PowerPoint is easy for presenter, hard for audience. Jeff Bezos says: “The traditional kind of corporate meeting starts with a presentation. Somebody gets up in front of the room and presents with a PowerPoint presentation, some type of slide show. In our view you get very little information, you get bullet points. This is easy for the presenter, but difficult for the audience. And so instead, all of our meetings at Amazon are structured around a 6 page narrative memo.”

“Full sentences are harder to write. They have verbs. The paragraphs have topic sentences. There is no way to write a six-page, narratively structured memo and not have clear thinking. When you have to write your ideas out in complete sentences, complete paragraphs it forces a deeper clarity.”

Why don’t you read the memos in advance? “Time doesn’t come from nowhere. This way you know everyone has the time. The author gets the nice warm feeling of seeing their hard work being read. If you have a traditional presentation, executives interrupt. If you read the whole 6 page memo, on page 2 you have a question but on page 4 that question is answered. And so that is what we do, we just sit and read.”

- The meeting really will begin with silence as everyone digests the content.
- Each participant may have his/her own way for digesting that information, i.e. some may take notes on the document; others won’t.
The participants in these meetings are incredibly sharp, and you can expect the meeting to be among the most difficult and intellectually challenging that you will ever attend.

- Data is king, and as noted, the appendix better be well researched, or it is likely to be your last 6-pager.

- Reportedly, Jeff will consistently surprise the presenter with at least one question that is the proverbial "two steps ahead", considering big picture and macro factors that the presenter may never have considered him/herself.

The six-page narratives are structured like a dissertation defense:

1. Context or question.

2. Approaches to answer the question – by whom, by which method, and their conclusions

3. How is your attempt at answering the question different or the same from previous approaches

Now what? – That is, what’s in it for the customer, the company, and how does the answer to the question enable innovation on behalf of the customer?

- It forces deep thinking. The 6-page data-rich narratives that are handed out are not easy to write. Most people spend weeks preparing them in order to be clear. Needless to say, this forces incredible, deep thinking. The document is intended to stand on its own. Amazon’s leaders believe the quality of a leader’s writing is synonymous with the quality of their thinking.

- It respects time. Each meeting starts with silent reading time. When I asked why they don’t send out the narratives in advance, the response was, “we know people don’t have the time to read the document in advance.”

- It levels the playing field. Think of the introverts on your team who rarely speak during a meeting. Introverted leaders at Amazon “speak” through these well-prepared memos. They get a chance to be heard, even though they may not be the best presenter in the organization.

- It leads to good decisions. Because rigorous thinking and writing is required – all Amazon job candidates at a certain level are required to submit writing samples, and junior managers are offered writing style classes – team members are forced to take an idea and think about it completely.

- It prevents the popularity bias. The logic of a well thought out plan speaks louder than the executive who knows how to “work the halls” and get an idea sold through
The downside to the 6-pager is that writing a good six-page evidence-based narrative is hard work. Precision counts and it can be hard to summarize a complex business in 6 pages, so teams work for hours preparing the document for these reviews. But that preparation does two things. First, it requires the team writing the document to really deeply understand their own space, gather their data, understand their operating tenets and be able to communicate them clearly. The second thing it does is a great document enables the senior executives to internalize a whole new space they may not be familiar with in 30 minutes of reading thus greatly optimizing how quickly and how many different initiatives these leaders can review.

References:

- Amazon Staff Meetings: “No PowerPoint”
- The Beauty of Amazon's 6-Pager
- Jeff Bezos’s Peculiar Management Tool for Self-Discipline
- The 6-page memo: What I learned from Amazon

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Ashish Kulkarni
GM Bajaj Electricals Ltd, Mumbai
Deep thoughts needs to be converted (after discussion & deliberations) into PPT for decisions
Like  Reply

Thinh Nguyen, CISSP, TOGAF, CCSK
Sr. Enterprise Architect - Security, Big Data, and Cloud Architecture
I’ve been communicating all these exact ideas, using PowerPoint slides. Think Jeff and I would work well together ... one day ... on this blue origin or somewhere else.
Like  Reply

There is 1 other comment. Show more.