



Business Communication



3 Group Presentation Pitfalls — and How to Avoid Them

Strategies for a polished, unified final product. **by Allison Shapira**

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Many of us have experienced poor group presentations. If you're giving one, it's the last-minute scramble the night before to decide who is presenting which part of the presentation. If you're observing one, it's the chaos of hearing multiple people talking over one another or, even worse, simply reading their slides word-for-word and ignoring their audience.

For many organizations, group presentations are a part of life. Your team may deliver a group pitch to a new client, or perhaps the capstone

exercise of your leadership development program includes a series of group presentations to the head of your business unit. Virtual meetings make these presentations easier than ever because your team doesn't have to be in the same location.

Putting together an effective group presentation takes teamwork and coordination so it doesn't look like a patchwork quilt. And yet, many of us never budget the time to fully prepare.

What's at stake here? Every presentation is an opportunity to build trust with your audience. The cohesiveness of your group presentation is an indicator to your clients of what their relationship will be like working with you. If your presentation is disjointed and disorganized, your client will wonder what the outcome of your project will be. If one member of your team puts down another during the presentation, how will your team treat the client's team? You are presenting a glimpse into your working relationship as well as into your organization's capabilities.

My colleagues and I have been coaching our clients on their group presentations for nearly 20 years. In addition, I'm part of the faculty in an executive education course on persuasive communication at the Harvard Kennedy School. This three-week course culminates in a series of group presentations, which I evaluate along with the other faculty in the program.

Based on this experience, here are some of the common mistakes we see in group presentations, followed by a few best practices to keep you on track.



Video Available Online

To view, please visit this article at [HBR.org](https://hbr.org).

Three Common Missteps

1. Each slide looks like it was designed by a different person.

When no single person is in charge of a presentation, you tend to see a disjointed slide deck of different fonts, text styles, and images. You also see people put their entire script on the slide and read from it word-for-word. This distracts your audience and loses their attention.

2. Presenters talk over one another.

When we don't take the time to decide who is covering what — and how we will transition from one person to the next — we start to interrupt one another, which reduces our professionalism. One of my clients once said to me, "What must our clients be thinking when we interrupt one another?"

3. Forgetting that you are "on."

Once someone finishes their part of a group presentation, they are so relieved to be done speaking that they forget they are still "on stage" or on camera. They start checking their phone or zoning out instead of actively listening to the person speaking next.

Luckily, each of those missteps can be prevented with the right preparation.

Three Best Practices

1. Strategize in advance.

When preparing for any type of presentation, I teach people to ask three questions: *Who is your audience?* *What is your goal?* and *Why you?* For group presentations, it's important to answer those questions together. The last question, *Why you?*, which actually means *Why do you care?*, prompts you to share your own motivations on the topic, helping your team bond as a cohesive unit.

When you add a group presentation to your calendar, block off time to prepare as a group. Use this time to agree on your audience's level of knowledge about the topic, your specific goal for the presentation, the main message, the general outline and who will present each section before each of you starts writing your individual components. This helps you avoid the last-minute stress trying to fit each of your slides into one cohesive unit. Also decide who will take what kinds of questions, or decide who on the team will be in charge of fielding questions and assigning them to the right person to answer.

2. Practice as a group.

Before the presentation, make time for a complete run-through, with slides. Specifically, practice your transitions from one person to the next, such as, *Stacey did a great job talking us through the challenges of entering this new market. Now, I'll provide a few solutions based on our firm's expertise.* Use a timer to ensure you are keeping to the allotted time, or set a realistic time limit based on the format of your meeting, so you ensure plenty of time to field questions. Make time to evaluate the slides together so that the language, font, and use of graphics are consistent.

3. Deliver with confidence and authenticity.

When it's time for the group presentation itself, lead with the speaker who best represents your organization; give junior speakers an opportunity to present in the middle. This ensures a strong first impression and takes some of the pressure off newer speakers. When speaking in person, position yourself so that you can reference the slides but speak directly to the audience. Bring your own personality to the presentation; you could say something like, *If you're from California like I am, then you'll know...* Personal anecdotes that connect to the audience are a terrific way to build trust between the audience and each member of the group presenting.

What changes in a virtual setting?

All the above suggestions hold true in [virtual presentations](#), especially the importance of doing a complete run-through on the virtual platform you'll be using. In these situations, designate one person to run the slides for the entire presentation so each person doesn't have to share their screen. Ensure each speaker has a professional background, adequate lighting on their face, and is clearly audible. Use this [video](#) for reference on how to prepare for virtual presentations. When speaking, look directly into the camera lens so the audience sees and feels your eye contact. When you are not speaking, mute yourself so your background noise doesn't interfere with the speaker.

Done well, a group presentation demonstrates the strength of your team and the quality of your work. Take advantage of this powerful opportunity to build trust with your audience and, as a result, help your organization succeed.

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