

# KEY MESSAGE.

Business  
Presentations  
with Structure



WOLFGANG HACKENBERG · CARSTEN LEMINSKY · EIBO SCHULZ-WOLFGRAMM

HAUFE.

**KEY MESSAGE. DELIVERED.**

**HAUFE GROUP**  
Freiburg · Munich



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## INTRODUCTION

**“TO ACHIEVE SOMETHING GREAT, I NEED TWO THINGS:  
A PLAN, AND NOT ENOUGH TIME.”**

LEONARD BERNSTEIN, AMERICAN COMPOSER AND CONDUCTOR

## DO OR DIE AT THE PROJECTOR

It's bizarre, isn't it? A company pours millions of dollars into developing and manufacturing a new product. A huge marketing machine cranks into gear to get it out the door. Yet whether it proves a cash cow or flop will boil down to one thing: to what happens when a handful of employees sit with the customer to present it. All they can count on at this meeting, apart from their own charm, is the business presentation on their computer. And after the introductions it is this font of data, this business card, and this source of inspiration all wrapped up in one — this magic tool — to which everyone's attention will turn.

But what if it falls flat? If no sparks fly? If the customer fails to be convinced, mainly because the presentation's twisted logic could never convince anyone of anything? So much — perhaps everything — depends on the contents of its handful of slides. Yet the glazed-over eyes of the customer soon make it clear that propriety is the only remaining reason to keep running through them to the end.

We can all agree that this is a **communication nightmare**. But an inability to communicate effectively can carry serious risks even when the stakes are lower. We can all surely agree also that, when it comes to communication, one of the two parties — the “transmitter” or the “receiver” — has to do the heavy lifting, with either the former **working hard to make the message intelligible or the latter working hard to interpret it**. Since the receiver simply must not be burdened with this work, the transmitter always needs to make sure that the message comes across as intended, framing the arguments and ideas in a way that sparks interest, having gained a thorough understanding of the topic first.

## AL GORE'S "INCONVENIENT TRUTH"

Late February 2007. University of Miami. Al Gore takes the stage. Within minutes he has 7,000 people in his thrall, sweeping them along with him. You can sense their enthusiasm grow. He stands before them, fresh and lively. Previously considered rather stiff and wooden, the former vice president manages to win over the audience, both for a topic that is so close to his own heart and for him as a person.

He is driven by an idea, a mission: climate protection. **His message:** we need to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and stop global warming. **His medium:** slides, prepared using nothing but standard presentation software.

This presentation, with its filmic quality and brimming with the conviction of a presenter who has completely internalized the message he is communicating, also serves as a platform for Gore himself. This talk in Miami is just one of many he has given on the topic across the globe. Time and time again he has delivered this presentation, has voiced his concern, has captivated his audience.



"BIG IDEAS CAN  
GET YOU FAR"

The roots of Al Gore's spectacular rebirth stretch back to a time before his Washington career. Back in the 1970s he had already been involved in environmental activism, sounding the alarm on global warming, and — we should emphasize here — often showing slides during the talks he gave on the topic. In 2003 he picked up the thread once more, traveling around the world and professionalizing his public appearances.

The movie director Davis Guggenheim was so impressed with Gore's slide show that he decided to film it. The result shook people out of their slumber globally, and was awarded several prizes, an Academy Award among them.

Although we are still in the early stages of climate protection, Gore has nonetheless managed to set many wheels in motion. He has reached and persuaded a wide section of society. And on a very different level, for those of us with a professional interest in communication, **Gore's success has served as a powerful reconfirmation of the enormous potential of his basic medium — the presentation.**

## ABOUT THIS BOOK

While each of the two examples of communication given so far relate to a traditional presentation setting, this may be a little misleading: presentations today are consumed for the most part on a computer screen, with the author not present. **This book is designed, therefore, to give you the skills to create business presentations that can be understood solely in terms of what is presented on each of their slides even when no one is there to guide the recipient through them.**

We explain how you can reduce what you have to say to its essentials and be left with a clear and unambiguous message for your audience. The aim of the book, therefore, is to help you quickly and easily achieve success as a communicator. At the end of the book you should be in a position to create self-explanatory presentations with action-oriented messages that inspire the reaction you want in the addressees. Your presentation will, if you follow our suggestions, consist of fewer slides, with each slide providing a much clearer overview of the points you wish to communicate.

Because of the deluge of presentations with which people in business now have to cope, we focus in this book on the classic business presentation. Please note, though, that the underlying method can be applied to other types of communication, such as speeches, team meetings, lectures, emails, and even phone calls. Tips on presentation techniques, such as on body language and pacing, are, however, not to be found in this book. And this book is most definitely not a guide to PowerPoint.

## COMMUNICATING INTO THE FAST TRACK

Every day we see evidence of the importance of communication: colleagues and line managers need to be kept up-to-date, customers and investors need to be kept excited, stakeholders need to be kept on board. In your own job you will often need to get decision-makers onside, convince doubters, and appease critics. As was clear long before Al Gore came on the scene, **your most brilliant thoughts, your best ideas, your sharpest insights, your boldest innovations will get you just short of nowhere if you cannot communicate them clearly, convincingly, and in a way that has people act on or implement them.**

All levels of the hierarchy and all fields of activity need to rise to the challenge of communication. The recent graduate swamped by project work, the young professional looking to stand out from her peers, the senior manager who spends more time consuming presentations than giving them: nobody in business can avoid immersion in communication processes — which, furthermore, always take place against a backdrop of time pressure.

**The goal of this book is to show you how to produce and use structured business presentations to communicate effectively with real impact. Effective communication is a challenge you must face head-on if you are to shift your career into the fast track.**

## MAKE YOURSELF UNDERSTOOD

**Turning back to Al Gore for a moment, what is it exactly that makes his presentations so distinctive?**

**A few things stand out:**

- He knows how to captivate his audience, touching them on an emotional level.
- He avoids using bullet points, turning instead to more effective visual elements, such as graphs, tables, and photographs.
- He presents facts and figures in a way that does not just wash over his audience.
- He tells stories, sometimes very personal ones.
- He has an attention-grabbing key message, which he repeats like a refrain: “The only thing we’re lacking is the will to act, but in America that will is a renewable resource.”

**He had a plan.** And with this plan he came up with something that, for those of us working in the field, is an ideal example of communication, one that drives its message home and leaves an impression on its recipients. This result is what we too want when, at a much lower level, we send emails and memos, write reports, and give presentations.

Now, none of us is Al Gore. And few of us have access to his resources (Gore draws, for example, on the advice of high-level professional consultants, with whom he practices his presentations meticulously, well in advance of delivering them). Above all: we will seldom find ourselves speaking to our target group in person, since live presentations are very much the exception nowadays. It is much more likely that we will, for example, send a report or presentation in advance to one or more recipients

and then, depending on how they like it, receive an invitation to present our ideas in person. If the live presentation goes well, we are often then asked to make the slides available for distribution. In both the case of sending the presentation ahead and of leaving it behind afterward, it is not in our power to determine where it will end up and who will read it. In both cases we will also not be able to guide the recipient through the presentation or be able otherwise to influence their understanding of it. Rather, the recipient will in these cases have to make sense of it on her own. So what we include in the presentation always needs to be self-explanatory. **Day in, day out, we need to make sure that the messages we transmit are not only logically consistent but also easy to understand without our necessarily being there to guide the reader through them.**

## LOGIC IS THE KEY

*“The problem with most bad presentations I see is not the speaking, the slides, the visuals, or any of the things people obsess about. Instead, it’s the lack of thinking.”*

(ANDREW DLUGAN, CONFESSIONS OF A PUBLIC SPEAKER)

FIRST THINK,  
THEN INK!

In any given corporation or firm there are usually plenty of employees with great language skills, artistic talents, and technical ability. The reports they write and presentations they produce will often be full of flowing language and bedazzling imagery. These documents, however, often fall flat. The core of what the authors want to say remains buried and out of sight of the intended recipients. Why does this happen?

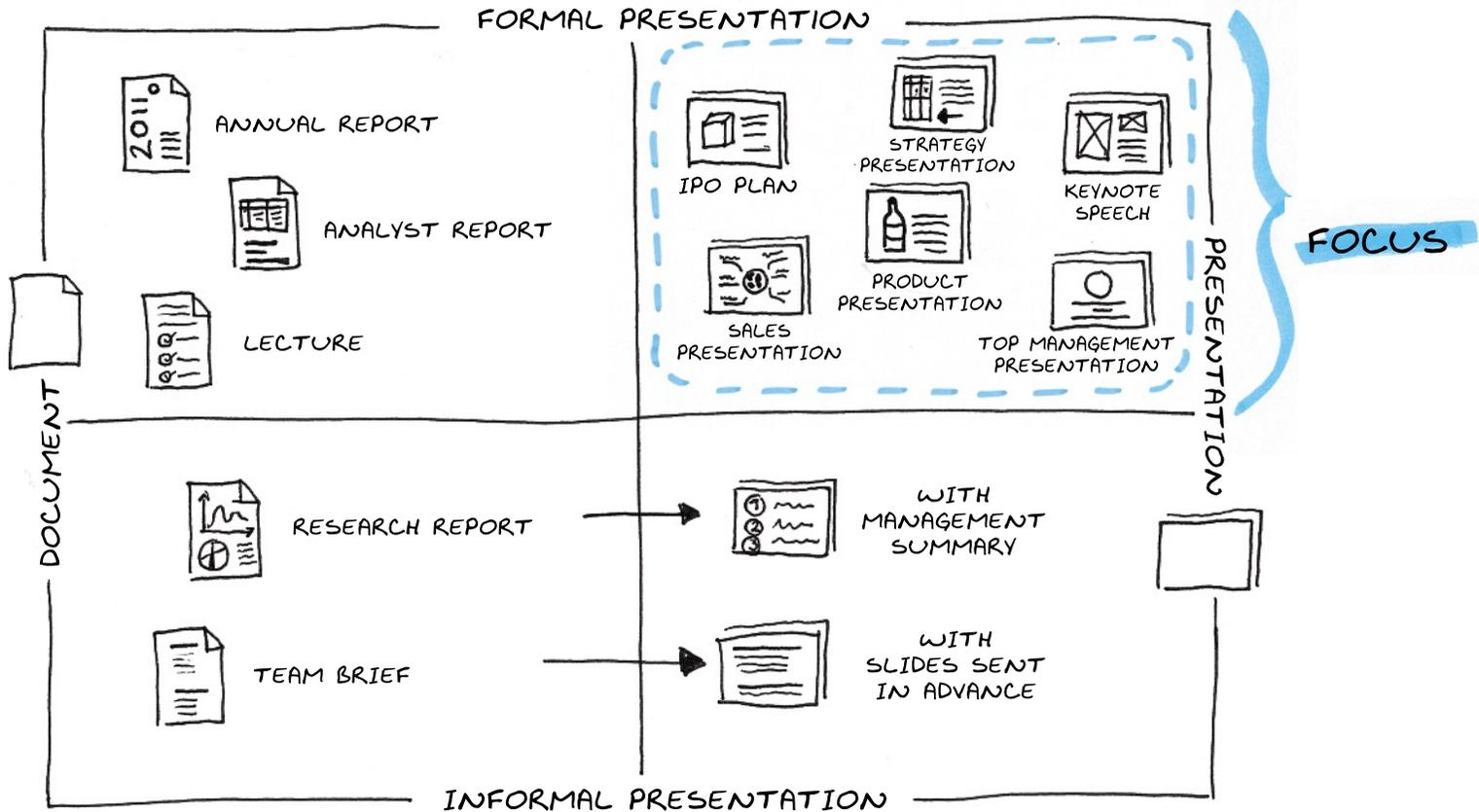
The problem is — as public speaking coach Andrew Dlugan puts it — a “lack of thinking.” **It is that not enough thought is put into the task at hand, the solution, the arguments to use, and especially the target audience or readership.** Authors often fail to spend enough time getting to grips with the material and beating a logical path through it or making sure that what they have to say is tailored to the intended audience. The consequences are obvious.

## STRUCTURE FIRST

There is a wealth of literature that focuses on the visual aspect of presentations: on which colors to use, which diagrams to produce, which images to include. Whole industries have grown up around these questions, with countless agencies only too happy to offer cosmetic procedures of varying effectiveness to nip and tuck your charts and illustrations. Good presentations are commonly equated with eye-catching slides. But this is a big mistake. Good presentations are ones that achieve their purpose. **The measure of success is their effect — not their visual design.** Effectiveness here means achieving whatever was intended, such as a definite change in the addressees' behavior or in their understanding of a particular situation.

The difference between effective and ineffective communication is to be found in the way the communicator shapes her arguments and in the ease with which the recipients can follow these on the way, it is hoped, to being won over by them. **The anatomy of the presentation — its internal structure — is of primary importance. In short: first the logic, then the look.**

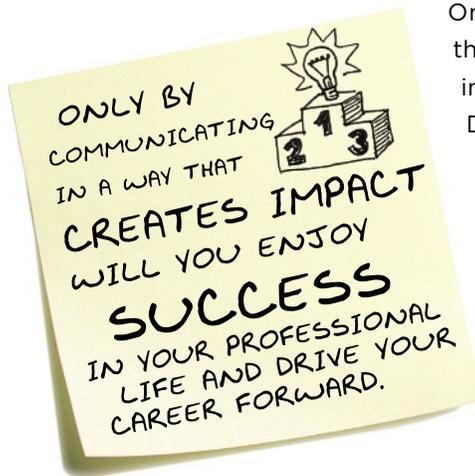
This is not to say that you should not invest time in making your slides look nice. On the contrary, and as you will see, getting the visual aspect right is an integral part of communicating effectively. But it is only one part: the much more fundamental prerequisite of effective communication is to identify the logical structure of the topic. Just as the visual element should make the topic less daunting to your audience, so too should your identification of this structure make the topic less daunting to you.



## TRAINING IS EVERYTHING

**In a nutshell: to help ensure that you not only hang on to your job but also excel at it, you need to be able to communicate effectively. Happily, this skill can be learned.**

With the methods presented in this book you should — given a certain amount of discipline on your part — soon be able to order your thoughts and unleash your full powers of persuasion on others. We will lead you step-by-step through the construction of a powerful argument and give you an exciting tour of the fundamental principles of effective communication. The knowledge you gain should be of direct benefit to your career.



Once you have grasped the methods, the next step will be to get comfortable with them: “practice makes perfect” applies here, as elsewhere. But even after just a few initial runs you will likely see significant improvements in your ability to communicate. Do not hold back from applying these methods in full, especially when the stakes are high for you or your company.

For certain formal business presentations (such as to the board or to customers) the rules about content, structure, and visual style will usually be much more stringent than in the case of documents produced for, say, a team meeting. The more formal the environment for which the business presentation is intended, the more care needs to be taken while producing it.

## FROM ONE PRACTITIONER TO ANOTHER

As former business managers and consultants we come from the world of actual practice, and we have produced this guide in the first instance for our fellow practitioners. Everything we have experienced over the years in the area of structured communication is what spurred us to delve more deeply into this topic and to develop the approach that we now teach in our seminars.

Our approach involves providing a set of tools with which professionals can improve the way they perform as a communicator in their day-to-day work. Our approach builds on Barbara Minto's Pyramid Principle, which we have adapted in the light of our years of experience and fine-tuned for our own use. Both as trainers and in our work as strategy consultants it has always helped us win over clients and colleagues to our way of thinking.

And the feedback we receive after our seminars gives us ever-greater confidence in the effectiveness of our approach. Internationally — from the United States to China — participants tell us they have experienced a significant improvement in their ability to think analytically and communicate effectively as a result of what they learned from us. In this book we therefore focus on the practical, everyday benefits of our approach and try, as much as we can, to steer clear of mundane theory.



### **Why So Many Presentations Miss Their Target**

*"PowerPoint makes us stupid." (Gen. James N. Mattis)*

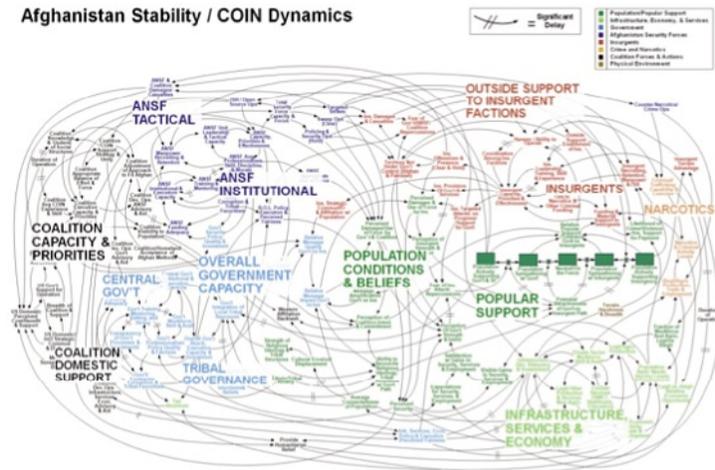
Presentations can be found today in almost all areas of professional life. And wherever they show up, the same dire consequences are rarely far behind. Many of us experience an almost Pavlovian response to presentations: on goes the projector, out tunes the brain. Expectations are often the culprit: bad experience after bad experience has made it difficult for us to believe that anything positive can come from a business presentation.

And it is surely true that very few of the countless slides served up to us are worth the time it would take to digest them. The reason: most of them misinform rather than inform, demotivate rather than enthuse. How many of us are not familiar with slides groaning under the weight of too much content, with those never-ending streams of meaningless graphics, with the tedious use of clip art to illustrate the self-evident, or with that terrible feeling of death-by-bullet-point caused by the very worst presentations?

Bloated and unstructured presentations fail in their key duty: to inform and persuade. This failure can have many consequences. It may suggest, for example, that the author is herself not yet comfortable with the material and that this is why she has been unable to reduce it to its essentials. If we are being honest, many of us can surely agree that it is sometimes hard to resist the temptation to hide our own lack of understanding behind a wall of eye-catching graphics.

EXCURSUS

### Afghanistan Stability / COIN Dynamics



U.S. Brigadier General H.R. McMaster once made a very insightful comment about how our use of presentations can be fatal: “It’s dangerous because it can create the illusion of understanding and the illusion of control.” The illusion of understanding and control — especially in the military realm, where presentations are, as elsewhere, now becoming ubiquitous — can quickly lead to our undoing. These words caused quite a stir. High-ranking officers expressed concern that discussion, critical thinking, and decision making were becoming stifled by the increasing reliance on slides.