

## BRIEF INSIGHTS by Joe McCormack

### BREVITY IN ACTION

I've spoken with hundreds of leaders and executives over 20 years and heard countless stories about how someone's inability to get to the point quickly spelled disaster. The dysfunction is real, immediate, and lasting. Here are a few examples:

- ▶ **General dismissal:** A field-grade Army officer uses a series of PowerPoint slides to deliver a brief to his superiors on a recommended strategic course of action. He watches his presentation unravel as a high-ranking general obsessed with details spends the entire time feverishly highlighting every single typographical error on the handout. The officer lost his audience in the minutiae.
- ▶ **A rising star stalls:** A brilliant young woman who looks as if she is right out of Central Casting—bright and talented—is widely recognized by senior leadership as the future go-to person. Her fatal flaw is well known, however: she cannot close big deals because she cannot shut up. Her motormouth bars her from any client-facing assignments.
- ▶ **Done deal comes undone:** After closing a \$500,000 contract with a new client, a sales executive is shocked to discover that his overenthusiastic support person has followed up with the client and explained all the reasons why he thinks they've purchased way more technology than they need. The verbal misstep drops the deal by \$200,000.
- ▶ **98-pager delivered:** A vice president of communications who's frantically looking for a simple, one-page product summary for a big press release discovers that the best her organization can deliver is a mega PowerPoint file with nearly 100 slides. It chokes her e-mail inbox and kills the story.
- ▶ **Hero's story overlooked:** A police detective takes the initiative to recognize a fellow officer's generosity and impact with disabled athletes by pitching his feel-good story to a major magazine. A reporter speaks to the detective, who unfortunately can not quickly sum up his pitch and rambles on. The reporter becomes too confused and doesn't run the story.
- ▶ **Luncheon leaves a bad taste:** Three hundred busy executives attend a fundraiser for a nonprofit organization during their busy workweek. The keynote speaker is slotted 20 minutes after the meal. He blows far beyond the allotted time, and after nearly an hour, the room is half empty and the feel-good charity loses its appeal.

You get the point. Today's world is on information overload, and there isn't enough time to sift through all the messages. If you can't capture people's attention and deliver your message with brevity, you'll lose them.

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### SEVEN QUESTIONS FOR DETERMINING YOUR LEVEL OF BREVITY

1. Can I hear an hour's worth of complex information and summarize it in a 2-minute debrief?
2. Do I write e-mails that get to the point in five lines or less?
3. Do my PowerPoint presentations contain fewer than 10 slides, with plenty of images and little text?
4. Can I translate complicated ideas into a simple story, analogy, or anecdote?
5. Can I expertly deliver headlines like a reporter?
6. Do I speak clearly and concisely—in plain English rather than confusing corporate speech or jargon?
7. Do I know instantly when I've "lost" somebody?

### HOW TO INCLUDE NARRATIVE IN YOUR PRESENTATION

1. State your purpose
2. Show a conflict
3. Explain your brand or product's intention
4. Explain how your brand/product will solve the conflict
5. Frame the story in a way that makes a lasting personal connection with the audience

### KEYS TO A GREAT SHORT STORY

- ▶ Strong headline
- ▶ Compelling lead paragraph
- ▶ Clear sense of conflict
- ▶ Personal voice
- ▶ Consistent narrative thread
- ▶ Logical sequence of events
- ▶ Character development
- ▶ Powerful conclusion