



## **A Broken PowerPoint Culture**

By Cliff Atkinson

By the fruit of their PowerPoint labor you shall know them. That's one painful truth that emerged from the final **report** of the Columbia Accident Investigation Board. In its analysis of the accident's organizational causes, the Board viewed "the endemic use of PowerPoint briefing slides instead of technical papers as an illustration of the problematic methods of technical communications at NASA."

The report included a Boeing PowerPoint slide with a withering analysis by information design expert Edward Tufte, who showed how the use of bullet points had filtered, compromised and misrepresented information. "In this context," said the Board, "it is easy to understand how a senior manager might read this PowerPoint slide and not realize that it addresses a life-threatening situation."

Unfortunately it's not just NASA and Boeing that find their cultures both reflected and crippled by this seemingly benign presentation graphics tool. Like huge mirrors hanging on the walls, PowerPoint is an open secret that lays bare the inner thoughts of every organization. For anyone who has the eyes to see, every title, bullet point, image, transition and animation reveals volumes about the tone and tenor of the organization, its openness to creativity and innovation, and its tolerance for thinking and presenting inside and outside of the organizational box.

It is because no one really sees PowerPoint clearly that it has become such a problem today. Corporations struggling to make their finances more transparent are finding that PowerPoint is making their job harder, not easier. Schools fighting to keep their students' attention are discovering that PowerPoint is actually putting them to sleep. And if PowerPoint's many critics are right, the behavior the tool produces is a direct assault on every aspect of healthy organizational culture.

Yet few organizations have the will or capacity to change their PowerPoint culture. The rapid adoption of PowerPoint has laid bare the fact that our culture's visual critical thinking skills are anemic. The past century we were effectively trained to be media consumers. But in a short 16 years, 400 million PowerPoint users are now media creators. At some organizations, PowerPoint has eclipsed written documents as the second most-used communications tool after e-mail. Every day we micro-cast an estimated 40 million shows across a vast unrecognized media network of projection screens in boardrooms, classrooms and courtrooms around the world. Yet we wield this media power with little to no training in audio-visual communication skills.

Faced with millions of users with a serious lack of training, organizations don't know where to begin, so they default to the only solution they know: the PowerPoint template. But this visual cure is worse than the disease, because there's nothing more toxic to an ecology of critical thinking than forcing ideas into a cookie cutter. The price every organization pays for bad PowerPoint is incalculable, in the form of lost productivity, diminished creativity and evaporating intellectual assets.

It will take nothing less than radical action to transform PowerPoint and make it a reflection of an organization's positive attributes. If NASA wants to make sure it never sees another ineffective slide like the one in the report, NASA Administrator Sean O'Keefe should immediately ban the use of bullet points in PowerPoint. And every CEO and president should follow suit. After this surgical strike, every organization needs to give its people the right tools, techniques and training, and then get out of their way. The power of media is now in the hands of the people. The smartest organizations will figure out ways to channel this potential into systems that encourage creativity and reflect best practices. Most organizations can benefit by simply holding PowerPoint to the same quality standards as every other product and service in their organization.

The Columbia PowerPoint slide was only a mirror that reflected NASA's culture; a visual microcosm of the cultural macrocosm. We will know that all of our organizational cultures are starting to improve when we begin to see into our own PowerPoint mirrors a little bit clearer.

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