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In Presentations, Learn to Say Less

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Published on HBR.org / January 10, 2012 / Reprint [H00871](#)

Imagine that you had 30 seconds instead of 30 minutes at the next executive staff meeting to get your message across. Would you be able to focus your energy on the most compelling way to convey your most important thought?

Honestly, many of us would be flustered by the limitations. But the ability to sharpen an idea so it can be communicated quickly and effectively is becoming critical. In most organizations today, information has expanded while time for analysis and decision-making has shrunk. We can't afford to wade through reams of material and convoluted arguments. We need to get to the core of an issue as quickly as possible.

But zeroing in is not easy. I once sat through a lengthy presentation where the senior manager politely asked the presenter to summarize his point in one or two sentences. The presenter looked like a deer caught in the headlights. Without his slides, notes, charts, and illustrations he was lost. And the presence of all those props was losing everyone else:

After the meeting, the general consensus was that the presentation was unclear.

Why is it so difficult for people to get to the point? Certainly it's not a lack of examples: We are constantly bombarded by sound bites and tweets, all of which convey short bursts of focused information. Yet the skill to turn a "presentation" into a "tweet" remains elusive for many. Let me suggest two largely unconscious reasons for this recurring pattern: Too much data and too little self-confidence.

Managers often deal with problems that have no right answer, which leads us to collect more and more data. Eventually, when the deadline arrives and we still don't have a clear answer, we end up presenting stories, facts, figures, and other interesting tidbits hoping that someone else will be able to make sense out of this ambiguity.

But even if our analysis does lead to a conclusion, many managers lack the self-confidence to state it and stand behind it. What if a senior person disagrees? Will the message upset someone? With these doubts in mind, many of us hedge our bets, avoid uncomfortable discussions, and surround the message with so much fluff that the real conclusion is barely visible.

So how can you get better at clearly conveying a message or helping your people develop this skill? Start with these steps to get it right:

1. When you prepare a presentation, work backwards. Start with the key message or takeaway that you want to convey. Then imagine that you had to send that message via Twitter instead of using slides, charts, documents, and discussions. Force yourself to summarize your key points in no more than 140 characters. Based on that focus, then

think through what other information you'll need as backup and support.

2. Practice making your presentation without any slides or other supporting materials — and limit the time to six minutes. Think of it as a TED talk that's going to be watched by millions of people on YouTube. Doing this (and getting a friend to capture it on video) will force you to be very clear about what you want to say and how to say it with conviction and zest.
3. Put yourself in the shoes of your audience and imagine how they might react to your condensed message. What questions will they ask and what concerns might they have? How will you address these, and how open will you be to alternatives? Speculating about these scenarios ahead of time will give you confidence to state your position clearly and respond to audience feedback.

It's not easy to say less and convey more. But if you learn how to do it well, you'll have much more impact on your audience and on your organization.

What are your suggestions for learning how to say less? All comments are welcome — as long as they are less than 140 characters!

This article was originally published online on January 10, 2012.



Ron Ashkenas is a coauthor of the Harvard Business Review Leader's Handbook and a Partner Emeritus at Schaffer Consulting. His previous books include The Boundaryless Organization, The GE Work-Out, and Simply Effective.