? Here's What to Do

by **Melissa Raffoni**

We've all been in meetings that seem to go on forever, whether they're being dominated by windbags or bounce aimlessly from one topic to the next. Don't just sit there and roll your eyes. Take control by trying one of the following options.

Be brave. Play dumb.

Even if you think you know what's going on, you may not really get it, or you may sense others don't get it. Consider the power of the statement, "I'm sorry, I'm lost."

Adapted from content posted on hbr.org on January 29, 2010.

Can somebody help me understand what problem we're trying to solve and what needs to happen to resolve it? Joe, can you help me out?" The key to the success of this tactic isn't your question. It's Joe. The person you appeal to should be one of the strongest communicators in the room. It forces the group to stop and hear clarification from the most articulate person. It often helps get a group back on track. Playing dumb is pretty smart.

Be a helper. Create shared visuals. Use some technology.

Another great question to ask: "Would it be helpful if I took some notes?" Flip open your laptop, and take notes on a projected screen or in a shared document (such as a Google Docs). This is much better than using a marker and flip chart, which don't allow for good group editing and require transcription. Taking and projecting notes serves two purposes. First, it refocuses participants on what they can see before them, which could be a list of questions, decisions to be made, individual commentary, or whatever makes sense.

Second, if you can sort it out, you can use the documentation to drive problem solving. Framing the discussion with a simple outline, such as "Problem, Objectives, Facts, Questions, Action Items, Next Steps," will help move the team from *A* to *B*. Better yet, it will keep the team from wandering off to *Y* and *Z*.

Also, don't neglect to wrap up the meeting without committing summaries and next steps to the document. Now, given your efforts, the group has a working document that serves as a reference for next time. It sounds

simple, but it works. What's really happening is you're volunteering to do the facilitating that the facilitator has failed to do.

Find the root cause of the meeting's lack of focus, and suggest a solution.

Politely observe that “we seem to be spinning our wheels here,” and ask what's causing the endless cycles. Sometimes identifying the reason for meetings from hell allows you to refocus them or call a new one to sort through the problem more productively.

Identifying root causes of bad meetings is not always easy. Here are some common examples of barriers that may be making that meeting interminable and unproductive:

- **Lack of preparation.** Often, meetings get stuck because not everyone (or no one) has prepared. Whether that meeting-prep document is sent out early or 20 minutes before the meeting starts, people may not stop to read it. Other times, someone conducts the meeting off the cuff or tosses out issues for brainstorming. These approaches waste everybody's time.
- **Who has the D?** Just ask the question, “Who's responsible for this decision?” Ask that person if they're comfortable making a decision, right now.
- **The right people aren't in the room.** Save a meeting from droning on by identifying the people who are needed but absent. “We really can't move

Participate

forward on this without Jane.” Then cancel the meeting, and reschedule it with Jane.

Taking some of these steps and saying some of these things when you’re not in charge might seem professionally precocious, but they’re good leadership and management skills. And if you think you’re in the meeting from hell, it’s likely many of your colleagues do, too. They’ll appreciate your effort to get the meeting back on track.

Melissa Raffoni is founder and CEO of The Raffoni Group.

CHAPTER 19

7 Ways to Stop a Meeting from Dragging On

by Joseph Grenny

When I got a speeding ticket a few years ago, I was offered the option of attending traffic school in lieu of a black mark on my otherwise spotless driving record. I showed up at city hall promptly at 6 p.m., hoping my educational experience would end at 8:30 as advertised. The instructor was 25 minutes late and quite disorganized. By 8:15, he was on slide 18 of 123 and seemed to be just getting into the groove. My heart sunk and I was quickly getting resentful. At 8:26 he launched into what

Adapted from content posted on hbr.org on April 25, 2016.

promised to be a lengthy story about a multicar accident. I felt a toxic sense of dread and powerlessness.

In 1964, social psychologists John Darley and Bibb Latané conducted an experiment on group powerlessness. Subjects were led to believe they were part of a group discussion about personal problems, when one participant is struck with an epileptic seizure. Darley and Latané wondered what conditions would predict whether the subject witnessing the seizure would either sit passively or interrupt the gathering and take action to help. It turned out that the larger the group, the less likely the subject was to break ranks from powerless peers and leave the room in search of help. This has become known as bystander apathy.

If human beings can act so passively when health and safety are on the line, it should be no wonder that we turn ourselves into victims when the sole risk is an hour or two of wasted time. Meetings are notoriously ineffective, because most participants act like passive victims rather than responsible actors.

Interestingly, even meeting leaders often view themselves as constrained by unstated and untested group expectations that limit their ability to intervene effectively in the group process. They allow dysfunctional time-wasting behavior to go unchecked because they imagine it is the vox populi.

I've made myself a meeting victim more often than I'd like to admit, but over the years I've discovered that if I'm suffering, others are likely suffering too, and it's in my power to do something. There are tactful things I can do to not only take responsibility for my own invest-

ment of time, but also to become a healthy voice for the silent majority. In fact, most people silently cheer when someone takes action to refocus or cut off time-wasting activities.

Here are seven of my favorite interventions for stopping meandering in a meeting:

- **Come prepared.** You can organize a chaotic conversation and gain disproportionate influence by simply arriving with a clearly articulated straw position on the topic to be discussed. Don't push it on people, but do offer to share it if others believe that it will help accelerate discussion. More often than not they will.
- **Set boundaries.** Take responsibility for your time. If a meeting is notorious for starting late and running over, let people know when the meeting begins what your boundaries are. For example, you might say, "I understand we're starting late but I have a commitment to the Murphy team I want to keep, so I have a hard stop at 10:45."
- **Trust your gut. Go public. Check with the group.** Notice, honor, and trust your gut. If you're feeling lost, pay attention. If you're feeling bored, take notice. There's a good chance others are, too. Then, tactfully and tentatively share your concern. Don't express it as truth; instead, own the fact that it is simply your experience. Next, check to see if others are feeling similarly. Here's what that might sound like: "I'm not sure I'm tracking the discussion."

We seem to be moving between three different agenda items. Are others seeing that, too?”

- **Restate the less than obvious.** If the discussion is toggling between two or more problems, summarize the topics on the table, and suggest the group tackle one at a time. For example, “I’m hearing points about both whether this is a good investment and when we should make the purchase. I think we’ve already made the purchase decision and timing is the only question. Is that right?”
- **Ask the question no one’s asking.** If a sacred cow is glaringly obvious, ask for confirmation of its existence. For example, “I’m getting from the comments that some of us question the wisdom of the original decision. Is that right?”
- **Spot the weeds.** Periodically point out digressions into unproductive detail or tangents. Everyone in the group is responsible for the group process, so if you say nothing, you’re part of the problem (see chapter 10 for more on silence in meetings). Say something to the effect of, “It sounds like we’re in agreement about the policy. Rather than word-smith it now, it might be better to have someone do a draft.”
- **Clarify responsibilities at the end.** It’s rare that someone in the meeting takes the time to summarize decisions and clarify commitments at the end. This usually only takes 60 seconds but can save hours in misunderstanding and unneces-

sary future meetings. Even if you aren't running the meeting, you can speak up and ask, "Can we take a second to summarize what we've agreed to and who will do what by when? Maybe I'm the only one who's fuzzy, but I want to be sure I follow through on my commitments."

As I sat festering in my misery in traffic school, I began to suspect I was not alone. I had 175 other classmates who might be playing victim right alongside me. So I checked my gut, went public, and addressed the person running the meeting.

"Officer, I'm anxious to hear the end of this story, but I'm wondering what time class ends."

He looked a bit uncertain. "I thought it ended at 9:30." I heard an audible groan from my classmates.

"What time were you told it ended?" he inquired.

"8:30," I said.

He looked at his watch. Then announced, "Class dismissed." The cheers were audible. I felt like the valedictorian of the class.

Joseph Grenny is a four-time *New York Times* best-selling author, keynote speaker, and social scientist. His work has been translated into 28 languages, is available in 36 countries, and has generated results for 300 of the *Fortune* 500. He is the cofounder of VitalSmarts, an innovator in corporate training and leadership development.

CHAPTER 20

When Your Boss Is Terrible at Leading Meetings

by Paul Axtell

If you think your boss is ineffective at leading meetings, you're not alone. Few managers have mastered the art of meetings, and even fewer organizations have made it a priority. Add to that the fact that leaders are busy—and often don't have the time to adequately prepare—and you've got a recipe for ineffective meetings. The question is, what can you do about it?

Adapted from content posted on hbr.org on May 16, 2016.

Participate

Three broad perspectives are available to you in every meeting:

1. You can offer to do things to support your boss in preparing, leading, and following up after the meeting.
2. You have the right to ask for whatever you need to be effective in the meeting.
3. You can choose to be responsible for the experience of other people in the meeting.

Let's look at each of these options individually.

What might you offer to do?

I love this perspective because it allows you to be supportive without making your boss wrong. A key aspect of influence is the ability to state a problem without blaming anyone. Offering to supply elements that may be missing is a powerful way to do this. Here are some things you might offer to do:

- Collect agenda suggestions from the group, and then prepare an agenda for your boss to review and edit.
- Find team members to lead the different agenda items, or offer to lead the meeting so the boss can more fully focus on the conversation.
- Handle all of the room arrangements—and be there early to make sure it's all set.
- Help bring the conversation back when it wanders away from the intended path.

- Notice who isn't yet involved in the conversation, and invite them to speak.
- Take notes so that a written summary can be prepared quickly after the meeting.
- Chart complex conversations on a whiteboard as they unfold so the group can stay on track and see what has been said.
- Listen for commitments and actions that are voiced, and then review them during the closing for each topic.
- Write and distribute a summary shortly after the meeting ends.

Stepping up and offering to do something will usually be appreciated and respected. However, we all know that our ability to speak frankly with our boss is determined by the level of trust and respect that exists between us. If your boss values what you bring to the group, you can be straightforward: "Sam, I think we can improve the quality of our meetings by doing a couple of things differently. If you agree, I would be willing to do the following."

If your boss takes offense at your offer or says, "No thanks, I've got it under control," then respond with, "OK, and if you change your mind, let me know. I just want to do whatever I can to support you." None of us are as open-minded or coachable in the moment as we think we are. There is a good chance that your boss will continue to think about your suggestion during the next few meetings. Without your offer, nothing will change; with your offer, it just might.

What do you need to be effective?

What are your most common complaints about these meetings? What could you ask for that would resolve each complaint? If you need something in order to be both present and productive in a meeting, find a diplomatic way to ask for it. Other people will probably be having the same experience and will welcome your initiative. Here are some suggestions for asking for what you need.

- **An agenda:** “Most of the time, I think it’s fine to find out what’s on the agenda when we walk into the meeting. On a few topics, like the budget, however, I would appreciate knowing the agenda ahead of time so I can prepare in a way that lets me add value to the conversation.”
- **Proper setup for each topic:** “Before we start this conversation, I’d like to know what input you’re looking for from us and where you want to be at the end of this discussion.”
- **Broader participation:** “I realize we’re a bit pressed for time, but there are a couple of people I’d really like to hear from in this conversation. So I’d appreciate if we could stay with this topic a bit longer so Sarah, Ganesh, and Tori can give us their views.”
- **Clarity:** “I might be the only person struggling with this conversation, but I need to get clear on where we are with this and what we’ve said so far.”

- **To stay on track:** “It appears that we’re now talking about something different than what’s on the agenda. Do we want to stay with this new topic or go back to our intended discussion?”
- **Alignment:** “It seems the group has settled on a direction. I’d like to ensure the decision works for everyone.”
- **Next steps:** “This was a great conversation, and I want to be clear about what, if anything, I need to do as a result. Could we nail down what actions will be taken next and when we should have them completed?”

How can you affect the experience of other participants?

Usually we go into a meeting thinking about one person: ourselves. Fair enough, but looking out for others is an easy way to add value and impact in an organization.

Consider these questions:

- Who is not yet participating in the conversation who might have something to say or ask?
- Who is affected by the decision and has not yet voiced their concerns or ideas?
- Who might not be able to attend and would like you to take notes or represent them in the meeting?
- Who would appreciate your collaboration on small-group work that is assigned during the meeting?

Participate

OK, now it's up to you. This is wonderful place to trust your instincts. Sincerity trumps all conversational skills. Take your boss to coffee, and offer to help. And, try the ideas that resonate with you in other meetings that you attend. You'll be pleased with the results.

Paul Axtell provides consulting and personal effectiveness training to a wide variety of clients, from *Fortune* 500 companies to universities. His latest book, *Meetings Matter: 8 Powerful Strategies for Remarkable Conversations* (Jackson Creek, 2015), received awards from the Nonfiction Book Awards and the Benjamin Franklin Book Awards, a Silver award in the Nautilus Book Awards, and was first runner-up for the Eric Hoffer Prize.

SECTION FOUR

Close and Follow Up

CHAPTER 21

The Right Way to End a Meeting

by Paul Axtell

A common complaint among managers is that the conversations they have with employees aren't producing results. "We keep talking about the same issue over and over, but nothing seems to ever happen!" they say. That's because most managers are missing a vital skill: the ability to deliberately close a conversation. If you end a conversation well, it will improve each and every interaction you have, ultimately creating impact.

Meetings are a series of conversations—an opportunity to clarify issues, set direction, sharpen focus, and move objectives forward. To maximize their effect, you need to actively design the conversation. While the

Adapted from content posted on hbr.org on March 11, 2015.

Close and Follow Up

overall approach is straightforward—and may seem like basic stuff—not enough managers are actually doing this in practice.

- **Set up each conversation** so everyone knows the intended outcomes and how to participate.
- **Manage the conversation rigorously** so the discussion stays on track and everyone is engaged.
- **Close the conversation** to ensure alignment, clarity on next steps, and awareness of the value created.

In my 35 years of experience as a corporate trainer, I've found that closure is more often than not the missing link between meetings and impact. Without it, things can be left unsaid, unchallenged, unclear, and uncommitted. Each agenda item should be considered incomplete unless it is wrapped up in a thoughtful, deliberate way.

To deliberately close a conversation, do these five things:

Check for completion. If you move to the next topic on an agenda too quickly, people will either cycle back to that topic later or they'll leave the meeting with their thoughts unclear or misaligned. Ask, "Is there anything else someone needs to say or ask before we change topics or adjourn the meeting?" Giving people the space to address their lingering concerns and questions allows you to deal with those issues promptly and move forward.

Check for alignment. If someone can't live with the decisions being made in the meeting or the potential out-

come of those decisions, ask that person what it would take to get them on board. People prefer to be united with the group, and if they aren't, there's a reason behind it that needs to be surfaced. Asking the question, "Is everyone OK with where we ended up?" will surface questions or concerns so they can be resolved as soon as possible.

Agree on next steps. Getting firm, clear commitments is the primary way to ensure progress between meetings. In order for a conversation to lead to action, you need to clearly state what you will do by when and ask others to do the same. To maintain the momentum of any project, nail down agreed-upon next steps, firm timelines, and individual responsibilities, and then follow up often. The question to ask here is "What, exactly, will we do by our next meeting to ensure progress?"

Reflect on the value of what you accomplished. This is one of the most powerful acknowledgment and appreciation tools. People rarely state the value created by a conversation, and therefore lose a wonderful opportunity to validate both the conversation and the individuals who are a part of it. After a presentation don't just say, "That was good." Instead, say "Let me tell you the five things I'm taking away from your presentation."

Check for acknowledgments. Did anyone contribute to the conversation in a way that needs to be highlighted? While you don't want to use acknowledgment and appreciation so frequently that it becomes a commodity

Close and Follow Up

with no value, at times someone's questions or remarks do help provide the tipping point that turns an ordinary conversation into an extraordinary one—and that's worth acknowledging. Doing so reinforces the conversations that occurred, supports the people in the meeting, and encourages everyone's desire to produce the expected results.

Try spending the next three weeks working on closing every conversation in this deliberate, thoughtful way. You'll see an immediate impact on how and when things get done.

Paul Axtell provides consulting and personal effectiveness training to a wide variety of clients, from *Fortune* 500 companies to universities. His latest book, *Meetings Matter: 8 Powerful Strategies for Remarkable Conversations* (Jackson Creek, 2015), received awards from the Nonfiction Book Awards and the Benjamin Franklin Book Awards, a Silver award in the Nautilus Book Awards, and was first runner-up for the Eric Hoffer Prize.

CHAPTER 22

Don't End a Meeting Without Doing These 3 Things

by Bob Frisch and Cary Greene

When a sports team finishes a game, they usually don't gather up their gear and immediately leave the court, rink, field, or locker room. The players and coaches take a few minutes for a post-game meeting—a ritual that's just as important as the pre-game warm-up.

Meeting participants can benefit from the same exercise. A quick wrap-up discussion before attendees leave the room goes a long way toward ensuring the gathering

Adapted from content posted on hbr.org on April 26, 2016.

Close and Follow Up

achieved what it set out to do and that future get-togethers will also prove successful. Here are three steps to take at the end of each meeting (though you can, of course, dial up or down each component as the situation warrants). Once you've done this in person, follow up in writing.

Confirm key decisions and next steps.

Recap what was decided in the meeting, who is accountable for following through, when implementation will occur, and how it will be communicated. You want every attendee to leave the meeting with the same understanding of what was agreed on so there's little chance of anyone reopening the issues later. One client we've worked with preps for this end-of-meeting review by writing on a flip chart to capture decisions as they're made so nothing is forgotten or overlooked. He also notes action items, including who is responsible, when things should happen, and how status will be reported back to the group.

Develop communication points.

If a colleague who missed the meeting asks an attendee "What happened?" the person who went to the meeting should know what to say. So before you wrap up, put the question to the group. "What are the most important things we accomplished in our time together here?" As the group responds, capture the key points on a flip chart, whiteboard, or shared document, and briefly summarize them. Once you have alignment on what should be communicated to others, ask everyone if there are any parts of the discussion that they wouldn't want to

be shared. Some information might be confidential; perhaps some ideas aren't quite ready for dissemination. Be as specific as possible here so everyone clearly understands what is off-limits. Then, as soon as possible after the meeting, send your agreed-upon talking points to everyone in an e-mail. The goal of this exercise is not to give people a script to read from. It's to provide guidance on the key messages they should convey and what they should keep to themselves, if asked, so the rest of the organization gets a consistent picture of what went on. After a recent strategy meeting of the top 30 executives at a major technology company, for example, the group decided on these communication points:

- This was not a one-time event but rather the beginning of this group coming together as a senior leadership team.
- We talked about our strategy, which is to build a collection of great businesses in strong categories.
- We agreed that each business should focus on driving its own growth, but where it makes sense, units and functions should leverage each other's best practices and capabilities. We captured some ideas for how to start doing this and talked about opportunities for leaders to grow and take on new boundary-spanning roles.

Gather session feedback.

Especially if your group will meet regularly, ask attendees for feedback on the session while it's fresh in their

minds. This is an often-missed opportunity to learn what people liked and what they would change. Instead of asking a broad question like “What feedback do you have?” which often yields equally vague and unhelpful responses, break the discussion into what we call “roses” (positives) and “thorns” (negatives). Start with the latter. Tell attendees to think about everything they have received or done related to the meeting from the time they were invited right through the review, including any pre-reads or prework and aspects of the meeting itself (such as location and use of time). Then ask, “What could be improved?” Avoid debating the suggestions raised, but do ask questions to clarify what’s being said. Finally, turn to roses. Ask the group, “What went well? What should we be sure to do again in the future?” Combined with the recap of decisions, next steps, and talking points, this last discussion helps you end the session on a positive note.

When you embed a regular post-meeting debrief that incorporates these three elements into your meetings, you’ll help your team dramatically improve its play.

Bob Frisch is the managing partner of the Strategic Offsites Group, a Boston-based consultancy, and is the author of *Who’s In The Room? How Great Leaders Structure and Manage the Teams Around Them* (Jossey-Bass, 2012). He is the author of four *Harvard Business Review* articles, including “Off-Sites That Work” (June 2006).

Cary Greene is a partner of the Strategic Offsites Group. They are coauthors of *Simple Sabotage: A Modern Field Manual for Detecting & Rooting Out Everyday Behaviors That Undermine Your Workplace* (HarperOne, 2015) and are frequent contributors to hbr.org.

SECTION FIVE

Specific Types of Meetings

CHAPTER 23

What Everyone Should Know About Running Virtual Meetings

by Paul Axtell

To make sure that your virtual meetings are adding value and velocity to your projects, do three things:

Focus on relationships.

The quality of people's relationships in a meeting determines the quality of the conversations that will occur during the meeting. That's why it's important to set aside time to build relationships among team members.

Adapted from content posted on hbr.org on April 14, 2016.

Specific Types of Meetings

Start with casual conversation.

Make it a practice for the conference lines to be open 10 minutes early, and designate that time for catching up. Ask someone to be there to greet and talk with people once the lines are open. If you're leading the meeting, prepare ahead of time so that you can spend time chatting rather than answering e-mails or reviewing your notes. Encourage others to make it a practice to show up early to converse.

Then, at the start of each meeting, ask three people to take a couple of minutes to share what's happening with them. Here are my favorite ways to start this brief conversation:

- Please catch us up on one of your other projects.
- What's happening in your country?
- How's your family?

Use people's names.

During the meeting, credit people when you refer to their earlier comments. Keep a chart next to you to help remember who's out there. People love to be recognized, and in virtual meetings, it builds a sense of community that can otherwise be diminished by not being in the same space. It also pulls meeting participants into a zone of being more attentive and thoughtful.

Meet face-to-face.

When team members visit from out of town or from another country, find time to see them. Schedule a working

dinner. Invite them to coffee. If there's driving involved, ride together. Pick them up at the airport. This lays the foundation for authentic conversation—so you'll feel less distant on your next virtual encounter.

Prepare, so you can be present and productive.

Publish an agenda.

A clear agenda helps your participants understand how you'll conduct the virtual meeting and allows them to think about and prepare for each topic in advance. This is particularly important for those who speak English as a second language. When people have time to prepare, they can participate more fully and powerfully. Expecting people to develop their thinking and then express it clearly in the moment during a meeting is asking too much.

The agenda doesn't need to be elaborate. For each topic, answer these questions:

- Why is this topic on our agenda?
- How much time is allocated for this topic?
- Where do we want to be at the end of our discussion?
- What do we need from participants?

Give yourself more time.

Plan on 20% more time than you think you'll need for each topic. The process of getting broad participation

Specific Types of Meetings

and checking to see if everyone has had a chance to express their views and ask their questions takes time—lots of time. You don't want to feel any pressure to get through an agenda. You'll sacrifice clarity and alignment if you or your team members feel rushed. You can always end early if the extra time you've built in isn't needed.

Identify who you want to hear from.

Before the meeting, consider:

- Who would get the conversation off to a great start?
- Who will be most affected by the topic?
- Who is likely to have different views and ideas?
- Whose experience needs to be brought into the conversation?

Part of feeling included and adding value in a group is having the opportunity to share what you're thinking about the topic. This can be difficult when you're in the same room and even harder virtually. Once you've thought about who you want to hear from, tell people which topics you'd like their input on. Letting people know that you want broad participation is the first step; calling on people strategically and gently is the second step. Knowing ahead of time who you want to get into the conversation for each topic will make this easy.

Lead to accomplish the agenda and to get broad participation.

Review how you'll manage the conversation.

Virtual meetings require a stronger leadership approach because you don't have access to the nonverbal cues about whether people have questions or would like to get into the conversation. These meetings also require more empathy and thoughtfulness on your part because people have this sense of being less connected than when they're in the same room.

Ask for the permission you need to be able to relax and enjoy leading the meeting. This is what I usually request:

- Permission to be firm about keeping the conversation on track
- Freedom to call on different people when it seems appropriate
- Agreement from everyone about setting aside their technology, unless they have a good reason for keeping it available

I also let people know that while I have a plan for the meeting, I'm open to their coaching and ideas on making the meeting work for everyone.

Asking for what you want gives you the opportunity to guide the group without making anyone wrong. It also gives people in the group permission to step outside of their normal ways of interacting and participate

Specific Types of Meetings

authentically. It's easy to be ourselves in small groups of four or five people over coffee. In larger groups and virtual groups, the conversation needs to be set up to be safe and effective.

Consider covering these points in your opening:

- “With your permission, I’d like to manage our conversation today in a deliberate fashion so that we all stay on track and to make sure that everyone gets heard. This doesn’t mean that I intend to be heavy-handed; I’d just like more freedom to keep the conversation focused and permission to call on people to ensure we have everyone’s questions and views expressed before we end a topic.”
- “For each item, I’d like to ask certain people to start the topic off. I’ve made notes on who I think might be affected and will check with each of you. Of course, if I haven’t called on you and you want to add something, please do so. You always have permission to get into any conversation if your ideas, questions, and views have not yet been expressed.”

Then, manage the conversation thoughtfully.

Go slowly. Without being able to see people as they speak, it’s not only harder to hear, it’s more difficult to process what’s being said. Speaking succinctly will help, and a calmer pace will provide openings for people to ask their questions. Refer to your chart of who’s in the meeting to keep track of who’s already spoken and to remind you to invite others to add to the conversation.

Consider adding a process step to check for clarity on each topic. Without visual clues, you can't always tell when people aren't understanding or are disagreeing. If you have people with different language or cultural backgrounds, getting to clarity and alignment may require more time going back and forth.

Paul Axtell provides consulting and personal effectiveness training to a wide variety of clients, from *Fortune* 500 companies to universities. His latest book, *Meetings Matter: 8 Powerful Strategies for Remarkable Conversations* (Jackson Creek, 2015), received awards from the Nonfiction Book Awards and the Benjamin Franklin Book Awards, a Silver award in the Nautilus Book Awards, and was first runner-up for the Eric Hoffer Prize.

CHAPTER 24

How to Run a Great Virtual Meeting

by Keith Ferrazzi

Virtual meetings have the potential to be more valuable than traditional face-to-face meetings. Beyond the fact that they're an inexpensive way to get people together—no travel costs and readily available technology—they're also a great opportunity to build engagement, trust, and candor among teams.

Virtual meetings are just as effective as in-person gatherings if key rules and processes are maintained and respected. Here's my comprehensive list of simple steps you can take to get the most out of your next one.

Adapted from content posted on hbr.org on March 27, 2015.

Before the Meeting

Turn the video on.

Since everyone on the call is separated by distance, using video is the best thing you can do to make everyone feel like they're in the same room. Choose from several options, including WebEx and Skype. Video makes people feel more engaged because it lets team members see each other's emotions and reactions, which immediately humanizes things. No longer are they just voices on a phone line; they're the faces of your coworkers responding to what you and others are saying. Without video, you'll never know if the dead silence in a virtual meeting is happening because somebody isn't paying attention, someone's rolling their eyes in exasperation, or an individual is nodding their head in agreement. Facial expressions matter.

Cut out status updates.

Too many meetings, virtual and otherwise, are reminiscent of a bunch of fifth graders reading to each other around the table: a waste of the valuable time and opportunity of having people together. The solution is to send out a simple half-page document in advance of the meeting to report on key agenda items—and then only spend time on it in the meeting if people need to ask questions or want to comment.

This type of prework prepares participants to take full advantage of the meeting by thinking ahead about the content, formulating ideas, or getting to know others in the group. This can help keep team members engaged,

says business consultant Nancy M. Settle-Murphy in her book *Leading Effective Virtual Teams*. But one thing is critical: It has to be assumed that everyone has read the pre-reading. Not doing so becomes an ethical violation against the team. I use the word “ethical” because it’s stealing time from the team—and that’s a disrespectful habit. The leader needs to aggressively set the tone that the pre-reading should be done in advance of the meeting.

Come prepared with the team’s opinions.

Not only do you need to do your pre-reading, but after seeing the agenda, you should also discuss what’s going to be covered with your team—that is, do your own due diligence. Often people get on a virtual call with a point of view, but because they haven’t done any real homework beforehand, they end up reversing their opinions once the call has ended and they’ve learned new information that they could have easily obtained in advance. If there’s a topic that seems to have interdependencies with people who work in another location, get their input ahead of time so you’re best representing those constituents in the meeting.

During the Meeting

Encourage collaborative problem solving.

Replace the standard detailed status updates that can weigh meetings down with a group problem-solving session. How do they work? Raise a topic for discussion, and the team works together—viewing their fellow team members as sources of advice—to unearth information

Specific Types of Meetings

and viewpoints and to generate fresh ideas in response to business challenges.

Give each person time on the agenda.

Along with collaborative problem solving, giving each person time on the agenda fosters greater collaboration and helps all team members weigh in. Here's how it works: In advance of the session, have team members write up an issue they've been struggling with and bring it to the group, one at a time. Each team member then gets five minutes on the agenda to discuss their issue. The group then goes around the table so everyone gets a chance to either ask a question about it or pass. After the team member answers everyone's questions, people then get an opportunity to offer advice in the "I might suggest" format, or pass. Then you move on to the next issue until everyone has had the opportunity to present their challenge and receive ideas for addressing it.

Kill mute.

In an in-person meeting, there are social norms: You don't get up and walk around the room, not paying attention. Nor do you make a phone call and "check out" from the meeting. Virtual meetings should be no different. You can't press mute and leave the room to get something or strike up a conversation with your spouse. So establish a standard: Just because you're in a virtual meeting and it's possible to be disrespectful without others knowing, such behavior is unacceptable. If you wouldn't do something in person, don't do it virtually.

Turning the volume on for everyone's phones will keep people in line and raises the potential for lively discussion, shared laughter, and creativity.

Ban multitasking.

Once thought of as a way to get many things done at once, multitasking is now understood to be a way to do many things poorly. Science shows us that despite the brain's remarkable complexity and power, there's a bottleneck in information processing when it tries to perform two distinct tasks at once. Not only is this bad for your brain, it's bad for your team. Set a firm policy that multitasking during your meeting is unacceptable, as it's important for everyone to be mentally present.

Here are three ways to make sure the ban on multitasking is followed:

- **Use video.** It essentially eliminates multitasking, because your colleagues can see you.
- **Call on specific people.** Ask someone, by name, to share their thoughts. Since no one likes to be caught off-guard, they'll be more apt to pay attention.
- **Give people different tasks in the meeting.** To keep people engaged, have a different team member keep the minutes of the meeting each time; track action items, owners and deadlines; and try coming up with a fun question to ask everyone at the conclusion of the meeting. If you meet regularly, rotate assignments to keep things fresh.

Specific Types of Meetings

Check in.

Nick Morgan, president of consulting company Public Words, recommends having constant touch points. “In a virtual meeting, you need to stop regularly to take everyone’s temperature. And I do mean everyone. Go right around the list, asking each locale or person for input.”

Assign a Yoda.

Candor is difficult even for co-located teams, but it’s the number one gauge of team productivity. To keep people engaged during virtual meetings, appoint a “Yoda.” Like the wise Jedi master in *Star Wars*, the Yoda keeps team members in line and makes sure everyone stays active and on topic. By being courageous and calling out any inappropriate behaviors, the Yoda keeps honesty from boiling over into disrespect. At critical points during the meeting, the leader should turn to the Yoda and ask, “So, what’s going on here that nobody’s talking about?” This allows the Yoda to express what they see happening and encourage risk-taking.

After the Meeting

Formalize the watercooler.

Have you ever been in a meeting, and after it’s over everybody walks out and vents their frustrations next to the water cooler? Make the water cooler conversation the formal ending of your next virtual meeting. Roughly 10 minutes before the meeting ends, do what everybody would have done after the physical meeting—but do it

in the meeting and make sure it's transparent and conscious, reflecting people's real feelings.

How? Have everyone go around and say what they would've done differently in the meeting. This is the final Yoda moment—the chance to “speak now or forever hold your peace.” This is the time when you say what you disagreed with, what you're challenged with, what you're concerned about, what you didn't like, and so on. Make it clear that all the watercooler-type conversations need to happen right now or never happen again. And if they do happen later, you're violating the ethics of the team.

Most important, civility and respect must be the norm in virtual meetings. There must be inalienable ethical rules that you follow before, during, and after a virtual meeting if it is to be truly successful. And that means adhering to two fundamental principles: Be respectful of others' time, and be present.

Keith Ferrazzi is the CEO of Ferrazzi Greenlight, a research-based consulting and training company, and the author of *Who's Got Your Back* (Broadway Books, 2009).

CHAPTER 25

Conduct a Meeting of People from Different Cultures

by Rebecca Knight

When you're running a meeting with participants from different cultures, consider your colleagues' various needs and approaches. How do you brainstorm ideas, make decisions, and address conflict in a way that is comfortable for everyone? Which culture's preferences should be the default? And how can you be sure that people who aren't from the dominant culture participate and are heard?

Adapted from content posted on hbr.org on December 4, 2015.

What the Experts Say

Multicultural meetings can be challenging to lead. “People bring their cultural baggage with them wherever they go—and that includes the workplace,” says Jeanne M. Brett, professor of dispute resolution and negotiations at Northwestern University’s Kellogg School of Management. Communication styles vary from culture to culture, as do notions of authority and hierarchy, which only heightens the potential for misunderstanding and hard feelings. “If you don’t prepare for cultural differences and anticipate them at the front end, they’re a lot harder to deal with after the fact,” she says. It’s daunting, but you needn’t feel overwhelmed, says Erin Meyer, a professor at INSEAD and the author of the book *The Culture Maps*. Approach your cross-cultural meeting with an open mind. And have faith in your abilities, because “you likely have more experience than you know,” adds Andy Molinsky, professor of organizational behavior at Brandeis University International Business School and the author of the book *Global Dexterity*. “You’ve probably run meetings where there was quite a lot of diversity, be it gender diversity, functional diversity, seniority diversity, or just different personalities. Culture is one more element,” he says. Here are some ideas to help your multicultural meetings go smoothly.

Be mindful of differences . . .

The key to showing cultural sensitivity in the workplace is being aware of the variations that exist among cultures and how they play out, says Molinsky. “There are

differences in how and where people are supposed to sit in meetings, the extent to which they get down to business at the start of a meeting versus how much time they spend socializing, the extent to which they're willing to provide feedback or argue publicly—there are so many different elements.” Meyer recommends “learning as much as you possibly can about the people and the regions of the world you are collaborating with so that you can adjust your management style in small ways.” Study up on a country's customs and professional practices, and become an expert observer of others. It's a team effort. Provide your colleagues with reading material on cultural differences, and encourage colleagues to “think about how their behavior is viewed so they can make adjustments too,” she adds.

. . . *But don't obsess over them*

And yet, says Molinsky, “sometimes culture matters, sometimes it doesn't, and you can't always anticipate” how cultural differences will play out. It's important to respect cultural norms, but don't be rigid about them—and especially don't pigeonhole individuals and groups of people. “Culture is only one potential influence on a person's style, his behavior, and how he perceives things,” he says. “You should have a working hypothesis but test it against evidence.” As the person in charge of the meeting, you'll probably need to make some adjustments and adaptations to your leadership style, but stay true to yourself, too. Don't be boorish or ignorant, but don't pretend to be someone you're not.

Set expectations

It's important to "create protocols and establish norms at the beginning" of your meetings, says Brett. "You want to be clear about what you expect and how meetings will run," she says. "This gives certain people the freedom to move outside their comfort zone, and it also gives you the freedom to rein in others." Say, for instance, some of your colleagues come from a culture where punctuality is not adhered to, but you want meetings to start and end in a timely manner. "You need to demonstrate that you understand different cultural behavior but also explain why you think it's critical for people to show up to meetings on time—and that people [who are late] will suffer the consequences," says Molinsky. "Be explicit. There are deal breakers." Structure and protocol "can override or supersede cultural norms" in other ways, too. If, for instance, you want to hold a group brainstorming session but some of your colleagues are from a culture that's typically reticent, ensure participation by asking "everyone to go around the room and spend two minutes describing their point of view on a particular problem," he says. "Institute rules" that are clear and that everyone follows.

Build relationships

Getting to know the personalities on your team is sound management practice in any culture, but it's especially important when your team is made up of people from different countries. "You need to know the people on your team and figure out the extent to which culture is an issue for each individual," says Molinsky. Say, for

instance, one of your team members comes from a hierarchical culture and is loath to provide feedback to a senior colleague. “If you would like him to speak up in a meeting, you need to talk with him beforehand and strategize with him on how he can adapt his behavior,” he says. Alternatively, “you need to forgive him for not doing it.” Focus, too, on forging bonds and fostering trust among your team members, says Meyer. “Invest time up front on building emotional bonds so that people on your team have opportunities to get to know each other by sharing meals or talking over drinks,” she says. “That way a lot of the cultural differences [that appear in the workplace] won’t matter as much.”

Be creative with conflict

When it comes to professional meetings, one of the biggest cultural differences is the degree to which open debate and disagreement are viewed as a positive, according to Meyer. “In countries like Korea, Indonesia, and Thailand, saying: ‘I disagree,’ is seen as very aggressive and could lead to a break in the relationship, whereas in France and Russia, it’s seen as a great opportunity to build a relationship,” she says. While “individual adjustments like softening your language” can be effective, it’s also worth trying to make your team more comfortable with conflict. Meyers suggests that before the meeting, you ask your team members to e-mail their ideas and thoughts to a central organizing body that will be grouped by theme and shared when everyone is together. “That way you’re disagreeing with an idea, not a colleague,” she says. “It’s not personal.”

Be flexible

Meetings are only one element of the flow of workplace decision making. There are pre-meetings, post-meetings, informal, one-on-one conversations in the corridor, and impromptu group discussions. If cultural differences are making group meetings particularly challenging, try “soliciting coworkers’ opinions in other venues and giving people an opportunity to provide feedback in different ways,” says Molinsky. “Be flexible about the process,” says Brett. “Consider breaking up your group into smaller subgroups.” And remember, adds Meyer, “In many countries, the formal meeting is not the place to hash out ideas—it’s for putting a stamp on what we’ve already decided in pre-meetings,” she says. In other words, don’t put too much stock in what takes place in the conference room. “Recognize that in many cultures the tough stuff is done off-line, one-on-one.”

Consider rewards

“It’s really hard for people to overcome their cultural behaviors because they’re so ingrained,” says Brett. But if you’re concerned that cultural differences are having a negative impact on your team’s capacity for growth and change, think about ways to push your colleagues outside their cultural comfort zones during meetings. “You need to institutionalize rewards around what you’re trying to motivate people to do so that it’s hardwired in,” says Molinsky. Say, for instance, you want to encourage more-open conflict and feedback at meetings, but your workforce is conflict averse. In that case, you could

“make providing feedback part of their performance evaluations” and a prerequisite for promotion. They get rewards when they do it well and perhaps even penalties if they fail. It’s not easy, but “it’s definitely possible to encourage and train people to behave in ways that might not feel natural,” says Meyer.

Rebecca Knight is a freelance journalist based in Boston and a lecturer at Wesleyan University. Her work has been published in the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and the *Financial Times*.

CHAPTER 26

Making Global Meetings Work

by June Delano

Running a virtual team is an interesting challenge, especially if people are spread across countries and time zones and have different levels of language proficiency. At one time I had a team of about 17 people spread across 10 countries, and we needed to have a meeting weekly or at least every other week. The challenge was that somebody was always in the meeting in the middle of the night, somebody was always the only person in a room while other people were in small groups.

This content originally appeared in the Virtual Teams module of *Harvard ManageMentor* (product #6789AR).

Specific Types of Meetings

So we experimented and came up with a model we called “inconvenience everybody equally.” That meant that we rotated our meeting time so that at some point, everyone—whether they were in London, Berlin, New Delhi, or New York—was up in the middle of the night or in the middle of their normal workday. And it meant that everybody got a chance to be drowsy and falling asleep, as well as wide awake and full of energy at the peak of their day.

We also came up with a rule that, at first, was very hard to enforce: Even if there were several people in one location, each needed to be on the phone separately—not in a room together. It completely changes the dynamic of a meeting if some people are together in one place and can see and talk to one another off-line.

So although several of us were sitting in a row in cubicles in the same office, we made sure that we all got on the phone equally with everybody else. That meant no side conversations and that everybody needed to put their expression into their voice rather than rely on facial expressions.

We also learned that it was really important to have an agenda go out ahead of time, particularly when you have people who are speaking a second or a third language. Seeing the agenda in advance gave them a chance to read and get familiar with the content and what was going to be discussed.

Finally, we made sure that we kept the agenda to those things that really mattered to everyone who was on the phone. If there are 17 people on the line, you don’t

want to have people getting bored and losing their sense of involvement and engagement in the meeting.

June Delano is a managing partner and cofounder of The ClearLake Group.

Give Your Standing Meetings a Makeover

by **Martha Craumer**

Regularly scheduled meetings (staff meetings, progress report meetings, and sales meetings) sometimes seem to be called out of habit or a sense of duty rather than need. They're valuable not only for the information they allow people to share but also for the face time they offer. However, their importance doesn't necessarily make them interesting. Meeting with the same people in the same room every week to discuss the same topics can get boring, resulting in many empty chairs—and a lack of enthusiasm among the remaining attendees. Here are

Adapted from the "The Effective Meeting: A Checklist for Success," *Harvard Management Communication Letter* (reprint #C0103A), March 2001.

Specific Types of Meetings

some ways to keep your regular meetings fresh—and attendance high.

Regularly review the meeting's purpose

From time to time remind participants of the reasons for meeting, and ask if the meeting still serves that purpose. For example, a project team may hold twice-weekly status reports at the beginning of a project, when there are a lot of new developments and many decisions to make. Once the initial frenzy subsides, though, there may only be enough new information to warrant a monthly meeting.

Solicit agenda items from the group in advance

This gives attendees a chance to bring up issues that are of interest to them.

Cancel when there is no reason to meet

Nothing on the agenda? Don't meet. There's no sense in gathering together just because it's what you do on Tuesdays at 11 a.m. People will come to appreciate that your meetings won't be a waste of time.

Rotate leadership of the meeting

Have each attendee take a turn running the meeting—setting the agenda, preparing materials, and introducing topics. It's a great way to inspire ownership of the meeting.

Martha Craumer is a senior writer at The Boston Consulting Group.

CHAPTER 28

How to Do Walking Meetings Right

**by Russell Clayton, Christopher Thomas,
and Jack Smothers**

Fran Melmed is the founder of Context, a communication and change management consulting firm. She spends her days performing communication audits for organizations and meeting with clients. Sounds like a recipe for a sedentary workday, right? On the contrary. Fran is part of a growing trend known as walking meetings or “walk and talk.”

A walking meeting is simply that: a meeting that takes place during a walk instead of in an office, board-

Adapted from content posted on hbr.org on August 5, 2015.

Specific Types of Meetings

room, or coffee shop. Nilofer Merchant wrote in *Harvard Business Review* about her own transition to walking meetings after realizing that, like many Americans, she was sitting way too much while she worked. Merchant traded her coffee shop meetings for walking meetings and immediately saw the benefits. Likewise, Melmed finds that merely holding some of her meetings while walking has given her the necessary time to “un-plug” that she needs in order to be an effective writer.

Recent research finds that the act of walking leads to increases in creative thinking. This certainly supports the idea that walking meetings are useful. Plenty of anecdotal evidence also suggests that walking meetings lead to more honest exchanges with employees and are more productive than traditional sit-down meetings.

Based on this, we undertook an exploratory study of the benefits associated with walking. We surveyed a population of approximately 150 working adults in the United States to gather input about their walking meeting and work habits. In short, we found that those who participate in walking meetings are 5.25% more likely to report being creative at their jobs than those who do not. Additionally, the responses suggest that walking meetings support cognitive engagement—or focus—on the job. Those who participate in walking meetings are 8.5% more likely to report high levels of engagement.

What we found adds support to the notion that walking meetings are beneficial for workers. Is an increase in creativity of 5.25% likely to make or break a business? Probably not. But look at these findings through the lens of a cost-benefit analysis. The costs associated with regu-

larly participating in walking meetings are next to nil. Keep in mind that walking meetings are *not* breaks from work. They are meetings that would have taken place regardless of whether they were held in someone's office or while walking around your building complex. There may be no cheaper way to achieve moderate increases in creativity and engagement.

Just how do walking meetings produce these positive benefits in the workplace? Ted Eytan, a physician and medical director of the Kaiser Permanente Center for Total Health and a vocal advocate of walking meetings, has some ideas. First, from a neurochemical perspective, Eytan emphasizes that our brains are more relaxed during walks due to the release of certain chemicals. This aids executive function, which governs how we focus on tasks and deal with unforeseen events, among other things. Open-ended responses to our survey seemed to back this up in that people said they had moments of creativity sparked by walking meetings.

Furthermore, Eytan believes walking meetings lead to better employee engagement by breaking down barriers between supervisor and subordinate or between coworkers. He sees the bonding achieved through walking meetings as a micro version of the connection often made between coworkers who travel together on business trips. David Haimen, a senior director of product development at Oracle, has experienced this in his meetings with team members: "The fact that we are walking side by side means the conversation is more peer to peer than when I'm in my office and they're across a desk from me, which reinforces the organizational hierarchy."

Specific Types of Meetings

To be sure, walking meetings aren't always the right choice (and not everyone is physically able to participate in them). Sometimes it is valuable to have materials or a whiteboard close at hand, and sometimes, as in an intense negotiation, it is important to be face-to-face. The best choices for walking meetings are situations in which colleagues are conferring on decisions or exploring possible solutions. Indeed, in our survey, participants who held managerial and professional positions experienced more of a creativity boost from walking meetings than those in technical or administrative jobs (though all categories realized some benefits).

If you are inspired to give walking meetings a try, here are a few tips that can help your walking meeting go well:

Consider including an “extracurricular” destination on your route.

Eytan, whose office is located in Washington, D.C., often mentions the nearby Washington Coliseum as a place to stroll by and notes it's where the Beatles played their first U.S. concert. Naming a point of interest, he says, provides more rationale and incentive for others to go for a walk.

Avoid making the destination a source of unneeded calories.

One of the arguments in favor of walking meetings is the health benefit. However, this is easily negated if the walking meeting leads to a 425-calorie white-chocolate mocha that wouldn't otherwise be consumed.

**Don't surprise colleagues or clients
with walking meetings.**

It's fine to suggest a walk if it seems appropriate in the moment, as long as it's clear that you'll be fine with a "maybe next time." But if you're planning ahead to spend your time with someone in a walking meeting, have the courtesy to notify them in advance. Doing so allows them to arrive dressed for comfort, perhaps having changed shoes. You might also keep water bottles on hand to offer on warm days.

Stick to small groups.

Haimes recommends a maximum of three people for a walking meeting.

Have fun.

Enjoy the experience of combining work with a bit of exercise and fresh air. Our data shows that those who participate in walking meetings are more satisfied in their jobs than their colleagues who don't.

Based on our survey and the clear case to be made for walking in general as a key to good health, it's smart to make walking meetings a habit—or at least to give them a try.

Russell Clayton is an assistant professor of management at Saint Leo University's Donald R. Tapia School

Specific Types of Meetings

of Business. Follow him on Twitter @ProfessorRWC. **Christopher Thomas** is an assistant professor of management at Saint Louis University's John Cook School of Business. **Jack Smothers** is an assistant professor of management at the University of Southern Indiana's Romain College of Business.

CHAPTER 29

Stand-Up Meetings Don't Work for Everybody

by Bob Frisch

Stand-up meetings have become a routine part of the workday in many organizations, mostly due to the adoption of agile and other innovative management methods. These are usually brief daily progress sessions in which an initiative team updates and coordinates efforts. The phrase “stand up” is literal—participants remain standing for the duration of the meeting—and the reason is

Adapted from content posted on hbr.org on May 27, 2016.

Specific Types of Meetings

speed. You want people to rapidly surface issues and solve disagreements. As the Wikipedia entry for stand-up meetings explains, “The discomfort of standing for long periods is intended to keep the meetings short.”

While it’s hard to argue with the success of agile tactics, it’s worth taking a moment to question the wisdom of an organization adopting stand-up meetings on a widespread basis. They don’t work for all interactions, and as with anything, treating them as a one-size-fits-all solution can have unintended consequences.

When I was a managing partner at Accenture, our organization and change strategy team helped design a new conference facility for one of our offices. We specifically varied the table shapes and sizes. Some rooms had a large round one in the center, others the classic boat-shaped, boardroom model. We had open-ended rectangles and squares, as well as U-shaped (with the boss typically seated at the center of the bottom of the U) and V-shaped (where the facilitator can move forward to stand in front of the individual participants) options. The reason for such variety is clear: The dynamics of a meeting are directly related to how people are seated relative to the boss, to one another, and to the presenter or facilitator.

Now think about a stand-up meeting, in which there is no rhyme or reason to how people are positioned. And overlay that with physical differences between teammates. Imagine someone who is 5’3” trying to make a point when a 6’4” colleague is standing in front of them, or picture the two debating the pros and cons of a critical problem while standing up. Don’t think that’s an issue? Then I’d bet you’re not 5’3”. Remember too that, statisti-

cally speaking, the average male is taller than the average female, so height-ism often carries over into sexism.

Consider also a healthy 25-year-old negotiating a difficult compromise with a 63-year-old peer who suffers from a mild heart condition, with the “time clock” for resolution set by the fact that both have to stand for the length of the conversation. The higher stamina of the younger worker could certainly put an unappreciated thumb on the scale in their favor. Attempting to compensate for these differences by, for example, telling the short people to stand in front or offering the older worker a seat while everyone else stands only serves to reinforce these inequalities. Chairs may make meetings longer, but, depending on the layout of the table, they also put everyone on equal footing (so to speak).

I'm not advocating for eliminating stand-up meetings. They can be effective in certain circumstances, and research has shown that they can boost group productivity (see the preface of this book for more on the benefits of stand-up meetings). But any organization that uses them regularly should review how, when, and why they're being held. Is one stand-up per day or week appropriate for your team instead of several? Should stand-up meetings be limited to 5 or 10 minutes or allowed to go longer, occasionally substantially so? Will people really perform better at the desired activity—brainstorming, discussing, decision making, and so on—while on their feet?

Assume you were 5'3" or in ill health or the most petite female in your organization having a raging disagreement with a tall, young, fit male. Would you want to be standing or seated?

Bob Frisch is the managing partner of the Strategic Offsites Group, a Boston-based consultancy; author of *Who's In The Room? How Great Leaders Structure and Manage the Teams Around Them* (Jossey-Bass, 2012); and coauthor, with Cary Greene, of *Simple Sabotage: A Modern Field Manual for Detecting and Rooting Out Everyday Behaviors That Undermine Your Workplace* (HarperOne, 2015). He is the author of four *Harvard Business Review* articles, including “Off-Sites That Work” (June 2006), and is a frequent contributor to hbr.org.

CHAPTER 30

Leadership Summits That Work

by Bob Frisch and Cary Greene

Every year, in virtually all large and midsize companies, high-level leaders come together for a leadership summit. These events usually last two to four days and can rack up millions of dollars in costs: airfare and accommodations for the 50 to 500 or so attendees, fees for outside speakers, production expenses, the many person days that go into planning, and the enormous opportunity cost incurred by taking so many top managers away from their normal duties for several days.

Reprinted from *Harvard Business Review*, March 2015 (product #R1503F).

Specific Types of Meetings

When executed well, these meetings are certainly worth the time and expense. They can serve as a powerful catalyst to align leaders, develop solutions to problems, introduce new strategies, and fuel collaboration across the organization. But many companies squander this rare opportunity to harness the collective knowledge of their frontline leaders.

The typical summit begins with a numbing sequence of platform presentations from a parade of C-level executives. Later sessions address topics, such as a new ad campaign or a product rollout schedule, that concern only a portion of the people in the room. A motivational speaker adds a dollop of entertainment. Some breakout sessions and an open mic Q&A with the top team, emceed by the CEO, pass for an exchange of ideas.

Information, proposals, and solutions flow in only one direction—from the top down—and not all that coherently. Attendees leave only slightly better informed and better networked than when they arrived. It's usually not clear whether they've understood the messages they're supposed to take back to their people, much less what anyone would be expected to do as a result. A huge opportunity has been missed. Contrary to what leaders and planners assume, you *can* have genuine and productive conversations with hundreds of people at once. Over the past decade we have designed and conducted leadership summits for thousands of executives in scores of companies, ranging from *Fortune* 500 multinationals to German *Mittelstand* family businesses, and we've seen such conversations take place. Remarkably straightforward strategies and practices can ensure that information

flows not only down from the top but also up from the group, and across it, in a way that allows leaders to direct the conversation without inhibiting creative responses. By applying the appropriate techniques before, during, and after the meeting, C-level leaders can get the full value of the knowledge of their frontline executives; see to it that participants leave with unambiguous messages that their employees can turn into action; and transform a meeting that often lulls people to sleep into an event that gets the organization's synapses firing.

Before the Summit

Why do CEOs and their top teams settle for less-than-optimal leadership conferences? A few executives may shy away from a real exchange of ideas for fear of losing control of the meeting. But most leaders and meeting planners simply assume that the events are too unwieldy to allow for much more than an annual update and marching orders from the top.

Here's how the planning process generally unfolds: Some 6 to 12 months in advance, a midlevel executive from HR, finance, strategy, marketing, or corporate communications is charged by the CEO or another top executive with planning the summit. He struggles to get on the executive team's calendar to discuss it. When he does, he uses his allotted 15 minutes to offer up some possible locations, three to five potential guest speakers, and a preliminary agenda seemingly related to a theme. Such themes are often so laughably vacuous—"One company, one vision," "Forward together," "Creating a common future"—that virtually any presentation or activity

Specific Types of Meetings

could be made to fit them. Executive team members spend a few minutes reacting to the locations. They may suggest a few more speakers. And then they promptly forget about the summit until a few weeks before the event, when the planner starts reminding them that they need to pull their presentations together.

That's when people start paying attention. C-level executives, division presidents, and function heads begin lobbying to add speaking slots or favored subjects to the agenda. The planner, lacking any real authority, attempts to allot them all time. Sometimes the CEO suddenly remakes the entire agenda. The result is a highly fragmented or superficial meeting conceived entirely from the perspective of top executives, with hardly a thought given to what the attendees are likely to take away from it, much less what they might contribute.

It doesn't have to be like this. Because these complicated conferences are scheduled so far in advance, there's plenty of time to take the steps needed to create a coherent, focused event. (Table 30-2 at the end of this chapter lays out the timeframe and important milestones for a summit from prep work to post-summit follow-up.)

Assign clear roles that have real authority.

Because the lines between directing, designing, planning, and coordinating a summit can blur, it often turns out that no one is clearly in charge of shaping the event. Roles and responsibilities should be clarified at the outset (see the sidebar "Who Should Do What?"). Rather than viewing meeting planning as a lower-level administrative function, the top executive convening the summit (the "meeting owner") should designate a summit

director and grant that person the authority to control the agenda and to say no to people asking to add things that don't fit its focus. Working with a design team, the director should oversee the creation of all pre-meeting, in-meeting, and post-meeting materials and activities. A coordinator, reporting to the director, should be appointed to handle scheduling, travel, production, and logistics with the venue. An emcee should be selected to introduce the sessions and speakers, smooth transitions, clarify questions from the audience to the speakers, and present instant polls and other social media input during the event. Facilitators are also needed to help guide small-group discussions.

WHO SHOULD DO WHAT?

Meeting Owner

- *Who*
 - The CEO or a member of the executive team
- *What*
 - Initiates the meeting and designates a Summit Director
 - Makes final decisions on the meeting's objectives, structure, and design
 - Retains ultimate accountability for achievement of the objectives

(continued)

WHO SHOULD DO WHAT?

Executive Team

- **What**
 - Provides input on the objectives and agenda
 - Develops content with the help of the Content Editor
 - Participates in presentations and panels
 - Tracks progress on commitments made at the summit

Summit Director

- **Who**
 - An internal or external strategy, HR, or marketing executive; reports to the Meeting Owner
- **What**
 - Works with the Meeting Owner and the Executive Team to confirm objectives
 - Owns the agenda
 - Works with the design team to create all meeting materials and activities
 - Manages the planning on a daily basis

Design Team

- **Who**
 - Led by the Summit Director; includes two or three other senior executives

- ***What***

- Creates the detailed agenda
- Deploys and analyzes all meeting surveys
- Confirms meeting design

Content Editor

- ***Who***

- A midlevel strategy or communications executive or a third-party speechwriter

- ***What***

- Tasked by the Meeting Owner with overseeing development of content, ensuring that all presentations are aligned with the objectives and coordinated with one another
- Attends rehearsals and provides feedback to presenters

Coordinator

- ***Who***

- A midlevel event planning or HR executive

- ***What***

- Coordinates scheduling, travel, and lodging
- Handles venue logistics
- Coordinates with speakers and other outside vendors

(continued)

WHO SHOULD DO WHAT?

Emcee

- *Who*
 - Could be the Meeting Owner, the Summit Director, or someone outside the company
- *What*
 - Introduces sessions and speakers
 - Creates smooth transitions between sessions
 - Summarizes discussions, clarifies questions from audience members, and presents instant polling and social media input during the event

Facilitators

- *What*
 - Guide small-group discussions in breakout or table sessions

Define a clear set of objectives for the conference by starting with the right questions.

The summit director's first contact with the CEO and the executive team may need to include a discussion of locations—an issue that requires a long lead time. But that's not the most important topic. The director should begin by asking two questions: "What do you want the outcome of the meeting to be from the perspec-

tive of the attendees?” and “What do you want them to say when their teams ask, ‘What happened at the big meeting?’”

The answers aren’t always readily apparent. But after some discussion, most executive teams develop a few concrete objectives. Depending on a company’s circumstances, objectives might include aligning everyone around a common set of priorities, solving problems impeding company progress, driving a cultural transformation, or accelerating the integration of a major acquisition. Typically, executives will want to specify several outcomes, but the important point is to formulate them as outcomes, not as a grab bag of agenda items loosely connected by a vague theme.

Take, for example, a consumer products company we’ll call Kallos, which has more than 35,000 employees and hundreds of thousands of sales reps. A new leader had succeeded a celebrity CEO, who in his wake left financial problems, low morale, and a culture that tolerated broken promises on the part of managers. The new CEO and his team, wishing to shake things up, developed five objectives for their summit of 200 executives: reach a realistic understanding of the current state of the company, including the need to drive growth; restore employees’ faith in the brand; prepare to embark on a cost-reduction program in a way that would not adversely affect consumers; ensure that everyone understood what they needed to do in the near and long term to fulfill those goals; and lay the groundwork to make sure everyone followed through on his or her promises.

Start the conversation before anyone leaves home.

Eight to ten weeks before the meeting, attendees should be surveyed so that the summit director can determine how much time to spend on each objective and identify related issues that should be addressed. To gauge people's current view of the five objectives, Kallos administered an anonymous survey that asked respondents, among other things, how proud they were of the quality and performance of the company's products, how comfortable they would be describing the financial situation of the company to a newly hired employee, and to what extent they believed that managers they dealt with on a day-to-day basis behaved as if they were accountable for their actions. When 90% of the 200 respondents indicated that they were proud of the brand, the focus of the objective "restore faith in the brand" was shifted to "determine how to communicate our pride in the brand to sales reps." Open-ended survey questions included the standard "What's the one question you or your team would like addressed at the upcoming conference?" and "If you were riding in the elevator with the CEO and could tell him the one thing that would most improve the company's prospects, what would it be?"

Design the summit around the objectives and coordinate the content.

Podium presentations, breakouts, and interactive sessions should be not only relevant to the meeting objectives but also coordinated so that together they form a coherent whole. This is commonsensical, but rare. That's

because the first time anyone other than a speaker or a few of his reports hears any of the podium presentations is often at the meeting itself.

Focusing C-level and other stage presentations on the objectives and making sure the presentations tie together requires appointing an individual as a single point of editorial contact. This role may be filled by someone from HR or corporate communications, or by a third-party speechwriter, but whoever it is should enjoy the protection of the meeting owner, who must deflect attempts to interfere. Four to six weeks before the meeting, the content editor should begin to assist all presenters, including outside speakers, in using one or more of the meeting's objectives as the starting point and backbone of their presentations and to coordinate the presentations with one another. The editor should attend rehearsals and provide feedback. He must hold the line against presenters who say they have a few extra slides but promise they can get through them in the allotted time and those who try to cram mountains of information onto each slide. With the guidance of a firm editorial hand, hours of formerly "must have" presentations by a succession of C-level executives will be transformed into short, pithy, coordinated talks.

Engage participants in the issues in the days leading up to the summit.

Seven to ten days before the meeting, attendees can be given reading material focused on the objectives. Include only the minimum amount necessary to set up discussions planned for the event. We've found that carefully focused and framed material usually takes no more than 60 minutes to read.

Specific Types of Meetings

An orientation webcast, similarly lasting no more than an hour, can also prepare participants to make meaningful contributions at the summit. For one luxury goods company, a key objective of an upcoming leadership conference was to prepare the organization for a new global e-commerce division, which would supplant an outmoded regional structure. Before the meeting, participants were required to join in on one of three webcasts conducted by the new division head, who used a few simple diagrams to explain the new operating structure and then answered typed-in questions from participants. Instead of wasting valuable conference time explaining the structure, top leaders were able to have a problem-solving session about its implementation with knowledgeable, well-prepared attendees—the people who would ultimately have to make the new structure work.

During the Summit

Solid pre-meeting work clarifies the objectives, coordinates the content, and initiates engagement with attendees. The design and execution of the meeting itself should make that work come alive in what is in essence a series of structured conversations, carefully orchestrated to generate ideas, alignment, and, often, surprises along the way. Employing some simple principles and tools can make that happen.

Pay attention to the pace and rhythm of the meeting.

Kallos kicked off its conference with a brief (15-minute) keynote in which the CEO introduced the meeting ob-

jectives and framed what was going to unfold. Day one was devoted to the first two objectives: understanding the current state of the company and communicating pride in the brand. Two 20-minute podium presentations, each focused on one objective, were broken up by exercises performed by each table and breakout sessions, followed by reports to the entire assembly. During lunch, a guest speaker addressed the drivers of successful direct selling, offered a case study, and took questions from the audience. After lunch, presentations from the product and marketing group, along with several exercises, focused on communicating pride in the brand, particularly to sales reps. Day two—featuring a similar mix of presentations, exercises, and breakouts, and a Q&A with the executive team—was devoted to the remaining objectives: cost reduction, accountability, and commitment. An abbreviated day three included breakouts by region and concluded with a call to action from the CEO and promises from the executive team to track and support the commitments individuals and groups had made during the summit.

IT'S TIME TO BREAK UP WITH BREAKOUT GROUPS

by Andrew McAfee

Does anyone actually enjoy breakout groups? It's a serious question. I participate in more than a few full-day or longer meetings every year—management retreats, training sessions, meetings of centers and professional

(continued)

IT'S TIME TO BREAK UP WITH BREAKOUT GROUPS

societies, and so on—and there's nothing I dread seeing on the agenda more than a time slot devoted to “breakout groups.”

This time slot usually follows a presentation on an important topic. The organizers then ask participants to split up into breakout groups for an hour. Groups could be organized in any number of other ways, and participants are typically assigned into these groups randomly. The groups report back for 30 minutes, then everyone goes to lunch.

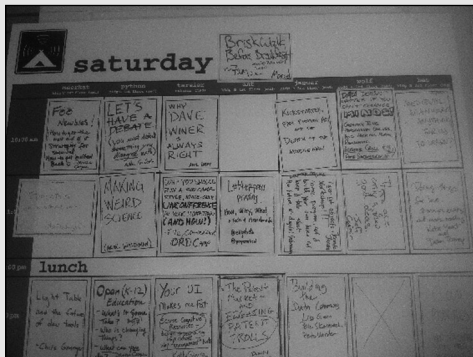
I find this a complete waste of an hour and a half. For one thing, the random assignments mean that many (most?) people spend the time in a group where they know little about the topic and probably also care little about it. For another, the reporting back is rushed, superficial (“we talked about X, then we talked about Y”), and rarely questioned. And finally, I don't think I've ever seen the results of breakout groups actually used for anything.

I have also noticed that breakout groups are a great way to take energy out of the room. People usually head off to them with an air of resignation and report back from them in monotone.

Breakouts aren't the product of sadistic minds, though. They're put into agendas by well-meaning people who don't want participants to passively sit all day while one person after another drones on at them from onstage. Breakout groups are intended to break up the monotony of a long meeting and get people talking to

each other about key topics. These are worthy goals; breakout groups are just lousy at realizing them.

What could work better? I think time slots devoted to mini “unconferences” would. I first came across the concept at FOO (“friends of O’Reilly”) events organized by tech guru Tim O’Reilly. At an unconference, time slots and meeting rooms are predetermined, but nothing else is. Using whiteboards or sticky notes, people propose sessions that they want to lead or facilitate and also decide (by looking at the whiteboards or sticky notes) which ones they want to attend. The photo here shows a portion of the agenda for the recently completed FOO Camp.



This agenda was assembled on the fly and reflected the topics participants cared enough about to volunteer their time, energy, and knowledge. Attendance at each session reflected relative interest in the topic among all participants. Attendance varies widely, but

(continued)

IT'S TIME TO BREAK UP WITH BREAKOUT GROUPS

this is not perceived as a problem; some topics are just of narrower interest than others.

I think it would be straightforward to adopt the un-conference approach to time slots at corporate meetings. If the organizers had a couple of topics that they wanted to be sure to cover, they could put them on the whiteboard before opening it up to others. And the organizers could wander around the rooms while sessions were taking place to see which ones had the most attendance and energy. Those should be the ones whose leaders report back to the group as a whole.

Andrew McAfee is the codirector of the Initiative on the Digital Economy in the MIT Sloan School of Management. He is the author of *Enterprise 2.0* and the coauthor, with Erik Brynjolfsson, of *The Second Machine Age*.

Adapted from content posted on hbr.org on July 18, 2012.

Allow for flexibility within sessions.

Given the many moving parts of large, multiday meetings—presentations, breaks, meals, breakouts, audio-visual setup, and the like—deviation from the schedule is impossible. Even so, flexibility can be maintained *within* sessions to address issues that arise or to pursue productive lines of discussion. For example, at the luxury goods

company's leadership summit, the division president conducted an instant poll asking attendees if they would feel comfortable explaining to others a strategy she'd just outlined. When a large percentage of the 90 people there said no, she asked participants to anonymously submit written questions, which she addressed on the spot. Only after a second instant poll indicated that virtually all attendees were comfortable explaining the strategy to others did the session proceed as planned.

**Improve the quality and effectiveness
of top-down communication.**

During conferences, top-down communication generally takes place in three ways: podium presentations, videos, and Q&As with the executive team. If the editor responsible for coordinating content has done a good job, the podium presentations will be succinct and integrated. We have found that an ideal podium session includes no more than four presenters who speak for 15 to 20 minutes each, using just five to seven slides.

Most leadership summits also include an open mic Q&A session in which attendees ask questions of the CEO or the executive team. The worthy intent is to provide unvarnished answers from the top in response to what's really on people's minds. But what actually happens is wearily predictable: impromptu speeches disguised as questions, multipart inquiries requiring time-consuming answers, softball questions intended to curry favor with the leaders, and questions relevant to only a handful of people in the room—to all of which the leaders must extemporize answers. Meanwhile, attendees

Specific Types of Meetings

who are hesitant to raise provocative (or any) issues in front of a large audience remain silent.

There is a better way. If you hold the Q&A on the second day, you can ask people to submit questions at the end of day one. That evening, the summit director, editor, and meeting owner can select the best questions and add ones they feel should have been asked; the executive team can formulate responses to the more provocative ones; and the rest can be parceled out to the appropriate executive team members. Many leaders resist this technique as somehow manipulative or undemocratic, feeling that an open mic is more honest. We argue that, in fact, this approach is ultimately *more* democratic, because it ensures that a cross section of questions are answered in a way that brings substance to what is often an empty exercise.

Use high- and low-tech approaches to capture the thinking of frontline executives and communicate it upward.

Numerous techniques can be employed to harvest the ideas of conference attendees. To determine which tool to use when, the director should ask four closely related questions:

- What kind of input is needed: Opinions? Questions? Brainstorming? Solutions to a specific problem? Complex judgments?
- What characteristics should the communication have: Anonymous or public? Guided or open-ended? In real time or delayed?

- What's the right unit from which to get that kind of input: Individuals? Small tables? Larger break-out groups?
- What are the most effective tools for gathering that kind of input from that unit: Polling? Discussion templates? Worksheets? Complex exercises? (See table 30-1.)

Polling technology as simple as a wireless keypad or an app accessed through a smartphone or web browser allows participants to respond to yes or no questions or to indicate how much they agree with statements such as "I am confident that we will achieve our revenue goals for the next two years." Polling results can be projected at the front of the room in real time for everyone to see (the luxury goods company did this). Text messages work well when more-substantive answers are desired, as when 140 attendees at a leadership conference for an information management company were asked to name the biggest obstacle to the company achieving its growth goals. Among the responses were: "We lack focus," "Too many initiatives distract our attention," "We lack new products," "The plan to grow is not clear," and "Our ability to attract and retain top-notch talent is questionable." The responses were compiled, and a subset was displayed on a screen at the front of the room for discussion.

Such audience response systems can also facilitate highly complex group deliberations during breakout sessions. Take, for example, an exercise we call "the poker chip game," first described in the 2006 *Harvard Business Review* article "Off-Sites That Work," which allows

Specific Types of Meetings

TABLE 30-1

The right tool to gather input from a crowd

	Response		Participants		Questions	
	Anony-mous	Public	Individual	Group	Open-ended	Pre-defined options
PRE-MEETING						
Survey	●	●	●		●	●
Webcast Q&A		●	●		●	
IN-MEETING						
Question cards	●		●	●	●	
Keypad polling	●		●	●		●
Poker chip game		●	●	●		●
Text-in answers	●		●	●	●	●
Table discussions		●		●	●	
Breakouts		●		●	●	
Pairs		●		●	●	
Com-mitment worksheets		●	●	●	●	
Give and Get		●	●		●	
POST-MEETING						
Survey	●	●	●		●	●
Intracorporate social network	●	●	●		●	

small groups using a game board and some poker chips to determine how a company should allocate its resources. Thanks to technology advances, the results of such exercises can be displayed instantly, providing comprehensive feedback to guide further deliberation.

Kallos conducted this game with its 200 attendees, who were divided among 20 tables. Each table was given 66 poker chips and a game board on which to allocate the discretionary portion of the annual \$3.3 billion operating budget. The result was eye-opening for top management. Every table significantly reduced the amount of money budgeted for product development and packaging and increased the allocation for marketing. In the healthy discussion that ensued, a consensus emerged that growth was being constrained by an inability to tell consumers a compelling story.

Many old-school, low-tech tools are still remarkably effective in gathering input, including 3×5 cards on which participants write questions; color-coded cards, which participants can hold up in response to questions; templates to guide small-group discussions; and reports from breakout sessions.

Such tools can make brainstorming—often unwieldy and unfocused when conducted with hundreds of people—more productive. Using a technique called “self-facilitated dialogue,” Kallos had pairs of participants spend 10 minutes in a conversation, guided by a paper template, about what the company should *start* doing, *stop* doing, and *continue* doing in the next 6 months to implement a strategy for increasing revenue. A member

Specific Types of Meetings

of each pair recorded the results of the conversation on the template. Another template was used to capture the suggestions from all five dialogues around the table and to communicate those results to the entire assembly.

A “round robin” variation of the breakout can be particularly effective in eliciting a full range of reactions to a series of issues. Instead of having 200 people sit through podium presentations on each of the 5 objectives, for instance, Kallos broke attendees into 5 groups of 40. Five executive team members, each responsible for explaining one of the objectives, rotated through the groups. Participants asked questions and provided input on every objective (captured on the lowly flowchart), an opportunity that top-down podium explanations cannot provide.

Make sure ideas flow across the meeting to lay the groundwork for genuine collaboration afterward.

The summit may be the only time in the year when many participants see one another. Yet all too often, connections are left to happen by chance—at meals, in breakout groups, or during coffee breaks and cocktail hours. To connect in a deliberate and more constructive way, we use an exercise we call “Give and Get.”

Typically, this exercise is part of a breakout session with anywhere from 30 to 60 people. Two charts, one labeled “Give” and the other marked “Get,” hang on opposite walls. On each chart, each participant is assigned a column with his or her photo, name, function, business unit, and location at the top.

In the Get column, each participant posts a card that completes this sentence: “If I could get help in one area that would make me and my team more successful in the coming year, it would be . . .” The card is like a classified ad, asking for a particular type of expertise or assistance. Perhaps someone needs help developing a product feature, reconfiguring a plant layout, or adjusting a customer contract to achieve a certain outcome. In the Give column, the participant posts a card that completes the sentence, “If I could name one area in which my team and I have developed expertise that may be useful to others in the company, it would be . . .”

After all the Give and Get cards have been posted, participants are given Post-it notes and asked to circulate around the room. If a participant sees a Get that she or someone she knows could address, she leaves a Post-it with a message about how she might be able to assist. If she sees a Give that could be helpful to her, she places a Post-it with a message under the card.

Once participants have posted all their offers to assist and requests for help, they switch rooms with another breakout group and survey the Gives and Gets on those walls. If each breakout room holds 50 people, each participant will see 100 requests for help and 100 offers. Those 200 Gives and Gets typically generate hundreds of Post-its, creating a network of connections across locations, functions, and business units. After the meeting, all the Gives and Gets are recorded and distributed to the appropriate individuals for follow-up.

These and other exercises, designed to ripple far beyond the walls of the meeting venue, can be explicitly

Specific Types of Meetings

tied to the objectives of the summit. Kallos, for instance, used a technique called the Wall of Commitments to further its goal of getting participants to follow through on their promises.

Here's how it worked: The packet each participant received on arrival contained worksheets printed on carbonless copy paper. At the end of day one, largely devoted to top-line growth, participants filled out a worksheet that asked them to list specific steps they and their teams would take to increase revenue immediately, in the coming 3 months, and in the coming 12 months. They handed in the original and kept the copy.

During the evening, unbeknownst to the attendees, 200 linear feet of eight-foot foam board walls were constructed in the auditorium. Participants' commitment sheets were posted on the walls under their names, affiliations, and photos. After dinner, the nine members of the executive committee went around the room with a stack of Post-it notes imprinted with their own names and posted comments on the commitment sheets. The comments ranged from "Great idea" and "Let me know if I can help with that" to "This is disappointing" and "I was hoping you were more ambitious than this."

The following morning, when the 200 participants walked into the auditorium, their reaction, as intended, was shock. As they wandered the perimeter of the room reading the comments about their own and their colleagues' commitments, some were visibly embarrassed. During the next two days, the commitment sheets that were generated to address the other objectives—which

were added to the walls—became more thoughtful. Not only did the quality of the promised actions greatly improve, but attendees learned what colleagues throughout the organization would be focusing on in the coming months, creating opportunities for collaboration. In several instances, participants formed teams to work on initiatives, coordinate their efforts, or establish discussion groups about commitments that dovetailed.

The element of surprise in this exercise can have a galvanizing effect, and identifying individuals creates opportunities for networking. But both features can be adjusted. For example, to spur ambitious commitments from the outset, participants can be warned that the executive team members will comment on their posts. To avoid embarrassing participants, the comments can be provided to them individually rather than posted publicly. Because Kallos was looking to jump-start a culture change, it dialed up both features.

After the Summit

Because companies generally don't design leadership conferences around concrete objectives, they typically pay little attention to what happens afterward. Morale may have been lifted, but the absence of clear direction usually results in halfhearted follow-up and few tangible outcomes. If, however, you've begun with a purpose in mind, you can do some simple things to make sure it is achieved.

Specific Types of Meetings

Create succinct materials for attendees to take home.

The real moment of truth for a summit occurs when leaders return to their divisions, regions, or functions, and people ask, “So, what happened at the meeting?” Those leaders should be able to answer clearly and explain the implications. But that’s hard to do if all they’ve brought back is a notepad full of haphazard observations, doodles, and a few vague slogans, as so often happens. Far better to supply them with communication aids such as talking points, pithy presentations, or video links to drive home the objectives of the meeting and form the basis of discussions with their teams. Meeting participants are encouraged to add their own content to make the messaging relevant. In some cases we have conducted sessions before the close of the meeting in which leaders, working with tablemates, simulate communicating major points to their teams and get feedback on both content and style.

Ensure that all commitments made at the summit—up, down, and across the organization—are kept.

Answers to all questions that were not addressed at the meeting, whether from executive team leaders or from attendees, should be provided within one to two weeks. What’s more, the executive team should track progress on any initiatives or commitments undertaken. Thirty days after the Kallos summit, each participant received an e-mail from an executive committee member listing the actions that person had committed to in the “next

30 days” section of his or her worksheet, followed by a single sentence: “Shoot me a quick e-mail letting me know how these went.”

Continue the conversation.

Within 48 hours of the meeting’s conclusion, conduct a survey to see if the goals were fulfilled and to ask participants about what worked, what could be improved, and what should be jettisoned for next year’s summit. Repeating the pre-meeting survey questions will give you valuable insights into the impact of the event. For example, the percentage of people saying they fully understood the company’s growth strategy rose from 37% in Kallos’s pre-meeting survey to 82% after the summit, and the percentage describing themselves as “optimistic” or “very optimistic” about the company’s prospects rose from 49% to 80%. To encourage collaboration within teams or discussion groups that emerged at the summit, either by design or by happenstance, enable attendees to continue the conversation among themselves through an intracorporate social network.

By adjusting how information flows—more up, more effectively down, and a lot more across—you can turn a leadership summit into a high point of the annual management calendar, one that makes a real difference. Leaders will know in advance that they’ll be heard. People across the organization will understand what the results of the meeting mean for them. Executive committee members will know that they’re going to get valuable

TABLE 30-2

Countdown to the leadership summit

Objectives	Content	Meeting design and structure	Speakers and presenters	Logistics
4–6 Months				
Begin conversations on desired outcomes.		Appoint Summit Director and assemble design team.	Identify potential outside speakers.	Select venue and finalize dates.
90 Days				
Discuss potential objectives.	Determine required materials for pre-meeting readings and summit presentations.	Determine topics and sequencing.	Secure outside speakers.	Send meeting invites. Finalize travel arrangements.
60 Days				
Solicit input on potential objectives from key stakeholders.	Hold pre-meeting webcast. Deploy pre-meeting survey.	Design high-level agenda.	Determine internal presenters and discuss potential objectives. Select Emcee.	

30 Days				
Establish final set of objectives.	Compile survey results. Draft pre-meeting readings and session material.	Refine structure on the basis of survey results. Draft detailed agenda, including tools to gather input.	Review internal presentations.	Walk through the venue and confirm details, including agenda timing.
1–2 Weeks				
Include objectives in pre-meeting reading material.	Distribute reading material to attendees. Finalize session content.	Conduct final walk-through of detailed agenda.	Conduct rehearsals with presenters and Emcee. Confirm external speakers.	Secure supplies and make table and breakout assignments. Test audiovisual equipment.
During				
Regularly remind attendees of the objectives.	Compile input gathered through breakouts, keypad polls, etc.	Remind attendees of structure and agenda	Ensure that speakers and presenters understand their roles.	Coordinate ad hoc needs with venue.
After				
	Deploy post-meeting survey. Distribute summit output and other communication aids.	Follow up on commitments. Establish forums for continued collaboration.		

Specific Types of Meetings

input and that the meeting will be well worth the considerable investment. And enthusiasm will build for each succeeding summit, as people look forward to a memorable event that's strategically significant for everyone.

Bob Frisch is the managing partner of the Strategic Offsites Group, a Boston-based consultancy, and is the author of *Who's In The Room? How Great Leaders Structure and Manage the Teams Around Them* (Jossey-Bass, 2012). He is the author of four *Harvard Business Review* articles, including "Off-Sites That Work" (June 2006). **Cary Greene** is a partner of the Strategic Offsites Group. They are coauthors of *Simple Sabotage: A Modern Field Manual for Detecting & Rooting Out Everyday Behaviors That Undermine Your Workplace* (HarperOne, 2015) and are frequent contributors to hbr.org.

APPENDIX A

Meeting Preparation Checklist

Use this tool to prepare for your next meeting.

Have you . . .

- ☐ Identified the specific purpose of the meeting?
- ☐ Made sure you need a meeting at all?
- ☐ Developed a preliminary agenda?
- ☐ Selected the right participants?
- ☐ Assigned roles to participants?

Adapted from *Running Meetings* (20-Minute Manager series; product #17003), Harvard Business Review Press, 2014.

Appendix A

- ☐ Decided where and when to hold the meeting and confirmed availability of the space?
- ☐ Sent the invitation, notifying participants when and where the meeting will be held?
- ☐ Sent the preliminary agenda to key participants and other stakeholders?
- ☐ Sent any reports or items needing advance preparation to participants?
- ☐ Followed up with invitees in person, if appropriate?
- ☐ Identified, if appropriate, the decision-making process that will be used in the meeting?
- ☐ Identified, arranged for, and tested any required equipment?
- ☐ Finalized the agenda and distributed it to all participants?
- ☐ Verified that all key participants will attend and know their roles?
- ☐ Prepared yourself?

APPENDIX B

Sample Agendas

A sample meeting agenda		
Topic	Preparation	Proposed process
1 What changes, if any, should we make to the agenda? TIME: 2 minutes PURPOSE: Decision LEADER: Mike	None	• Mike polls team.
2 What deltas from the previous meeting will we focus on in this meeting? TIME: 3 minutes PURPOSE: Decision LEADER: Anne	Review applicable deltas from previous meeting notes.	• Anne reviews areas of improvement that we agreed to focus on during this meeting.

(continued)

Adapted from “How to Design an Agenda for an Effective Meeting,” by Roger Schwarz, posted on hbr.org on March 19, 2015.

Appendix B

Topic	Preparation	Proposed process
3 How do we best manage the fluctuating internal demand for our services? TIME: 50 minutes PURPOSE: Decision LEADER: Peg	Identify relevant information, criteria, and assumptions that you believe should guide the decision.	• Statement of the problem. TIME: 5 minutes • Team identifies and agrees on relevant information to consider. TIME: 10 minutes • Identify and agree on criteria for acceptable solutions. TIME: 10 minutes • Identify and agree on assumptions. TIME: 10 minutes • Craft solutions that meet the above constraints. TIME: 15 minutes
4 Which firm should we select for the adjacent markets acquisition study? TIME: 15 minutes PURPOSE: Decision LEADER: Martin	Read the attached memo recommending three firms. Be prepared to ask questions and share your initial preference and your reasoning.	• Questions and additional information regarding the recommendations of the three firms. • Decision to select one firm.
5 What developmental assignments are available during the next FY for high-potentials? TIME: 15 minutes PURPOSE: Decision LEADER: Noah	Review the attached memo identifying the current high-potential managers and the areas in which we are seeking developmental assignments for them. If feasible, be prepared to offer an appropriate developmental assignment.	• Identify the available developmental assignments. • Match the assignments to the pool of high-potential managers. • Agree on next steps for any high-potential managers who have not been given a developmental assignment.
6 PLUS/DELTA: What did we do well for this meeting? What should we do differently for the next meeting? TIME: 5 minutes PURPOSE: Decision LEADER: Carrie	None	• Members identify pluses and deltas. • Team agrees on deltas to work on for next meeting.

A blank meeting agenda template

Meeting agenda

MEETING NAME _____

DATE _____

TIME _____

Topic	Preparation	Proposed process
1 TIME ALLOTTED: PURPOSE: LEADER:		
2 TIME ALLOTTED: PURPOSE: LEADER:		
3 TIME ALLOTTED: PURPOSE: LEADER:		
4 TIME ALLOTTED: PURPOSE: LEADER:		
5 TIME ALLOTTED: PURPOSE: LEADER:		

Branded Books Meeting: sales, marketing, production, editorial team

9/17/16; 10:00–11:00; 307W

Jessica, Erin, Lisa, Mary, Jane, Audra, Sarah, Alex, Jen,
Kate

Meeting objective:

To coordinate our marketing, sales, production, and editorial activities in order to execute our plan to generate \$750,000 in sales of branded e-books across all channels: retail, e-tail, and our own website this fiscal year.

What	How	Who	Time
Introduction	• How did it go? What's the word on the new lines of books?	Mary	5 min
Book revision planning	• Overarching strategy: Need to revise/refresh before a potential customer picks up the book and says, "Outdated!" • Options: ◦ Since book display plans are done 4 months in advance, should the reprint schedule be on an 18–24 month cycle? ◦ Should we coordinate the revision schedule with the reprint schedule? Do we know the reprint schedule far enough in advance—or is that driven by sales? • Next steps	Jane	15 min

(continued)

What	How	Who	Time
Paperback & e-book publication schedule	• We agreed that we'd offer the e-book and PDF versions of the paperbacks one month pre-bound book date, so the first group of five will be live and promoted on 2/14/17. • How do we develop an informed point of view about e-book/print book publication schedules? How do we gather best practices? • Next steps	Mary	15 min
Pre-sales meeting	• Scheduled for mid-October. • How can the team help prepare? • Should we pursue the possibility of pre-loading the first 10 Must Reads book on an e-reader? • Next steps	Mary	10 min
Merchandising idea	• How about grouping our books by topic rather than by series? For example, what if we grouped all of our Managing People books together? ◦ <i>10 Must Reads on Managing People</i> ◦ <i>HBR on Finding and Keeping the Best People</i> ◦ <i>HBR Guide to Delivering Effective Feedback</i> • Next steps	Jane	10 min
Recap	• What we decided • Next steps—who's doing what	Jane	5 min

APPENDIX C

Meeting Follow-Up Checklist

Have you . . .

- ☐ Written a succinct follow-up note, including what, who, and when?
- ☐ Distributed the note to all participants?
- ☐ Recorded any task due dates in your calendar so you can follow up to make sure they're completed?
- ☐ Distributed the note to all other relevant stakeholders?

Adapted from *Running Meetings* (20-Minute Manager series; product #17003), Harvard Business Review Press, 2014.

Appendix C

- ☐ Followed up with key stakeholders in person to make sure they're aware of meeting highlights?
- ☐ Assessed yourself as leader?
- ☐ Assessed the outcome of the meeting?
- ☐ Met with critics?
- ☐ Thought through what you could do better next time?

APPENDIX D

Sample Follow-Up Memo

Branded Books Meeting: sales, marketing, production, editorial team

9/17/16 Follow-Up Notes

Attendees: Jessica, Erin, Lisa, Mary, Jane, Audra, Sarah, Alex, Jen, Kate

Meeting objective:

To coordinate our marketing, sales, production, and editorial activities in order to execute our plan to generate \$750,000 in sales of branded e-books across all channels—retail, e-tail, and our own website this fiscal year.

Appendix D

What	How	Who	When
Pre-sales meeting	• Most important meeting in the buying cycle • 25 national account reps • Loved the jackets! • Sell sheets very helpful ◦ Thanks to Sarah, Mary, and Alex for creating them!	Team	Done
Book revision planning	• Overarching principles ◦ When a content area (managing supply chains, doing business in China, marketing) undergoes a sea change, we should be ready to update ASAP. ◦ The new content in a refreshed book needs to be game changing. ◦ And we must be sure we're going to sell a lot more of the refreshed book; otherwise, we'll lose money on returns. ◦ Need to revise/refresh before a potential customer picks up the book and says, "Outdated!"	Jane Jane w/ Mary and Jess	Ongoing Ongoing
Paperback & e-book publication schedule	• We agreed that we'd offer the e-book and PDF versions of the paperbacks one month pre-bound book date, so the first group of five will be live and promoted on 2/14/17. ◦ We agreed that we'd use the branded lines as an experiment for figuring out nontraditional digital/print book release, marketing, and merchandising.	Jane Team	2/14/17

(continued)

What	How	Who	When
Merchandising idea	- What if we suggested grouping our books—all of our books, not just the branded lines—by topic rather than by series (for example, when all six 10 Must Reads are out, as well as the new paperbacks and authored books [such as Grote on performance appraisal]): - What if we grouped all the Managing People books together: 10 Must Reads on Managing People - HBR on Finding and Keeping the Best People - Grote's new book on performance appraisal - In e-tail, we already do this type of grouping (Sarah and Alex); that is, thematic book lists with focus on core topics. - Need to look at Alex and Sarah's e-tail promotion of 10 Must Reads: <i>The Essentials</i> with each author's related books. - Also need to take a field trip to some physical bookstores—before the winter weather!		
		Sarah	9/18/17
		Mary	10/18/17

APPENDIX E

Digital Tools to Make Your Next Meeting More Productive

by Alexandra Samuel

Meetings may seem like the ultimate holdout against the digitization of working life: After all, what's more analog than talking directly with another person? Even though the core work of a meeting—listening to and connecting with other people—hasn't changed, there are lots of ways technology can make that work easier and more effec-

Adapted from content posted on hbr.org on March 12, 2015 and July 3, 2015

tive. Given how much of our working lives we spend in meetings, building a digital meeting toolkit is one of the smartest investments you can make in tech-savvy productivity. Here are the tools you need.

Before Your Meeting

Find a group meeting time with Doodle, which lets you poll the various people who are part of your meeting and find a time that works for everyone. You'll get the best results if you hook it up to your own calendar (so you only offer people options that actually work for you) and if you set expectations by explaining you're using Doodle to find the time that works for as many people as possible—even if you can't find one that works for everyone.

Quickly schedule one-on-one meetings so the process of finding a time doesn't consume more time than the meeting itself. Use Google appointment slots or Calendly to set up times when you're available for calls or meetings, and when you want to take a meeting, share the link to your open slots.

If you're booking a call with someone in another time zone, make sure you're actually booking the same time into your calendars. Send an actual calendar invitation, rather than just agreeing on a time via e-mail, and as long as your calendaring app has built-in time zone support (nearly all of them do), you can avoid making a mistake. And use Every Time Zone to figure out what the time zone difference actually is, so you don't invite someone to a 4 a.m. meeting.

Find a place to meet. On-demand services like Liquid-space or Desks Near Me give you lots of options for iden-

tifying a meeting space, even when you're on the road. You can book weekly, daily, or even by the hour.

During Your Meeting

Take notes in Evernote or another dedicated digital notebook application. Capturing good, searchable notes makes meetings much more valuable, and the right note-taking tool will make it easy for you to file your meeting notes with the project or topics they relate to. Best of all, if you use the Evernote mobile app to snap pictures of your meeting whiteboard or flip charts, optical character recognition makes those handwritten notes searchable, too.

Share note taking with Google Docs. When you use a Google Docs document to capture meeting updates in more-or-less real time, you'll be able to see and contribute to each other's notes as long as you have an internet connection. (Be sure to copy the meeting notes in Evernote afterward, if that's where you like to keep all your project notes.) That means you and your team can take notes collaboratively, so that if one person's talking, another person records what's being said. This is a particularly nifty trick if you're working with one or more colleagues on a meeting with a client or another team, because you have a kind of psychic link—you can suggest ideas to one another alongside the notes you're taking. And if you don't have an internet connection but you and your colleagues all work on Macs, you can use the fab SubEthaEdit to collaborate with even less lag than you get on Google Docs, simply by creating a computer-to-computer network.

Bring an extra screen to view reference materials. The one downside of digital note taking is that if you need to refer to a document during your meeting, you have to flip back and forth between your note-taking application and your reference document. That's why I always carry my iPad. I use the application GoodReader to store any PDFs or documents I might need to look at during a meeting. And because GoodReader is hooked up to my DropBox account, I can always access a document I need to have open, even if I didn't think to preload it in GoodReader.

Collaborate with mind mapping. I'm a huge fan of mind mapping: diagramming ideas and information visually, using something that looks like a tree or flow-chart. While some people actually take their meeting notes in mind map form (been there, done that, reverted to text), I find mind maps most useful when I'm part of a group discussion where we need to capture and organize ideas together. My two favorite mind-mapping apps for meetings are MindMeister (very flexible and powerful) and Popplet (less expensive, a little easier to use, less flexible). If you're using mind mapping in a face-to-face meeting, you can simply hook a projector up to one computer, but the real-time collaboration support in these apps mean they're great for using during virtual meetings, too.

Inspire new thinking. Your meeting outcomes will only be as good as the thinking that goes into them. But huddling around a PowerPoint presentation is hardly a recipe for inspiring bold new ideas. Instead, think about

using a collaborative visual tool like Popplet to share ideas, so that you can reorganize them on the fly.

Convert action items to tasks. Once you leave a meeting, it's easy for follow-up steps to fall by the wayside. It really helps if everyone in a meeting actually puts their action items into their task manager—something that's a lot easier with TaskClone. A reader put me onto this service, which can scan Evernote to find any action items and then import them into your favorite task management tool.

Access your outcomes. Too often, we leave meetings with a tangible outcome, only to lose it in the digital morass. Even if you generally take your meeting notes in Evernote or another digital note-taking program, you may still have trouble tracking down that brilliant brainstorm that occurred on a pile of Post-its, the inspired idea you wrote in your paper notebook, or the meeting notes written on a flipchart. That's why it's handy to snap a photo of any written output and add it to Evernote, so that it becomes searchable.

For Virtual or Phone Meetings

While all the tools I've mentioned here are useful in both face-to-face and virtual meetings, there are a few extra tools I'd recommend for people conducting virtual or phone meetings.

Share screens faster with Join.me. I've tried GoTo-Meeting, WebEx, Google Hangouts, and Skype. They all work some (or even most) of the time. But the only bullet-proof screen-sharing tool I've used is Join.me. It

works for me every time, and because it's so fast to set up a meeting and share a link, it works even if I'm already midcall when I realize I need to share my screen.

Choose a back channel. If you're doing a client or prospect call with colleagues who are in another office or location, keep yourselves in sync by choosing an instant messaging back channel before your meeting begins. There's nothing worse than needing to send your copresenter an urgent note but discovering you have to wait for him to read his e-mail so he can see it. A back channel chat provides a way of discreetly asking someone to let the conversation move forward or of checking in with other meeting attendees to see if they feel like your meeting has lost focus. Your back channel can be Skype, Lync, MSN, Apple Messages, or Gmail Chat—any messaging application works, as long as it has desktop support (so you're not trying to type urgent messages into your phone) and you have connected to your colleague before the meeting begins. (Send a test message just to be sure.) Even if you're using a virtual meeting application that supports private messaging, I recommend using a separate app as your back channel so you don't accidentally share your message with the client.

Record crucial phone meetings. If you're participating in a phone meeting and aren't in a position to take notes (or can't type fast enough), consider recording your call for future reference. TapeACall, which is available for both iPhone and Android, makes it really easy: Just install the app, and then conference the TapeACall number into your call. (Note that in many jurisdictions it's illegal to tape a call unless everyone consents.)

Set up these tools on your computer and mobile devices, and you'll be better equipped to make the most of your meetings. Far from distracting you from your work and colleagues, this is one place technology can help you reconnect with them—by making the time you spend together as valuable as possible.

Alexandra Samuel is a speaker, researcher, and writer who works with the world's leading companies to understand their online customers and craft data-driven reports such as "Sharing Is the New Buying." The author of *Work Smarter with Social Media* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2015), Alex holds a PhD in political science from Harvard University. Follow Alex on Twitter @awsamuel.

Index

- accomplishments in meetings,
 - value of, 117
- acknowledgments of participant contributions, 117–118
- agenda
 - effective, 25–31
 - input for, 26, 78–79
 - mapping to goals, 23
 - purpose of, 25
 - reviewing and modifying, 30
 - sample, 199–203
 - setting, 7–8
 - sharing before meeting, 110
 - for virtual meetings, 129, 152–153
- agenda items
 - alignment on, 111, 116–117, 120
 - checking for completion of, 116
 - ground rules for, 60–61
 - leadership responsibility for, 29–30
 - process for addressing, 28–29
 - proper setup for, 110
 - as questions, 26–27
 - selecting topics for, 26
 - for standing meetings, 156
 - time allotted to, 43–46
 - time estimates for, 28
- anonymous polls, use of in meetings, 55
- attendance, criteria for, 87–92
- attendees
 - choosing, 47–49
 - cutting off, during meetings, 67–69
 - feedback from, 121–122
 - interjections by, 93–96
 - at leadership summits, 177–178, 188–191
 - meeting objectives and, 23
 - number of, 47–49
 - silence by, as agreement, 53–56
 - See also* participants
- audience response systems, 185–187
- back channels, 216. *See also* digital tools for meetings
- board meetings, 22. *See also* types of meetings
- body language, reading and using, 2, 81

Index

- boss
 - as ineffective leader, 107–112
 - supporting, 108–109
- boundary setting, 103. *See also* interventions for bad meetings
- brainstorming, 16, 49, 187
- breakout groups, 179–182
- calendars, 212. *See also* scheduling meetings
- Calendly, 212. *See also* digital tools for meetings
- calmness, during interruptions, 79
- cancelling meetings, 156
- checklists
 - follow-up, 205–206
 - preparation, 197–198
- clarity, asking for, 110, 133
- closing a meeting, 115–118, 119–123
- collaborative problem solving, 137–138
- commitments, on next steps, 117, 120
- communication
 - e-mail, 13
 - face-to-face, 13–14, 128–129
 - styles, across cultures, 144–145
 - tools, 213–217
 - top-down, 183–184
 - two-way, 13
- communication points, 120–121
- conducting meetings, 53–83, 127–133, 137–140, 143–149, 156, 160–161, 178–191
- conference calls, 13. *See also* types of meetings
- conflicts, managing, 147
- confusion, overcoming, 95–96, 97–98
- consensus, group, 64–65. *See also* decision-making meetings
- continuous improvement process, 30–31
- control, regaining, of meeting, 77–83
- convenience meetings, 16–17. *See also* types of meetings
- conversations
 - casual, 128
 - cutting off, during meetings, 67–69
 - designing, 115–116
 - ending, 115–118
 - versus meetings, 15–16 (*see also* types of meetings)
 - one-to-one, 81–83
 - real-time, 13
 - in virtual meetings, managing, 131–133
 - water cooler, 140–141
- creative thinking, 158, 159
- cross-cultural meetings, 143–149, 151–153. *See also* types of meetings
- cultural differences, 144–145, 147–149
- cultural sensitivity, 144–145
- cutting people off during meetings, 67–69. *See also* conversations
- decision makers, 48, 61, 99–100
- decision making
 - group, 63–66
 - by leader, 65–66
 - as meeting purpose, 27–28

- decision-making meetings, 17–18.
 See also types of meetings
- decisions, confirming key, 120
- decision-supporting meetings,
 17–18. *See also* types of
 meetings
- decision tree, on whether to hold
 a meeting, 11–14
- declining meeting invitations,
 87–92
- derailed meetings, 71–75, 77–83
- Desks Near Me, 212–213. *See*
 also digital tools for
 meetings
- devices, banning during meet-
 ings, 3–4. *See also* interrup-
 tions, managing
- digital tools for meetings,
 211–217
- disagreement
 in multicultural teams, 147
 stating your, 95
- discussion, facilitating. *See*
 conducting meetings;
 conversations
- distractions, managing, 3–4,
 38, 41
- Doodle, 212. *See also* digital tools
 for meetings
- duration of meetings. *See* sched-
 uling meetings
- 8-18-1800 rule, 49. *See also* par-
 ticipants, number of
- ending a meeting. *See* closing a
 meeting
- evaluation of meeting, 30–31. *See*
 also feedback
- Evernote, 213, 215. *See also* digi-
 tal tools for meetings
- examples and samples
 agenda, 199–203
 follow-up checklist, 205–206
 follow-up memo, 207–209
 preparation checklist, 197–198
- executive team meetings, 22. *See*
 also types of meetings
- expectations
 group, 102
 setting, 146
- face-to-face communication,
 13–14, 128–129
- facilitating discussions. *See*
 conducting meetings;
 conversations
- feedback, 121–122, 148–149, 193
- 50-minute meetings, 35–36. *See*
 also scheduling meetings
- flexibility in cross-cultural meet-
 ings, 148
- focus, lack of, 99–100
- follow-up, 111, 140–141
 checklist for, 205–206
 sample memo for, 208–209
- formality meetings, 17. *See also*
 types of meetings
- “Give and Get” exercise, 188–189
- global meetings, 151–153. *See also*
 types of meetings
- goals, for meeting, 19–24, 27–28,
 33–34, 174–175
- GoodReader, 214. *See also* digital
 tools for meetings
- Google, 212. *See also* digital tools
 for meetings
- Google Docs, 98, 213. *See also*
 digital tools for meetings

Index

- ground rules, 59–61, 146
- group consensus, 64–65
- group decision making, 27–28, 63–66
- group discussions, 56
- group problem solving, 137–138
- group work sessions, 16. *See also* types of meetings
- guidelines. *See* ground rules
- gut instincts, 103–104. *See also* interventions for bad meetings
- heat mapping topics, 55–56
- hell, meetings from, interventions for, 97–100. *See also* interventions for bad meetings
- high-stakes meetings, 18. *See also* types of meetings
- ideas, speaking up with, 94
- ineffective meeting leadership, 107–112
- information dissemination, 16–17. *See also* types of meetings
- interjections, 93–96
- interruptions, managing, 60, 77–83
- interventions for bad meetings, 97–112
- invitations, declining, 87–92
- jellyfish rule, 68–69
- Join.me, 215–216. *See also* digital tools for meetings
- language barriers. *See* communication; global meetings
- large meetings, challenge of, 2–3. *See also* attendees, number of
- leader's choice, 65–66. *See also* decision-making meetings
- leaders, ineffective, 107–112
- leadership
 - of cross-cultural meetings, 143–149
 - of standing meetings, 156
 - of virtual meetings, 131–133
- leadership conferences and goal setting, 23
- leadership summits, 167–196
 - breakout groups in, 179–182
 - commitments made at, 192–193
 - engaging participants before, 177–178
 - execution of, 178–191
 - feedback on, 193
 - flexibility in, 182–183
 - follow-up after, 191–193
 - idea flow during, 188–191, 193
 - input from conference attendees at, 184–188
 - objectives for, 174–177
 - orientation webcasts, 178
 - pace and rhythm of, 178–179
 - preparation for, 169–178, 194–195
 - presentations at, 176–179
 - Q&A sessions in, 183–184
 - role assignment for, 170–174
 - take-home materials for, 192
 - top-down communication and, 183–184
 - See also* types of meetings

- length, of meeting, 4–5. *See also*
scheduling meetings
- Liquidspace, 212–213. *See also*
digital tools for meetings
- location, for meeting, 24
- majority vote, 65. *See also*
decision-making meetings
- materials. *See* pre-reads
- meetings from hell, interven-
tions for, 97–100. *See also*
interventions for bad
meetings
- meetings that drag, interventions
for, 101–105. *See also* inter-
ventions for bad meetings
- Microsoft Outlook, 36. *See also*
scheduling meetings
- mind mapping, 214. *See also*
digital tools for meetings
- MindMeister, 214. *See also* digital
tools for meetings
- mobile devices, banning during
meetings, 3–4
- moderation. *See* conducting
meetings
- multicultural meetings, 143–149,
151–153. *See also* types of
meetings
- multitasking, 3, 41, 60, 139. *See
also* ground rules
- need to meet, assessing. *See*
decision tree, on whether to
hold a meeting; attendance,
criteria for
- nonverbal communication, 81.
See also interventions for
bad meetings
- note taking, 98–99, 213, 215.
See also digital tools for
meetings
- notes, follow-up, 111, 117, 120,
140–141, 191–193, 208–209
- objectives, 19–24, 33–34,
174–177. *See also* goals, for
meeting
- off-topic discussions, 67–69,
71–75, 77–83, 104, 111
- one-to-one conversations, 81–83
- outcomes, summarizing, 104–
105, 215. *See also* follow-up
- participants
acknowledgment of, 117–118
affecting experience of other,
111
calling by name, 128, 139
calling on, 6
checking in with, in virtual
meetings, 140
choosing, 47–49
cutting off, during meetings,
67–69
input from, 78–79
interruptions by, 77–83
at leadership summits,
177–178, 188–191
number of, 2–3, 47–49
off-track comments by, 71–75
preparation for meetings, 29
relationship building among,
127–129, 146–147
silence by, as agreement,
53–56
tasks for, 139
See also attendees

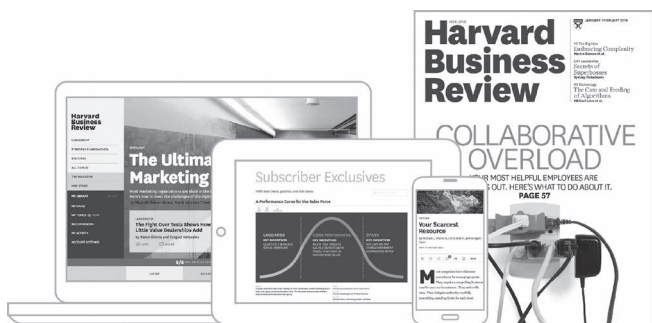
Index

- participation, 6
 - broad, 110
 - declining meeting invitations, 87–92
 - interjections, 93–96
 - in virtual meetings, 130, 131–133, 138
- phone calls, 13. *See also* types of meetings
- planning meetings. *See* preparation
- playing dumb, 97–98. *See also* interventions for bad meetings
- plus delta evaluations, 30–31. *See also* feedback
- polling technology, 185–187. *See also* digital tools for meetings
- Popplet, 214–215. *See also* digital tools for meetings
- preparation
 - checklist, 197–198
 - lack of, 99
 - for leadership summits, 169–178, 194–195
 - for meetings, 29, 40, 103, 128–130, 136–137, 197–198
 - for virtual meetings, 129–130, 136–137
- pre-reads, 23, 40, 136–137
- problematic behavior, managing, 77–83
- problem solving, collaborative, 137–138. *See also* types of meetings
- purpose of meeting, clarifying, 33–34, 72–74, 156. *See also* goals
- questions
 - agenda items as, 26–27
 - asking difficult, 104
 - to evaluate meetings, 30–31
- reading materials. *See* pre-reads
- recurring meetings. *See* standing meetings
- regularly scheduled meetings, 155–156. *See also* types of meetings
- relationship building
 - in multicultural teams, 146–147
 - in virtual teams, 127–129
- restatement of topics, 104. *See also* interventions for bad meetings
- rewards and cultural differences, 148–149
- rules. *See* ground rules
- session feedback, 121–122
- scheduling meetings, 4–5, 35–36, 37–41, 151–152. *See also* time management
- shared visuals, 98–99. *See also* interventions for bad meetings
- shot clocks, 43–46. *See also* time management
- silence during meetings, 53–56
- sit-downs, one-on-one, 82–83
- size of meeting, 2–3. *See also* attendees, number of
- small group discussions and participation, 56
- social meetings, 17. *See also* types of meetings

- standing meetings, 155–156. *See also* types of meetings
- stand-up meetings, 5–6, 163–166. *See also* types of meetings
- status updates, 136–137. *See also* types of meetings
- SubEthaEdit, 213. *See also* digital tools for meetings
- talking points, 120–121. *See also* follow-up
- tangents, 104. *See also* interventions for bad meetings
- TapeACall, 216. *See also* digital tools for meetings
- TaskClone, 215. *See also* digital tools for meetings
- technology, 3–4, 211–217
- 30-minute meetings, 37–41. *See also* scheduling meetings
- time management, 4–5, 28, 35–36, 37–41, 43–46, 129–130. *See also* scheduling meetings
- time zones, 151–152
- tools. *See* digital tools for meetings
- top-down communication, 183–184
- types of meetings, 15–18, 125–196
- unproductive meetings, 97–100
- updates, 6–7, 27, 136–137
- value of meeting, assessing, 88
- video conferencing, 13, 136, 139
- virtual meetings
- agendas for, 129, 152–153
 - banning multitasking during, 139
 - checking in with participants, 140
 - follow-up after, 140–141
 - global, 151–153
 - leadership of, 131–133
 - participation during, 130, 131–133, 138
 - preparation for, 129–130, 136–137
 - pressing mute during, 138–139
 - relationship building for, 127–129
 - running, 127–133, 135–141
 - time for, 129–130
 - tools for, 215–217
 - value of, 135
 - See also* types of meetings
- walking meetings, 157–162. *See also* types of meetings
- water cooler conversations, 140–141
- weekly meetings, goals for, 21–22
- wrap-up discussions, 119–123
- Yoda, 140. *See also* participants

Notes

Harvard Business Review



Invaluable insights always at your fingertips

With an All-Access subscription to *Harvard Business Review*, you'll get so much more than a magazine.

Exclusive online content and tools
you can put to use today

My Library, your personal workspace for sharing, saving, and organizing HBR.org articles and tools

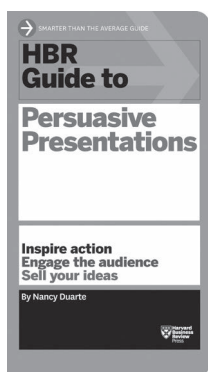
Unlimited access to more than 4,000 articles in the *Harvard Business Review* archive

Subscribe today at hbr.org/subnow

Smart advice and inspiration from a source you trust.

Harvard Business Review Guides

Packed with concise, practical tips from leading experts—and examples that make them easy to apply—the HBR Guides series provides smart answers to your most pressing work challenges. Arm yourself with the advice you need to succeed on the job, from the most trusted brand in business.



AVAILABLE IN PAPERBACK
OR EBOOK FORMAT
WHEREVER BOOKS ARE SOLD

-
- Better Business Writing
 - Coaching Employees
 - Finance Basics for Managers
 - Getting the Mentoring You Need
 - Getting the Right Work Done
 - Managing Stress at Work
 - Managing Up and Across
 - Office Politics
 - Persuasive Presentations
 - Project Management

BUY FOR YOUR TEAM, COMPANY, OR EVENT.

To learn more about bulk discounts visit hbr.org.

HBR Guide to
**Project
Management**

Harvard Business Review Guides

Arm yourself with the advice you need to succeed on the job, from the most trusted brand in business. Packed with how-to essentials from leading experts, the HBR Guides provide smart answers to your most pressing work challenges.

The titles include:

HBR Guide to Better Business Writing

HBR Guide to Finance Basics for Managers

HBR Guide to Getting the Mentoring You Need

HBR Guide to Getting the Right Job

HBR Guide to Getting the Right Work Done

HBR Guide to Giving Effective Feedback

HBR Guide to Making Every Meeting Matter

HBR Guide to Managing Stress

HBR Guide to Managing Up and Across

HBR Guide to Persuasive Presentations

HBR Guide to Project Management

HBR Guide to **Project Management**

HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW PRESS

Boston, Massachusetts

Copyright 2012 Harvard Business School Publishing Corporation

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise), without the prior permission of the publisher. Requests for permission should be directed to permissions@hbsp.harvard.edu, or mailed to Permissions, Harvard Business School Publishing, 60 Harvard Way, Boston, Massachusetts 02163.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

HBR's guide to project management.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-1-4221-8729-6 (alk. paper)

1. Project management. I. Harvard business review. II. Title: Guide to project management.

HD69.P75H394 2013

658.4'04—dc23

2012026957

The paper used in this publication meets the requirements of the American National Standard for Permanence of Paper for Publications and Documents in Libraries and Archives Z39.48-1992.

What You'll Learn

You've been asked to lead a project. You appreciate the vote of confidence, but are you panicking because you haven't a clue where to begin? Do you worry that stakeholders will tug you in a million directions, making it impossible to set clear goals, let alone deliver the goods on time and on budget? How will you know when to stick to your original plan and when to be flexible? And how will you keep all your team members excited about this project—when they have so many other pressures on them?

This guide will give you the confidence and tools you need to manage projects effectively. You'll get better at:

- Choosing the right team and keeping it humming
- Avoiding “scope creep”
- Zeroing in on critical tasks and mapping out a logical sequence
- Making heads or tails of Gantt and PERT charts
- Getting disruptive team members on board

What You'll Learn

- Keeping stakeholders in the loop
- Gauging your project's success
- Deciding when to cut bait
- Capturing—and using—lessons learned

Contents

Overview

1. The Four Phases of Project Management	3
<i>What's involved in planning, build-up, implementation, and closeout—and how these processes overlap</i>	
2. The Cast of Characters	31
<i>Who's who in project management</i>	

Phase 1: PLANNING

3. A Written Charter	41
<i>Your marching orders</i>	
4. Dealing with a Project's "Fuzzy Front End"	47
<i>You can't eliminate uncertainty in the early stages of a complex project—but you can manage it.</i>	
BY LOREN GARY	
5. Performing a Project Premortem	53
<i>Learn from your project while it's still alive and well.</i>	
BY GARY KLEIN	

6. Will Project Creep Cost You—or Create Value? 57

*Set strict limits on scope, but be flexible
when major opportunities arise.*

BY LOREN GARY

Phase 2: BUILD-UP

7. Setting Priorities Before Starting Your Project 65

Three steps for staying on track

BY RON ASHKENAS

8. Boost Productivity with Time-Boxing 73

*Tips for getting your team's calendars—and
yours—under control*

BY MELISSA RAFFONI

9. Scheduling the Work 77

Put the horse before the cart.

10. HBR Case Study: A Rush to Failure? 87

When does speed trump quality?

BY TOM CROSS

11. Getting Your Project Off on the Right Foot 101

*Set your project up for success with a well-
planned launch.*

12. The Discipline of Teams 107

*Mutual accountability leads to astonishing
results.*

BY JON R. KATZENBACH AND DOUGLAS K. SMITH

Phase 3: IMPLEMENTATION

13. Effective Project Meetings	113
<i>Run your meetings well, and infuse your project with energy and direction.</i>	
14. The Adaptive Approach to Project Management	117
<i>What to do when your usual decision tools cease to be useful in the face of uncertainty</i>	
15. Why Good Projects Fail Anyway	123
<i>The risks that come with big projects—and how to manage them</i>	
BY NADIM F. MATTA AND RONALD N. ASHKENAS	
16. Monitoring and Controlling Your Project	127
<i>Don't be afraid to revise your plan.</i>	
BY RAY SHEEN	
17. Managing People Problems on Your Team	135
<i>Make sure people stay on task, pull their weight, work together, and meet quality standards.</i>	
18. The Tools of Cooperation and Change	139
<i>What to do when people disagree on goals, how to achieve them, or both</i>	
BY CLAYTON M. CHRISTENSEN, MATT MARX, AND HOWARD H. STEVENSON	
19. Don't Throw Good Money (or Time) After Bad	143
<i>How to avoid chasing after sunk costs</i>	
BY JIMMY GUTERMAN	

Phase 4: CLOSEOUT

20. Handing off Authority and Control 151

Gauge your success before wrapping things up.

BY RAY SHEEN

21. Capturing Lessons Learned 157

Four steps to an effective after-action review

BY RAY SHEEN

Glossary 163

Index 167

Overview

Chapter 1

The Four Phases of Project Management

Whether you're in charge of developing a website, designing a car, moving a department to a new facility, updating an information system, or just about any other project (large or small), you'll go through the same four phases: planning, build-up, implementation, and closeout. Even though the phases have distinct qualities, they overlap. For example, you'll typically begin planning with a ballpark budget figure and an estimated completion date. Once you're in the build-up and implementation phases, you'll define and begin to execute the details of the project plan. That will give you new information, so you'll revise your budget and end date—in other words, do more planning—according to your clearer understanding of the big picture.

Adapted from *Pocket Mentor: Managing Projects* (product #1878), Harvard Business Review Press, 2006

Overview

Here's a chart that outlines the activities of each phase, plus the skills and tools you may need for doing the work:

PROJECT PHASES

Planning	Build-up	Implementation	Closeout
ACTIVITIES			
Determine the real problem to solve	Assemble your team	Monitor and control process and budget	Evaluate project performance
Identify stakeholders	Plan assignments	Report progress	Close the project
Define project objectives	Create the schedule	Hold weekly team meetings	Debrief with the team
Determine scope, resources, and major tasks	Hold a kickoff meeting	Manage problems	Develop a post-evaluation report
Prepare for tradeoffs	Develop a budget		
KEY SKILLS			
Task analysis	Process analysis	Supervising	Follow-through
Planning	Team building	Leading and motivating	Planning
Cost-benefit analysis of options	Delegating	Communication	Communication
	Negotiating	Conflict management	
	Recruiting and hiring	Problem solving	
	Communication		
TOOLS			
Work Breakdown Structure	Scheduling tools (CPM, PERT, Gantt)		Post-evaluation report: analysis and lessons learned

Planning: How to Map Out a Project

When people think of project planning, their minds tend to jump immediately to scheduling—but you won't even

get to that part until the build-up phase. Planning is really about defining fundamentals: what problem needs solving, who will be involved, and what will be done.

Determine the real problem to solve

Before you begin, take time to pinpoint what issue the project is actually supposed to fix. It's not always obvious.

Say the CIO at your company has asked you, an IT manager, to develop a new database and data entry system. You may be eager to jump right into the project to tackle problems you have struggled with firsthand. But will that solve the *company's* problem? To increase the project's chances of success, you must look beyond the symptoms you have observed—“*We can't get the data out fast enough*” and “*I have to sift through four different reports just to compile an update on my clients' recent activity*”—to find the underlying issues the organization is trying to address. Before designing the database, you should ask what type of data is required, what will be done with it, how soon a fix is needed, and so on. If you don't, you'll run the risk of wasting time and money by creating a solution that is too simplistic, too complicated, or too late—or one that doesn't do what users need it to do.

Identify the stakeholders

The real problem will become even clearer once you figure out who all your **stakeholders** are—that is, which functions or people might be affected by the project's activities or outcomes, who will contribute resources (people, space, time, tools, and money), and who will use and

benefit from the project's output. They will work with you to spell out exactly what success on the project means. Have them sign off on what they expect at the end of the project and what they are willing to contribute to it. And if the stakeholders change midstream, be prepared not only to respond to the new players but also to include all the others in any decision to redirect the project.

Whether you're managing a project in a corporation or working as an independent consultant, it's critical to have the support of the people you're working for. They may take a blue-sky view and demand an enormous amount of work within an unrealistic time period or expect you to perform miracles with inadequate resources or staffing. As the project manager, you'll need to make sure the requirements and resources line up fairly evenly, or you will set yourself up for failure.

Define project objectives

One of your most challenging planning tasks is to meld stakeholders' various expectations into a coherent and manageable set of goals. The project's success will be measured by how well you meet those goals. The more explicitly you state them at the outset, the less disagreement you will face later about whether you have met expectations. In the planning phase, however, much is still in flux, so you'll revise your objectives later on, as you gather information about what you need to achieve.

When defining objectives, think SMART. They should be:

- Specific
- Measurable

- **Action-oriented**
- **Realistic**
- **Time-limited**

Suppose your HR department has been tasked with identifying potential new providers for your company's health benefits plan because the current ones aren't delivering the level of service they should given how much money employees have to pay for them. The project's SMART objectives may be to:

1. **Survey** *<action-oriented>* at least **six** *<measurable>* providers that meet the department's minimum threshold criteria for service quality.
2. **Recommend** *<action-oriented>*, at the **June** *<time-limited>* board of directors' meeting, the **three** *<specific>* that offer the best and broadest coverage at a cost that is at least **10%** *<realistic>* less than the company's current per-employee contribution.

Keep the following factors in mind as you define your project's objectives:

- **Quality.** Identify quality standards, and determine how to measure and satisfy them.
- **Organization.** Calibrate goals depending on the people and other resources you have available.
- **Communication.** Determine what information each stakeholder needs and how to deliver it.

***Determine scope, resources,
and major tasks***

Many projects fail either because they bite off more than they can chew and thus grossly underestimate time and money or because a significant part of the work has been overlooked. One tool that can help you avoid these problems is the **Work Breakdown Structure (WBS)**, which aids in the process of determining scope and tasks and developing estimates. (See the sample later in this chapter.) The underlying concept is to subdivide complex activities into their most manageable units.

To create a WBS:

- Ask, “What will have to be done in order to accomplish X?”
- Continue to ask this question until your answer is broken down into tasks that cannot be subdivided further.
- Estimate how long it will take to complete these tasks and how much they will cost in terms of dollars and person-hours.

A WBS typically consists of three to six levels of subdivided activities. The more complex the project, the more levels it will have. As a general rule, you shouldn’t have more than 20—and only an enormous project would require that many.

Here in the planning phase, don’t worry about the sequence of activities. You will take care of scheduling in

the build-up phase. Rather, use the WBS to create the framework that you'll fill in once you have a better sense of your staff, budget, and time constraints. Padding estimates is an acceptable way to reduce risk, but do it openly and communicate your reasons to the stakeholders.

As a result of your thoughtful planning, you'll be able to rough out an estimate of how many people—with what skills—you'll need for the project. You'll also have a good idea of how long the project will take.

Prepare for trade-offs

Time, cost, and quality are the three related variables that typically dictate what you can achieve.

$$\text{Quality} = \text{Time} + \text{Cost}$$

Change any of these variables, and you change your outcome. Of course, such alterations often occur in the middle of a project. If your time frame for developing a new database management system is suddenly cut in half, for instance, you will need to either employ twice the number of people or be satisfied with a system that isn't as robust as originally planned. Don't let bells and whistles get in the way of mission-critical activities. The key is to establish a level of quality that meets your stakeholders' needs.

Knowing from the start which variable is most important to each stakeholder will help you make the right changes along the way. It's your responsibility to keep everyone informed of any tweaks and tell them what the consequences will be in terms of time, cost, and quality.

WORK BREAKDOWN STRUCTURE

Sample Planning Document

Develop a Work Breakdown Structure (WBS) to ensure that you do not overlook a significant part of a complex activity or underestimate the time and money needed to complete the work. Use multiple pages as needed.

DESCRIBE THE OVERALL PROJECT:

The overall project will migrate 3 Web servers and databases to a new physical data center. The project requires that 5 new servers be provisioned in the new data center: these servers will mirror the production servers existing in the old data center. The new servers will be built to the same specifications as the old ones; they will run the same application and have the same content. Once implemented, the new equipment will be tested to confirm functionality. The sites will have a cutover and “go live” date. Finally, the old equipment will be decommissioned and reabsorbed into inventory.

MAJOR TASK

Obtain equipment.

Level 1 Sub Tasks

Purchase 3 Web servers and 2 databases.

Ship equipment to new data center.

Level 2 Sub Tasks

Cut P.O. and order servers.

Alert data center that equipment is slated for arrival.

Sub Task Duration

7 days

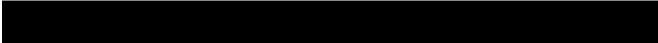
MAJOR TASK

Provision and implement equipment.

Level 1 Sub Tasks

Physically install hardware.

Load operating systems.



Load applications.
Mirror content to new servers.

Level 2 Sub Tasks

Rack and cable new equipment in data center and ensure physical and network connectivity.
Load base-level operating systems for Web and database servers.
Load application level software, including Web server software, data-base applications, and any required dependencies.
Copy configurations from production sites, transfer to new servers, and load appropriately.

Sub Task Duration

8 days

MAJOR TASK

Test equipment.

Level 1 Sub Tasks

Test machines.

Level 2 Sub Tasks

Ensure network connectivity, as well as Web and database access functionality and integrity.

Sub Task Duration

2 days

MAJOR TASK

Go live with new equipment.

Level 1 Sub Tasks

Cutover to new production site.
Data and content integrity check.

(continued)



Overview



MAJOR TASK (CONTINUED)

Level 2 Sub Tasks

Switch Web and database access to new sites.

Run a series of predetermined tests to ensure that data is accurate and that any updates since mirroring have been captured and applied as necessary.

Sub Task Duration

2 days

MAJOR TASK

Test again.

Level 1 Sub Tasks

Let sites burn in for 24 hours and check integrity once again.

Level 2 Sub Tasks

Run series of tests once more to ensure that updates and logging are functioning correctly.

Sub Task Duration

1 day

MAJOR TASK

Decommission old equipment.

Level 1 Sub Tasks

Remove equipment from data center.

Reabsorb equipment for future use.

Level 2 Sub Tasks

De-install equipment; erase software and content.

Ship equipment back to inventory.

Sub Task Duration

2 days

Build-Up: How to Get the Project Going

In the build-up phase, you bring your team together. Time estimates become schedules. Cost estimates become budgets. You gather your resources. You get commitments, and you make them.

Assemble your team

Your first task in this phase is to assess the skills needed for the project so you can get the right people on board. This assessment flows directly from the Work Breakdown Structure you did during the planning phase, in which you developed your best estimate of the necessary tasks and activities. You may need to bring in people—either temporary workers or employees from other parts of the organization—who have certain skills. Don't forget to budget time and money for training to cover any gaps you can't fill with people who are already up to speed.

Plan assignments

If you've built your own team, you've probably already decided who will do what. Or, if you've inherited a team but worked with the members before, you can still make the assignments yourself. But if a new, unfamiliar group is assigned to you, list the people on the team, list the skills required, and talk to each team member about her own skill set before you match people to tasks. This approach starts the process of team communication and cohesion. For example, if the project calls for a skill no one on the team possesses, members may know someone else

who has it—or they may express interest in being trained themselves.

Clearly, you can't do everything yourself, even if you want to. After you've decided how you will assign tasks to team members, give each person the information and resources needed to succeed—and then back off and let your team members do their jobs. You may, as the project proceeds, have to delegate more tasks than originally anticipated. Be flexible enough to do so—without forgetting that you, as project manager, are the one who's accountable for results. (See the sidebar “Tips for Delegating Effectively.”)

Create the schedule

It would be nice if you could tally up the to-dos and say, “With the resources we have, we will need this much time”—and then get exactly what you've asked for. But the reality is, most projects come with fixed beginning and end dates, regardless of available resources.

To create a realistic schedule within those constraints, work backward from any drop-dead deadlines you know about—that is, dates that cannot be changed—to see when your deliverables must be ready. For instance, if an annual report is due for a shareholder's meeting and you know it takes the printer two weeks, then all the final art and copy for the report must be ready to go to the printer two weeks before the meeting.

Depending on the complexity of your project, you may also rely on tools such as the **Critical Path Method** and a **Performance Evaluation and Review Technique (PERT) chart** to help with the sequencing of tasks and

a **Gantt chart** to map out their chronological order and duration. You'll learn how to use these tools elsewhere in this guide. For now, though, keep in mind the “working backward” rule of thumb and these basic steps for scheduling:

1. Use the Work Breakdown Structure or a similar outline to develop a list of activities or tasks, and

TIPS FOR DELEGATING EFFECTIVELY

- Recognize the capabilities of your team members.
- Trust your team's ability to get the job done.
- Focus on results, and let go of your need to get involved in how tasks are accomplished.
- Consider delegation as a way to develop the skills of your team.
- Always delegate to the lowest possible level to make the best use of staff resources.
- Explain assignments clearly and provide resources needed for successful completion.
- Deflect reverse delegation. Do not automatically solve problems or make decisions for your staff members. Focus on generating alternatives together.

plot out their sequence by determining which ones are critical to achieving the desired final outcome.

2. Assign each task a deliverable—for instance, “compose rough draft of survey questions.”
3. Use deliverables to create a schedule with realistic due dates.
4. Identify bottlenecks that could upset the schedule.
5. Determine ways to remove bottlenecks, or build in extra time to get around them.
6. Establish control and communication systems for updating and revising the schedule.
7. Keep all stakeholders involved in and informed of the project’s progress and any schedule modifications.

Hold a kickoff meeting

As soon as you’ve chosen your players and set the schedule, bring everyone together for a kickoff meeting. Go over the project’s plan and objectives with the group in as much detail as possible, and review the proposed time frame. Be sure to clarify roles and responsibilities.

Encourage people to point out spots where problems may occur and where improvements could be made. Take all suggestions seriously—especially in areas where the team members have more experience than you do—and adjust your estimates and activities accordingly.

Develop a budget

The first question to ask when developing a budget is, “What will it take to actually do the work?” To determine your costs, break down the project into the following categories:

- **Personnel.** Have you included all costs, both on-going and extra, for employees and contract workers? (This is typically the largest part of a budget.)
- **Travel.** Is everyone onsite, or will employees be brought in from other locations?
- **Training.** Does everyone know how to use all the necessary equipment and software? Do the members of your team possess all the required skills? Will training involve travel? Will you need to teach users how to implement your project when it's completed?
- **Supplies.** Will your team need anything in addition to the usual computers, software, and so on?
- **Space.** Do people have to be relocated? How much room will be required in the new space, and at what cost? Will there be ongoing maintenance expenses?
- **Research.** Will you have to buy studies or data to support this project? How much research will your team have to perform itself? At what cost?
- **Capital expenditures.** What expensive equipment or technical upgrades will be necessary to do the

job? Will any capital expenditures pay for themselves? If so, how?

- **Overhead.** What is your projected overhead expense? Is it in line with your company's standard overhead percentage?

After you've entered the figures from these standard categories into the budget, ask a trusted adviser what you forgot. Did you overlook insurance? Licensing fees? Costs for legal or accounting support?

A budget, no matter how carefully planned, is just your best guess. Expect actual numbers to deviate from original estimates, and stay as flexible as possible within your limitations of time, quality demands, and total money available.

Implementation: How to Execute the Project

It's time to put the plan into action. The implementation phase is often the most gratifying, because work actually gets done, but it can also be the most frustrating. The details can be tedious and, at times, overwhelming.

Monitor and control process and budget

Whether you have a formal project control system in place or you do your own regular check-ups, try to maintain a big-picture perspective so that you don't become engulfed by details and petty problems. Project-monitoring software systems can help you measure your progress. No single approach works for all projects. A system that's right for a large project can easily swamp a small one

with paperwork, whereas a system that works for small projects won't have enough muscle for a big one.

Respond quickly to changes in data or information as they come in, and look for early signs of problems so you can initiate corrective action. Otherwise, all you are doing is monitoring, not exercising control. Make it clear to your team that your responses to problems that arise won't do any good if you don't receive timely information. (In most cases, the weekly updates are fine.) But don't jump in to fix things too quickly—allow your team members to work out small problems on their own.

Watch the real numbers as they roll in to ensure that they are matching the budgeted amounts. Be ready to explain why extra costs are unavoidable. Common ones that sneak up on projects include increased overtime to keep things on schedule, consultant fees to resolve unforeseen problems, and fluctuations in currency exchange rates.

Report progress

Stakeholders will generally want regular updates and status reports. Consult with them to see how much information they'd like and in what format. Don't hide or downplay problems as they come up, or you can easily transform them into crises. If you keep your stakeholders informed, they may turn out to be good resources when issues do arise.

Hold weekly team meetings

When you're immersed in project details, it's easy to be diverted from critical activities to side paths that waste time. You and your team can stay focused by meeting

TIPS ON CONTROLLING PROJECT SLOWDOWNS

Try these approaches before accepting the inevitability of a delay in project completion:

- ***Renegotiate with stakeholders.*** Discuss the possibility of increasing the budget or extending the deadline.
- ***Use later steps to recover.*** Reexamine budgets and schedules to see if you can make up the time elsewhere.
- ***Narrow the project's scope.*** Can nonessential elements of the project be dropped to reduce costs and save time?
- ***Deploy more resources.*** Can you put more people or machines to work? Weigh the costs against the importance of the deadline.

once a week and periodically asking yourselves what's essential to the project's success.

Set clear agendas for your meetings. Try structuring them around production numbers, revenue goals, or whatever other metrics you've chosen to gauge performance. Many of your agenda items will naturally stem from targets the project has missed, met, or exceeded: For instance, you may need to discuss as a group whether to incorporate more travel into the project because you've

- **Accept substitution.** Can you go with a less expensive or more readily available item?
- **Seek alternative sources.** Can you get the missing item elsewhere?
- **Accept partial delivery.** Can you keep work going if you take the items that are ready now and receive the rest of the delivery later?
- **Offer incentives.** Can you provide bonuses or other enticements to facilitate on-time delivery?
- **Demand compliance.** Will insisting that people do what they said they would get the desired result? This may require support from upper management. Use this tactic selectively; be careful not to damage important relationships in pursuit of your goal.

noticed a decline in productivity at a satellite office. Or you might ask the product designers on your team to continue gathering among themselves on a biweekly basis because they've doubled their creative output since they've begun doing so. Keep the momentum going by following up each week on any to-dos and connecting them with the metrics for overall performance. Also, celebrate small successes along the way—that will rekindle the team's enthusiasm as you make progress toward your larger objectives.

Manage problems

Some problems have such far-reaching consequences that they can threaten the success of the entire project. Here are four of the biggest you'll face:

1. **Time slippage.** The most common problem in project management is falling behind schedule. Delays may be unavoidable, but you can usually at least improve the situation. The first step is to recognize that you're behind. If you've been monitoring the project's progress carefully, you'll quickly notice when schedules are being re-adjusted to accommodate delays or unexpected bottlenecks.
2. **Scope creep.** Time slippage can result from internal pressure to alter the scope of the project. When stakeholders ask for changes, it's your job to communicate clearly to them how those changes will affect cost, time, or quality.

On some projects, scope creep is an ongoing battle for the project manager. After specific milestones and budgets have been agreed upon, people may begin to see more that could be achieved. Don't get caught up in trying to solve problems that lie beyond the established scope of your project—even ones that your company urgently needs to address.

3. **Quality issues.** Quality assurance plays a major role in any project's success. Unfortunately, it sometimes gives way to deadline pressure. Don't rush essential quality checks for the sake of the

schedule. And when you examine deliverables, use the most appropriate tools—such as detailed inspections, checklists, or statistical sampling—to accept or reject them. Return or rework rejected deliverables, depending on costs.

4. **People problems.** These are often the most difficult challenges a project manager must confront. They can generally be avoided or handled early on if you communicate frequently with each team member. Weekly staff meetings may not be enough; daily interaction—with individual team members or with the team as a whole—may be necessary.

Pay attention to small signs of emerging problems, such as a team member's increased tension and irritability, loss of enthusiasm, or inability to make decisions. When you see signs like these, get to the heart of the problem quickly and deal with it. Don't let it grow from a small irritant into a disaster.

Closeout: How to Handle End Matters

Though some projects *feel* endless, they all, eventually, come to a close. How do you, as project manager, know when to make that happen? And how do you go about it?

Evaluate project performance

Before closing out your project, your team needs to meet its goals (or determine, along with key stakeholders, that those goals no longer apply). Compare your progress with the scope everyone agreed on at the beginning. That

POST-EVALUATION REPORT

Sample Analysis and Lessons Learned

Project name: *Project Phoenix* **Date:** *5/29/200X*

Present at this session: *Rafael, Phil, and Carmen*

PROJECT PHASE/TASK

Equipment acquisition

What Worked

Obtained the Web servers on time and on budget.

What Didn't Work

Logistical problems with availability of database servers—caused a delay. Expedited order that introduced additional expense.

Ways to Improve

Need to order equipment earlier.

PROJECT PHASE/TASK

Provision and implement equipment

What Worked

Two days were recovered through the efforts of Rafael and Carmen during provisioning phase.

PROJECT PHASE/TASK

Test equipment

What Worked

Testing phase was successful; during testing, a bug in the database content was discovered and corrected prior to cutover.

PROJECT PHASE/TASK

Go live with new equipment

What Worked

Smooth cutover with minimal downtime.

What Didn't Work

Some users were unaware that there would be a brief outage.

Ways to Improve

Publicize work window to user base more aggressively.

PROJECT PHASE/TASK

Test again

What Worked

Tested fine.

PROJECT PHASE/TASK

Decommission old equipment

What Worked

Decommissioned sites and erased content successfully; reabsorbed stock into inventory.

What Didn't Work

Some confusion over serial numbers and inventory, but straightened out in the end.

Ways to Improve

Check serial numbers at an earlier phase to minimize problems at the end of project.

TARGET ANALYSIS

How well did the project/team do...

In achieving goals and meeting project objectives?

Success: all goals were achieved.

At meeting deadlines and the final completion date?

Success: met our target date.

At monitoring and staying within budget?

Success: slight overrun was unavoidable.

(continued)

Overview

TARGET ANALYSIS (CONTINUED)

How well did the project/team do...

At communicating with stakeholders?

Partial success: we could have done better at communicating requirements earlier to individuals involved in the phases of the project.

RESOURCES ASSESSMENT

Were the allocated resources appropriate, sufficient, and efficiently used? (i.e., time, people, money)

Generally, the resource allocations were appropriate. The project went slightly over budget, but was not inappropriate. The people involved had the expertise necessary to carry out the highly technical phases of the project. The time resources were appropriate as the project was completed on time with no room to spare.

LESSONS LEARNED

What are the key lessons learned that can be applied to future projects?

At each phase of the project, it is crucial to anticipate the next steps and to alert groups or individuals of resource requirements as early as possible in the process. By so doing, we probably could have acquired the equipment in a more timely manner and would not have had to scramble so much in the later phases to meet our target dates.

will tell you how well the project has performed—and if there's still work to do. When you discuss your findings with your stakeholders, make sure you reach consensus with them on how “finished” the project is. Keep your scope front and center so everyone uses the same yardstick to measure success.

Close the project

The steps you take to wrap things up will depend on whether your team assumes ownership of its own deliv-

erables, hands them off to others in the organization, or must terminate the project altogether. Later in this guide, you'll learn about these three types of closeouts and some techniques you can use to make them go smoothly. If all has gone as planned with your project, then it's time for celebration. Even if, as is more likely, there are some rough spots along the way—the project takes longer than expected, the result is less than hoped for, or the costs overtake your estimates—it's still important to recognize the team's efforts and accomplishments.

Debrief with the team

No matter what the outcome, make sure you have scheduled a **post-evaluation**—time to debrief and document the process so that the full benefits of lessons learned can be shared. The post-evaluation is an opportunity for discovery, not for criticism and blame. Team members who fear they'll be punished for past problems may try to hide them rather than help find better ways of handling them in the future.

Develop a post-evaluation report

The post-evaluation report documents all information that will be useful not only for the current team and stakeholders but also for future project managers who may use it to plan their own projects. (See the sample report in this chapter.) It should include:

- **Insights from the team.** Which lessons identified during the debrief should be applied going forward?

A NOTE ABOUT PROJECT MANAGEMENT OFFICES

Large companies often have what's called a **Project Management Office** (PMO), which does some combination of the following:

- Establishes processes and templates to guide project managers in planning and execution.
- Provides coaching and assistance to business leaders, project managers, and team members trying to apply the processes and templates.
- Directly manages projects to achieve desired objectives. (PMOs in heavily matrixed organizations don't usually take on this responsibility.)

A PMO that's well run helps each project team develop an appropriate plan, conduct a reasonable risk estimate, and track progress—and it allows teams room to deviate from standard procedure when it makes sense to do so.

- **Future status.** What will happen to the project now that it has been completed? Was it part of a larger project, or was it a self-contained entity that completed its goals?
- **Status of ongoing critical tasks.** What is the current state of ongoing tasks that contain a high level of technical risk or are being performed by outside vendors or subcontractors?

- **Risk assessment.** Could or did any risks cause financial loss, project failure, or other liabilities?
- **Limitations of the audit.** Do you have any reason to question the validity of the post-evaluation? Is any information missing or suspect? Did anyone in the group seem to resist providing details?

Even after you've completed your project, you can draw on the knowledge you've gained, the skills you've learned, and the relationships you've formed. You've accumulated valuable assets. The trick is to keep using them as you begin new projects.

Chapter 2

The Cast of Characters

To meet your project objectives, you need the right people on board—and they must have a clear understanding of their roles. Here’s a breakdown of who does what.

Sponsor

The **sponsor** champions the project at the highest level in the company and gets rid of organizational obstructions. She should have the clout to communicate effectively with the CEO and key stakeholders, provide necessary resources, and approve or reject outcomes. It’s also important that she have “skin in the game”—in other words, accountability for the project’s performance.

Project Manager

The **project manager** identifies the central problem to solve and determines, with input from the sponsor and

Adapted from *Harvard Business Essentials: Managing Projects Large and Small* (product #6198BC), Harvard Business Review Press, 2004

Overview

stakeholders, how to tackle it: what the project's objectives and scope will be and which activities will deliver the desired results. He then plans and schedules tasks, oversees day-to-day execution, and monitors progress until he evaluates performance, brings the project to a close, and captures the lessons learned. The project manager receives authority from the sponsor. In many respects, he's like a traditional manager because he must:

- Provide a framework for the project's activities
- Identify needed resources
- Negotiate with higher authorities
- Recruit effective participants
- Set milestones
- Coordinate activities
- Keep the vision clear and the work on track
- Make sure everyone on the team contributes and benefits
- Mediate conflicts
- Make sure project goals are delivered on time and on budget

Team Leader

Large projects may include a **team leader**, who reports directly to the project manager. In small projects, the

project manager wears both hats. The team leader cannot act like the boss and still obtain the benefits of team-based work. Instead, he must adopt the following important roles:

- **Initiator.** Rather than tell people what to do, the leader draws attention to actions that must be taken for team goals to be met.
- **Model.** He uses his own behavior to shape others' performance—by starting meetings on time, for example, and following through on between-meeting assignments. Leaders often rely heavily on this tactic, since they typically cannot use promotions, compensation, or threats of dismissal to influence team members.
- **Negotiator.** He gets what he needs from resource providers by framing the project as mutually beneficial.
- **Listener.** He gathers from the environment signals of impending trouble, employee discontent, and opportunities for gain.
- **Coach.** He finds ways to help team members maximize their potential and achieve agreed-upon goals. Coaching opportunities are abundant within teams because the skills members eventually need are often ones they don't already have.
- **Working member.** In addition to providing direction, the leader must do a share of the work,

particularly in areas where he has special competence. Ideally, he should also take on one or two of the unpleasant or unexciting jobs that no one else wants to do.

Team Members

The heart of any project, and the true engine of its work, is its membership. That's why bringing together the right people is extremely important.

Criteria for membership

Although the skills needed to accomplish the work should govern team selection, keep in mind that you're unlikely to get all the know-how you need without providing some training. Consider the following areas of proficiency:

- **Technical skills** in a specific discipline, such as market research, finance, or software programming
- **Problem-solving skills** enabling individuals to analyze difficult situations or impasses and to craft solutions
- **Interpersonal skills**, particularly the ability to collaborate effectively with others—a critical aspect of team-based work
- **Organizational skills**, including networking, communicating well with other parts of the company, and navigating the political landscape, all of which help the team get things done and avoid conflicts with operating units and their personnel

When forming project teams, people tend to focus too narrowly on technical skills and overlook interpersonal and organizational skills, which are just as important. For instance, a brilliant programmer may thwart team progress if she is unwilling to collaborate. By contrast, an organizationally savvy person with average technical skills may be the team's most valuable member, thanks to his ability to gather resources and enlist help from operating units.

Individuals who are strong on all four skill measures are few and far between. Make the most of the talent available, and take steps to neutralize weaknesses in your group. Look for people not just with valued skills but with the potential to learn new ones. Once you identify a candidate for membership, discuss her potential contribution with the sponsor. Consult her supervisor as well, since team membership absorbs time that would otherwise go toward regular assignments.

You may have to add new members and possibly bid thanks and good-bye to others over time, as tasks and needs change. One note of caution: Team members gradually develop effective patterns for working together, making decisions, and communicating. Cohesion is undermined when too many people join or exit the team.

Contributions and benefits

Free riders—team members who obtain the benefits of membership without doing their share—cannot be tolerated. However, not every member has to put in the same amount of time. For example, a senior manager who must direct much of his attention to other duties may

still add value to the project by securing resources or by building support within the organization.

Just as each member must contribute to the team's work, each should receive clear benefits: a learning experience that will pay career dividends, for instance, or a fatter paycheck or bonus. Otherwise, individuals will not participate at a high level—at least not for long. The benefits they derive from their regular jobs will absorb their attention and make your project a secondary priority.

THE PROJECT STEERING COMMITTEE

Some projects have a **steering committee**, which consists of the sponsor and all key stakeholders. The committee's role is to approve the charter, secure resources, and adjudicate all requests to change key project elements, such as deliverables, the schedule, and the budget.

A steering committee is a good idea when different partnering companies, units, or individuals have a strong stake in the project. Because it represents these various interests, it is well positioned to sort out complicated interfirm or interdepartmental project problems. Likewise, it can be helpful if you anticipate many change requests. The downside to having a steering committee? It involves another level of oversight, and its meetings take up the time of some of the company's most expensive employees. So don't have a committee if you don't need one.

Alignment

The goals of the project team and those of its individual members must align with organizational objectives. For that reason, everyone's efforts should be coordinated through the company's rewards system. This kind of reinforcement begins at the top, with the sponsor. Since she is accountable for the team's success, some part of her compensation should be linked to the team's performance. Moving down the line, the project manager and team members should likewise see their compensation affected by team outcomes. Such alignment gets everyone moving in the same direction.

Phase 1 **Planning**

Chapter 3

A Written Charter

Every project should have a **charter** that spells out the nature and scope of the work and management's expectations for results. A charter is a concise written document containing some or all of the following:

- Name of the project's sponsor
- Project's benefits to the organization
- Brief description of the objectives
- Expected time frame
- Budget and resources available
- Project manager's authority
- Sponsor's signature

Creating a charter forces senior managers to clearly articulate what the project should do. Consider this example:

Adapted from *Harvard Business Essentials: Managing Projects Large and Small* (product #6211BC), Harvard Business Review Press, 2004

Phil was the sponsor of his company's effort to reengineer its order fulfillment and customer service operations. As an outspoken critic of these functions, he was the right person for the job. He had long been dissatisfied with the time it took to fill orders and with the company's mediocre customer service, and he thought the costs of these operations were too high. So he put Lila in charge of a project to improve them.

What sorts of cost cutting was Phil anticipating? What exactly were his complaints about the current system? What would success look like? Lila attempted to pin down Phil on those questions, but without success. He was too busy to think it all through and too eager to delegate responsibility for the project's outcome. Other company executives were also anxious to see improvements but, like Phil, had no clear ideas about the outcomes they wanted. So when Lila quizzed senior managers about the subject, they cited no specific goals. Lacking guidance, Lila and her team members developed their own goals and criteria for success.

The team pushed forward, and Lila reported progress to Phil over the course of the 10-month effort. Resources were always a problem, particularly since Lila was never sure how much money she could spend and how many people she could add to the team at key stages. Every request for resources had to be negotiated on a case-by-case basis with Phil.

The team eventually completed its tasks, meeting all of its self-declared goals. It had cut order-fulfillment time by one-third and the overall costs of fulfillment and customer service by 12%. And 90%

of customers could now get all their issues resolved with a single phone call. The team celebrated with a splendid dinner, and members went back to their regular duties.

Senior management, however, was not entirely pleased with the outcome. “You did a pretty good job,” Phil told Lila. “The improvements you’ve made are significant, but we were looking for a more sweeping reorganization and larger cost savings.” Lila was stunned and more than slightly angry. “If he wanted these things,” she thought, “why didn’t he say so?”

Situations like this are common but can be avoided with a charter that clarifies the project’s objectives, time frame, and scope.

Objectives

As Lila’s case demonstrates, project managers need more than a broad-brush description of the objectives for which they will be responsible. Ambiguous goals can lead to misunderstandings, disappointment, and expensive rework.

Take, for instance, the following statement: “Develop a website that’s capable of providing fast, accurate product information and fulfillment to our customers in a cost-effective way.” What exactly does that mean? What is “fast”? How should accuracy be defined? Is one error in 1,000 transactions acceptable? One in 10,000? To what degree must the site be cost-effective? Each of those questions should be answered in consultation with the project’s sponsor and key stakeholders.

A thoughtful charter specifies the ends, but the means should be left to the project manager and team members. Telling the team what it should do *and* how to do it would undermine the benefits of having recruited a competent group. As J. Richard Hackman writes in *Leading Teams*: “When ends are specified but means are not, team members are able to—indeed, are implicitly encouraged to—draw on their full complement of knowledge, skill, and experience in devising and executing a way of operating that is well tuned to the team’s purpose and circumstances.”

Time Frame

In addition to setting specific, measurable objectives, you’ll need to establish a time frame for achieving them. The project cannot be open-ended. In some cases, the deadline must be firm, and the scope becomes variable. Suppose a software company promises to deliver a new release every three months. The project team must make adjustments to the scope of its new releases—adding or dropping product features—to meet each deadline.

By contrast, if the project’s scope is fixed, then a logical deadline can be established only after the project manager and team break down the objectives into sets of tasks and estimate the duration of each task. Nevertheless, the charter should contain a reasonable deadline—one that can be amended as the project team learns more about what it must do.

Scope

Of course, options are always more plentiful than time and resources. One useful technique for making the

right choices is to have key stakeholders and project participants join in a brainstorming exercise to define what should be within scope and what should not.

Think of the sponsor's expectations (the ends to be sought) as part one of the charter and the project plan (the means) as part two. The project manager typically creates the plan, but it's important to get the sponsor's approval on it so you don't run into the same problems Lila faced with Phil. Ideally, it represents the best ideas from many or all team members. It's especially valuable for large, complex endeavors because it provides details about tasks, deliverables, risks, and timetables. It serves as a road map for the team.

Chapter 4

Dealing with a Project's “Fuzzy Front End”

by Loren Gary

Project management used to be about driving out uncertainty. You nailed down all the deliverables at the outset and fine-tuned your specs so implementation could be as routine as possible. Sure, there were always a few surprises, but overall you had a pretty good idea of what to expect. In many of today's complex projects, however—whether they involve new-product development, IT installation, or internal process improvement—uncertainty simply can't be eliminated.

If you were retooling a shoe company's manufacturing plant, says David Schmaltz, a Washington-based project management consultant, “perhaps only 10% of the

Adapted from *Harvard Management Update* (product #U0306C), June 2003

work would be devoted to building the new production line, but 50% would have to do with the uncertainty surrounding which shoe style will sell best in the next quarter. . . . Thus, instead of trying to cut its time to market by building production lines faster, the company focuses on building production lines that can more easily accommodate changing shoe styles.”

Studies of exceptional project managers in fast time-to-market industries show that the initial phase of a complex project, often referred to as the **fuzzy front end**, has a disproportionately large impact on end results. So it’s important to tread carefully. Resist the urge to dive right into implementation. “Defining the problem first gives you greater degrees of freedom in solving it,” says Bob Gill, president of the Product Development and Management Association, a New Jersey-based nonprofit. “Instead of assuming that your riveting equipment is operating too slowly, if you step back and say, ‘The real issue is that my cost of manufacturing the product is too high,’ you enable other possible alternatives to solving the problem—for example, redesigning the process so that the product requires fewer rivets.”

Build Your Community Early

You’ll need input from key stakeholders before you can reach a robust understanding of the nature and scope of what needs to be done. Ask people in various groups likely to be affected by your project to help explore the opportunities, advises Peter Koen, a professor at the Stevens Institute of Technology, also in New Jersey. “Asking

up front the questions about the unmet needs and the value of what you're doing can help prevent unsatisfactory results down the road—for example, bringing out products to a mature and declining market.”

As you invite others into the work of defining the problem, you'll soon realize that your project's community is much larger than you originally imagined. And it will shift over time, points out Chuck Kolstad, CEO of Antara, a high-tech firm in California. “Stakeholders who have only informational input into the early phases of the project may wield decision-making power later on.” If you make it clear in those early days that you value their insights and will incorporate them, your stakeholders will be much more inclined to give you the buy-in you need. Here's where your recruitment skills come into play: As you share your developing vision for the project with a colleague whose assistance you'll need, ask her what's in it for her. Help her find her project within yours.

Assuming a typical complex project, which lasts less than a year, “the week or two you spend at the outset just having conversations with people is far from useless, despite its appearance,” says Schmaltz. When plans slip or new requirements are added, he continues, the relationships you've built during this initial phase will “constitute a benevolent conspiracy of people committed to figuring out how to make the project work.”

Work Backward

Research about cognitive bias has shown that decision makers are unduly influenced by how they initially frame

their thoughts about a topic. Once you've defined the problem, don't focus yet on the current process or product you want to improve. Instead, says Jim Goughenhour, vice president of information technology at Sealy, "imagine what the ideal end state would look like, then work back to put in as much of it as you can given the time, budget, and political realities."

The traditional approach to one of the projects Goughenhour oversees—creating a consistent sales reporting system—would have been to revisit the purpose of all the existing reports used by sales and marketing people throughout the company and explore ways of combining them. "If we'd done that," he says, "we'd have spent most of our money making minor improvements that didn't come close to the ideal."

Be the Voice of Reason

By the end of the project's initial phase, you'll produce a general plan that sets expectations within the project community and the company at large. That's certainly no small task, but it can be an even bigger challenge to manage the expectations of your sponsor—the project champion three or four levels above you who insists that the work be completed in four weeks.

Remember your "sacred responsibility to disappoint," says Schmaltz. You know that unsettling hunch you've got, now that the fuzzy-front-end conversations are winding down, that the project will take much longer than expected and will cost a lot more, too? "Only by disappointing the project champion with this news in the beginning can you delight him in the end," Schmaltz says.

"Otherwise you end up being a slave to his unrealistic expectations, and instead of guaranteeing success, you're almost certain to produce failure."

Loren Gary was the editor of *Harvard Management Update*.

Chapter 5

Performing a Project *Premortem*

by Gary Klein

Projects fail at a spectacular rate. One reason is that too many people are reluctant to speak up about their reservations during the all-important planning phase. By making it safe for dissenters who are knowledgeable about the undertaking and worried about its weaknesses to speak up, you can improve a project's chances of success.

Research conducted in 1989 by Deborah J. Mitchell, of the Wharton School; Jay Russo, of Cornell; and Nancy Pennington, of the University of Colorado, found that prospective hindsight—imagining that an event has already occurred—increases the ability to correctly identify reasons for future outcomes by 30%. We have used prospective hindsight to devise a method called a *premortem*, which helps project teams identify risks at the outset.

Reprint #F0709A. To order, visit hbr.org.

A premortem is the hypothetical opposite of a postmortem. A postmortem in a medical setting allows health professionals and the family to learn what caused a patient's death. Everyone benefits except, of course, the patient. A premortem in a business setting comes at the beginning of a project rather than the end, so that the project can be improved rather than autopsied. Unlike a typical critiquing session, in which project team members are asked what *might* go wrong, the premortem operates on the assumption that the "patient" has died, and so asks what *did* go wrong. The team members' task is to generate plausible reasons for the project's failure.

A typical premortem begins after the team has been briefed on the plan. The leader starts the exercise by informing everyone that the project has failed spectacularly. Over the next few minutes those in the room independently write down every reason they can think of for the failure—especially the kinds of things they ordinarily wouldn't mention as potential problems, for fear of being impolitic. For example, in a session held at one *Fortune* 50-size company, an executive suggested that a billion-dollar environmental sustainability project had "failed" because interest waned when the CEO retired. Another pinned the failure on a dilution of the business case after a government agency revised its policies.

Next the leader asks each team member, starting with the project manager, to read one reason from his or her list; everyone states a different reason until all have been recorded. After the session is over, the project manager reviews the list, looking for ways to strengthen the plan.

In a session regarding a project to make state-of-the-art computer algorithms available to military air-campaign planners, a team member who had been silent during the previous lengthy kickoff meeting volunteered that one of the algorithms wouldn't easily fit on certain laptop computers being used in the field. Accordingly, the software would take hours to run when users needed quick results. Unless the team could find a workaround, he argued, the project was impractical. It turned out that the algorithm developers had already created a powerful shortcut, which they had been reluctant to mention. Their shortcut was substituted, and the project went on to be highly successful.

In a session assessing a research project in a different organization, a senior executive suggested that the project's "failure" occurred because there had been insufficient time to prepare a business case prior to an upcoming corporate review of product initiatives. During the entire 90-minute kickoff meeting, no one had even mentioned any time constraints. The project manager quickly revised the plan to take the corporate decision cycle into account.

Although many project teams engage in prelaunch risk analysis, the premortem's prospective hindsight approach offers benefits that other methods don't. Indeed, the premortem doesn't just help teams to identify potential problems early on. It also reduces the kind of damn-the-torpedoes attitude often assumed by people who are overinvested in a project. Moreover, in describing weaknesses that no one else has mentioned, team members

Planning

feel valued for their intelligence and experience, and others learn from them. The exercise also sensitizes the team to pick up early signs of trouble once the project gets under way. In the end, a premortem may be the best way to circumvent any need for a painful postmortem.

Gary Klein is a senior scientist at MacroCognition, in Yellow Springs, Ohio.

Chapter 6

Will Project Creep Cost You— or Create Value?

by Loren Gary

Allow the wrong changes to your project, and you can veer off course, run over budget, and miss key deadlines. Reject the right change, and you may fail to capitalize on a major opportunity. Hence the dilemma: How do you stay open to improvements without succumbing to “creep,” in which small tweaks add up to budget- or schedule-busting modifications? By making sure the project’s boundaries are sharply delineated and the impact of potential alterations or slippage can be quickly calculated.

The Planning Phase

A surprising number of projects get under way without a thorough attempt to define parameters. Haste is the chief

Adapted from *Harvard Management Update* (product #U0501C), January 2005

culprit here, says Dave Moffatt, who brings 40 years of industry project-management experience to his role as senior operations adviser at Harvard Business School (HBS). As you plan your project, clarify it in the following important ways:

Differentiate scope from purpose

“A project’s purpose is the general benefit it will provide to the organization,” explains Alex Walton, a Florida-based project consultant. “Its scope comprises the particular elements (or product attributes) that the project team can control and has agreed to deliver.”

For example, a project’s purpose may be to create a new electronic game that will increase a toy company’s holiday sales by 40%. But the team developing the product needs to know what features it must have and what the budget for producing it will be. The **scope statement** provides this kind of information; it spells out, in a few sentences, how the team intends to achieve success and, thus, the criteria on which it will be evaluated. Get input on scope from your key stakeholders to align their expectations with the project’s actual trajectory.

Plan in the aggregate

Defining scope isn’t enough to ensure clear boundaries, however. “Organizations also need to do aggregate project planning,” says HBS professor Steven Wheelwright, “in which they develop a strategy that lays out a pattern and rhythm for when subsequent projects will occur.” This is especially important for product development.

Lacking a schedule for future projects, a product engineer with a new idea may grow concerned that it will never be implemented and thus try to slip it into the product that's now in development—regardless of the impact on the cost and schedule.

Analysis of prior projects serves as a valuable adjunct to aggregate planning. Study the past several internal IT projects your company has undertaken. What patterns emerge? Your findings can help you identify and better prepare for potential trouble spots in IT projects on the docket for the coming years.

Set the rules

Another way to minimize creep is to require conscious discussion and approval before significant changes can occur. For instance:

- **Set up a change control board.** In highly structured project environments, such a group is responsible for “gathering information about the impact that a proposed change will have on the schedule, budget, or scope; voting on the proposed change; and then sending a request-for-change document on for the project sponsors’ signature,” says Bob Tarne, a senior consultant who specializes in IT and telecommunications projects for PM Solutions in Pennsylvania.

For an IT project affecting the sales, marketing, and logistics departments, your change control board would contain senior managers from those

units. Smaller projects—costing less than \$1 million and lasting less than 12 months—can effectively function without a formal board, says Tarne. The project manager can simply solicit the advice of key stakeholders as needed.

- **Establish thresholds for additional work.**

Michele Reed, an independent project management consultant in Washington, says, “Any change entailing more than 5% of the original cost or hours budgeted for that particular line item in the project should trigger a formal request for a scope change.”

- **Limit the number of new features.** Set guidelines for how many new major and minor features can be included in a project of a certain size. This helps the project team control the inherent fuzziness of front-end planning by forcing it to choose only the ones that are most important to customers right now.

The Execution Phase

When it's time to implement the project, break it into small components with short time frames and focus first on the tasks with the least uncertainty and variability.

For example, a software development team working on a product with four new features—the fourth of which it is not yet sure the market really wants—might choose to create the other three first because it is confident that the market wants them. The launch date for the fourth feature would be set to occur later, after the team has

gathered enough additional customer input to confirm that it is critical.

But don't wait until all subprojects are complete before checking on whether the whole project (or product) is going to be a success, says Wheelwright. He recommends an approach known as **periodic system prototyping**: "At regular intervals during the execution phase, link up all the subprojects for a system test. This helps ensure that the subprojects you've created are coming together as planned."

Should *This* Add-On Be Approved?

During construction of McArthur Hall, HBS's residence for students in executive education programs (some of which last as long as eight weeks), a scope-change decision was made to create 10 rooms so guests of attendees could visit for a few days at a time.

Reducing the number of rooms for students by 10 would have cut into the program's long-term revenue potential by reducing the available space for registrants. Better to build 10 additional rooms to accommodate guests, the project's executive sponsor argued, and to pay for the additional cost over several years out of the larger income stream that would result from keeping the number of exec-ed suites as originally planned. Careful ROI analysis, in other words, helped the project's overseers find the optimal way of dealing with the proposed add-on.

By following the recommendations outlined here for your project's planning and execution phases, you can eliminate scope changes that don't merit such analysis. If

you define clear boundaries up front, the change requests that come through are much more likely to be worth serious consideration.

When considering a scope change, make sure your stakeholders fully understand the purpose of the change. For example, have market conditions made it important to accelerate the schedule so that the product can ship earlier than originally planned? Do new industry standards, adopted since the planning phase, need to be accommodated? Or is a new technological solution required, because the one initially chosen hasn't panned out?

Next, explain how the proposed change affects everything: the scope statement and project plan, the available resources, the total cost, and the schedule. Finally, encourage stakeholders to consider what will happen if the change is not made. In these deliberations, says HBS's Moffatt, the opinions of people who represent the end users should be given the greatest weight.

As the project manager, if you're lobbying for a change, you've got to have a plan for funding it. If the future revenue generated by the add-on won't cover the cost, find other places in the project where you can save money, and focus on things you can directly control within the next 30 to 90 days in the schedule, advises Reed.

Loren Gary was the editor of *Harvard Management Update*.

Phase 2

Build-Up

Chapter 7

Setting Priorities Before Starting Your Project

by Ron Ashkenas

In a rush to demonstrate initiative and take action, new project managers often launch activities without first getting a sense of which ones are the most critical and what the sequence should be. As a result, they unwittingly slow things down.

Take this example: Plant managers at a global manufacturing company kept getting peppered with unnecessary, often redundant, data requests from corporate headquarters. To reduce this burden, the head of manufacturing asked a senior engineer to lead a project team to streamline data sharing. Upon receiving the assignment, the engineer enthusiastically (1) fired off an e-mail requesting that all heads of corporate functions nominate team members and send lists of the data they wanted from the plants; and (2) sent a note to a dozen

plant managers asking for their views about which reports to eliminate. Within hours, the new project manager was overwhelmed and confused: Some of the corporate executives balked at her requests because this was the first they'd even heard of the project; others said they needed more details about the problem before they could respond; and still others sent long lists of required reports. The plant managers, too, came back with an odd mix of questions and requests. So instead of getting off to a fast start, the project manager stirred up resistance, created extra work for herself and others, and ended up with a pile of information that wasn't very useful.

It's not as difficult as you might think to avoid a situation like this. Here are three simple steps you can take to get your priorities right before you set your project in motion:

1. Clarify the assignment

Do not start any activities until your stakeholders have blessed your charter. You can easily spin your wheels on all sorts of misguided tasks if you're not clear on the overall objectives of the project and how success will be measured (what); the business context for it (why); the resources available (who); the timing (when); and any key constraints or interdependencies (how). Though it would be nice if your boss or project sponsor had sorted out these issues *before* giving you the assignment, the reality is that most projects are not commissioned with this level of specificity and clarity—so it will be up to you to get it. In the example above, if the project manager had done this before sending e-mails, she would have

discovered that the head of manufacturing had talked only in general terms to the other corporate functional leaders about the data-overload problem—and had not told them he was starting a specific project with a defined goal and timetable.

2. *Organize your troops*

Once you've figured out what needs to be accomplished and recruited team members, get people engaged quickly so they feel ownership of the project. Ask for their reactions to the charter and their experiences regarding the issues, and treat them as partners rather than temporary subordinates. Work with them to develop a “modus operandi” for your team—how often you will meet, how you will communicate with one another, when you will review progress with the sponsor, and so on. If you don't get organized from the beginning, you'll waste time later chasing down people, coordinating calendars, and repeating key messages.

The same goes for identifying and reaching out to stakeholders. Have your team help you create a “map” of the people who will be affected in some way by the project. Sketch out how they relate to one another and to the project—and then do a political analysis of the key players. Which individuals or groups will be supportive and enthusiastic about your project? Which ones might be anxious or even resistant? Who will need to be won over or given special attention? Such analysis would have revealed to the project manager in our manufacturing example that some (or all) of the corporate functional leaders—who would have to

SAMPLE CHARTER FOR DATA-STREAMLINING PROJECT

What: Reduce corporate's requests for data from plants by 50%—and free up at least four hours per week for the plant managers and staff.

Why: The plants need to focus on increasing equipment utilization while managing a greater mix of products. This means spending more time planning and leading and less time reporting. Currently, every corporate function is asking for information from the plants—often the same information in different forms at different times.

Who: The project manager will recruit team members from plant operations, corporate finance, quality assurance, and human resources. Others may be called upon as necessary. All members will

change their way of collecting data to comply with her requests—would not be supportive of her project and may in fact be hostile. And with that insight, she might have approached them differently.

3. Pull your project plan together

You're now ready to develop a project plan, or at least a good working draft, given what you know about your objectives and your stakeholders. Conduct a brainstorming session with your team to identify all the activities that

be part-time but may have to dedicate 25% of their time to this effort.

When: The project should commence immediately. Develop an inventory of current reporting requirements within 30 days and recommendations for consolidation and streamlining within 60 days. Start eliminating redundant reports within 90 days. Complete implementation within 120 days.

How: The corporate functions must reach consensus about which common data requests can be met with existing systems and standardized reports. Data requests that are unique for particular plants should be exceptions, not the rule, and should involve minimal customization.

might be required to complete the project—including data collection, completion of “quick wins,” stakeholder meetings, and presentations. Encourage your team to be creative and not to worry at this point about timing. Write each item on a sticky note, and post the notes on the wall.

Once all the activities are up there, organize them into categories and put the groupings in sequence. Some of the categories will “run” in parallel and represent separate (but probably related) work streams.

Build-Up

The notes on the wall, taken together, represent your project plan.

Now take a hard look at that total picture. Give each team member 100 “units” to allocate to the various activities (without discussion); ask them to pay close attention to which ones *must* be done successfully to achieve the project’s objectives. Then compare the allocations and see which activities are considered critical as opposed to “nice to do.” This should lead you to the tough discussion of which ones to drop or delay so the highest priorities will get the focus and the resources they require. After you’ve completed this exercise, go back to the overall project plan and make the necessary adjustments: Remove the low-value steps, and load the high-value ones for success.

Clearly, it’s counterproductive to get things moving without prioritizing tasks. But controlling the all-too-natural impulse to jump the gun only at the beginning of your project is not sufficient. New opportunities, issues, ideas, and threats will continue to materialize, as will new steps and work streams—often without anyone understanding how these items even made their way onto the table. You’ll need to keep setting and resetting priorities to make sure you and your people are always on target. To do this, bring your team together at least once a month to step back and reassess the project plan. At each of these meetings, ask your team two questions: First, “Has anything changed that should make us rethink our priorities?” And second, “If we were just given

this assignment now, would we approach it differently?” This will help you keep your priorities clear—and your project on track.

Ron Ashkenas is a senior partner at Schaffer Consulting in Stamford, Connecticut, and the author of *Simply Effective: How to Cut Through Complexity in Your Organization and Get Things Done* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2009). He is a regular blogger for hbr.org.

Chapter 8

Boost Productivity with Time-Boxing

by **Melissa Raffoni**

Editor's note: To keep your project on schedule, you'll need team members who are focused and productive. Here are some tips for getting their calendars—and your own—under control.

Everybody needs more time—but since no one gets more than 24 hours a day, the only choice is to use those hours more effectively. One proven technique, time-boxing, involves just three steps.

First, list everything you and your team members want to accomplish in a given week, month, or quarter. Include project goals and the tasks necessary to achieve them. It may help to group activities by job function, such as strategy, business development, daily operations,

Adapted from *Harvard Management Update* (product #U99120), December 1999

Build-Up

and people management. With that kind of framework, you can see whether the team is spending its time in the right places.

Second, estimate how much time each item will require. Think carefully about the steps for completing the tasks. This is the part that “keeps me honest,” says Beran Peter, CEO of Instruction Set, an educational consulting company in Massachusetts. “If I realize I’m not going to hit my estimate, I’m able to assess why and evaluate how I might make a change to get back on track.”

Third, block off the appropriate amount of time for each item. If you think writing a business plan will take 32 hours, try setting aside four hours for every Tuesday and Thursday over the next four weeks. The challenge, of course, is prioritizing and fitting the time in where it makes sense. Don’t forget to allow some leeway. Change is inevitable, and you may need to add tasks midstream.

Once you get started on time-boxing, you’ll find it has several benefits:

- It forces you to think through project goals and figure out how much time you really need to make them happen.
- It provides a framework for setting expectations and boundaries. If a team member’s calendar is full, she’ll have to say no to extra requests—or you’ll have to work with her to consciously reassess priorities.
- It improves your ability to estimate time demands.

- It enables you to assess—and pull the plug on—unproductive initiatives that suck up too much time.

Your team will feel better about the work it's doing. Everyone will be more focused. You'll all accomplish more. And—no small matter—people will avoid burnout from taking on more than they can handle.

Chapter 9

Scheduling the Work

Now that you've used the Work Breakdown Structure to identify and define your project's tasks and estimate how long each will take, you're ready to put them in sequence. That involves three steps:

- Examining relationships between tasks
- Creating a draft schedule
- Optimizing the schedule

Examining Relationships Between Tasks

Task relationships dictate the order of activities in a project. Suppose ABC Auto Company plans to introduce a new passenger car and has asked a team to design and test it. The team needs to build and test both external

Adapted from *Harvard Business Essentials: Managing Projects Large and Small* (product #6242BC), Harvard Business Review Press, 2004, and *Pocket Mentor: Managing Projects* (product #1878), Harvard Business Review Press, 2006

Build-Up

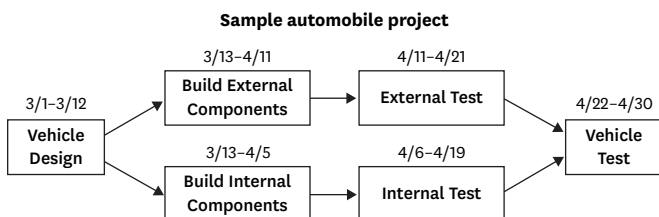
and internal components before it can test the whole car. Because of those dependencies, the project's tasks must be scheduled in this sequence: (1) design the vehicle, (2) build and test both external and internal components, and (3) test the vehicle built from those components. (See figure 1.)

Component building and testing, however, can simultaneously follow parallel tracks—one for external components, another for internal ones. Why? Because those two sets of build-and-test activities depend on vehicle design but not on each other. By recognizing opportunities to perform different activities in parallel, as in this example, you can reduce the amount of time your overall project takes.

Once you've evaluated the relationships between tasks, brainstorm with your team to come up with a rough sequence that makes sense in light of the dependencies you've identified.

FIGURE 1

Project network diagram: task relationships



Source: Harvard ManageMentor® on Project Management (Boston: Harvard Business Publishing, 2002). Used with permission.

Creating a Draft Schedule

At this point, you're ready to create a draft schedule, which involves assigning a deliverable to each task (for instance, "build prototype for market testing"); setting realistic due dates; identifying bottlenecks so you can eliminate them, develop workarounds, or add time to accommodate them; and establishing a protocol for updating or revising the schedule. In your draft schedule, indicate start and end dates for all activities and recognize task relationships. Remember, this is just your first stab at scheduling—you'll make adjustments later, after the team has had a chance to review it.

Project managers rely on several tools for scheduling their teams' work. Here are a few useful ones to have at your disposal.

The Critical Path Method

As its name suggests, the **Critical Path Method (CPM)** helps you identify which tasks are critical—those that must be completed on time for the project to meet its deadlines—so you can allocate resources efficiently. Project managers often use CPM to plot the sequence of activities.

Consider a project involving six tasks with the following requirements and time expectations:

Activity	Requirement	Time to Complete
A		5 days
B		3 days

(continued)

Build-Up

Activity	Requirement	Time to Complete
C	A and B completed	4 days
D	B completed	7 days
E	A completed	6 days
F	C completed	4 days

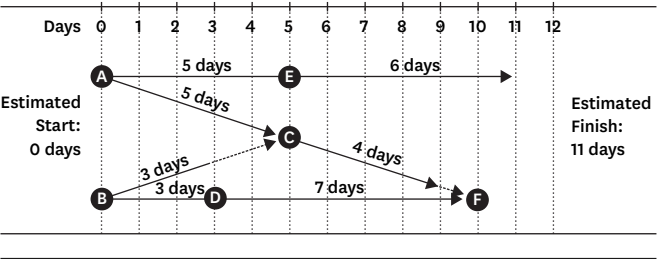
You can diagram the critical path as shown in figure 2.

This chart tells you that at the earliest, you can complete the project in 11 days. It also shows that activities A and E are critical to your overall deadline. Given this information, you may want to readjust your resources and put more toward these tasks.

Let’s revisit the ABC Auto Company project and the accompanying **network diagram**, discussed earlier. The diagram not only illustrates dependencies between tasks but also reveals the critical path: (1) vehicle design, (2) build external components, (3) external test, and (4) vehicle test. Why does this progression of tasks define the critical path? Because it’s the longest path in the diagram. The other path—which passes through (1) build

FIGURE 2

Critical Path Method



internal components and (2) internal test—is shorter by two days. Team members working on those activities could spend two extra days on them and still not throw the vehicle test off schedule. And they wouldn't shorten the overall schedule if they completed their work on non-critical-path activities ahead of time. The reason? **Tasks on the critical path determine total project duration.**

Gantt chart

If all you need is a way to show when activities should begin and when they should end, try making a **Gantt chart**. You can easily create one with spreadsheet or project-management software. (See figure 3.)

This is a popular scheduling tool because it's simple and it allows people to see the project at a glance. But it does not spell out relationships between tasks, as CPM does, so you may want to make note of dependencies inside the time blocks.

PERT charts

Some project managers use **Performance Evaluation and Review Technique (PERT)** as an alternative to the Gantt method for scheduling. Because it illustrates the critical path (it's essentially a network diagram) and lays out the project milestones, it's a handy tool for communicating the big picture to your team members. (See figure 4.) A PERT chart may have many parallel or interconnecting networks of tasks, so periodic reviews are essential for complex projects. As you're tracking your project's progress later on, you may need to come back and revise the chart. For example, if the time between dependent tasks exceeds your estimates, and those

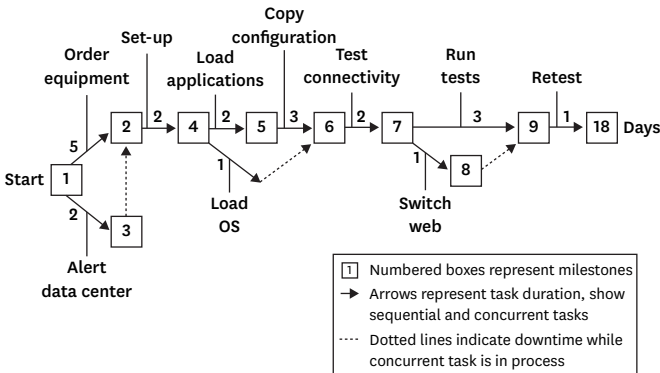
FIGURE 3

Gantt chart

Activities	4/8-4/14	4/15-4/21	4/22-4/28	4/29-5/5	5/6-5/12	5/13-5/19	5/20-5/26
Install new servers							
Obtain equipment							
Implement equipment							
Test equipment							
Go live with new equipment							
Repeat testing							
Decommission old equipment							
Evaluate process							

Source: Harvard ManageMentor® on Project Management (Boston: Harvard Business Publishing, 2002), 26. Used with permission.

FIGURE 4

PERT chart

Source: Harvard ManageMentor® on Project Management (Boston: Harvard Business Publishing, 2002), 25. Used with permission.

tasks are on the critical path, you'll have to make up for lost time elsewhere in the schedule to avoid missing the project's overall deadline.

Which scheduling tools are best for your purposes? Whichever ones fit how you like to work, allow you to keep all team members informed, and remind people that they are part of a larger effort.

Optimizing the Schedule

After you've created the draft schedule, work with your team to improve it. Have the group help you look for:

- **Errors.** Are all time estimates realistic? Pay particular attention to tasks on the critical path

because if any of these cannot be completed on time, the entire schedule will be off. Also, review the relationships between tasks. Does your schedule reflect the fact that some tasks can't start until others are completed?

- **Oversights.** Have any tasks been left out? Have you allowed time for training?
- **Overcommitments.** In reviewing the schedule, you may discover that some employees would have to work 10 to 12 hours per day for months on end to complete the tasks assigned to them, for instance, or that a piece of equipment is booked to deliver above and beyond its capacity. If you find such problems, redistribute the load.
- **Bottlenecks.** Any task that causes the work feeding it to pile up must be identified and dealt with. Think of an auto assembly line that stops periodically because the people who install the seats cannot keep up with the pace of the line. The usual way to handle this problem is to speed up the work process used in that task or add resources to it (for example, more people or better machinery).
- **Imbalances in the workload.** Are some team members being asked to do more than their share while others do very little? Rebalancing the load could reduce the overall schedule.
- **Slack time that can be filled.** You may be able to shorten the whole schedule by shifting resources

away from noncritical-path activities. For example, if you have four people working on a noncritical task that has four to five days of slack time, shift some or all of those people to a critical task for several days.

Even if you're using project-planning software to keep track of tasks and times, do this kind of thorough reality check with your team members. Any software you consider buying should make it easy to develop and change charts, calculate critical paths, produce schedules and budgets, factor in weekends and holidays, create different scenarios for contingency planning, and check for overscheduling of individuals and groups.

Chapter 10

HBR Case Study: A Rush to Failure?

by Tom Cross

Editor's note: HBR's case studies present fictionalized accounts of actual dilemmas faced by leaders, and offer solutions from experts.

“There is absolutely no reason why the contractors shouldn't be able to give us rapid product development and flawless products—speed and quality both,” David MacDonagle said as he tried to light a cigarette. The warm wind, portending rain, kept blowing out his matches. Finally he gave up and slipped the cigarette back in his pocket.

MacDonagle, the head of the Canadian Aeronautics Administration, was nervous. Everyone at CAA headquarters was nervous. Very shortly, the project that many of them had devoted the past four years to would have its first real-world test, 350 kilometers above the earth.

Reprint #R1104N. Reprint Case only #R1104X. Reprint Commentary only #R1104Z

Feeling cooped up in the executive offices and oppressed by the presence of the media, MacDonagle had gone outside to breathe some air—actually, some tobacco smoke—and had invited the sharp young program manager Samantha Van Sant to join him.

Van Sant, a former Canadian army major, had a lot of skin in the project too. Since 2006 she'd been managing the two contractors the CAA had commissioned to build the \$1.2 billion set of giant robotic arms known as Retractable Extended-Arms Compatible Holder, or REACH, for the International Space Station.

"So how do you deal with nerves?" MacDonagle asked.

"I usually go out for a run," Van Sant said, looking down the road that led from CAA headquarters through the cornfields, on which she'd logged many miles.

They turned to look back at the agency's buildings, which despite their grandeur looked small in the empty Quebec landscape. The sight reminded Van Sant of one of MacDonagle's catchphrases: "We are a small spacefaring nation. . . ."

Canada was indeed a small player in space compared with the U.S., Russia, Europe, and Japan. Always at risk of being marginalized, the CAA had done everything possible to get the REACH contractors, Hollenbeck Aircraft and Eskina Software Systems, to complete the first phase of the project in time to get it to the space station this year, when the orbiting lab would officially be complete. And, amazingly, they had made the deadline—and come in on budget. REACH was now attached to the station, though there was still much more to come, including an

even more sophisticated set of “hands” that would fit on the ends of the robotic arms for extremely delicate work. The additions were to continue for two more years.

The contractors had been great about speed; the problem was quality. Glitches with the software, motors, and circuits had kept turning up. The fact was, not a single test in four years had gone flawlessly. “Yeah, yeah, we can fix that,” the contractors’ reps always said, dismissing the CAA’s concerns. “Hey, this is life in the fast lane,” a rep told Van Sant after one of REACH’s arms had failed to retract on command. “Remember, we told you that the compressed schedule would increase the risk.”

The contract that she managed called for parallel development, meaning that the project’s phases—R&D, prototyping, testing, production, and quality control—overlapped, with each one beginning while the previous one was as much as 50% incomplete. That was sacrilege in some aerospace circles. But owing to the space station’s construction deadline and the everpresent threat of cuts to the CAA’s budget, the agency was aiming to do a decade’s worth of work in six years. Computer simulations had to take the place of some real-world testing. Component quality control was less thorough. Because of all the unknowns in the project, the CAA had agreed to a cost-plus-fixed-fee contract, under which the contractors were paid a specified amount over their costs for labor, materials, and overhead.

MacDonagle’s insistence on a rapid approach to development had been one of the main reasons Van Sant had been hired as a program manager. During her years in

the army, she had established a bulletproof reputation for being aggressive and goal oriented. She and MacDonagle saw eye-to-eye. She knew speed was critical.

“We’d better go, I guess,” MacDonagle said. “The media hounds are waiting. I told them I’d do quickie interviews once I got back. I know what they’ll ask me: Is REACH going to work this time?” As they headed toward the building, the rain started. He looked at Van Sant. “So is it?”

Trouble in the Air

Red marker in hand, MacDonagle held forth before a group of reporters, asking whether they were aware that 50 years ago, the U.S. had blasted half a billion inch-long copper needles into orbit to reflect radio waves and thereby facilitate communications. Those needles were still floating around, and some had torn through one of the space station’s solar collectors. “The solar arrays are the big bird’s big red wings,” he said, turning to the whiteboard and drawing the collectors.

He drew a gash in one of them. “A hole here means less electricity,” he said, tapping the board. “Ever since the solar array got that hole from those flying needles, the space station has been operating on less power. Fixing it is tricky, because it’s very far from the modules where the astronauts work and because of the risk of electrocution. Once an array is in place, you can’t turn it off. It keeps generating power from sunlight. So if a spacewalker were to try to go out there and fix it, he’d be liable to get 100 volts of direct current through his body. That’s where REACH comes in.”

He took a moment to draw the Canadian creation, then stepped back to admire his sketch. The machine's two long arms stretched out toward the solar array in a nurturing embrace.

"Fixing solar arrays isn't what REACH was designed for," MacDonagle said. "It's meant to do the mundane work of replacing battery units on the exterior of the space station. But since REACH is up there, it's being pressed into service for the repair. It will stitch together the solar array while the astronauts control it from the safety of their module." He put the cap back on the marker and began fielding questions.

As Van Sant watched, someone tapped her on the arm. It was Alfred Siroy, the head of a CAA panel that had been trying to find out why there were so many quality issues with equipment from the Hollenbeck-Eskina venture.

"How long before they deploy it?" he asked.

"Soon—later—I'm not sure," she said.

Siroy always made Van Sant defensive. He'd made no secret of his disapproval of the way the REACH program was being managed, and of the parallel approach in particular. She knew that this viewpoint would figure in his forthcoming report. Fortunately, he was an overly meticulous writer, so the draft was taking forever. She asked him how the writing was going.

"Slow," he said, shaking his head. "But we do have a title: 'The Rush to Failure.'"

This gave her a start. "What failure?" she asked. "REACH is about to perform a critical repair task."

He shot her a skeptical look. "Rapid ramp-up was a laudable goal," he said. "But you have to give a contractor

adequate time for QA. And you have to have a contract that gets the incentives right.”

He continued: “We did an analysis. Your compressed schedule forces Hollenbeck-Eskina to cut corners, resulting in prototypes that fail. Substituting computer simulations for rigorous ground testing is a recipe for disaster. There isn’t an electronic data management system that would allow the contractors and the CAA to access current test data for analysis. The prototypes aren’t equipped with the instruments that would provide adequate test data. And the contractors have no incentive to push back: The cost-plus contract puts all the risk on the CAA. The agency and the contractors have different goals and objectives.”

Van Sant couldn’t disagree about the contract; its weaknesses had become increasingly evident to her. But if speed was the priority, they were unavoidable. “The contract language is ancient history,” she said dismissively.

“You can rewrite history,” Siroy said. “Any contract can be altered as long as both sides agree—you know that.”

Suddenly, Van Sant saw, one of the staff members who’d been monitoring the goings-on at the space station began ushering MacDonagle away from the reporters, who, smelling blood, tried to follow. MacDonagle caught her eye, and Van Sant didn’t like the look she saw on his face. Something bad had happened.

She slipped inside the communications room, where journalists weren’t allowed, just before the door was shut. Over the speakers she could hear the astronauts at the space station talking about the power switching unit

and using the word “failure.” She heard someone say, “We have to go to Plan B.”

REACH was probably experiencing the same problem that had come up during its last on-ground test. A system failure notification had gone off, but the contractors had dismissed it as a “reporting error,” meaning it hadn’t reflected a true mechanical breakdown. Still, no one wanted to deploy REACH while red lights were flashing. There was too great a risk that the robotic arms would fail at a critical moment.

“What’s Plan B?” Van Sant asked MacDonagle.

“I don’t know,” he said quietly, “but whatever it is, it won’t involve anything that came from us. REACH is Canada’s only contribution to the space station.”

Support from on High

“We’ve got video!” someone shouted, and there on the screens were multiple images of a man in a space suit dangling at the end of a loading crane.

It was well past midnight, but the reporters were still at CAA headquarters. They gathered around the screens. MacDonagle and Van Sant had long since given up trying to avoid them and were mingling with them as the repair attempt unfolded high above West Africa.

Everyone watched in silence as the crane, jury-rigged for the purpose, carried a spacewalker toward the space station’s torn solar array. REACH couldn’t even be seen—it was docked somewhere else.

“Harris Webb,” MacDonagle said ruefully as he watched the figure in the shiny suit. “It’s so fitting.” Years

ago, MacDonagle and Webb had been pilots on the same shuttle mission, and Webb, though much younger, had been chosen to lead it. A U.S. physician, mountaineer, author, pilot, and gourmet cook, as well as an astronaut, he was the ultimate go-to guy, brilliant and fearless—almost to the point of being foolhardy.

The reporters were excitedly discussing his stunt. Because REACH had failed, Webb was going out on the end of the crane to repair the array by hand. In one gloved hand he held what looked like an oversized hockey stick wrapped in insulation, so that he could stop himself from bumping into the arrays. In the other he carried several two-meter lengths of plastic cable that would be used to “stitch” the pliable solar array back together.

“Wow,” a reporter gasped as Webb, reaching awkwardly, began threading one of the cables through the openings in the array.

“Cowboy,” MacDonagle hissed under his breath. He put his hands on his head and looked at the ceiling.

Van Sant spotted Charlie Truss, one of the reps from Hollenbeck, sitting in a corner, his tie loose. He looked miserable. But she didn’t feel pity for him—just annoyance. She went over to him.

“Whatever happens up there tonight,” she said, “things are going to change down here. Our only way forward from this fiasco is to show that we’ve taken concrete steps to improve QA and finally get some positive results.”

“I’m all for that,” Truss said. “But anything you do to increase QA is going to slow things down. Once that happens, the costs start increasing and you become vulnerable to budget cuts. If we turn our existing contract into

a traditional aerospace contract with all those sequential steps and inevitable delays, we might as well say good-bye to the improvements to REACH that are in the pipeline.”

“If speed has to be sacrificed for a more reliable REACH, then so be it,” Van Sant said. “The contract has major flaws. You’re accountable for speed but not performance. We have to share the risk. We need a contract with performance-based incentives and penalties so that we can balance speed, quality, and results. Our goal is reliable components and systems that perform—and that should be your goal, too. We need to work as a unified team willing to push back on each other to get results.”

Behind her the reporters gasped. She rushed to a screen and was relieved to see only that Webb, as he had finished his repair, had accidentally let go of a set of pliers, which was now drifting off into space.

But then Webb did something incredible. He turned to his Earth audience and began making a statement defending the failed REACH. “Everyone’s going to blame REACH, but they shouldn’t,” he said. “It’s a great piece of technology. I want to commend David MacDonagle and the CAA for overcoming a lot of technical obstacles in a big hurry and getting REACH up here on time. It’s going to be a vital part of our operations. One little power-unit problem doesn’t mean anything. Complex machines fail—that’s just the way it is. We’ll fix it, just like we fixed the solar array. I understand that the CAA has a great upgrade coming in the next couple of months—a new set of robot hands that are so nimble they can peel a hard-boiled egg. I say, Get it ready and shoot it up here. We’ll

Build-Up

start using it right away. I've got a few eggs that need peeling."

Van Sant was stunned, and she could see that Truss was, too. Then, giving her a small smile, he asked: "What were you saying about the contract?"

Tom Cross is a senior director in executive education at the University of Virginia's Darden School of Business, where he develops executive-learning programs for Department of Defense leaders. Previously he was a senior executive at such firms as KFC and Office Depot.

Should Van Sant push for a renegotiated contract for REACH?

See commentaries that follow.

Commentary #1

by Gary L. Moe

Whenever you hear about large, complex, costly government-sponsored tech initiatives that fail to meet expectations, the blame almost always falls on the "hurry up" schedule. If only the public agency hadn't pushed the contractors so hard, if only the developers had been given more time to refine the design, if only a few more months or years had been built into the production schedule, the technology would have worked perfectly. But it's not true.

Government sponsors can give contractors all the time and money in the world to complete a detailed requirements analysis and perfect a project design, and the

finished product still probably won't work flawlessly. So-called big-bang design, in which developers labor mightily to get every last detail correct, is incapable of yielding a fully functioning, error-free product, because human beings, no matter how brilliant they are, cannot foresee all the issues that might arise in a complex technology.

What's needed instead is an iterative development process, whereby you build a prototype or even a fully fledged product and then put it out there, test it, and learn from its weaknesses, most of which you couldn't have seen on the drawing board or in a 3-D simulation. In the next iteration, you enhance the product. Then you run another round and another and another until finally you have something that works. The more complex a technology is, the more iterative the development needs to be.

This is how products are developed in the nongovernment sector. Take the auto industry. Cars are so complex that a manufacturer will put a model through a number of builds and a lot of testing before starting full production. In software, this process is called *agile development*. Developers write code for a week, test it to find out how to improve it, and then write some more code.

An interactive approach also works best when it comes to organizational change. No matter how hard you work on designing a reorganization, you will get it only 60% right, so you have to keep working at it, and finally you'll get to 90% right. (It never gets any better than that.)

Iterative development can work both for big long-term projects and for big one-offs, which is what many components of the International Space Station are. You

break the development into pieces and apply the build-test, build-test method to the parts.

So why do government organizations, especially those that are defense- or space-related, favor the big-bang approach? There are a number of reasons, some involving the way procurement is handled. But the root of the problem is that iterative development entails experimentation, and experimentation entails failure. Government agencies don't like failure because it ruins political careers. So they try to avoid experimentation. But usually what they end up with is an even bigger failure—and no clue about why it happened.

My advice for Samantha Van Sant, then, is to restructure the contract to break further development of REACH into small chunks and require the contractors to practice iterative improvement, instead of striving for full initial functionality. Cutting down on the functionality delivered in each phase might help too, since 80% of cost and schedule overruns are usually due to the last 10% to 20% of requested functionality.

Gary L. Moe is a director in McKinsey's Business Technology Office and is based in Silicon Valley.

Commentary #2

by Tom Quinly

In the world of cutting-edge product development, the struggle between speed and quality is over. Speed has won—decisively. In today's highly competitive global

markets, getting innovations out quickly can mean the difference between success and failure. But it's also a given that the quality must be high. Quality has become table stakes.

A lot of research has been published on the holy grail of lightning-speed development. Concurrent engineering programs, agile teams, risk mitigation programs, spiral development, outsourcing, harmonizing tools, and advanced simulation and modeling tools all can help you attain it, but your own people, processes, and market demands will determine the right recipe. What works best for us is forming small, seasoned, highly talented teams; being clear about time-to-market expectations; making sure developers have the right set of tools; and keeping our technical teams engaged, customer focused, and happy.

Bureaucracy, however, is an innovation killer. It's inevitable that as a business grows, things that don't add value creep into processes. With each slipup there's a tendency to add another process check. In isolation, each makes perfect sense, but in the aggregate, innovation is choked, and the team can't move nimbly.

I recall an experience early in my career, when a major development project had gone poorly. At an executive review, I was prepared to explain what had happened, what we'd learned, and what we'd done to stop the bleeding. Our CEO looked around at the others in attendance and said that he was disappointed—not in the group that had failed (mine), but in the other groups, because they *hadn't* failed. They weren't being as aggressive as he expected. That story lives on in the lore of the company, and it says a lot about our culture.

It's not that we encourage failure—we use it as a tool. Complex development programs rarely (if ever) come out of the gate perfectly; something unanticipated often happens. A lot can be learned from reviewing failures and looking at processes, expectations, people, and tools. Were our requirements too ambitious or ill defined? Did we not map the highest-risk areas and have well-designed mitigation plans? This relentless focus on learning improves predictability, reduces cycle time, and helps us get a high-quality offering to market ahead of the competition.

That's why I would advise Van Sant to give up the dinosaur perspective that speed means having to sacrifice quality. She should engage the entire team in examining the failures and exploring ways to achieve quality without upsetting the schedule. If REACH has few qualified alternative partners, then disrupting a long-standing contract with a highly experienced and specialized partner would be counterproductive. If Hollenbeck-Eskina is the best option, I would avoid having to reopen the contract and potentially lose the partner's deep project knowledge. However, if Hollenbeck-Eskina was not totally engaged and forthcoming in helping understand and correct the failures, it may be time to involve other potential partners or to stand firm on a contract renegotiation.

Tom Quinly is president of the motion control segment at Curtiss-Wright Controls, based in Charlotte, North Carolina, which develops products for aerospace, defense, and industrial markets.

Chapter 11

Getting Your Project Off on the Right Foot

With your project team formed, your charter delivered, and the team's tasks scheduled, you've still got a few critical matters to take care of before work commences. First, your project needs a **launch**—a special event that marks its official beginning. Second, you must set up activities and provide tools that foster team building. And third, you must institute behavioral norms that make collaborative work possible and communicate them to all participants.

Why Launch Meetings Matter

The launch represents the very first project milestone. If conducted properly, it has substantial symbolic value.

The best way to kick off a project is through an all-team meeting, one with appropriate levels of gravity and

Adapted from *Harvard Business Essentials: Managing Projects Large and Small* (product #6280BC), Harvard Business Review Press, 2004

fanfare. You'll have already held many planning sessions with key individuals—but those informal get-togethers are no substitute for a face-to-face meeting attended by all team members, the sponsor, your stakeholders, and, if appropriate, the organization's highest-ranking official.

Physical presence at this meeting has great psychological significance, particularly for geographically dispersed teams, whose members may have few future opportunities to convene as a group. Being together at the beginning of their long journey and getting to know one another on a personal level will build commitment and bolster participants' sense that this team and project are important. If certain people cannot attend the launch meeting because of their geographic location, they should participate virtually, through videoconferencing or, at the very least, speakerphone.

The sponsor's presence and demeanor at the launch speak volumes about the importance—or unimportance—asccribed to the project's mission. As Jon Katzenbach and Douglas Smith write in "The Discipline of Teams" (HBR March–April 1993):

When potential teams first gather, everyone monitors the signals given by others to confirm, suspend, or dispel assumptions and concerns. They pay particular attention to those in authority: the team leader and any executives who set up, oversee, or otherwise influence the team. And, as always, what such leaders do is more important than what they say. If a senior executive leaves the team kickoff to take a phone call ten minutes

after the session has begun and he never returns, people get the message.

Here are your main tasks for the launch:

- **Welcome everyone aboard.** Acknowledge and thank all those who will contribute to the project. Mention each person by name. Many attendees will be core team members, and others will be peripheral members who participate for a limited time or in a limited way. But all are members.
- **Ask your sponsor to say a few words.** Have him articulate *why* the project's work is important and *how* its goals are aligned with larger organizational objectives. Otherwise, people won't see consequences for themselves and the company, and they won't make their best effort.
- **Make introductions.** Unless people are already familiar with one another, they probably won't know who has which skills. If the group isn't too large, ask participants to introduce themselves, to say something about their background and expertise, and to explain what they hope to contribute to and get from the project.
- **Share the charter.** Explain the goals, deliverables, and timetables you've documented.
- **Seek consensus.** Get everyone to agree on what the charter means.

- **Describe the resources available.** Although you'll certainly want to stoke the team's enthusiasm at the launch, it's equally important to set realistic expectations about the amount of support (both workers and budget) you'll have.
- **Describe incentives.** What will members receive, beyond their normal compensation, if the team meets or exceeds its goals?

Though participants will develop a sense of belonging and common goals only with time and through shared experiences, you'll have planted the seeds at the launch meeting. People should now begin to think of themselves as members of a real team.

Provide Activities and Tools for Working Together

Giving people collective goals and handing out free T-shirts with a team logo creates a team in name only. Project teams gel through joint work, idea sharing, and give-and-take in decision making and information exchange.

A project manager can facilitate that kind of collaboration through regularly scheduled meetings, communication tools such as project newsletters and websites, and the physical colocation of team members. Off-site social events may also be valuable, since they can help groups cohere. You'll want to encourage people to forge the bonds of trust and friendship that make team-based work stimulating and productive.

Establish Norms of Behavior

It takes time to build an effective project team. Individuals come to the effort with personal agendas. Some may view their new teammates as competitors for promotions, recognition, and rewards. Others may harbor grudges against one or more of those with whom they have been thrown together. And there's always a member or two lacking in social skills.

Such problems can undermine your project if they're not contained or neutralized. One of the best ways to manage them is to set up unambiguous norms of behavior that apply equally to all. As Jon Katzenbach and Douglas Smith point out in *The Wisdom of Teams*, the most critical rules pertain to:

- **Attendance.** The team cannot make decisions and accomplish its work if members fail to show up for meetings or joint work sessions. If you, the leader, are chronically late or absent, people will follow your example.
- **Interruptions.** Turn cell phones off during meetings and work sessions. Also, make it clear that people are not to interrupt others. Everyone has a right to speak.
- **Sacred cows.** Agree that no issues will be off-limits. For example, if a process-reengineering team knows that a change will upset a particular executive, its members should not be reluctant to discuss it.

Build-Up

- **Disagreements.** Team players are bound to come up with competing solutions as they tackle problems. Encourage them to vent disagreements in constructive ways.
- **Confidentiality.** Some team issues may be sensitive. Members will discuss them freely only if what is said within the team stays within the team.
- **Action orientation.** The purpose of teams is not to meet and discuss. It's to act and produce results. Make that clear from the beginning.

What behavioral norms should your group observe? That depends on the purpose of the group and the personalities of its members. But the basics include mutual respect, a commitment to active listening, and an understanding of how to voice concerns and handle conflict.

To guarantee the free flow of ideas, some groups may want to adopt specific guidelines that support calculated risk taking, for instance, or spell out procedures for acknowledging and handling failure. Whatever norms your group follows, make sure all members have a hand in establishing them—and that everyone agrees to abide by them. Members' participation and acceptance will head off many future problems.

Chapter 12

The Discipline of Teams

*A summary of the full-length HBR article by **Jon R. Katzenbach** and **Douglas K. Smith**, highlighting key ideas.*

THE IDEA IN BRIEF

The word *team* gets bandied about so loosely that many managers are oblivious to its real meaning—or its true potential. With a run-of-the-mill working group, performance is a function of what the members do as individuals. A team's performance, by contrast, calls for both individual and mutual accountability.

Though it may not seem like anything special, mutual accountability can lead to astonishing results. It enables a team to achieve performance levels that are far greater than the individual bests of the team's members.

Excerpted from Harvard Business Review, July–August 2005 (republished from 1993), Reprint #R0507P. To buy the full-length article, visit www.hbr.org.

To achieve these benefits, team members must do more than listen, respond constructively, and provide support to one another. In addition to sharing these team-building values, they must share an essential *discipline*.

THE IDEA IN PRACTICE

A team's essential discipline comprises five characteristics:

1. **A meaningful common purpose that the team has helped shape.** Most teams are responding to an initial mandate from outside the team. But to be successful, the team must “own” this purpose, develop its own spin on it.
2. **Specific performance goals that flow from the common purpose.** For example, getting a new product to market in less than half the normal time. Compelling goals inspire and challenge a team, give it a sense of urgency. They also have a leveling effect, requiring members to focus on the collective effort necessary rather than any differences in title or status.
3. **A mix of complementary skills.** These include technical or functional expertise, problem-solving and decision-making skills, and interpersonal skills. Successful teams rarely have all the needed skills at the outset—they develop them as they learn what the challenge requires.

4. **A strong commitment to how the work gets done.** Teams must agree on who will do what jobs, how schedules will be established and honored, and how decisions will be made and modified. On a genuine team, each member does equivalent amounts of real work; all members, the leader included, contribute in concrete ways to the team's collective work-products.
5. **Mutual accountability.** Trust and commitment cannot be coerced. The process of agreeing upon appropriate goals serves as the crucible in which members forge their accountability to each other—not just to the leader.

Once the essential discipline has been established, a team is free to concentrate on the critical challenges it faces:

- For a team whose purpose is to make recommendations, that means making a fast and constructive start and providing a clean handoff to those who will implement the recommendations.
- For a team that makes or does things, it's keeping the specific performance goals in sharp focus.
- For a team that runs things, the primary task is distinguishing the challenges that require a real team approach from those that don't.

If a task doesn't demand joint work-products, a working group can be the more effective option. Team opportunities are usually those in which hierarchy or organizational

boundaries inhibit the skills and perspectives needed for optimal results. Little wonder, then, that teams have become the primary units of productivity in high-performance organizations.

Jon R. Katzenbach is a senior partner at Booz & Company and a former director of McKinsey & Company. **Douglas K. Smith** is an organizational consultant and a former partner at McKinsey & Company.

Phase 3 **Implementation**

Chapter 13

Effective Project Meetings

Run your meetings well, and you'll infuse your project with energy, momentum, and direction. How do you make them productive? Follow these simple guidelines.

Setting the Stage for the Meeting

- Make sure a meeting is even necessary. If you can accomplish your goal efficiently without calling one (via e-mail, for example), do so—and avoid eating up everyone's time.
- Clarify the meeting's objective. If it is to make a decision, explain that and give participants the time and materials needed to prepare.
- Sound out key participants on important agenda items ahead of time. What you discover may suggest that alterations are in order.

Adapted from *Harvard Business Essentials: Managing Projects Large and Small* (product #6198BC), Harvard Business Review Press, 2004, and Harvard ManageMentor, an online product of Harvard Business Publishing

Implementation

- Invite only people who have something to contribute or who can learn from the discussion.
- Provide an agenda in advance that clearly supports the objective.
- Insist that people get up to speed on the issues before they arrive, bring relevant materials with them, and show up ready to contribute to the discussion.

Running the Meeting

- Restate the meeting's purpose. This will sharpen the group's focus.
- Let everyone have a say. If one or two individuals are dominating the conversation or if certain attendees are shy about leaping in, say, "Thanks for those ideas, Phil. What are your thoughts about this problem, Charlotte?"
- Keep the discussion centered on the key issues.
- End with confirmation and an action plan that includes a clear time frame: "OK, we've decided to hire DataWhack to install the new servers. And, as agreed, I will obtain the purchase order today, Bill will phone the salesperson later this week and set up the schedule, and Janet will begin looking for someone to take the old equipment off our hands. We'll regroup at the usual time next week to see where things stand."

Following Up

- Send out a note summarizing the meeting's outcomes. People will be encouraged by it because it's evidence that the team is one step closer to its goal.
- Remind individuals of their tasks and deadlines.
- Offer support to anyone who may be overwhelmed with other work or may struggle with a task. People are often reluctant to ask for assistance, even when they recognize that they need it.

Chapter 14

The Adaptive Approach to Project Management

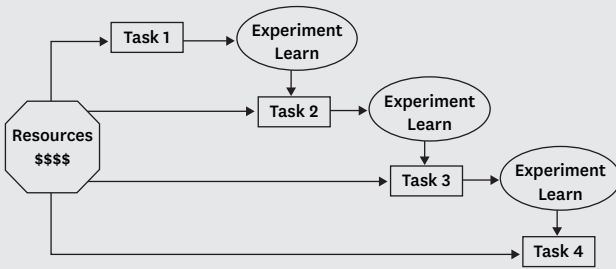
Does your project involve an unfamiliar technology or material? Is it substantially larger than others you've overseen? Are the tasks different from those your team has handled in the past?

If you answered yes to one or more of those questions, the traditional approach to project management may not work. That's because it takes for granted that you can pinpoint what needs to be done, what it will cost, and how much time you'll need. In situations with higher levels of uncertainty—if you face unanticipated risks,

Adapted from “Project Adaptation: Dealing with What You Cannot Anticipate,” *Harvard Business Essentials: Managing Projects Large and Small* (product #6273BC), Harvard Business Review Press, 2004

A NEW MODEL FOR SPONSORS

The adaptive model of project management creates a new role for project sponsors, one that Robert Austin likened to venture capitalism in the 2002 *Science* article “Project Management and Discovery.” Rather than give teams a big pile of resources at the beginning, they support projects in stages, as results roll in. Like VCs, sponsors advance resources to purchase information and reduce uncertainty—and each investment gives them the option of remaining in the game.



for instance, or if the range of potential outcomes is very wide—decision tools such as return on investment, net present value, and internal rate of return (which assume predictability of future cash flows) cease to be useful. You may have to consider a more adaptive approach.

In their research on large IT implementation projects, Lynda Applegate, Robert Austin, and Warren McFarlan (the authors of *Corporate Information Strategy and Management*) found that companies such as Cisco Systems

have enjoyed success with adaptive project-management models that:

- **Approach tasks iteratively.** Teams engage in small incremental tasks, evaluate the outcomes of those tasks, and make adjustments as they move forward.
- **Have fast cycles.** Short lead times allow an iterative approach.
- **Emphasize early value delivery.** Small, early deliverables encourage feedback and the incorporation of learning into subsequent activities.
- **Staff the project with people who can adapt.** Some people are faster learners than others and are more amenable to change.

Cisco refers to its approach as “rapid iterative prototyping.” Many tasks serve as probes—that is, as learning experiences for later steps. This tactic is analogous to the notion of the “cheap kills” that research and development organizations use to sort through many possibilities quickly and at low cost. When the right solution is not apparent, they try a number of simple experiments to separate promising and unpromising options. Even failed experiments provide insights into what will work.

WHAT-IF PLANNING AND CHUNKING

To enhance their ability to adapt to shifting conditions, some firms rely on the techniques that Cathleen Benko and F. Warren McFarlan call “what-if planning and chunking” in their book *Connecting the Dots: Aligning Projects with Objectives in Unpredictable Times*. Sweden-based software firm Ellipsus Systems used **what-if planning** to decide which programming standard—wireless application protocol (WAP) or Java—it would choose for its software. Since it was unclear which standard would dominate, cofounder Rikard Kjellberg designed projects based on both and then took early prototypes to a trade show to test participants’ preferences. His contingency planning led to a successful partnership with Java-maker Sun Microsystems.

Minnesota hotel-management company Carlson Hospitality Worldwide uses **chunking** to break big, expensive projects into smaller, more manageable ones, thereby boosting their chances of receiving approval and

funding. After the board of directors rejected a \$15 million request to overhaul the company's central reservation system, managers broke the project into work units that each had stand-alone benefits and minimal mutual dependencies. That is, if one chunk was canceled, others could still move ahead. The board soon approved the first chunk. Ultimately, Carlson's new reservation system was voted best in the industry; its voice-reservation chunk alone generated \$40 million in annual revenue by 2003. "Chunking helps us learn constantly and perpetually reassess our priorities," says CIO Scott Heintzeman. "It also reduces risk and focuses people's efforts on each work unit. And because the work on each chunk extends for no more than three to six months, people maintain their energy and enthusiasm."

Adapted from "Close the Gap Between Projects and Strategy," *Harvard Management Update* (product #U0406A), June 2004

Chapter 15

Why Good Projects Fail Anyway

*A summary of the full-length HBR article by **Nadim F. Matta** and **Ronald N. Ashkenas**, highlighting key ideas.*

THE IDEA IN BRIEF

Big projects fail at an astonishing rate—well over half, by some estimates. Why are efforts involving many people working over extended periods of time so problematic? Traditional project planning carries three serious risks:

- **White space:** Planners leave gaps in the project plan by failing to anticipate all the project's required activities and work streams.
- **Execution:** Project team members fail to carry out designated activities properly.

Excerpted from Harvard Business Review, September 2003, reprint #R0309H. To buy the full-length article, visit www.hbr.org.

Implementation

- **Integration:** Team members execute all tasks flawlessly—on time and within budget—but don’t knit all the project pieces together at the end. The project doesn’t deliver the intended results.

Manage these risks with **rapid-results initiatives**: small projects designed to quickly deliver mini-versions of the big project’s end results. Through rapid-results initiatives, project team members iron out kinks early and on a small scale. Rapid-results teams serve as models for subsequent teams who can roll out the initiative on a larger scale with greater confidence. The teams feel the satisfaction of delivering real value, and their company gets early payback on its investments.

THE IDEA IN PRACTICE

Rapid-results initiatives have several defining characteristics:

- **Results oriented:** The initiatives produce measurable payoffs on a small scale.

Example: The World Bank wanted to improve the productivity of 120,000 small-scale farmers in Nicaragua by 30% in 16 years. Its rapid-results initiatives included “increase pig weight on 30 farms by 30% in 100 days using enhanced corn seed.”

- **Vertical:** The initiatives include people from different parts of the organization—or even different

organizations—who work in tandem within a very short time frame to implement slices of several horizontal—or parallel-track—activities. The traditional emphasis on disintegrated, horizontal, long-term activities gives way to the integrated, vertical, and short-term. The teams uncover activities falling in the white space between horizontal project streams, and properly integrate *all* the activities.

Example: Take a companywide CRM project. Traditionally, one team might analyze customers, another select the software, a third develop training programs. When the project's finally complete, though, it may turn out that the salespeople won't enter the requisite data because they don't understand why they need to. Using rapid-results initiatives, a single team might be charged with increasing the revenues of one sales group in one region within four months. To reach that goal, team members would have to draw on the work of all the parallel teams. And they would quickly discover the salespeople's resistance and other unforeseen issues.

- **Fast:** The initiatives strive for results and lessons in less than 100 days. Designed to deliver quick wins, they more importantly change the way teams work. How? The short time frame establishes a sense of urgency from the start, poses personal challenges, and leaves no time to waste on inter-organizational bickering. It also stimulates creativity

and encourages team members to experiment with new ideas that deliver concrete results.

Balancing Vertical and Horizontal Activities

Vertical, rapid-results initiatives offer many benefits. But that doesn't mean you should eliminate all horizontal activities. Such activities offer cost-effective economies of scale. The key is to *balance* vertical and horizontal, spread insights among teams, and blend all activities into an overall implementation strategy.

Example: Dissatisfied with its 8% revenue increase in two years, office-products company Avery Dennison launched 15 rapid-results teams in three North American divisions. After only three months, the teams were meeting their goals—e.g., securing one new order for an enhanced product with one large customer within 100 days. Top management extended the rapid-results process throughout the company, reinforcing it with an extensive employee communication program. As horizontal activities continued, dozens more teams started rapid-results initiatives. Results? \$8 million+ in new sales, and \$50 million in sales forecast by year-end.

Nadim F. Matta is a managing partner, and **Ronald N. Ashkenas** is a senior partner, of Schaffer Consulting in Stamford, Connecticut.

Chapter 16

Monitoring and Controlling Your Project

by Ray Sheen

Unlike processes—where the same people repeatedly perform the same activities—projects often involve unique activities (such as using new technologies, building new buildings, or writing new software) carried out by individuals who may be working together for the first time. So as a project leader, you'll need to actively monitor progress to figure out whether your plan is really bringing the team closer to its objectives.

When monitoring and controlling a project, you'll follow five basic steps:

1. Track project activities

It's important to check in with team members regularly to make sure they're completing their tasks and meeting quality standards. You can do this most effectively

through team meetings if everyone works at the same location. However, given how common distributed teams are in today's business environment, it can be difficult to get the entire group together. When that's the case, I conduct separate working sessions with individuals or small groups needed for particular activities. For example, I recently participated in a "live meeting" conference call where engineers from three locations helped prepare a product-development proposal for a customer. If I had created a draft, sent it around for comments, and then tried to integrate all the feedback, it could easily have taken weeks to complete the document. Instead, I had the right engineers reviewing it over the phone for about three hours, until everybody agreed on the wording. After a working session like this, I loop the rest of the team in at a larger group meeting or through e-mail.

I also use "buddy checks" to verify that tasks are done properly. When someone completes an activity, another team member looks at the results. This is not an in-depth technical analysis; it's a quick check to confirm that the person who did the work hasn't accidentally overlooked something or misunderstood the requirements. A team member checking a training plan for a new system, for example, would make certain that all departments in need of training have been included. If possible, have someone who will *use* the results of the activity do the buddy check. When I worked with a medical device company on developing a new product, I had its regulatory department review the design documentation and test data to flag any missing information that would be re-

quired later for regulatory submittal. If a team member with a stake in the activity's result is not available, you can do the buddy check yourself—but make it clear that it's not a performance appraisal. It's just one team member looking out for another.

2. Collect performance data

A few companies have project management information systems that automatically generate reports. If you have access to one, by all means use it—but also seek out performance data through short **pulse meetings**, where team members share status updates on activities and assess risks, either face-to-face or virtually. I limit these to 10 minutes and discuss only the tasks started or finished since the last meeting. The purpose is to get a quick sense of where things are, not to roll up sleeves. If the team identifies any problems or risks, I resolve them in a separate working session with the appropriate individuals.

I normally pulse projects on a weekly basis, which allows me to track progress adequately and identify problems in time to respond to them. However, when a project is in crisis mode, the “pulse rate” quickens. I once managed a project in which the power system for a new facility failed three days before the building needed to be up and running. An important business objective hinged on that deadline. The team worked around the clock to identify the cause of the failure, replace the destroyed component, and bring the facility back on line. All that would normally have taken two to three months, but we had three days, so I pulsed the project every three hours.

3. Analyze performance to determine whether the plan still holds

Activities seldom go precisely as anticipated. They may take more or less time; they may overrun or underrun the budget. A departure from your plan isn't a problem unless it's likely to compromise the team's objectives. On one project, I had an engineer report at a pulse meeting that a new mold would be two weeks late. But since the mold wasn't on our critical path and we had nearly six weeks of slack time in that portion of the schedule, the team didn't need to take special action. If the late deliverable had put us in danger of missing an important goal, I would have called a meeting with the appropriate team members to figure out a solution.

This is the time when careful project planning pays dividends. Knowing the critical path will help you decide which issues warrant a schedule change. If you've identified risks up front that could undermine your objectives, you can more easily recognize which snags are threats to the project's success. Having estimated each activity's duration and costs and carefully noted any uncertainties, you'll be able to distinguish between variances that aren't a big deal and those that suggest larger underlying problems.

When a plan does need revising, you may have to extend the end date, apply budget reserves, remove deliverables from the project's scope, or even cancel the project. On one software development project I oversaw, we had an excessively "buggy" first release. Before trying to fix the software, I quickly checked the requirements docu-

ment and realized that the developers were using an out-of-date version. We had to reschedule the software development task for that module, causing us to delay project completion by about a month, but the change clearly needed to be made.

4. Report progress to your stakeholders

Some project managers and team members perceive **stakeholder reviews**—which involve preparing reports and conducting progress meetings—as wasted effort because they take time away from other activities. However, if managed properly, these reviews propel a project toward success. There are three types: management reviews, tollgate reviews, and technical reviews. For all three, record and circulate action items, and keep meeting minutes in the project file for future reference.

The purpose of the **management review** is to manage risk. Stakeholders may examine several projects at a time to see if the portfolio as a whole will generate the desired business performance and to identify systemic weaknesses. They'll look at individual projects on their own merits as well. Such reviews are normally held at regular intervals—monthly, for instance. When conducting them, keep in mind that your stakeholders care about reaching business goals, not about following the team's day-to-day activities. I recently attended a review where the project leader spent nearly 30 minutes describing technical designs the team was considering and testing, which only bored and frustrated the stakeholders. Instead, he should have spent five minutes telling them the project was on schedule (it was), that the team had

made progress on its technical analysis (it had), and that no new risks had been identified.

Creating a **project dashboard** is a great way to summarize your objectives and show stakeholders whether the project, as currently planned and managed, will achieve them. (You can break it down into components such as schedule, cost, and performance.) This is often called a **stoplight chart**, since it usually indicates activity statuses in red, yellow, and green. Most companies have a standard format to help senior managers quickly and efficiently assess progress and risks on many projects. When using color coding, make sure everyone understands exactly what each color means. For example, do you list all incomplete tasks in red? Or are some of them green, because the plan for completion is approved and under way?

When you need to report bad news in a management review, always couch it in terms of risks to project objectives. Explain how certain task delays will prevent the team from realizing project goals on time, for instance, or how a resource shortage will reduce the rigor of an activity and thus the quality of its deliverable. When you present problems, also give options for responding to them and discuss the risks associated with each solution. The stakeholders will decide which risks they want the business to take.

The **tollgate review** (also called the **stage-gate review**, or **phase-gate review**) is a decision meeting, not a status check. It's used when a business plans and executes projects in discrete phases. In it, the project team summarizes the results of the preceding phase and pre-

sents a plan for the next phase. The stakeholders assess the plan, options, and risks, and then decide whether to approve, redirect, or cancel the project. If they say to proceed to the next phase, they also provide the team with the necessary resources, including funding.

At a **technical review** (sometimes referred to as a **peer review**), an independent team of experts—internal or external consultants, say, or representatives from a regulatory agency—provides an in-depth analysis of project results. The purpose is to ensure that team members did the work accurately, completely, and to the right quality standard. Stakeholders may give a stamp of approval at this time: If the team has successfully completed one phase of the project, it can now proceed to a tollgate review for approval to begin the next phase.

5. Manage changes to the plan

When revising a plan, you may make major changes or just minor tweaks that will allow the team to meet its objectives.

If you propose major changes to your stakeholders, spell out the costs and risks of adopting them and those of sticking with the original plan. A defense contractor that I work with was asked by the Air Force to improve performance of a weapon-system component. After the Air Force reviewed the proposed options (which included costs, risks, and schedules) and selected one, the contractor synchronized updates to design documentation, manufacturing processes, supplier contracts, the project schedule, and the budget so the transition would be as seamless as possible. When making such large-scale

revisions, record them (along with the rationale) on some type of change log in the project records. You can use your normal project-planning processes and techniques to revise your plan. Send the new plan to your team members, and explain any changes that affect them.

Minor changes may come up as you're implementing a contingency plan or working out details of a portion of the project that was planned only at a high level. The project team can usually manage these on its own, without seeking stakeholder approval, unless the changes will directly affect stakeholders or their departments.

As you're monitoring your project, remember that meeting your objectives trumps everything else. Don't get hung up on compliance with the original plan. In my experience, almost every project plan must be revised at some point—especially when you're developing new products or systems, because what you learn in the early stages sheds light on how later-stage tasks should take shape. Don't be afraid to change course if it will bring you within reach of your goals.

Ray Sheen teaches and consults on project and process management. He has more than 25 years of experience leading projects in defense, product development, manufacturing, IT, and other areas, and has run a project management office in GE's Electrical Distribution business.

Chapter 17

Managing People Problems on Your Team

Your most important resource is your people. After you've done the hard work of selecting the right team members and getting them revved up for the project, you need to make sure they stay on task, pull their weight, work collaboratively, and reach the quality standards you've established with your stakeholders. If you don't, you're highly unlikely to meet your goals, let alone your deadlines and budget targets. Here's how to recognize and deal with various people problems you may encounter as a project manager.

Adapted from *Pocket Mentor: Managing Projects* (product #1878), Harvard Business Review Press, 2006

Implementation

Team structure problems

Problem	Possible causes	Potential impact	Recommended action
• Your team lacks necessary skills.	• You overlooked certain skill requirements during planning. • You discovered a need for new skills in the midst of the project.	• The project doesn't move forward as fast as it should, or it stalls.	• Arrange for a team member to be trained in the skills needed. • Hire outside consultants or contractors who have the skills.

Problem	Possible causes	Potential impact	Recommended action
• A team member leaves.	• This could happen for many reasons, ranging from sudden illness to departure from the organization.	• Severity depends on the skills and knowledge lost: • If you can easily redistribute the work or hire someone with the same expertise, the impact may be slight. • If not, the loss could create a crisis.	• Have backup team members at the ready. • Cross-train people so they can fill in for one another. • Make one person's departure an opportunity to bring an even more skilled team member on board.

Interpersonal problems

Problem	Possible causes	Potential impact	Recommended action
Team members are too friendly.	They spend excessive amounts of time chatting or discussing personal problems.	- Overall productivity decreases. - Time is wasted, and the project slows down. - Hard-working team members resent those who work less efficiently.	- Emphasize that social gatherings need to be planned for after work. - Reorganize team subgroups to disrupt cliques.

Problem	Possible causes	Potential impact	Recommended action
Conflicts exist within the team.	People have a hard time reconciling different personalities, working styles, or areas of expertise.	The schedule, quality of work, overall productivity, and team cohesiveness could all suffer.	- Focus team members on the project's goals, not on personal feelings. - Separate the underlying causes from the surface disturbances, so you can solve problems at the root. - Propose solutions, not blame.

(continued)

Implementation

Productivity problems (continued)

Problem	Possible causes	Potential impact	Recommended action
• Time is spent on the wrong tasks.	• People manage their time poorly. • A team member prefers some tasks over others, regardless of relative importance. • You've sent the wrong message about priorities.	• Work on critical tasks is delayed. • The overall project is delayed.	• Clarify which tasks are most important. • Assign tasks to pairs of team members to work on together so they can keep each other in check. • Provide resources to help members improve time management skills.
Problem	Possible causes	Potential impact	Recommended action
• The quality of the work is poor.	• A team member misunderstands the requirements of the job. • Different people measure the work by different standards. • Someone doesn't have adequate skills to complete a task.	• Work must be redone, costing money and time. • The project fails.	• Be clear from the start about quality expectations and standards of measure. • Develop an action plan for improving the quality of the team member's work. • Provide training and support to develop skills.

Chapter 18

The Tools of Cooperation and Change

A summary of the full-length HBR article by Clayton M. Christensen, Matt Marx, and Howard H. Stevenson, highlighting key ideas.

Editor's note: Sometimes you need to manage change within projects. Other times the projects themselves are agents of change in a company, and you have to overcome organizational resistance. Arm yourself with the right tools, and you can elicit cooperation rather than entrenchment.

THE IDEA IN BRIEF

Why do managers struggle so hard to get employees' cooperation on change initiatives? Even charismatic leaders

Excerpted from *Harvard Business Review*, October 2006, reprint #R0610D. To buy the full-length article, visit www.hbr.org.

have spotty records—winning commitment to change in some cases but failing dismally in others.

According to Christensen, Marx, and Stevenson, too many leaders use the wrong change tools at the wrong time—wasting energy and risking their credibility. For example, a vision statement helps get people on board if they already agree on where their organization should go. Without that consensus, vision statements won't change behavior—aside from provoking a collective rolling of eyes.

How to wield the *right* change tools, at the right time? Gauge how strongly your people agree on 1) where they want to go and 2) how to get there. Then select tools based on the nature of employees' agreement. For instance, if people disagree about goals and ways to achieve them (common during mergers), use power tools—such as threatening to make key decisions yourself. If employees have goals that differ from your company's but agree on how work should be done (think independent contractors), use management tools—including training and performance measurement systems.

Choose the correct tools, and you spur the changes your firm needs to stay ahead of rivals.

THE IDEA IN PRACTICE

Selecting the Right Change Tools

Scenario #1: If employees agree on goals but disagree on how to achieve them, use **leadership tools**: vision, charisma, salesmanship, and role modeling.

Example: In December 1995, Microsoft's Bill Gates published his visionary "Internet Tidal Wave" memo. The memo persuaded employees that the World Wide Web would become integral to computing (which countered most employees' beliefs). Employees responded with products that crippled Internet rival Netscape and maintained Microsoft's dominance in the software industry (which employees and the company wanted).

Scenario #2: If employees disagree on both goals and how to get there, use **power tools**: threats, hiring and promotion, control systems, and coercion.

Example: To merge JP Morgan with BankOne, CEO Jamie Dimon slashed hundreds of executives' salaries 20% to 50%. He threatened to select a single IT platform to replace the firm's myriad systems if the IT staff didn't pick one themselves in six weeks. And he told branch managers they'd lose their jobs if they failed to meet sales quotas.

Scenario #3: If employees agree on both goals and how to get there, use **culture tools** to counter complacency. In particular, use "disaggregation" (separating the organization into entities that each have their own agreed-upon goals and plans for achieving them) to disrupt high-level agreement about goals and methods that could otherwise preserve the status quo.

Example: Hewlett-Packard recognized that its new inkjet printer business—with its unique technology and economics—could thrive only if it was protected from the cultural expectations of its traditional laser printing business. Disaggregating the two businesses eliminated the need for cooperation between them and enabled the groups to operate on very different profit models.

Scenario #4: If employees disagree on goals but agree on how work should be done, use **management tools**: measurement systems, standard operating procedures, and training.

Example: In many companies, the reasons unionized manufacturing workers come to work differ markedly from those of senior managers. But as long as workers accept management's assertion that following certain manufacturing procedures will help them make products with desired quality and cost, they will follow those procedures.

Clayton M. Christensen is the Kim B. Clark Professor of Business Administration at Harvard Business School in Boston. **Matt Marx** was a doctoral student at HBS. **Howard H. Stevenson** is HBS's Sarofim-Rock Baker Foundation Professor of Business Administration, Emeritus, and the chairman of the board at Harvard Business Publishing.

Chapter 19

Don't Throw Good Money (or Time) After Bad

by Jimmy Guterman

You approved the development of a high-profile new product for your company a year ago—but now things aren't going well. Despite previous forecasts that customers needed your product, the market has changed, and the response is uncertain at best. But you're not going to give up and throw away \$10 million, are you?

Actually, spending another dime on a doomed product is the wrong decision. Yet chasing after **sunk costs** (investments that are no longer recoverable) is a common error. *Just another couple hundred thousand dollars*, you say to yourself, *and we'll be able to recoup our investment*.

Adapted from *Harvard Management Update* (product #U0205D), May 2002

Don't fall for that line of reasoning. True managerial wisdom lies in a kind of forgetfulness—the ability to ignore prior investments, costs, and benefits, and to focus instead on the situation at hand. When faced with insufficient information and tight time constraints, managers regularly use simplifying strategies, known as **judgment heuristics**, as decision-making shortcuts. Problem is, human psychology always enters into the process, leading to cognitive biases—conclusions based on misperceptions or faulty inferences. The sunk-cost trap is a type of cognitive bias. Harvard Business School professor Max H. Bazerman, author of *Judgment in Managerial Decision Making*, likens this “nonrational escalation of commitment” to standing at a bus stop for hour after hour. At some point, you have to admit that the bus is not coming.

You can avoid escalating your company's commitment to a product, person, or strategy beyond a reasonable point. These guidelines will help.

Don't make choices merely to justify past decisions

Should you retain an underperforming, abusive contractor simply because you hired him and don't want to be accused of flip-flopping? Should you continue to extend credit to a company that has consistently failed to meet its obligations, since it promises that just one more loan will turn everything around? In the abstract, the answer to both questions is clearly no. But it's easy to let context obscure your better judgment.

Avoid this problem by gathering external evidence to support your choices. When deciding whether to move

forward on a project, consult as many outside sources and devil's advocates as you can, so you're sure to consider how people other than your supervisor might view your quandary. Failure to see the big picture often results in overly cautious decision making, which in turn can lead to the sunk-cost trap.

***Focus on the quality of the decision,
not the quality of the outcome***

Many people fall into the sunk-cost trap because they fear being judged for the unfortunate consequences of their good-at-the-time decisions. When things go sour, HBS professor emeritus Howard Raiffa explains, decision makers become “more worried about acts of commission, like changing course, than acts of omission, like continuing to take the company down the wrong road. *If I just go along as things are now, the thinking goes, things might change. If I commit an act of commission and admit that the current course is wrongheaded, that may trigger a review. . . .* There are huge internal and external pressures to keep going even if all parties realize it's wrong and it's going to stay wrong.”

If you're managing a decision maker, you can prevent unnecessary escalations of commitment by making it clear that no one will be punished for not owning a crystal ball.

***The more you equate time with money,
the more susceptible you are to the
sunk-cost trap***

That's the conclusion Hong Kong University of Science and Technology marketing professor Dilip Soman

reached after conducting a series of sunk-cost experiments. As he noted in a 2001 article in the *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making*, sunk costs don't usually trip us up when our main investment is time. But they do present a problem when we become more adept at converting that investment into a monetary equivalent.

Use decision rules to prevent cloudy thinking

In *Judgment in Managerial Decision Making*, Bazerman lays out a common scenario: "You personally decided to hire a new middle-level manager to work for you. Although you had expected excellent performance, early reports suggest that she is not performing as you had hoped. Should you fire her? Perhaps you really can't afford her current level of performance. On the other hand, you have invested a fair amount in her training. Furthermore, she may just be in the process of learning the ropes. So you decide to invest in her a bit longer and provide additional resources so that she can succeed. But still she does not perform as expected. Although you have more reason to 'cut your losses,' you now have even more invested in this employee."

Precise targets can help you avoid such rounds of rationalizing. Establish in advance how much time and money you're willing to pour into a project or person before you need to see specific results. As the investment sage Warren Buffett once said, "When you find yourself in a hole, the best thing you can do is stop digging." Targets tell you when to put down the shovel. They enable

you to discriminate, says Bazerman, “between situations in which persistence will pay off and situations in which it will not.”

Jimmy Guterman was a senior editor at hbr.org.

Phase 4

Closeout

Chapter 20

Handing Off Authority and Control

by Ray Sheen

Now that you've executed your project, it's time to gauge your success and then finalize activities, ranging from transferring control of new systems or facilities to presenting deliverables to stakeholders. Why not finalize activities first? Because you can't know when to close up shop until you've determined whether you've met your objectives.

In other words, success means achieving the goals in your charter and scope statement—not necessarily finishing all the tasks on your Gantt chart. Whether your team is releasing a product, adopting a new system, opening a facility, or improving a process, you'll need to validate that those goals, if still relevant, have been reached. Since stakeholders care far more about realizing business ben-

efits than they do about adhering to the plan's "critical path," the team needs to get out of the weeds and sharpen its focus on those benefits as it completes the project.

Awhile back, I bumped into someone I had worked with years ago on a product-development initiative, and he mentioned that it was one of the best projects our organization had done. After we parted ways, I tried to reconstruct what was so good about it, because it was not well planned or executed. I realized it was the closeout phase that saved us. In our plan, we had overlooked some business systems that had to be changed to accommodate the new product; we were late getting staff assigned, so we soon fell behind schedule; and we had to replan the project on several occasions as a result of estimating errors and technical problems. Scrambling to recover from the delays, we went over budget by about 10%. In the endgame, however, we made up for those earlier problems by meeting market needs. We made sure that when the product launched, it worked well, it was easy for customers to order and for us to build, and our business systems could support it without difficulty. All that paid off—sales exceeded expectations. That's why stakeholders viewed the project as a success, despite the stumbles in planning and execution.

Once you've achieved your objectives—or determined that they're no longer relevant—you'll take one of three approaches to winding down your project:

The team hands off the project to itself

In such cases, team members become the primary users and maintainers of their own deliverables. When I was

at GE, for example, we had a project team that designed and oversaw the installation of a new high-voltage power test facility. Once that was up and running, the head of the team and several other members went on to manage the facility. If your team inherits its own deliverables, it will need to close any administrative accounts or files (such as supplier contracts and purchase orders) associated with development and open new ones for operational deployment.

The team terminates the project

Here, all activities come to a halt, and the organization either releases or redeploys the resources. This can happen when a project has problems, such as a massive overrun, but sometimes it's due to forces outside the team's control. For instance, I once worked with several project teams on coordinating financial processes for two companies planning to merge. The teams had been in place for months and had made great progress when an unexpected government ruling barred the merger at the last minute. The teams disbanded within 24 hours. This type of closeout is administratively straightforward (the end is indisputable, after all), but it can be emotionally difficult because people often lose their assignments—or their jobs—without warning.

The team integrates the project

When using this approach—by far the most common and the most challenging—your team must ensure that others embrace its deliverables and apply them appropriately. In the dozens of new-product initiatives I've helped

manage, it has taken as much or more time and work to hand off the product design to the manufacturing and quality organizations and to ensure the training of sales, marketing, and service staff as it has to design, develop, and validate the products themselves. As you integrate your project, you may face organizational resistance to change. If you think that will happen, you can add a transition phase to the project that includes pilot runs, beta tests, and any other activities that will make adoption easier.

Clearly, your closeout method will depend largely on business conditions—and so will the tools and techniques you'll apply within it. Here are a few I've found especially helpful in managing expectations as projects near completion:

The punchlist

This is used mainly in construction projects, but it works well for any type of project where people may try to slide in extra requests—for example, additional features—at the end. The team meets with the stakeholders and reviews the results of project activities. During that review, everyone helps identify remaining tasks, which you put on a “punchlist” of final action items. The team then tackles each item, and when everything on the punchlist is finished, so is the project. Because stakeholders have already agreed on your final to-dos, they'll be much less likely to ask for “just one more thing” at this stage. The punchlist is a good fit when you need to terminate a project, because the team may have a hard time letting go, and this focuses the group on closure. While working with a contract manufacturer of plastic parts several

years ago, I helped a team use this tool to ensure that all the tests, inspections, and pilot runs needed to certify a new mold were done and that the mold was brought on line in a timely manner.

The “stakeholder handshake”

Projects that have a fuzzy scope statement—as many research initiatives and small, informal projects do—benefit from this technique because it keeps the work from going too far beyond the plan’s boundaries. Meet with your key stakeholders to compare the project’s accomplishments with the contract or scope statement, and ask them to agree on whether the project is indeed finished. Have them set an end point or elect to close the project now and, if necessary, open a new one. Such meetings tend to include wide-ranging discussions of options, so it’s good to come prepared with several proposals. Following the meeting, document the stakeholders’ decision and circulate it so there’s no confusion. When I conduct a project-management assessment for an organization, I often close it in this fashion. Many times, I’ve been asked to “see what we need to improve.” After I complete my review, I meet with the executive who hired me. Usually we agree that the assessment is over, discuss the findings, and then determine if I’m needed to help implement them.

The “scope creep parking lot”

During project execution, eager stakeholders may have proposed additional ideas, or team members may have been tempted to add bells and whistles. Ideally, you’ve captured those items in a list that some project managers call the “scope creep parking lot,” so they’re not lost—

but they also haven't derailed the plan by introducing new activities or changing boundaries. Now that you're closing the project, it's time to review this list so you can create follow-on proposals for your stakeholders. This technique can be effective when a team prepares to hand off a project to itself because stakeholders may be more likely to accept the deliverables if they know they'll have the opportunity to tweak them later. I've used the scope creep parking lot on several software-development projects. In each case, although minor issues were found during user-acceptance testing, the projects could close because we worked them into the scope for the next release.

Whichever closeout approach and tools you use, don't forget to celebrate your team's achievements. Success breeds success. Even on projects that weren't perfectly planned or executed, team members have worked hard to meet the business objectives and should be rewarded if they've done so. This will encourage them to do good work for you in the future—and the positive example will prompt other teams to achieve their project goals as well. Hold off on discussing opportunities for improvement. It's best to do that in a separate lessons-learned session that's focused on improving the way you manage the next project. For now, take a moment to “bask in the glow” of your current project.

Ray Sheen teaches and consults on project and process management. He has more than 25 years of experience leading projects in defense, product development, manufacturing, IT, and other areas, and has run a project management office in GE's Electrical Distribution business.

Chapter 21

Capturing Lessons Learned

by Ray Sheen

Though every project is different, you can and should always learn from what you've just done. Companies with a project management office (PMO) conduct a **lessons-learned session**—sometimes called a **postmortem** or an **after-action review**—as a formal part of each project's closeout. Those without a PMO typically share insights informally, as team members reminisce. Either way, it's important to capture learning while the experience is still fresh.

For example, I recently led a small project that lasted only a few months, and the team gathered for a dinner immediately after we wrapped things up to talk about what went right and what went wrong. It was a great conversation, and the next project we do will be better because of it. Since the project had a short time frame and the team was intact for the whole thing, it was relatively

easy to discuss all aspects, from early planning through completion. When we returned from the dinner, one of the other team members and I updated the project folder with notes about our lessons learned.

By contrast, when I managed an engineering department at a *Fortune* 500 company, some of our projects lasted three years, and the core teams inevitably changed over time. I remember conducting a lessons-learned session with a product development team right after it had launched a new offering. Unfortunately, only one person in the room had been on board back when the project began—and she had moved into a different role by the time it was winding down. With the benefit of hindsight, we could spot errors that the original team had made in the project plan. But we could not identify the events or explain the thinking that led to those errors, since most of us had not been there. From then on, I took a different approach to long-term projects: I started gathering lessons after each phase rather than waiting until the project's end, so the team could clearly recall and accurately analyze what happened. This had the added bonus of allowing us to incorporate the lessons sooner.

When I conduct lessons-learned sessions, I follow a four-step process:

1. Evaluate the business case

The first question I ask is, “Has the project delivered on its promised result?” This isn’t meant to help you judge how well the team did the work; it’s to gauge whether the project has met senior management’s expectations

as clarified in the project selection and approval process—and whether those goals were really within reach. Projects are approved on the basis of forecasted business benefits, such as sales growth, cost reduction, cycle-time improvement, defect reduction, or increased capacity. Whatever the forecasted benefit, has it been realized? If not, were the original assumptions and project justifications inaccurate? By carefully examining these issues and sharing the findings with the project's sponsor, a team can improve its organization's ability to select projects and to establish realistic objectives in project charters. If you have a PMO, it will normally take responsibility for incorporating such lessons into project-initiation processes.

2. Evaluate the project plan

Next I ask, “Was the project plan reasonable and appropriate for the project goal and business conditions?” I consider whether it excluded any necessary activities or included any unnecessary ones. I also look at the cost and schedule estimates for each activity. These should reflect the business and technology conditions at the time the project began and provide sensible buffers. Then I review the initial risk assessment to determine which risks were not anticipated, which ones were improperly rated, and which response approaches were inadequate. Finally, I consider the practices established for both team and stakeholder communication. Did the plan allow enough opportunities for updates and information exchange? Did conversations take place at the right times,

with the right people? Were decisions made in a timely fashion?

3. Evaluate the project-management methodology

The third question I ask is, “Were the organization’s project-management procedures and systems beneficial?” To answer it, I focus on whether the company even *has* procedures, templates, or checklists; how current and relevant they are (if they do exist); how appropriate the mandated reviews and control points were for the project; and how useful the project-management information system was in communicating the project’s plans and status to all the players.

Lessons learned are often embodied in companies’ project-management procedures and systems. When I served as a consultant to a midsize contract manufacturer, I was surprised to find that it had no centralized project-management procedures, even though all of its work was project based. The firm simply hired experienced project managers and allowed them free rein. This led to a “rock star” mentality among project managers and no consistency in approach. Anyone assigned to a new project team had to learn new scheduling, budgeting, and reporting techniques. The duplication of systems and resulting inefficiency in project execution took a high toll on the organization. Individuals participating on multiple projects had to support multiple, often conflicting, meetings and report formats, leading to numerous “re-dos.” The company established a PMO, and over the

next three to four months we created the procedures and systems that allowed for coordinated, simplified project planning and execution.

4. Evaluate individuals' performance

Last, I ask, “What feedback do I need to give team members on their performance (good or bad), and what should I tell their supervisors?” I recommend following this step, even if it’s not officially required, for all core team members. I typically ask the full team to help identify the “superheroes” among them. This both publicly reinforces the importance of contributing your best and minimizes the impression that the project leader is playing favorites. The members with poor performance I address individually. Of course, specific methods for conducting any performance appraisals must be in accordance with local human resource practices.

An effective lessons-learned process encourages continuous improvement. However, in my experience, the reports from these sessions are seldom read by anyone—so don’t pin all your hopes on the documentation you’ve tucked away in the project file. Instead, turn the lessons into a list of action items for the PMO or for your team members to ensure that they are incorporated into the next project. Apply the insights right away by updating checklists, tweaking review processes, and making any other necessary adjustments before the next project launches.

Ray Sheen teaches and consults on project and process management. He has more than 25 years of experience leading projects in defense, product development, manufacturing, IT, and other areas, and has run a project management office in GE's Electrical Distribution business.

Glossary

Charter. A concise written description of the project's intended work. The charter may contain the name of the sponsor, the project's benefits to the organization, a description of the objectives, the expected time frame, and a budget.

Critical Path Method. A planning technique used for complex projects that consist of several activities. Any activities that need to be completed before others can move forward are considered "critical"—in other words, necessary for the on-time success of the project. The total duration of the project is defined by the critical path.

Gantt chart. A bar chart showing when project tasks should begin and when they should end.

Launch. A special meeting or event that marks a project's official beginning.

Adapted from *Harvard Business Essentials: Managing Projects Large and Small* (product #3213), Harvard Business Review Press, 2004.

Management review. A meeting where stakeholders may examine several projects together, as well as individually, to see if the portfolio as a whole will generate the desired business results and to identify weaknesses.

Network diagram. A scheduling chart that indicates all the relationships between tasks and reveals the critical path. Generally synonymous with a **PERT chart** (below).

Performance Evaluation and Review Technique (PERT). A scheduling method that, when charted, represents every task as a node that connects with other nodes required to complete the project. A **PERT chart** may have many parallel or interconnecting networks of tasks, so periodic reviews are encouraged for complex projects. Unlike the Gantt chart, it indicates all the important task relationships and project milestones.

Post-evaluation. A meeting where the project team debriefs and documents its process for the purpose of learning and sharing lessons and making improvements. Also called a **lessons-learned session**, a **postmortem**, or an **after-action review**.

Project management office. A corporate office (typically in a large company) that establishes processes and templates to guide an organization's project managers in planning and execution, provides assistance to individuals trying to apply those processes, and sometimes manages individual projects.

Project Steering Committee. A group that approves the project charter, secures resources, and adjudicates all requests to change key project elements, including deliverables, the schedule, and the budget.

Punchlist. The project team's final list of action items, approved by key stakeholders.

Scope creep. The tendency (often as a result of pressure from stakeholders) to permit changes that exceed a project's scope and may wreak havoc on the schedule, the quality of the work, or the budget.

Scope creep parking lot. A list of additional ideas or bells and whistles proposed during a project. The idea is to "park" them so they can be revisited later, without danger of derailing the current project.

Stoplight chart. A project-monitoring tool that uses red, yellow, and green color coding to indicate the status of each project activity.

Sunk costs. Project investments that are no longer recoverable.

Technical review. A meeting where an independent team of experts provides an in-depth analysis of project results to ensure that team members did the work accurately, completely, and to the right quality standard. Sometimes called a **peer review**.

Tollgate review. A meeting where the project team summarizes the results of the preceding phase and presents a plan for the next phase so stakeholders can decide whether to approve, redirect, or cancel the project. Also called a **stage-gate review**, or a **phase-gate review**.

Variance. The difference (positive or negative) between actual and expected results in the budget. Managers use variance to spot sources of trouble and areas of exceptional performance.

Work Breakdown Structure (WBS). A planning routine that breaks down a project's goal into the many tasks required to achieve it. The time and money needed to complete those tasks are then estimated.

Index

- accountability, 109
- action orientation, 106
- adaptive approach, to project management, 117–121
- after-action review, 157–162
- agenda, for team meetings, 20–21
- aggregate planning, 58–59
- assignments, planning, 13–14

- behavioral norms, 101, 105–106
- bottlenecks, 16, 84
- brainstorming, 68–69
- budget
 - developing a, 17–18
 - monitoring, 18–19
- build-up phase, 4–5, 13–18, 65–110
 - assignment planning in, 13–14
 - budget development in, 17–18
 - establishing behavioral norms in, 105–106
 - launch meetings in, 16, 101–104
 - priority setting in, 65–71
 - schedule creation in, 14–16, 77–85
 - team assembly in, 13
 - team building in, 104
 - team discipline in, 107–110
 - time-boxing in, 73–75
- capital expenditures, 17–18
- change control board, 59–60
- change management, 133–134, 139–142
- change tools, 139–142
- charter, 41–45
 - definition of, 163
 - elements of, 41
 - example of, 42–43
 - explaining, at launch meeting, 103
 - objectives clearly stated in, 43–44
 - sample, 68–69
 - scope of, 45
 - time frame in, 44
- charts
 - Gantt, 15, 81, 82, 163
 - PERT, 14, 81, 83, 164
 - stoplight, 132
- chunking, 120–121
- closeout phase, 4, 23–29, 151–162
 - debrief with team in, 27
 - performance evaluation in, 23–26, 151–152
 - post-evaluation in, 157–162
 - post-evaluation report in, 27–29

Index

- closeout phase (*continued*)
 - project closure in, 26–27, 151–156
- cognitive bias, 49–50
- communication, among stakeholders, 7
- confidentiality, 106
- consensus, 103
- costs
 - determining, 17–18
 - extra, 19
 - sunk, 143–146, 165
- critical path, 130
- Critical Path Method (CPM), 14, 79–81, 163
- deadlines
 - pressure of, 22–23
 - setting, 44
 - working backward from, 14–16
- debriefing, 27
- decision rules, 146–147
- delays, tips for dealing with, 20–21
- delegation
 - of assignments, 14
 - reverse, 15
 - tips for effective, 15
- deliverables
 - early, 119
 - handoff of, 152–153
 - integration of, 153–154
- draft schedule, 79–83
- execution phase. *See* implementation phase
- expectations, setting realistic, 50–51, 104
- failure
 - rates, 53, 123
 - reasons for, 123–126
 - rush to, 87–100
 - “fuzzy front end,” 47–51, 60
- Gantt chart, 15, 81, 82, 163
- goal setting, 6–7
- horizontal initiatives, 126
- implementation phase, 4, 18–23, 113–147
 - budget monitoring in, 18–19
 - change management in, 133–134, 139–142
 - controlling scope creep in, 60–62
 - failure in, 123
 - people problems in, 135–138
 - problem management in, 22–23
 - progress reporting in, 19, 131–133
 - project monitoring in, 18–19, 127–134
 - team meetings in, 19–22, 113–115
- incentives
 - describing, 104
 - for on-time delivery, 21
- integration failure, 124
- interpersonal problems, 137
- interpersonal skills, 34, 35
- iterative development, 97–98, 119
- judgment heuristics, 144
- kickoff/launch meetings, 16, 101–104
- launch, 163
- lessons-learned session, 157–162

- management review, 131–132, 164
- meetings
 - attendance at, 105
 - following up after, 115
 - interruptions during, 105
 - kickoff/launch, 16, 101–104, 163
 - pulse, 129
 - running, 114
 - setting stage for, 113–114
 - team, 19–22, 113–115
- mutual accountability, 109
- network diagram, 78, 80–81, 164
- ongoing tasks, 28
- organization, 7
- organizational objectives, alignment with, 37
- organizational skills, 34
- overcommitments, 84
- overhead, 18
- oversights, 84
- overtime, 19
- peer review, 133, 165
- people problems, 23, 135–138
- performance data, 129
- performance evaluation, 23–26, 130–131, 151–152
- Performance Evaluation and Review Technique (PERT)
 - chart, 14, 81, 83, 164
- periodic system prototyping, 61
- personnel costs, 17
- personnel problems, 23, 135–138
- phase-gate review, 132–133, 166
- planning phase, 3–12, 41–62
 - aggregate planning in, 58–59
 - charter and, 41–45
 - defining objectives in, 6–7
 - determining scope, resources, and tasks in, 8–12, 57–60
 - failure in, 123
 - “fuzzy front end” and, 47–51
 - preparing for trade-offs in, 9
 - problem definition in, 5, 48, 49
 - project premortem in, 53–56
 - setting realistic expectations in, 50–51
 - stakeholder identification in, 5–6
- post-evaluation, 27, 157–162, 164
- post-evaluation report, 27–29
- postmortem, 157–162
- premortem, 53–56
- priority setting, 65–71
- problem definition, 5, 48, 49
- problem management, 22–23
- problem-solving skills, 34
- product development, 58–59, 87–100
- productivity, 73–75, 138
- progress reporting, 19, 131–133
- project creep, 57–62
- project dashboard, 132
- project management
 - adaptive approach to, 117–121
 - build-up phase, 4, 13–18, 65–110
 - closeout phase, 4, 23–29, 151–162
 - implementation phase, 4, 18–23, 113–147
 - methodology, evaluation of, 160–161
 - people involved in, 31–37
 - planning phase, 3–12, 41–62
 - tools, 10–12, 14, 24–26
- project management office (PMO), 28, 157, 164
- project manager, 31–32, 45

- project monitoring, 18–19, 127–134
- project network diagram, 78, 80–81, 164
- project objectives
 - alignment with, 37
 - in charter, 43–44
 - clarifying, 66–67
 - defining, 6–7
 - team member alignment with, 37
- project plan, 68–70, 130–131, 159–160
- project premortem, 53–56
- project slowdowns, 20–21
- project steering committee, 36, 165
- project termination, 153
- prospective hindsight, 53–56
- pulse meetings, 129
- punchlist, 154–155, 165
- quality
 - issues, 22–23
 - versus cost and time, 9
 - versus speed, 87–100
 - standards, 7
- rapid development approach, 87–100
- rapid iterative prototyping, 119
- rapid-results initiatives, 124–126
- reports, post-evaluation, 27–29
- research costs, 17
- resources
 - available, 104
 - deploying additional, 20
 - determining, 8–9
- reverse delegation, 15
- risk assessment, 29
- rush to failure, 87–100
- sacred cows, 105
- schedule
 - creating, 14–16, 77–85
 - draft, 79–83
 - errors in, 83–84
 - optimizing, 83–85
 - rushed, 87–100
- scope, 8–9, 20, 45, 58
- scope creep, 22, 57–62, 165
- “scope creep parking lot,” 155–156, 165
- scope statement, 58
- slack time, 84–85
- SMART objectives, 6–7
- software, project monitoring, 18–19
- space costs, 17
- sponsors, 31, 45, 50–51, 102, 118
- stage-gate review, 132–133, 166
- “stakeholder handshake,” 155
- stakeholder reviews, 131
- stakeholders
 - clarifying objectives with, 66–67
 - identifying, 5–6
 - input from, 48–49
 - renegotiating with, 20
- steering committee, 36, 165
- stoplight chart, 132, 165
- sunk costs, 143–146, 165
- supply costs, 17
- tasks
 - approaching iteratively, 119
 - determining major, 8–12
 - examining relationships between, 77–78
 - ongoing, 28
 - prioritizing, 65–71
 - scheduling, 77–85
 - tracking, 127–129

- team
 - assembling your, 13
 - discipline, 107–110
 - productivity problems, 138
 - structure problems, 136
- team building, 104
- team leader, 32–34
- team meetings, 19–22, 113–115
- team members
 - alignment of, with objectives, 37
 - behavioral norms for, 105–106
 - conflicts among, 106, 137
 - contributions and benefits, 35–36
 - criteria for, 34–35
 - debriefing, 27
 - entering and exiting of, 35
 - evaluating performance of, 161
 - monitoring and control of, 127–134
 - organizing, 67–68
 - planning assignments for, 13–14
 - problems with, 23, 135–138
 - technical review, 133, 165
 - technical skills, 34, 35
 - time, versus quality and cost, 9
 - time-boxing, 73–75
 - time frame, 44
 - time slippage, 22
 - tollgate review, 132–133, 166
 - trade-offs, 9
 - training, 13
 - training costs, 17
 - travel costs, 17
 - uncertainty, 47–48, 117–118
 - variance, 166
 - vertical initiatives, 124–125, 126
 - what-if planning, 120
 - white space, 123
 - Work Breakdown Structure (WBS), 8–12, 13, 166
 - “working backward,” 14–15, 49–50
 - workload imbalances, 84

Notes

Notes

Notes

Notes

Notes

Notes

Notes

Notes

Notes

Notes

Smart advice and inspiration from a source you trust.



Whether you need help tackling today's most urgent work challenge or shaping your organization's strategy for the future, *Harvard Business Review* has got you covered.

HBR Guides Series

HOW-TO ESSENTIALS FROM LEADING EXPERTS

HBR Guide to Better Business Writing
HBR Guide to Finance Basics for Managers
HBR Guide to Getting the Right Work Done
HBR Guide to Managing Up and Across
HBR Guide to Persuasive Presentations
HBR Guide to Project Management



HBR's 10 Must Reads Series

IF YOU READ NOTHING ELSE, READ THESE DEFINITIVE ARTICLES FROM HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW

HBR's 10 Must Reads on Change Management
HBR's 10 Must Reads on Leadership
HBR's 10 Must Reads on Managing People
HBR's 10 Must Reads on Managing Yourself
HBR's 10 Must Reads on Strategy
HBR's 10 Must Reads: The Essentials

SAVE

**Buy for your team, clients, or event.
Visit our site for quantity discount rates.**

hbr.org/books/direct-and-bulk-sales

