Advice for Engineering Review Presenters

Engineering review presentations are a special breed of technical talks. Here is some advice on making those reviews productive.

Tell the audience why you are there

Eng. reviews can be a good forum for reporting progress, gathering design feedback, asking for management decisions, and communicating plans[8]. Make the purpose of your presentation clear before you start. Put a name / contact email on the title slide.

Be a spoiler

An eng. review is not a mystery novel. Do not hold back the goods until your 30th slide; present them on the 2nd instead[9]. Take a moment to describe the problem before the solution, and to explain why any existing solutions fall short[10]. Spend the rest of the review providing necessary detail, justification or background. Remember, you may never get to your 30th slide.

Think about to whom you are presenting

It takes a bit of effort to take a step back and look at your material from the perspective of someone that is not immersed in the subject at hand. That effort always pays off. If you are not sure, test with someone outside your area.

Internals are less important than interfaces

Engineers tend to focus on the implementations and internal details. Eng. reviews are more useful for communicating interfaces, assumptions, external behavior, or how your project otherwise affects other teams' plans.

Slides are bad documents; documents are bad slides

Verbose slides distract the audience, but telegraphic bullet points are of poor documentation value for those who miss the review. A useful technique is to make a first draft of your slides without worrying about verbosity, then move all the text to the notes (or a separate document) and re-write the minimum amount of bullet points necessary to script your talk. If you're using fonts smaller than 16pt you have too much text on a slide.

Time matters

Many unsuccessful eng. review presentations fail because of poor time management. Plan for questions and designate a team member to be your time keeper. Actively manage the discussions, flagging issues that are taking too long by writing them down for post-review follow-up actions. Practice the talk at least once, to make sure it fits into ⅔ of the allotted time (budgeting the other ⅓ for questions).

luiz@barroso.org
2013

[8] Try to anticipate the outcome of the eng. review. For example, a review communicating plans should not come as a complete surprise to the relevant technical leads and managers in your area.
[9] People sometimes avoid this tactic since it may cause audience members to jump ahead and ask questions that will be better dealt with by the later slides. Those questions are a positive consequence of this technique, so don't avoid it. You have grabbed their attention. Instead manage your audience and let them wait for the details.
[10] Ideally a new solution should allow existing ones to be deprecated.