

# Working Backwards

Insights, Stories,  
and Secrets from  
Inside Amazon



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## Six-Pager Example

### Dear PowerPoint: It's Not You, It's Us

Our decision-making process simply has not kept up with the rapid growth in the size and complexity of our business. We therefore advocate that, effective immediately, we stop using PowerPoint at S-Team meetings and start using six-page narratives instead.

### What's Wrong with Using PowerPoint?

S-Team meetings typically begin with a PowerPoint (PP) presentation that describes some proposal or business analysis for consideration. The style of the deck varies from team to team, but all share the constraints imposed by the PowerPoint format. No matter how complex or nuanced the underlying concepts, they are presented as a series of small blocks of text, short bullet-pointed lists, or graphics.

Even the most ardent PP fans acknowledge that too much information actually spoils the deck. Amazon's bestselling book on PowerPoint describes three categories of slides:

1. 75 words or more: A dense discussion document or white paper that is not suitable for a presentation—it's better distributed in advance and read before the meeting.
2. 50 words or so: A crutch for the presenter who uses it as a teleprompter, often turning away from an audience while reading aloud.
3. Even fewer words: A proper presentation slide, used to visually reinforce primarily spoken content. The presenter must invest time to develop and rehearse this type of content.\*

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\* Nancy Duarte, *Slide:ology: The Art and Science of Creating Great Presentations* (Sebastopol, CA: O'Reilly Media, 2008), 7.

One widely accepted rule of thumb, the so-called 6x6 Rule, sets a maximum of six bullet points, each with no more than six words. Other guidelines suggest limiting text to no more than 40 words per slide, and presentations to no more than 20 slides. The specific numbers vary, but the theme—limiting information density—is a constant. Taken as a whole, these practices point to a consensus: there's only so much information one can fit into a PP deck without confusing, or losing, one's audience. The format forces presenters to condense their ideas so far that important information is omitted.

Pressed against this functional ceiling, yet needing to convey the depth and breadth of their team's underlying work, a presenter—having spent considerable time pruning away content until it fits the PP format—**fills it back in, verbally**. As a result, the public speaking skills of the presenter, and the graphics arts expertise behind their slide deck, have an undue—and highly variable—effect on how well their ideas are understood. No matter how much work a team invests in developing a proposal or business analysis, its ultimate success can therefore hinge upon factors irrelevant to the issue at hand.

We've all seen presenters interrupted and questioned mid-presentation, then struggle to regain their balance by saying things like, "We'll address that in a few slides." The flow becomes turbulent, the audience frustrated, the presenter flustered. We all want to deep dive on important points but have to wait through the whole presentation before being satisfied that our questions won't be answered somewhere later on. In virtually every PP presentation, we have to take handwritten notes throughout in order to record the verbal give-and-take that actually supplies the bulk of the information we need. The slide deck alone is usually insufficient to convey or serve as a record of the complete argument at hand.

### Our Inspiration

Most of us are familiar with Edward Tufte, author of the seminal (and Amazon bestselling) book *The Visual Display of Quantitative Information*. In an essay titled "The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint:

Pitching Out Corrupts Within,” Tufte encapsulates our difficulties precisely:

As analysis becomes more causal, multivariate, comparative, evidence based, and resolution-intense, the more damaging the bullet list becomes.

This certainly describes S-Team meetings: complex, interconnected, requiring plenty of information to explore, with greater and greater consequences connected to decisions. Such analysis is not well served by a linear progression of slides, a presentation style that makes it difficult to refer one idea to another, to fully express an idea in sparsely worded bits of text, and to enlighten instead of distract with visual effects. Rather than making things clear and simple, PowerPoint is stripping our discussions of important nuance.

Tufte’s essay proposes a solution. “For serious presentations,” he writes, “it will be useful to replace PowerPoint slides with paper handouts showing words, numbers, data graphics, images together. High-resolution handouts allow viewers to contextualize, compare, narrate, and recast evidence. In contrast, data-thin, forgetful displays tend to make audiences ignorant and passive, and also to diminish the credibility of the presenter.”

He goes on: “For serious presentations, replace PP with word-processing or page-layout software. Making this transition in large organizations requires a straightforward executive order: From now on your presentation software is Microsoft Word, not PowerPoint. Get used to it.” We’ve taken this recommendation to heart, and we now propose to follow his advice.

### **Our Proposal: Banish PP in Favor of Narratives**

We propose that we stop using PowerPoint in S-Team meetings immediately and replace it with a single narrative document. These narratives may sometimes include graphs and bulleted lists, which are essential to brevity and clarity, but it must be emphasized: merely reproducing a PP deck in written form will NOT be acceptable. The goal

is to introduce the kind of complete and self-contained presentation that only the narrative form makes possible. **Embrace it.**

### **Our Tenet: Ideas, Not Presenters, Matter Most**

A switch to narratives places the team's ideas and reasoning center stage, leveling the playing field by removing the natural variance in speaking skills and graphic design expertise that today plays too great a role in the success of presentations. The entire team can contribute to the crafting of a strong narrative, reviewing and revising it until it's at its very best. It should go without saying—sound decisions draw from ideas, not individual performance skills.

The time now spent upon crafting gorgeous, graphically elegant slide presentations can be recaptured and used for more important things. We can give back the time and energy now wasted on rehearsing one's time at the podium and relieve a major, unnecessary stressor for many team leaders. It won't matter whether the presenter is a great salesperson, a complete introvert, a new hire out of college, or a VP with 20 years of experience; what matters will be found on the page.

Last, the narrative document is infinitely portable and scalable. It is easy to circulate. Anyone can read it at any time. You don't need handwritten notes or a vocal track recorded during the big presentation to understand its contents. Anyone can edit or make comments on the document, and they are easily shared in the cloud. The document serves as its own record.

### **The Readers' Advantage: Information Density and Interconnection of Ideas**

One useful metric for comparison is what we call the *Narrative Information Multiplier* (tip of the hat to former Amazon VP Jim Freeman for coining this term). A typical Word document, with text in Arial 11-point font, contains 3,000–4,000 characters per page. For comparison, we analyzed the last 50 S-Team PowerPoint slide presentations and found that they contained an average of just 440 characters per page. This means a written narrative would contain **seven to nine times**

*the information density* of our typical PowerPoint presentation. If you take into account some of the other PowerPoint limitations discussed above, this multiplier only increases.

Tufte estimates that people read three times faster than the typical presenter can talk, meaning that they can absorb that much more information in a given time while reading a narrative than while listening to a PP presentation. A narrative therefore delivers much more information in a much shorter time.

The Narrative Information Multiplier is itself multiplied when one considers how many such meetings S-Team members attend in a single day. A switch to this denser format will allow key decision-makers to consume much more information in a given period of time than with the PowerPoint approach.

Narratives also allow for nonlinear, interconnected arguments to unfold naturally—something that the rigid linearity of PP does not permit. Such interconnectedness defines many of our most important business opportunities. Moreover, better-informed people make higher-quality decisions, and can deliver better, more detailed feedback on the presenting teams' tactical and strategic plans. If our executives are better informed, at a deeper level, on a wider array of important company initiatives, we will gain a substantial competitive advantage over executives elsewhere who rely on traditional low-bandwidth methods of communication (e.g., PP).

### **The Presenters' Advantage: Forces Greater Clarity of Thought**

We know that writing narratives will likely prove to be harder work than creating the PP presentations that they will replace; this is actually positive. The act of writing will force the writer to think and synthesize more deeply than they would in the act of crafting a PP deck; the idea on paper will be better thought out, especially after the author's entire team has reviewed it and offered feedback. It's a daunting task to get all the relevant facts and all one's salient arguments into a coherent, understandable document—and it should be.

Our goal as presenters is not to merely introduce an idea but to demonstrate that it's been carefully weighed and thoroughly analyzed.

Unlike a PP deck, a solid narrative can—and must—demonstrate how its many, often disparate, facts and analyses are interconnected. While an ideal PP presentation can do this, experience has shown that they rarely do in practice.

A complete narrative should also anticipate the likely objections, concerns, and alternate points of view that we expect our team to deliver. Writers will be forced to anticipate smart questions, reasonable objections, even common misunderstandings—and to address them proactively in their narrative document. You simply cannot gloss over an important topic in a narrative presentation, especially when you know it's going to be dissected by an audience full of critical thinkers. While this may seem a bit intimidating at first, it merely reflects our long-standing commitment to thinking deeply and correctly about our opportunities.

The old essay-writing adage “State, support, conclude” forms the basis for putting a convincing argument forward. Successful narratives will connect the dots for the reader and thus create a persuasive argument, rather than presenting a disconnected stream of bullet points and graphics that leave the audience to do all the work. Writing persuasively requires and enforces clarity of thought that's even more vital when multiple teams collaborate on an idea. The narrative form demands that teams be in sync or, if they are not, that they clearly state in the document where they are not yet aligned.

Edward Tufte sums up the benefits of narratives over PP with his own blunt clarity: “PowerPoint becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of PowerPoint makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts.”

### **How to Conduct a Meeting in This New Format**

Narratives would be distributed at the start of each meeting and read by all in attendance during the time normally taken up by the slide deck—approximately the first 20 minutes. Many will want to take notes, or annotate their copy, during this time. Once everybody signals their readiness, conversation about the document begins.

We know that people read complex information at the rough



average of three minutes per page, which in turn defines the functional length of a written narrative as about six pages for a 60-minute meeting. Our recommendation is therefore that teams respect the six-page maximum. There will no doubt be times when it feels difficult to condense a complete presentation into this size, but the same limitation—which is really one of meeting lengths—faces PP presenters as well. We believe that six pages should be enough, but we will review over time and revise if necessary.

## **Conclusion**

PowerPoint could only carry us so far, and we're thankful for its service, but the time has come to move on. Written narratives will convey our ideas in a deeper, stronger, more capable fashion while adding a key additional benefit: they will act as a forcing function that shapes sharper, more complete analysis. Six-page narratives are also incredibly inclusive communication, precisely because the interaction between the presenter and audience is zero during reading. No biases matter other than the clarity of reasoning. This change will strengthen not just the pitch, but the product—and the company—as well.

## **FAQ**

**Q:** Most other companies of our size use PowerPoint. Why do we need to be different, and what if this switch turns out to be the wrong move?

**A:** In simplest terms, we see a better way. Amazon differs from other major companies in ways that help us stand out, including our willingness to go where the data lead and seek better ways of doing familiar things. If this move doesn't work out, we'll do what we always do—iterate and refine, or roll it back entirely if that's what the results show us is best.

**Q:** Why not distribute the narrative ahead of the meeting so we're ready?

**A:** The short time between distribution and the meeting might not give all attendees sufficient time for that task. Also, since the document replaces the deck, no time is lost by dedicating this phase of the

meeting to a silent reading that brings everybody up to speed before Q&A begins. Last but certainly not least, this gives each presenting team the most possible time to complete and refine their presentation.

**Q:** My team has proven to be very good at PP presentations—do we HAVE to switch?

**A:** YES. One danger of an unusually strong PP presentation is that the stage presence or charm of the presenter can sometimes unintentionally blind the audience to key questions or concerns. Slick graphics can distract equally well. Most importantly, we've shown that even the best use of PP simply cannot deliver the completeness and sophistication that narratives can.

**Q:** What if we put our PP deck into printed form and add some extended comments to strengthen and extend the information content?

**A:** NO. Reproducing PP on paper also reproduces its weaknesses. There's nothing one can do in PP that cannot be done more thoroughly, though sometimes less attractively, in a narrative.

**Q:** Can we still use graphs or charts in our narratives?

**A:** YES. Most complex issues derive key insights from data and we expect that some of that data may be best represented in the form of a chart or graph. However, we do not expect that graphics alone can make the compelling and complete case we expect from a true written narrative. Include them if you must, but don't let graphics predominate.

**Q:** Six pages feels short. How much can we fit onto a page?

**A:** The six-page limit acts as a valuable forcing function that ensures we only discuss the most important issues. We also set aside 20 minutes for reading and expect that every attendee can read the entire thing during that time. Please don't fall prey to the temptation to fiddle with margins or font size to squeeze more into the document. Adding density to stay under the six-page limit works against this goal and tempts writers to stray into less important areas of consideration.

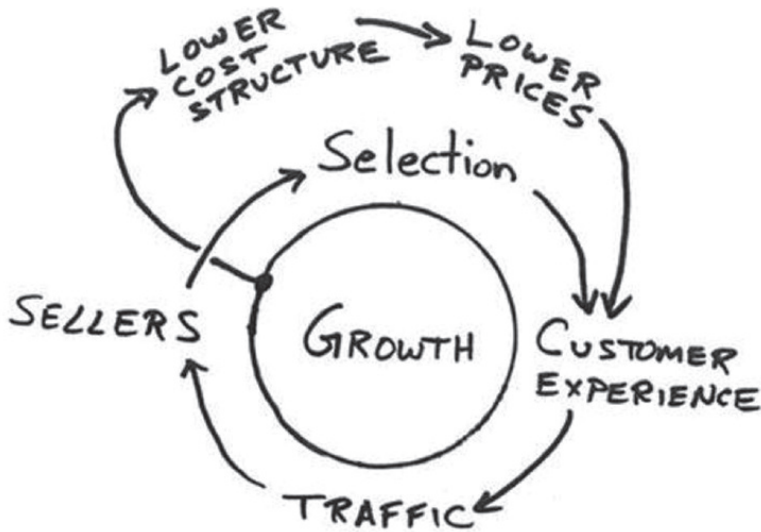
**Q:** How will we measure the success of this change?

**A:** Great question. We have not been able to identify a quantitative way to measure the quality of a series of S-Team decisions today,

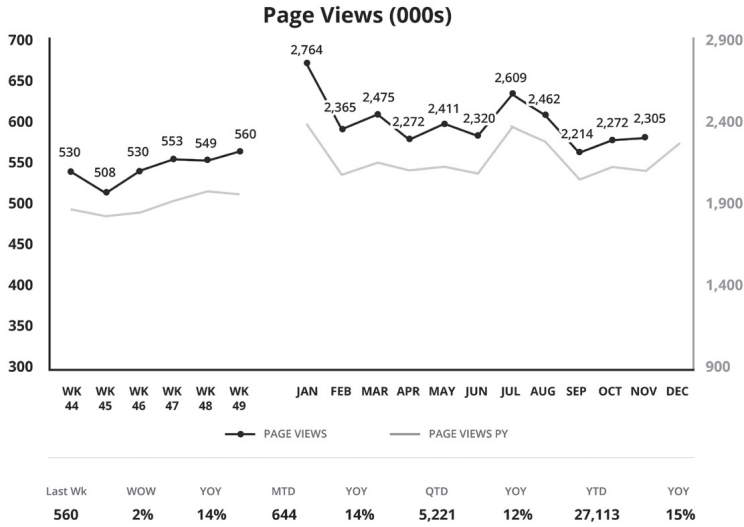
nor are we proposing a metric at this time. Comparing the two approaches will be a qualitative exercise. We propose implementing narratives for the next three months and then polling the S-Team to ask if they're making better-informed decisions.

**Figure 1.**

In 2001 Jeff drew the simple diagram below on a napkin to illustrate Amazon's virtuous cycle, also called the "Amazon flywheel." This sketch, inspired by the flywheel concept in Jim Collins's book *Good to Great*, is a model of how a set of controllable input metrics drives a single key output metric—in this case, growth. In this closed-loop system, as you inject energy into any one element, or all of them, the flywheel spins faster:



**Figure 2.**

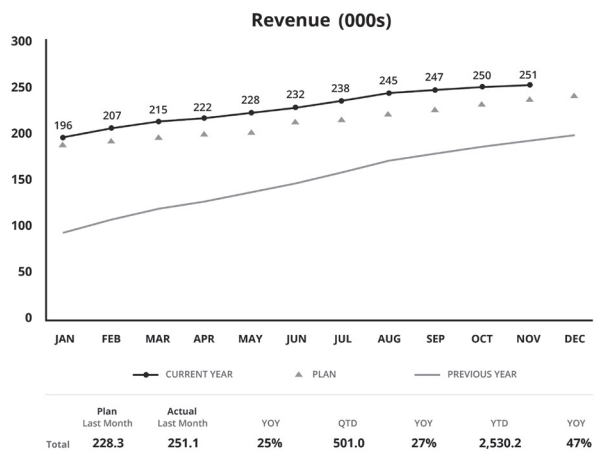


This graphic measures page views for a business, and conveys a lot of data in a small space:

- The gray line is prior year, the black line is current year
- The left graph, those first 6 data points, shows the trailing 6 weeks
- The right graph, with 12 data points, shows the entire trailing year month by month
- This built-in “zoom” adds clarity by magnifying the most recent data, which the 12-month graph puts into context.

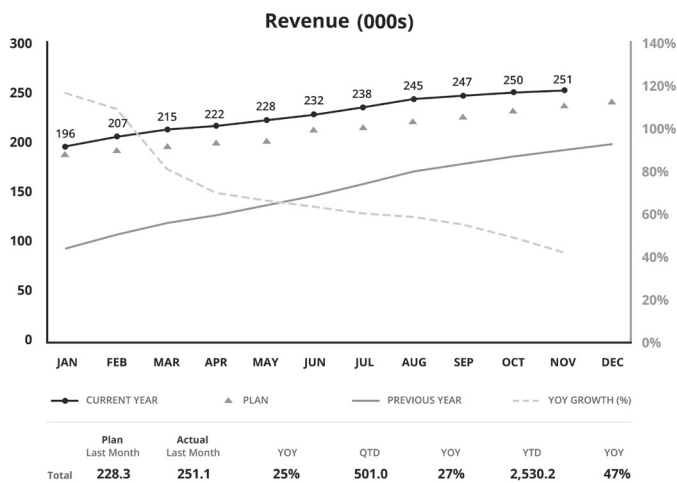
At the bottom of the chart, we call out additional key data points, most of which compare one period to another.

Figure 3.



There’s nothing to see here, so let’s move on—right? Maybe not. Here’s the same graph with one additional trend line: YOY growth rates plotted with a dotted line against a secondary y-axis:

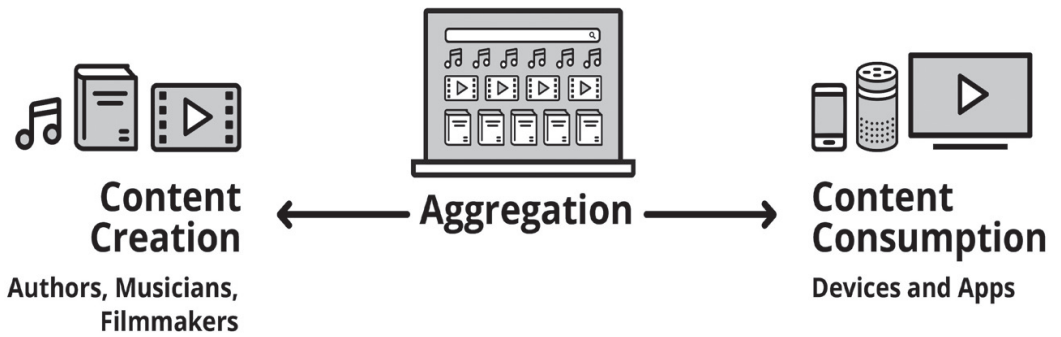
Figure 4.



Without the dotted line, you might not have noticed the rate at which the current and projected year trends are slowly converging. Adding YOY *growth rates* in addition to the underlying metric you are measuring is a great way to spot trends.

**Figure 5.**

When Jeff first met with Steve and asked him to take on leadership of Digital and Devices, he drew a version of this picture on the whiteboard (without the now-current icons and graphics that we have added here to make it easier to understand):



**Figure 6.**

<b>Amazon's Product Segment</b>	<b>Three Months Ended September 30 Y/Y Net Sales Growth</b>	
	<b>2003</b>	<b>2004</b>
<b>US Media</b>	<b>15%</b>	<b>12%</b>
<b>US Electronics &amp; other General Merchandise</b>	<b>35%</b>	<b>27%</b>
<b>Non-US Media</b>	<b>50%</b>	<b>41%</b>
<b>Non-US Electronics &amp; other General Merchandise</b>	<b>259%</b>	<b>132%</b>

Throughout 2004, Amazon sales had continued to grow, but the rate of growth decreased from the prior year, across all lines of business. The output metric of sales revenue was not growing as fast as we wanted. One example can be found embedded in the Supplemental Net Sales Information section of Amazon's earnings results.<sup>1</sup> Amazon's largest product segment at the time, the U.S. Media business, comprised retail sales of books, music, and video, and had grown 12 percent year over year. One year earlier, that same business had been growing by 15 percent year over year. From 15 to 12 is a 20 percent drop in growth rate. Every other product segment was experiencing the same slow decline—growing more slowly than before.



If you would like to learn more about how to apply the Amazon processes and principles and get your organization to start working backwards, visit our website at [www.workingbackwards.com](http://www.workingbackwards.com).

# Appendix A

## Interview Feedback Examples

Below are examples of weak and strong feedback. Note how the weak feedback focuses extensively on the candidate's work experience, passion, and strategic thinking (good that the interviewer asked about thinking) but doesn't give specific examples of actual work the candidate has accomplished. (In the strong feedback example, the candidate's answer about his actual work proved to be the reason we didn't hire him.) There is also no verbatim Q&A—we don't know what questions the interviewer asked or what the candidate's answers were. There is no data from the interview that a hiring manager can use to assess the candidate.

Read the second example of feedback to see how much easier it is to form your own opinion of the candidate based on the questions and answers. The feedback is a combination of objective data and subjective analysis.

### Weak Feedback

I am inclined to hire Joe for a product management position on our team. He has a solid background owning and driving strategy for Red Corp. and two other relevant companies. He came across as having a good understanding of the unique challenges that face our space, and his experience would be an asset to our company as we craft the various ways in which to enter this market segment. In discussing the challenges that face our company, he was articulate and demonstrated a firm grasp on the ways that our company should enter a market

segment that is quickly evolving. His experience at Red Corp. will be useful in the context of evaluating/analyzing companies to partner with or acquire to further our strategy. I liked his demonstrated passion for the media industry throughout his career.

## Good Feedback

I interviewed Joe both for his biz dev abilities and his product management skills. I was left flat on both. I thought his strategic thinking and business judgment were weak and that his examples from work lacked specificity as to his own contributions—too much about “what we did” as opposed to “what I did”—too hard to get him to clearly articulate his own contributions. He was a passenger, not a driver.

*Q: Why do you want to work for our company?*

*A: You're focused on customer experience. The trajectory of the company is favorable. I like the idea of getting involved while your company is this size and at this stage of growth.*

Okay, I guess this answer is reasonable, but the reasoning didn't seem particularly solid or compelling.

*Q: What is your most significant professional accomplishment?*

*A: Biz dev deal that we did with Blue Corp. while I was at Red Corp. While I was too junior to lead the strategy elements for the deal, the strategic output of the deal was really big for us—brought several other players like Yellow.com to our doorstep to do similar deals.*

*Q: So what was your role?*

*A: I was one of three members of the deal team; me, the VP of Product Development, and a guy from legal. My role was relationship manager, so when business owners had specific needs, they would bring them to me and I would execute them with Blue Corp.*

*Q: So what was your big accomplishment in this deal?*

*A: It was my job on this deal to work with the biz dev guy at Blue Corp. to turn our needs for the deal into a contract. The contract was two hundred pages long.*

While I probed multiple times here, he didn't give me any evidence of something substantial that he had personally done on this deal. He was proud of the strategic import of the deal, but admitted at the outset that he had nothing to do with setting deal strategy. I was then looking

for him to give me specific evidence of tough hurdles or negotiation tactics that he had employed in cranking out this huge agreement (or at least evidence of really hard work), but he didn't volunteer anything. I was psyched when he first started to tell me about this, thinking that he has great experience in putting together big deals, but it sounded like the VP and legal team members did all the driving.

*Q: If you could add or change anything about our website to improve customer experience, what would it be and why?*

*A: I would make Category X more prominent. It is buried on the site today and people don't know that it's available.*

*Q: Really? Why do you think it is strategically important for us to surface Category X more prominently?*

*A: Well actually, Category Y is probably a better example of something that I would add to the website and make more prominent.*

*Q: Okay, so then why should we make Category Y more prominent? Of all the products we sell, why is that one strategically important to surface?*

*A: Because competitor A is running away with the business and competitor B is in the business now too, and because it is something customers would want to buy from us.*

*Q: Okay, forget about these categories for a minute, what should we change in our website with respect to Category Z?*

*A: I would create a daily goods checklist that lets people buy goods like Z1, which they need regularly, and which we would ship to them at regular intervals before they run out. This would save people a trip to Competitor C.*

He failed miserably on this question. Not only did he waffle on his original answer, but he showed really poor innovation and strategic thinking here by honing in on smaller concepts that failed to tie back to big meaty customer experience or competitive issues (selection, price, customer experience).

# Appendix B

## Sample Narrative Tenets and FAQs

Dave Glick, a former Amazon VP, was the first person to use tenets in the six-pager. Dave had a series of narrative review meetings with Jeff that did not go well. Dave said,

We had gotten through those bad meetings and to a place where we could have a discussion about our strategy. At the end of the discussion, we had agreement on the strategy, and we summarized it in five bullet points. Jeff said, “You should write these down and put them at the top of your document every month, so we remember what we decided last time.” And thus, tenets were born. The next month I showed up with my document with the tenets front and center. It helped us all reload the cache, and made the rest of the meeting productive since we didn’t have to rehash our previous decisions.<sup>1</sup>

One of the many benefits tenets can bring is strong alignment among everyone involved. They also provide a set of guiding principles to rely on to help with decision-making. Jeff liked the tenets so much that he asked other teams to incorporate them into their narratives. Formulating a tenet is difficult, and subtle nuances of meaning can sometimes have a large downstream impact on a project.

Tenets help organizations make hard choices and trade-offs. A tenet breaks the tie between two benefits, values, or outcomes where there is a natural tension between them. It is often the case that individuals or

departments find themselves in conflict over the two outcomes because there is a legitimate argument for both outcomes. A simple example is speed vs. quality. Obviously both are desirable, and certain teams or individuals may be more focused on speed while others are more focused on quality.

## Sample Tenets

***Simple example tenet (this is not an Amazon tenet): Speed and quality are always important, but, when forced to make a choice between the two, we will always prioritize quality.***

In this tenet, either answer (speed or quality) is valid. When the leadership team of your company aligns on a tenet like this one, refers to it consistently in meetings, and insists that it appear in relevant six-pagers, you will be amazed by how effective this is in aligning and enabling your organization.

Amazon had been working with tenets before we adopted the six-pager narrative approach. Jeff, for example, often discussed the following tenet with various internal audiences.

***Tenet: We don't make money when we sell things. We make money when we help customers make purchase decisions.***<sup>2</sup>

This guided some challenging and controversial decisions in Amazon's early days, one of which was about product reviews posted on our website. Negative reviews could potentially discourage a customer from buying a product and thus reduce revenue. So, if we are in the business to make money, why would we post negative reviews? But the tenet states that we make money not by selling things, but by helping customers make purchase decisions. The tenet instantly makes our obligation obvious. The customer needs information, positive and negative, to make an informed decision. We continued to post negative customer reviews.

***Tenet: When forced to choose between building something that's convenient for customers or convenient for ourselves, we'll choose the former.***

Seems like an obvious one, but companies don't always follow this tenet. Packaging, for example. Have you ever experienced the joy of opening a box that contains that product you've desperately been waiting for, only to have your joy turn to despair because the product is encased in a clamshell container of military-grade plastic? That packaging was most definitely created for the convenience of the company—easier to ship, easier to display in a store, harder for customers to steal.

Before we articulated this tenet, Amazon made this very mistake. We developed packaging designed to make it cheap and easy to wrap our

books and sturdy enough to prevent damage in shipping. In 1999, Jeff received an email from an elderly woman who wrote that she loved Amazon's service, except for one problem: she had to wait for her nephew to come over to break through the packaging.<sup>3</sup> After receiving that email, Jeff asked the team to invent a new design that would have all the characteristics the company needed and that would also be easy for customers to open. Amazon extended that concept ten years later to other product lines with its Frustration-Free Packaging Initiative.<sup>4</sup>

***Tenet: We don't let defects travel downstream. When we notice a defect, we will not rely on good intentions to solve the problem. We'll invent and build systematic methods to eliminate that defect.***

This tenet is useful in any continuous improvement environment such as the fulfillment centers and the customer service operation. In order to prevent a defect from traveling downstream, you may need to build systems to detect and measure the defect and create a feedback loop to make sure the defect doesn't happen again. The problem will not be solved by encouraging people to try harder or relying on the good intentions of customer service people. The heartfelt "I'm sorry you had this problem, we will try harder to meet your needs in the future" does not result in the improvement of a flawed system.

One well-known defect in a fulfillment center is the "switcheroo"—when the actual weight of a package ready for loading onto a delivery truck does not match the expected weight of the products that should be in the box (plus the weight of the packaging). This is an indication that something is wrong with the order—maybe the wrong item was packed or the order is incomplete. When the weights don't match, the package is flagged and a person has to open it and inspect what's inside. This sounds pretty simple, but, in aggregate, it's a massive endeavor. You have to have precise data on the weight of tens of millions of items from millions of manufacturers, merchants, and sellers. Your weighing scales have to be extremely accurate, or they may detect a mismatch when there isn't one.

But what happens if a package goes out with the defect undetected? The customer may get something different from what was ordered. This does not make for a good customer experience.

The tenet says that we will "eliminate the defect." That's an aggressive goal, and it cannot be achieved immediately. It serves as a powerful advocate for the customer, and it has led to the development of many systems and processes to prevent and eliminate defects. As we've described, one of the best-known of these processes is the Andon Cord, which was adapted from the Toyota Production System: factory workers

can pull a physical cord to halt the assembly line when they spot a defect. At Amazon, the customer service people have a virtual cord—actually a button—that they can push when a defect is noticed. It instantly prevents Amazon from selling any more of the affected product until the customer issue is resolved.

This tenet appeared in so many narratives and was so useful in advocating for the customer that Amazon incorporated it into the Leadership Principles as *Insist on the Highest Standards*.

## Sample FAQs

An FAQ is a good way to tee up issues for discussion or highlight important points or risks in your argument. Such FAQs allow the author to take control over the discussion and steer it to productive areas for dialogue. An honest, objective, and nonemotional tone tends to work best when answering these questions. There's no point in sugarcoating things, and it helps to state the tough issues up front. Amazon's Earn Trust leadership principle states, "Leaders listen attentively, speak candidly, and treat others respectfully. They are vocally self-critical, even when doing so is awkward or embarrassing. Leaders do not believe their or their team's body odor smells of perfume. They benchmark themselves and their teams against the best." Here are some FAQs that we have found useful:

*What were the biggest mistakes we have made last period, and what have we learned from them?*

*What are the key inputs for this business?*

*What is the single biggest thing we can do to move the needle in this business, and how will we organize to do just that?*

*What are the top reasons we should not do what we're proposing today?*

*When push comes to shove, what are the things we won't compromise on?*

*What's hard about the problem we are trying to solve?*

*If our team had X more people or Y more dollars, how would we deploy those resources?*

*What are the top three new initiatives, products, or experiments our team has launched in the past X months, and what did we learn from them?*

*What dependencies do we have in our area today over which we wish we had control?*



# Appendix C

## Timeline of Events in the Book

**1998**

Colin joins Amazon

**1999**

Bill joins Amazon

Bar Raiser program launched

**2001**

Formal Weekly Business Review (WBR) established

**2002**

Amazon Product API launches

First two-pizza teams created

**2003**

Colin starts as Jeff's shadow

Amazon Web Services (AWS) group is formed

**2004**

Working Backwards PR/FAQ process formalized

Use of PowerPoint at S-Team meetings is banned (June 9)

Digital Media organization formed (Bill owns business team)

First version of Amazon Leadership Principles distributed to company

**2005**

Amazon Prime launch

(February 2)

Colin ends role as Jeff's shadow to become COO of IMDb (July)

**2006**

AWS Simple Storage Service (S3) launch (March 14)

AWS Elastic Compute Cloud (EC2) Public Beta launch (August 25)

Unbox public launch

(September 7)

Fulfillment by Amazon launch (September 19)

**2007**

Kindle launch (November 9)

**2008**

Amazon Video On Demand launch (September)

**2011**

Prime Video launch and rebranding (February)

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