

# Beyond Bullet Points, 3rd Edition

Using Microsoft® PowerPoint® to  
Create Presentations That Inform,  
Motivate, and Inspire

**CLIFF ATKINSON**

COPYRIGHT © 2011 BY CLIFF ATKINSON  
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

## BONUS CHAPTER 11

# Preparing Others for BBP with a Five-Minute Exercise

### **IN THIS CHAPTER, YOU WILL:**

- Prepare others for the Beyond Bullet Points (BBP) approach by opening a dialog about PowerPoint.
- Prompt your audience to do the talking.
- Experience how a simple exercise opens the door to a new way of thinking.

**INTRODUCING** Beyond Bullet Points (BBP) to people who use Microsoft PowerPoint in a conventional way can be a tough sell. It's no wonder—if all your audience has ever experienced is someone reading bullet points from slides, the headline-making BBP presentation in Chapter 1 can be hard to imagine. Comparing the conventional PowerPoint approach with the BBP approach is like comparing apples and oranges—although the two are definitely the fruit of PowerPoint software, that's about all they have in common. A BBP presentation doesn't look, feel, or act like a conventional presentation, and it can be a difficult concept to fathom unless you've experienced it yourself. Because BBP is such a difficult approach to imagine, it helps if you give people a very quick peek of what presentations could be like if they looked at PowerPoint differently.

This chapter explains what I do to facilitate the process of change when I give an in-person workshop. My basic approach is to first start a dialog with the people in the room—there's such a big gap between BBP and the everyday experience of PowerPoint that it's worth the time to step back for a bit, talk about people's expectations for PowerPoint, and review how the conventional approach works for them. Then I let people experience PowerPoint in a profoundly different way with a five-minute exercise. This chapter

attempts to share that experience with you. But be forewarned—when you click the button to start the exercise, you will instantly transform a tool that people think is not social into a very social media that extracts engagement and meaning from the people in a room in a way they've never seen.

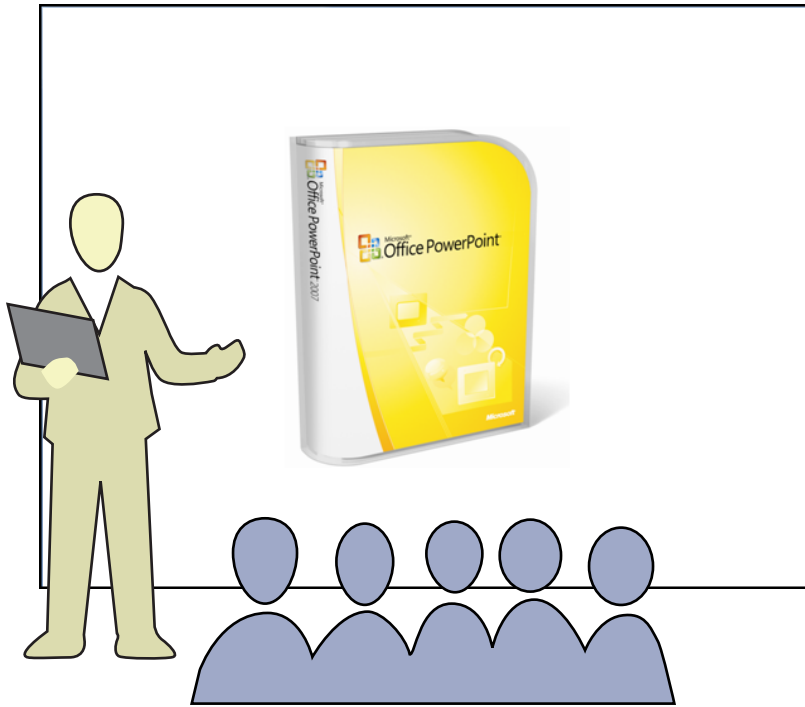
## ■ A Cross-Country Conversation

If you ask people to describe their typical experience of PowerPoint presentations, they are unlikely to use the phrase “frighteningly powerful” as the *Fortune* magazine reporter did when describing the BBP presentation in Chapter 1. Instead, they use far different language to explain what it's like to be an audience member these days. It turns out people have very strong opinions about PowerPoint presentations, but they're frustrated because presenters don't usually ask them what they think. So I traveled across the country to visit a wide range of organizations, large and small, to hear firsthand what people thought about the presentation software tool and to give them a quick taste of what BBP is like.

No matter what people do within an organization—whether they work in management, sales, marketing, education, corporate training, or some aspect of the law—the role PowerPoint plays in their lives these days is striking. In two short decades, PowerPoint has changed how people communicate in ways that have gone largely unrecognized and unheralded. PowerPoint is one of the most highly visible tools in our culture—we use it to project images on screens of every size, in every imaginable context, for every imaginable purpose. But at the same time that PowerPoint is visible, it's also invisible in the sense that we tend to take it for granted. The conventional way we use the tool is so thoroughly ingrained in our experience, it's hard to imagine it can do anything more than what we do with it today—that's why it's important to open up a dialog about it.

Every time I meet a new group, I start with a question. As you probably do when you use PowerPoint software on a computer during your live presentations, I stand at the front of the room while a data projector displays a magnified image of the PowerPoint slide on a large screen behind me, as shown in Figure 11-1. On my first slide, I display a picture of a PowerPoint software box on the screen and ask the audience, “When you think of the word *PowerPoint*, what comes to mind?”

As described in Chapter 7, asking an open-ended question at the start of a presentation is a good way to find out what's on your audience members' minds. You can then gauge their mood and adjust your tone and topic appropriately as you make your points going forward.



**FIGURE 11-1** What comes to mind when you think of the word *PowerPoint*?

After I show the software box on the screen and ask people what comes to mind, someone might say “Presentations!” I repeat this response as I write the word *Presentations!* directly on the Tablet PC screen, and this text also appears on the screen behind me. I continue taking responses, repeating them as I write them on the screen, as shown in Figure 11-2. As I engage my audience in conversation at the start, I get a sense of the audience, what they think about PowerPoint, and what role it plays in their lives. Most people I talk to have used PowerPoint software themselves, and even if they haven’t, they have all experienced many presentations that were created with the software.

**Tip**





**FIGURE 11-2** Recording the audience responses during a PowerPoint presentation by writing directly on the screen with a Tablet PC with a stylus.

"Slides!" someone else says. When PowerPoint entered the scene two decades ago, people commonly paid service agencies to produce 35-mm slides or transparencies that speakers used to project information on a screen during a presentation. PowerPoint made this expensive and time-consuming process cheap and fast, giving everyone with a PC the ability to create his or her own slides. Today the word *slides* is almost synonymous with PowerPoint, as are *deck* and *foils*, which are also common terms used in organizations to refer to PowerPoint files.

"Graphics!" is a common response that I hear and write down on the screen. PowerPoint is part of a broader cultural trend that long ago moved much of our information from books to screens. People experience image and sound on television, in films, and on their computer screens, and they expect to do the same when they walk into a meeting room, where the use of PowerPoint is the norm. Long before today's do-it-yourself media phenomenon, PowerPoint put the power to make and distribute multimedia in the hands of millions. When you create a PowerPoint presentation, you in fact are making media, and when you display it on a screen, e-mail it to colleagues, or post it on a Web site, you are distributing it. This unrecognized media network conveys enormous amounts of information every day, yet few people see the network as a network.

"My life!" someone says, as others in the room laugh in agreement. PowerPoint has become so thoroughly integrated in people's daily working lives that it's common for people to spend much of their day working with the software tool. "The default!" is another response. With its lion's share of the presentation software market, PowerPoint is the tool people open first to create visual media for projection. PowerPoint moved well beyond the sphere of business presentations long ago—today people commonly use it for legal presentations, academic presentations, political presentations, and even religious presentations. The reality is that PowerPoint is everywhere, and it is here to stay.

"PowerPoint culture!" someone says, as others in the room nod in agreement. People who use the software in organizations know that an unseen culture and unspoken assumptions shape every bullet point, chart, and illustration. As you might know from personal experience, PowerPoint is deeply entrenched and even inseparable from this culture, complete with distinct histories, rules, conventions, styles, and vocabularies. To show up without a PowerPoint presentation in many of these contexts would raise eyebrows, because using PowerPoint can be a sign of cultural acceptance. In these settings, PowerPoint also conveys credibility—people assume that if you've taken the time to put together slides, you must have spent time thinking about the topic, and if you don't have a deck, you're not as credible as those who do.

"Bullet points!" This style of presenting information primarily with bulleted lists of text is the norm in PowerPoint. "Templates!" The conventional PowerPoint approach uses a single master file that is intended to establish a consistent graphical style for every slide. You can find the root of your organization's PowerPoint culture in its organizational template. The investment and important decisions made in this single critical PowerPoint file determine whether every presentation at that organization will help or hurt its presenters and, in turn, its mission.

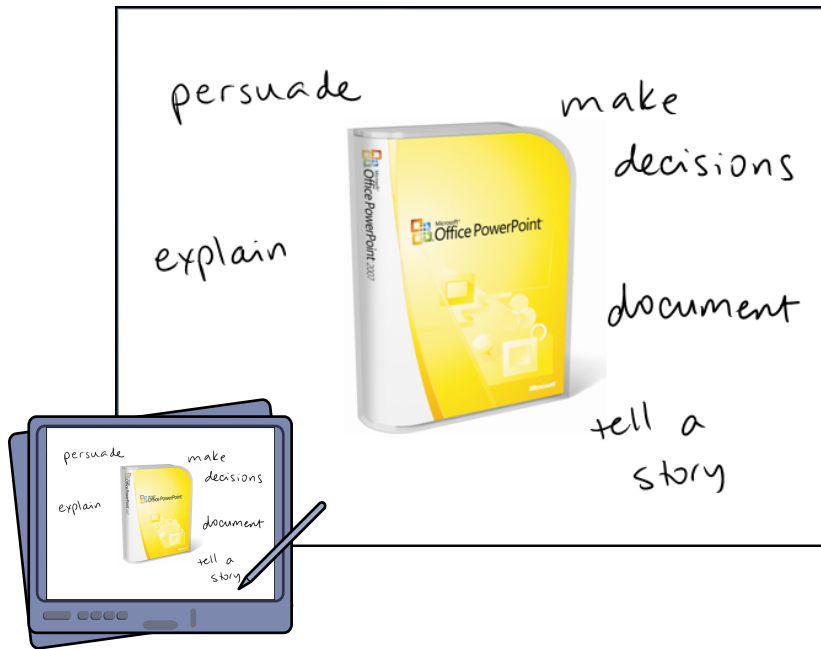
"Hate it!" As much as people might love PowerPoint in some ways, it turns out they hate it in other ways. Perhaps no other software tool stirs up as much strong negative emotion, prompting cartoon parodies, editorials, essays, and periodic waves of blog postings. The language people use is strikingly strong, including "Death by PowerPoint!" or "Gag!" or "Torture!" or even "Soul-crushing!" These responses are important to address with the audience, but first I clarify with the group exactly what they expect from PowerPoint software.

Next in the workshop, I ask, "When you sit at your computer and open up PowerPoint, what types of things do you intend to accomplish with the tool?" I click my remote control to advance to the next slide—another PowerPoint software box on a blank background. As we continue our conversation, people respond and I repeat their responses as I write them down on the Tablet PC screen, as shown in Figure 11-3.

Their responses most often include

- **“Persuade”** People say they use PowerPoint to change people’s minds, to “motivate,” “change behavior,” “sell,” “raise money,” or “get a budget approved.”
- **“Make decisions”** People aim to get things done with PowerPoint—for example, to “solve a problem,” to “galvanize” or “gain consensus,” to “gain approval,” or to “get buy-in.”
- **“Explain”** People want to “communicate key points,” “clarify,” “update,” “inform,” “focus,” and “illustrate an idea.” People use PowerPoint to “simplify,” “summarize,” “reinforce,” and “synthesize.”
- **“Tell a story”** People use the software to “hold the context,” “keep myself on track,” “tailor a message to an audience,” “engage,” and sometimes “entertain.”
- **“Document”** People say they use PowerPoint to “report,” “provide data and backup for my ideas,” “print handouts,” and “hold ideas.” To some extent, the popularity of PowerPoint software is tied to deeper changes at work in our global culture, including a rapid shift from using text as the primary mode of communication to using multimedia as the preferred mode. This can be seen in many organizations in which PowerPoint has eclipsed written reports and memos as the primary means by which people communicate information with one another in extended form.

In short, people say that they use PowerPoint to accomplish the most important work they do, both at an individual and organizational level. From the strategic to the tactical, you probably use PowerPoint to persuade, make decisions, explain, tell your stories, and document intellectual assets. From the quarterly report to the sale of a company to the opening statement of a trial to the policies and proposals of government, PowerPoint is at center stage today. It’s no wonder all of us demand a great deal from the software tool.



**FIGURE 11-3** People say that they're clear about what they want to accomplish when they use PowerPoint.

## The People Issues

The next slide is similar to the previous slides, except that here I sketch red horns and a pitchfork on the PowerPoint software box, as shown in Figure 11-4. At this point, I say, "Some people say that the way PowerPoint is used can have a negative impact. When you are an audience member at a PowerPoint presentation, in what ways does the presenter's use of the tool negatively impact the relationship between you and the presenter?"





**FIGURE 11-4** People say that the conventional PowerPoint approach often harms the relationship between speakers and presenters.

Their responses usually include comments along these lines:

- **“Reading the slides!”** This is the most common response, along with “The presenter should just e-mail it to me!” and “It’s just a transcript!” and “Just give me the handout and save us both some time!” For a tool that was supposed to help us present more effectively to one another, it often causes many people to prefer not be at the presentation at all rather than endure someone reading bullet points to them. The tendency of presenters to simply read the slides is especially “Frustrating!” because people don’t know whether they should look at the text on the slide or at the speaker.
- **“Using slides as a crutch!”** People say this frequently, or “Hiding behind it!” or “Using it as a cheat sheet!” These are tough words for any speaker to hear, especially if you know that audiences automatically expect you to be “unprepared,” “lazy,” and ultimately “disappointing.”

- **“Lose their personality!”** You might want to be natural and relaxed when you present, but people say that bullet points make the atmosphere formal and stiff and “unnatural” with “no spontaneity.” Worse, people say that speakers “overcompensate” by adding animations and special effects to divert attention away from their own lack of organization, rehearsal, or speaking skill.
- **“Antisocial!”** People say that conventional PowerPoint presentations leave audiences feeling detached and disconnected from the others in the room. Many people today aim for a more collaborative and conversational presentation, yet in reality, the results are “Silencing!” or “One way!” or “Condescending!” or even “Dominating!” In no uncertain terms, audiences are saying to presenters that the conventional PowerPoint approach diminishes a presenter’s public speaking ability and degrades the relationship between the presenter and them.

The comments that people make about their bad experiences are harsh, but if you’re a presenter who uses PowerPoint, you need to hear them. There can be no illusion that showing a PowerPoint slide on a screen as you begin your talk will automatically fill your audience with anticipation. Instead, people are saying the mere sight of a PowerPoint slide often fills them with dread because they expect to be bored, overwhelmed, and frustrated. Many audience members say their experiences have been so consistently bad that for you as a presenter, the PowerPoint deck is literally stacked against you before you have even spoken the first word of your presentation.

## ■ The Information Issues

The comments people make about the conventional PowerPoint approach generally fall into two categories. The first has to do with how the conventional approach affects the presenter, the audience, or the relationship between them. This category covers the responses up to now, so I write the word *People* on the upper left of the screen, as shown in Figure 11-5. The second category has to do with the impact of the conventional approach on the material being presented, so I write the word *Information* on the upper right side of the screen to cover the rest of the responses that now follow.



**FIGURE 11-5** People also say that the conventional approach impairs the audience's understanding of the information that is presented.

Here are some typical responses:

- **"Too simplistic!"** People often say this, along with "dumbed down" and "makes me feel like a second grader." It's not only in workshops like mine that people are saying they are frustrated with the conventional bullet points approach. They're expressing themselves in a wide range of forums, including discussion groups, surveys, books, essays, articles, tweets, and blog postings.
- **"Data dump!"** More often than they experience intellectual underload, people complain about cognitive overload in PowerPoint presentations. "Too complex!" they say, and the presentations can be "overwhelming," with too much raw information. The use of bulleted lists comes across as "wordy," which can lead to a presentation that "never ends" and that is "forgettable."

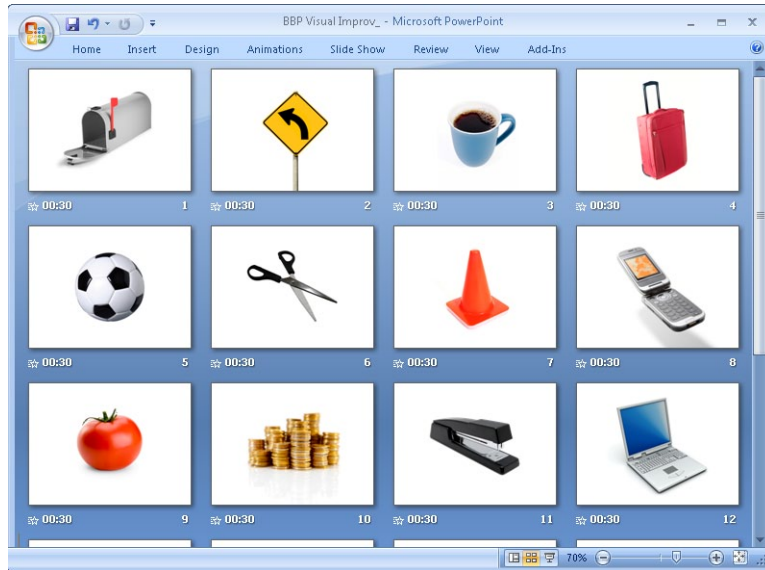
- **“No story!”** People say that PowerPoint presentations are “a jumble” of “incoherent lists” without context, with “no direction” and “no conclusion.” People say that they’re not sure what they’re supposed to do with the information as they ask, “What’s the point?”, and they find that the information is “not results-oriented,” practical, or applicable.
- **“Frankendeck!”** People say that PowerPoint presentations can be like a Frankenstein monster—a “mish-mash” of slides filled with “pointless graphics” and “crazy colors” with “unreadable” text that “looks horrible” and is ultimately “bad design.” People report that their organizations spend a great deal of time, money, and emotional energy on PowerPoint presentations with only “low-grade output.”

The categories *People* and *Information* distinguish between the two necessary ingredients of a live presentation. First you need to have people there in the form of a presenter and an audience; second you need to have information to communicate. What people are saying about the conventional PowerPoint approach is a symptom of something that’s gone missing. The pendulum has swung too far in the direction of bulleted lists, charts, and graphs to the point where we’ve lost the balance we need to make us feel connected to one another. In the fast-paced culture of change and complexity in which we live, people understandably yearn for a return to the basics of human connection, inspiration, and common purpose.

But all is not lost. In the next section, you’ll see how to quickly address the people issues when you work with a group of people who are not familiar with BBP. The rest of this book has shown you how to get to the root of the information issues when you are able to take the time to do so.

## ■ Visual Improvisation

After the group I’m presenting to has taken the time to talk about the situation and listen to one another, it’s time for them to stand up and directly experience something different. I help them do that by administering a special PowerPoint presentation called “BBP Visual Improv,” similar to the one shown in Figure 11-6. This speaking exercise challenges participants to improvise a story using a series of visuals included in the presentation, and in the process it helps them see PowerPoint in a new light.



**FIGURE 11-6** The BBP Visual Improv exercise, including images available from [www.iStockphoto.com](http://www.iStockphoto.com).

The Visual Improv presentation includes a set of PowerPoint slides with one simple photo object per slide. You can create your own version of the presentation and administer the exercise to a group by following the steps in the upcoming sections.

The Visual Improv exercise can transform the way you and your group think about PowerPoint in as few as five minutes. Conduct the exercise for any number of purposes—as part of a training program to introduce BBP to your group, as a simple ice-breaker, or as a regular speaking or team-building exercise.

## Step 1: Create the Presentation

Open a new PowerPoint presentation, name it, and save it on your local computer. On the Home tab, in the Slides group, click the New Slide drop-down menu, and select Blank. Select the new slide, and repeatedly press Ctrl+D until you have created 20 slides. Press Ctrl+A to select all the slides, and then on the Animations tab, under Advance Slide, select the On Mouse Click option. Then select the Automatically After option, and set the timing to 00:30.

Review the style and aesthetics of the photo objects on each of the slides shown earlier in Figure 11-6, and add a photograph with this extremely simple style to each of the slides you created. In addition to using photo objects, feel free to use a screen capture or a product shot, or add a logo, a single word, or a simple shape such as an arrow. Look for simple graphics that visually evoke a topic and leave a great deal of room for interpretation. Increase the impact by using photos that evoke topics or ideas that your group knows. For example, if you're part of a corporation, use the name of your competitor or perhaps a photo of someone who is well known in the industry. It is very important that the graphics you choose be appropriate for your group, because an inappropriate graphic can send the wrong message and put an abrupt end to the exercise.

**Tip**

## Step 2: Instruct the Group

When you introduce the Visual Improv exercise, you are the facilitator of the group and need to make sure everyone is clear about how the exercise works and what they should do. With a smaller group, everyone gets to participate, which is the ideal. With larger groups, you need to ask for volunteers. For example, if there are seven tables of people, ask the groups to select two volunteers per table, and when they have chosen the speakers, ask the volunteers to raise their hands to let you know who is speaking. Calculate how long the presentation will take based on an allowance of 30 seconds per slide, in addition to your introduction and conclusion, and make sure you have enough slides in advance. Five minutes (10 slides) is plenty of time for the exercise, but after eight minutes (16 slides), people's attention starts to wane.

The following is the script that I use—adapt this script and then use it while you first display the PowerPoint file on the screen in Slide Sorter view:

*This is a PowerPoint presentation displayed in Slide Sorter view, where you can see all of the slides at one time. Each slide has a single, simple photograph on it. And notice in the lower-left corner of the slides the number 00:30, which indicates that each slide is timed to automatically advance after 30 seconds. This exercise is based on a game that you might have played when you were in school. In this*

*game, one person in a group begins telling a story, and the next person continues the story, and so on until everyone has had a chance to join in and tell a part of the story. Well, today we're going to tell a story specifically related to our group here today. But there's a PowerPoint twist to it.*

*When I start the PowerPoint presentation, one of the images on the PowerPoint slides will appear on screen. I'll begin the exercise as the first speaker by looking at the image and using it as a prompt to start the story, somehow weaving the subject of the image into my narration. The image will stay on screen for 30 seconds, and then it will fade away and a new slide will appear. That's my cue as the current speaker to sit down, and also the cue for the next person in line to stand up. That person now has to improvise on the new image as he or she continues the story for the next 30 seconds. Each image will be a surprise to each speaker, so you will have to think on your feet and plumb the depths of your creativity and wit to integrate the image into your narration. After the 30 seconds, the image automatically advances, and that person sits down while the next person stands and continues the story by improvising on the new image.*

### Step 3: Administer the Exercise

Next, to get things rolling, choose a specific topic that defines the group—such as their area of work or a common topic of interest—and describe the topic to the group. For example, if you're with the marketing team at Company X, say, "Today we're going to tell a story that concerns the marketing team at Company X. When you contribute to the story, make sure that your comments stay focused on this topic." If you don't define the story properly at the start, the group will take the story in different directions, and that will water down its impact. When you're ready to start, press the F5 key to begin the PowerPoint presentation in Slide Show view with a photo of a mailbox, as shown in Figure 11-7.

Following is the script that I use for the mailbox photo—adapt this script and use it as you introduce the setup of the exercise with your own first photo:

*It's Monday morning of next week. You arrive at your desk, sip your cup of coffee, and see an e-mail message marked Urgent with a Subject line that reads, "Major Announcement." You think this is strange, because the Address line says that the message is from the board of directors, and you've never seen them send an e-mail message directly to the entire organization. As you read the message, the board explains that it has had a top-secret initiative in the works for a year, which they now can announce officially today. This is a major change from the way the organization currently does business, and it will have a significant impact on every single person. The e-mail message explains what is going to happen next . . .*



**FIGURE 11-7** The first speaker (the presenter) uses the image on the first slide as a visual prompt, to begin a story that relates to the specific group in the room.

At this point, 30 seconds have passed, and the image changes to the one shown in Figure 11-8. Stop speaking, and move away from the podium and to the side of the room.



**FIGURE 11-8** After 30 seconds, the next person in the group stands up, using the new image to improvise on the story and move it forward.



After you have introduced the first slide and moved to the periphery of the room, say something only if you need to guide the group. For example, if people start to stray too much off the focused topic you introduced, gently nudge the group back on track by saying, “Be sure you stay focused on our story about \_\_\_\_.” Also make sure that, if possible, each person stands up to present his or her 30-second talk—this is basic good public speaking practice. If someone forgets to stand, motion with your hand upward and ask them to rise.

The next person stands up, and after laughing nervously, says something like, “As you know, change at this organization is never straightforward!” People in the room laugh as she continues, “But although there will be curves in the road, be assured that we are moving forward!” More laughter. “So let me begin by telling you specifically about the curve in the road that we have to negotiate before we get to where we want to be.” She continues until the slide changes to the image shown in Figure 11-9, at which point, she sits down and the next speaker stands up.



**FIGURE 11-9** After 30 seconds, the speaker sits down as the image fades, and the next speaker continues the story using the new image that appears.

The next speaker looks at the screen and mutters, “Is it time for our coffee break yet?” People chuckle as he pauses for a few seconds, takes a breath, and says, “But of course, we’re not going to think about getting behind the wheel of our new initiative until we’ve had our first cup of coffee!” Laughter. “So we’re going to sit down and take a closer look at the plan ahead. We’re going to need all the rest we can get, because once the caffeine

kicks in, there's no stopping us!" Applause. He continues until the next image appears, and he sits down as the next person continues the story.

Through the next 5 to 8 minutes, each person transitions creatively from one image to the next along the same story line. In the first moments, someone is presented with a new image to use to improvise the story, and everyone else is on the edge of their seats. What will she think of next? People pay close attention to the person who is speaking and how he or she will reveal meaning from the unexpected image. Then it's on to the next image, and person, who continues the story from that point forward.

The simple Advance Using Timings feature that you applied to the slides gives each person a chance to participate for an equal 30 seconds—no more, and no less, no matter who they are or what they do—making the experience democratic, participatory, and self-running. People who like to talk are constrained; people who don't are challenged to expand. Together the group creates a single, simple story. The story is not polished and perfect, but it's valuable and meaningful to everyone in the room because they have created it together. The people in the room connect the dots, the images, the ideas, and each participant to one another.

After the last person finishes and you arrive at the last slide, improvise a story ending using the last photograph on the screen to conclude the exercise, and then say something like "The End!" Ask the group to give everyone a round of applause for participating.

Throughout the exercise, the room is periodically filled with laughter and applause, sometimes prompting people who are walking by to poke their heads in to find out what is going on. Sometimes there is a nervous pause when someone can't think of what to say. But just about anything they end up saying is warmly received—everyone can empathize with being on the spot because they all were on it too. Some speakers have a great deal to say and go on talking past the 30 seconds, until others in the group let them know it's time to sit down. Other speakers have a hard time filling 30 seconds and tap their watches as others in the group politely hold themselves back from making suggestions. Someone in the group usually says something outrageously clever that has everyone in the room laughing to the point of tears.

Wherever and whenever I conduct the Visual Improv exercise, I am always amazed at how smart, creative, and articulate people can be when they are presented with a challenge like this. People in every type of organization and at every level within an organization have done the exercise, including administrative assistants, CEOs, doctors, lawyers, and more—each time it has been a rich exercise because the story emerged from the experience of each group in the language of its members. These brief five to eight minutes reaffirm that we all have the ability to use PowerPoint to resolve the people issues that audiences describe if we use the tool the right way.

## Step 4: Reflect and Summarize

Now that you've finished the presentation, press the Esc key in PowerPoint to return the Visual Improv presentation to Slide Sorter view, shown earlier in Figure 11-6. Say something like, "Again, this is obviously a PowerPoint presentation, as you can see. But it is very different from the presentations you usually experience. What did you think of it?"

At this point, I switch back to my earlier presentation that is still open on my desktop and click to advance to the next slide, which has a photo of a PowerPoint software box. I sketch angel wings and a halo on the slide, as shown in Figure 11-10, which visually relates to the earlier image with the horns I used in Figure 11-4. This graphical technique visually links the story to previous points we discussed without the need for me to verbally make the connection. The response to my question is strong and immediate, and I write the group's comments on this new slide.

Following are some typical responses:

- **"Alive!"** The Visual Improv exercise literally brings the room to life with the tremendous energy of the people who are there and brings to center stage the element that people find most "interesting"—other people. It "brings together" a feeling of deep engagement and camaraderie as every person participates in "teamwork" that they find very "stimulating." People describe the experience with words rarely used to describe a conventional PowerPoint presentation, like "fun," "curiosity," "anticipation," and "surprise." The exercise instantly changes the tone and tenor of a group, opening up a degree of "imagination" that "overcomes staleness." Ironically, for a tool that is often blamed for shutting down people, this simple exercise easily opens them up and "brings out personality" for every person there in a way that many people say they don't experience anywhere else.
- **"Dependent on us to be here!"** If you e-mailed the PowerPoint file of the Visual Improv presentation to someone who was not in the room during the exercise, they would see only a set of slides with simple images and wonder what you were talking about. The reality of what happened "in the moment" was precious and fleeting, created wholly from the personalities, voices, fast thinking, wit, and creativity of the people there. Because each person "can't read ahead," the experience is by its nature unscripted and "unpredictable," making it "intriguing" and incredibly full of "suspense." For some people, it was also "scary" because they did not know what they were going to say until it was their turn. The visual on the screen prompts the verbal narration, which demands that people be there to create the

experience as they “improvise.” This is a practical demonstration of why we gather together to meet in the first place. There is an incredible amount of information we communicate in person that simply cannot be captured in e-mail, on a piece of paper, or on a Web site—sometimes you really do have to be there.



**FIGURE 11-10** The BBP Visual Improv exercise unlocks creativity, spontaneity, and an abiding sense of camaraderie among the people in the room.

- **“Power of the image!”** The shapes, colors, and variety of the images literally bring color into the room and help people tap into their “creative” sides. They prove that you “don’t need text” in order to communicate. Almost like an electronic theater set, the images on screen offered a “visual backdrop” that immersed the speaker in an interesting image. The images became a “visual trigger”—a springboard for people to transform photos of everyday objects into powerful and memorable story metaphors in the blink of an eye. This technique “brought out information” from people and provided a “clear direction” by using a “shift to story” instead of bulleted lists of text.
- **“Focus on the speaker!”** The Visual Improv exercise shifts the dynamics of the conventional relationship between a speaker and an audience as each person uses the screen as a “cue, not a cue card.” When the audience sees the simple image,

their attention quickly shifts to the person speaking. This creates a dependence on the speaker to extract the meaning from the screen. Each person knows that he or she is going to have to speak at some point in the story, so he or she has to be “really listening” to what other people say. For many people, this media experience is a rare moment of focus as they put down their PDAs and ignore their laptop computers and “pay attention” to the people in front of them with “no e-mail” to distract them.

### A VISUAL IMPROV DISCLAIMER

There might be times when the Visual Improv exercise does not work. Sometimes a group is not open to someone from within the group administering the exercise rather than an outside consultant. You might not have used the best wording when you introduced and set up the presentation. The group might be hostile to the idea of doing something like this, or it could be that the exercise is simply not otherwise a good match with the participants. Be sure to consider whether this might be the case before you administer the exercise, and don’t conduct it unless you’re certain that your audience will be receptive.

After you facilitate the conversation about people’s experience of the Visual Improv exercise, redisplay the comments they made about what they want to accomplish when they use PowerPoint, as shown on the left in Figure 11-11. Ask the group to quickly review these comments, review their comments about the conventional approach (middle), and then review their comments after the Visual Improv exercise (right). Facilitate a discussion about the power of images to tell a story to help them meet their goals for PowerPoint, specifically in terms of resolving the people issues that every presenter faces.

Granted, the Visual Improv exercise wasn’t a prepared PowerPoint presentation given by a single presenter, but it does give people a direct experience of how PowerPoint can be used differently to relate better to an audience and how any presenter can tap into the powerful new techniques it demonstrates.



**FIGURE 11-11** Comparing what people say they want, what they currently get, and how the Visual Improv exercise got them closer to their goal.

## Sophisticated Simplicity

Despite the bewildering and endless array of media in the world, we simply don't have experiences of media like the Visual Improv exercise. The five-minute exercise focuses attention on people, not the medium, which is profoundly different from film, TV, and the Internet, where people gaze exclusively at a screen. In a time when people complain about how technology can alienate or disconnect us from one another, here is a simple yet profound example of how a technology can bring people back together.

The Visual Improv exercise actually works contrary to the way most other media work. The general trend of media is to add more and more razzle-dazzle and special effects to keep a viewer glued to the screen. Likewise, in presentations, we think we need to add more and more to a screen to capture people's attention. But it turns out that subtracting from a screen can increase attention. Put more on a screen, and people stare at the screen. Put less, and they stop looking at the screen and start looking at one another instead.

The sequence of still images that stay on screen for 30 seconds in the Visual Improv exercise is different from the constant flow of images we're used to seeing in film and television. If the images were continually moving and then narration or music were added, we would be absorbed in the movement on screen and the sound and not paying attention to one another. As you reduce the motion in the Visual Improv exercise, you create 30-second increments when attention focuses on each speaker rather than on the screen. This counterintuitive use of a projected image brings a level of interpersonal engagement that films or television shows cannot produce. The important guideline that each person should stand, if possible, to speak transforms the physical space in the room because no one who participates can be a passive audience member. Each person must stand up, speak, and participate in creating the experience.

In the Visual Improv exercise, the way the simple graphics were used in the presentation results in the people in the room paying attention to one another—each image is a photo of an object that was removed from its background, as shown in Figure 11-12. When the image is placed on a white screen, it becomes iconic, and each picture prompts, engages, inspires, and extracts the limitless imagination of the people there. If you were to add additional logos, backgrounds, and text to the screen, as in the conventional PowerPoint approach, the details would detract from this exercise and quickly render it ineffective.



**FIGURE 11-12** Using starkly simple images in the Visual Improv exercise results in the people in the room paying attention to one another.

The Visual Improv exercise is obviously about much more than PowerPoint—it's about the people in the room and their voices, personalities, and on-the-spot thinking that bring forth and shape the experience. At the same time, the experience is not possible without PowerPoint. In the few minutes it takes to run the Visual Improv exercise, you help other people experience PowerPoint in a new way that resolves many of the people issues audiences describe. With those issues handily resolved, now introduce your team to the rest of this book to help them solve the information issues by using the BBP approach.

## ■ Twenty-First-Century Media

One of the most surprising responses I received from a participant in this Visual Improv exercise was, "This is twenty-first-century media!" I was taken aback at first—after all, how could such a simple PowerPoint presentation be so forward-looking? The comment reminded me that we are still in the early days of a new era. The outdated notions of a purely verbal presentation with paper note cards has given way to different expectations.

Now we are looking for something more during a live presentation, including projected images that complement the spoken word, but without the distraction that keeps us from seeing, listening to, and conversing with one another. It will likely turn out that the first 20 years of using PowerPoint were just our first attempt at getting it right, and that period has shown us we need to keep trying.

The Visual Improv exercise is only one example that demonstrates there is a deep source of media innovation that waits untapped in PowerPoint, waiting for you to see it in a fresh light and begin to unlock it. You'll begin to deliver the transformational experience people had in the Visual Improv exercise as you unlock the power of the BBP approach as described in this book. And as you do, you'll create a new way of communicating that brings meaning, sparks creativity, and generates conversation and is also quite modern and sophisticated—very twenty-first century indeed.



