Use Diagrams to Tell Stories

Idea In Short

Diagrams give presentations structure and direction. Use flow, structure, cluster and data-display archetypes to show relationships, sequence and causality. Pick the right diagram for the message and keep it simple.

Diagrams as Story Scaffolding

Nancy Duarte's Slideology argues that page-after-page of bullet points and text fail the audience. Consultants who agree need thoughtful diagrams to show relationships between things and move the story along. Diagrams provide scaffolding for the narrative. They answer what comes first, what comes last and whether correlation or causality links the elements. The goal is not to be heavy-handed and force the audience through an outline. The goal is to provide enough organization that the audience follows the logic. Without structure, the presentation feels like a box of Trivial Pursuit facts, disorienting and painful. Duarte's website shows more than 4,000 diagrams, but they fall into six main archetypes. Consultants will find this familiar territory because the work involves putting things in buckets, prioritizing them and making the complex simple every day.

Flow Diagrams Show Sequence

Flow diagrams appear in every proposal and every project kickoff presentation. The linear flow explains the different phases and what happens when. This scopes the project so the client does not expect phase three activities at the beginning. It also reminds the client where the team stands in the process. The linear flow reduces ambiguity about what the team will deliver and when. Circular flow diagrams show up in lean and Six Sigma presentations, where continuous improvement never ends. Plan-Do-Study-Act [PDSA], Plan-Do-Check-Act [PDCA] and Define-Measure-Analyze-Improve-Control [DMAIC] all loop because sustainable change is a never-ending process. Divergent and convergent flows can feel heavy-handed if used carelessly. A diagram that splits into multiple paths without

clear logic tells the audience nothing except that the situation is complex. If a path breaks into two or three options, a simple list often communicates better than nuanced graphics. Multi-directional flows risk looking like chaos, and the client already knows the problem is complicated. 1 Process flow maps, however, deserve attention as bread-and-butter consulting tools that teams build hundreds of times across a career.

Structural Diagrams Show Relationships

Matrices are tables in plain language. Simple grids with something at the top and something on the left are easy to read and useful. A mentor once reminded a colleague that consultants do not use tables enough. Tables force the presenter to organize information into rows and columns, which compels clarity. Tree diagrams describe relationships between people or ideas. Root cause diagrams, also called Ishikawa or fishbone diagrams, look like a fish skeleton and force the presenter to group similar issues. When 50 reasons exist for high supply chain costs, the fishbone method elevates the major causes into the ribs of the diagram, such as resources, strategy and communication. Organization charts are the most familiar structural diagram in corporate life. Layer diagrams show hierarchy or progression, which consultants use most often in maturity models. A practical example might show what a strong resume looks like, starting with basic achievements that should be quantified, organized and ideally supported by a compelling story.

Cluster and Abstract Diagrams

Cluster diagrams resemble multiple versions of a Venn diagram where the presenter mixes, matches and groups sets of smaller items. These can resemble clip art more than insight, so restraint matters. The consultant should ask whether the overlap adds clarity or simply looks clever. Abstract diagrams radiate from a point, with or without a core. They range from a yin-yang symbol to a sunflower to a pentagon. These show one-to-many or many-to-many relationships. The famous McKinsey 7S framework is one example, and it provides a template for analyzing complex problems with multiple interdependent factors. Consultants often see these on proposals where the adviser does not yet know the specific problem but wants to signal where they might look. 2 The abstract diagram communicates breadth of thinking, even when the depth has yet to emerge. The risk is that a diagram designed to impress can confuse instead. The test is simple: if the audience cannot explain the diagram back to you in one sentence, it has failed.

Displaying Data With Clarity

Data displays are the bread and butter of consulting. Finding smart ways to analyze data and represent it compellingly to motivate change defines the craft. Key questions drive the choice of chart. When should the presenter use a bar chart instead of a histogram? When does a stacked chart communicate better than a simple comparison? How should an axis be labeled to avoid misleading the audience? What does a misleading chart look like, and why does it erode trust? Trend displays add further considerations around time frame, sample size and what to emphasize with color or a callout. If the slide shows an average, the presenter must decide whether to display the median, mean or mode. Distribution charts include scatterplots, spider charts and histograms. 3 Reading publications with strong data journalism builds the judgment needed to choose the right chart for the right message.

Duarte's Five Principles for Data

Duarte's guidance on displaying data needs no paraphrasing because it is excellent in its quotable form. When displaying data in a presentation, the presenter must adhere to one principle above all others: clarity. Data slides are not about the data. They are about the meaning of the data. Duarte offers five principles to present data in the clearest possible way. Tell the truth. Get to the point. Pick the right tool for the job. Highlight what is important. Keep it simple. These principles apply whether the chart compares quarterly revenue, tracks a customer satisfaction trend or shows the distribution of defect rates across factories. The consultant's job is to make the meaning obvious so the client can decide and act. A chart that requires three sentences of explanation has already failed. The audience should grasp the takeaway within seconds of the slide appearing. Consultants who master this discipline turn data into decisions, and decisions into action. The best presentations do not bombard the audience with every number. They curate the evidence to build a narrative that leads inexorably to the recommendation.

- 1Duarte On The Power Of Visual Storytelling In Presentations
- 2McKinsey 7S Framework Overview
- 3The Economist Data Visualization As A Benchmark For Chart Quality

Summary

Duarte's Slideology shows that diagrams provide the scaffolding for a story. Flow diagrams show sequence, structures show relationships and data displays drive decisions. Clarity is the overriding principle. Pick the right tool, highlight what matters and keep it simple.