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Team Presentations: Prepare Like a Winning Relay Team

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Imagine this: Your industry isn't doing well and hitting your company's year-end numbers depends on the next big design win. You are leading the design team and are confident you have the best solution. Your team has one final presentation to the customer, and then they will decide if they will go with your solution.

Sara begins the presentation and is off to a good start. However, less than 10 minutes into the presentation you realize that Sara has gone over her time and is no longer on topic. A couple of minutes go by and finally, the senior guy in the audience interrupts, flips through his handouts and says, *"I'm not sure where you're going with this and how it relates to us, but please flip to slide 18 and have someone present from there. Then we will finally get some information that pertains to us."*

Unfortunately, this scenario is all too familiar. Team presentations are much like a relay race where the best, fastest collection of people doesn't always win. Similar to how a relay team prepares for the big race, a group of presenters needs to prepare as a team, practice their transitions or handoffs between speakers, and dedicate time to deliberately practice the presentation together. Let's look at preparation, transitions, and deliberate practice in more detail.

Prepare Individually and as a Team

A team presentation requires more preparation because there are more individuals and messages to coordinate. Our experience suggests that when it comes to team presentations, individual experts go off alone to prepare their slides, and then come together to review each other's content. This is a classic recipe for failure. Instead, teams that perform best sit down together without slides and start by focusing on their audience. They ask important questions like:

- Who is the audience and what do they already know about our topic?
- What does the audience really want to know at this point in time?
- What information is important to us, but not really that important to the audience? (Hint: this is a good place to cut out information)

Once your team has answered these questions, you'll want to develop a core message. The core message or bottom line of your presentation serves as the one theme that will tie all the presenters' content together so the audience leaves with a clear overall message. Now your team can go off and do some individual work creating content.

Pass the Baton Between Presenters and Main Points

We've all watched with disappointment as a relay team, who looks like they're going to win, goes into its final baton pass and drops the baton. In this situation, it is almost impossible to recover. Transitions in a team presentation are just as critical. They are the handoffs that link your main points and individual speakers together. Transitions are an opportunity to reinforce your core message, summarize key information, and move your audience farther along in your story.

To transition easily and effectively, a presenter should provide a brief summary of their content and then introduce the next topic and presenter. The key here is to focus on the content and how what you just covered connects to the next set of information. Transitions are typically two to three sentences and can be as simple as, *"Now that I've reviewed the product specifications and how they meet your requirements, James is going to talk about our system on a chip solution."*

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Practice like a Team on the Track

A professional relay team would never even think about going into a competition without doing some trial runs first. Teams delivering presentations need to do the same. They need to deliberately practice, which includes:

- **Standing up and practicing the entire presentation** from beginning to end
- **Practicing your transitions** (baton passes) so they are clear and connect individuals and content
- **Measuring your performance.** Are you keeping to time limits? Are you focused on the audience and not reading a bunch of data-filled slides?
- **Planning for mistakes.** What will you do if someone drops the baton? What will you do if an audience member takes you off track? What will you do if you suddenly have 15 minutes less than planned?

If your team finds itself in a situation where it doesn't have time to practice, here's the "crunch method" for deliberate practice:

Nail your opening: As a team, talk through and define your core message and how you'll open your presentation. Your core message should be stated in your opening and then supported throughout your entire presentation. Have your first presenter rehearse the opening with the entire team (even if it's over the phone).

Rehearse your transitions: The "baton passes" can make or break your presentation. Write out your transitions and practice each transition statement aloud as a team to make sure you have a tight, smooth presentation.

Nail your close: Decide as a team how to wrap up your presentation. The close should include a summary of what your team covered; remind the audience of what you want them to do (pick your design, invest in your company, or support your project); and remind them of your core message.

People remember what comes first and what comes last—so make sure your opening and close are well planned and rehearsed.

Every presenter wants to avoid the sense of panic they feel when a presentation isn't going well. The best way to avoid a bad team presentation is to train like a relay team and prepare to win the race. Just like a relay team would rehearse its baton passes and practice on the track, your team should prepare content that is focused around a core message, rehearse your transitions, and deliberately practice. Imagine a team presentation that is much better than one you could do on your own. Now you're thinking like a winning relay team member.

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