HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW

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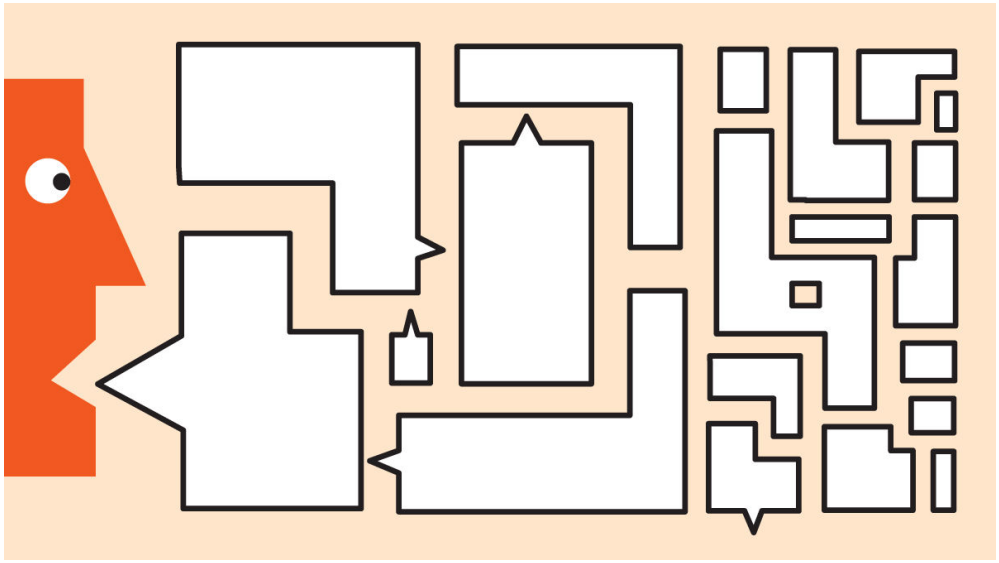
Create a Conversation, Not a Presentation

You and your audience should reach a conclusion together. *by John Coleman*

Published on HBR.org / July 29, 2015 / Reprint H0281B



Nicholas Blechman for HBR

When I worked as a consultant, I was perennially guilty of "the great unveil" in presentations—that tendency to want to save key findings for the last moment and then reveal them, expecting a satisfying moment of awe. My team and I would work tirelessly to drive to the right answer to an organization's problem. We'd craft an intricate presentation, perfecting it right up until minutes or hours before a client meeting, and then we'd triumphantly enter the room with a thick stack of hard copy PowerPoint slides, often still warm from the printer.

But no matter how perfect our presentation looked on the surface, we regularly came across major issues when we were in the room. These one-sided expositions frequently led to anemic conversations. And this hurt our effectiveness as a team and as colleagues and advisers to our clients.

The last-minute nature of the unveiling meant that our clients (or internal teammates to whom we were presenting) did not have time to fully understand the information and were not prepared to participate in discussion. This made our problem-solving, and consequently, our solutions worse. Group intelligence typically trumps individual intelligence, and the insights our clients and teammates could have added with further reflection would have improved our results tremendously.

The great unveil—particularly when unaccompanied by careful pre-discussions with the members of the client team—would also lead us to make interpersonal and organizational mistakes. Team members, seeing a controversial solution for the first time, would become defensive. We'd miss problems, or solutions that had already been tried and failed, and if someone brought these up in the middle of our presentation, we'd end up distracted and confused.

When we created a perfect solution in isolation and made it "ours" to present, we ignored the fact that each individual needed to arrive at the conclusions independently to really understand it, to believe in it, and to be willing to work hard to execute it.

And frankly, relying entirely on the presentation made for boring meetings. No one wants to sit and listen to another person present for hours on end. People want to ask questions and to provide their own insights. They want to problem-solve and debate.

We're all familiar with these issues, and yet the tendency toward "the great unveil" presentation style persists. If we want to foster conversations rather than presentations, what are some effective ways to do so?

First, draft the materials in careful partnership with important members of the audience. Often the best way to start problem-solving is simply to have an initial discussion with everyone involved and get their thoughts on the issues and potential outcomes in play. This helps surface the broadest array of topics and allows everyone to feel heard and included. Then, as the problem-solving evolves, work with these team members consistently at key checkpoints to review the latest information and get their thoughts. Keep them informed throughout the process so that at the end of it, there are no surprises in the room.

Second, design a presentation that invites insight and discussion. For most meetings, you want presentations that have enough detail to be read and understood in advance. You want to include key insights on most pages, along with call-out questions for discussion to keep readers thinking critically about the issues in play. Finally, use "punchline first" communication. If you start the presentation with an executive summary that lists key conclusions, your counterparts can keep those conclusions in mind, testing them as they encounter the more in-depth information throughout the presentation.

Third, send the "final" materials well in advance of any group discussion and require a pre-read. If you show up to the meeting with a warm deck that no one has seen, most thoughtful people will spend their time in the meeting trying to read and absorb it, even if you're describing the material in detail in person. This is particularly true of introverts and others who prefer time to absorb information before speaking about it and drawing their own conclusions. Requiring a pre-

read and offering a few days over which to accomplish it guarantees that everyone has an opportunity to fully consider a presentation in advance of the meeting.

Fourth, avoid marching through any document page-by-page, and disperse responsibility for leading components of the discussion. If everyone has prepared, they will be more informed—but they'll also disengage if you then try to painstakingly read every word. The best approach is to appoint someone to facilitate the conversation, then have that person or others discuss the executive summary, any crucial ideas within the text, and open the dialogue. The presentation or document you've routed then becomes a reference for points of conversation. This works even better when several people help introduce the key facts rather than one lone presenter—establishing the environment for inclusive discussion.

Finally, appoint facilitators to draw out comments and questions from the whole group. If one or two people are primarily responsible for the project or viewed as the senior people or leaders in the room, have them ask questions of the group and assure that everyone's voice is heard. This can be formulaic by surveying each person about key conclusions one-by-one, or with adept facilitators, it can be more free-flowing, drawing out opinions from various people as the conversation develops.

Communication between groups of people is most effective when participants are engaged, and the discussion is both inclusive and collaborative. Creating an ethos of conversation, rather than a one-sided presentation, for critical discussions can better leverage the collective intelligence of the team, make solutions to organizational problems better and more comprehensive, and improve ownership for execution of ideas.

This article was originally published online on July 29, 2015.

John Coleman is the author of the *HBR Guide to Crafting Your Purpose* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2022).

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