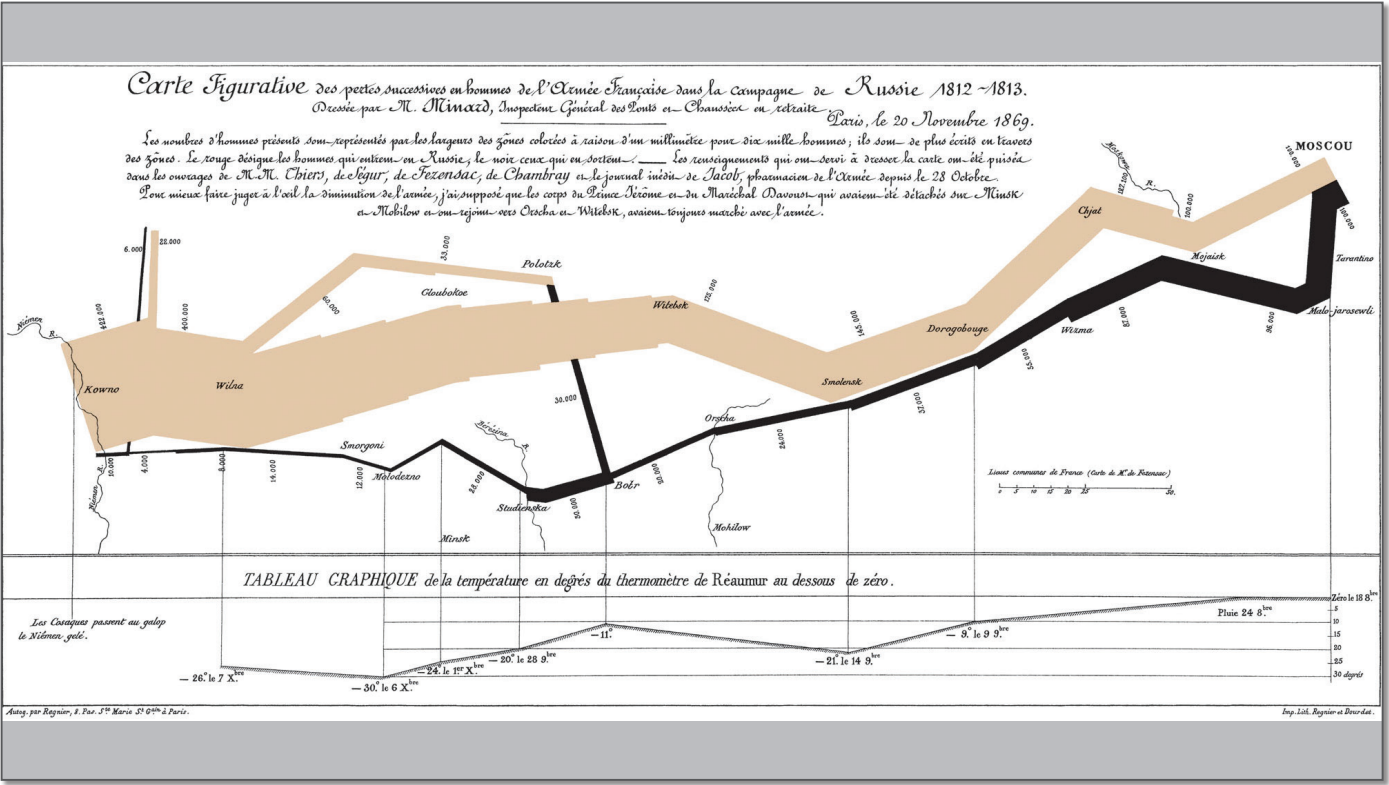# If Napoleon Had to Present to the Board

Charles Minard's pioneering data visualization gets a modern makeover for today's executives


Draw out the insights that can inform recommendations

French engineer Charles Minard was a data visionary when, in 1869, he created this chart of Napoleon's 1812 march on Russia. Now more than 150 years later, Minard's visualization still endures, regarded as "the best graphic ever produced." And yet, like many of today's charts, it's not easy to understand at a glance. The dominant element — the large tan band that shrinks in height — represents the horrific death toll of Napoleon's soldiers as he advanced deep into Russia, then retreated. But it takes time to study this chart to extract that meaning.


◀ Identify the most important data point

The data labels on the far left show the scope of this tragedy. Napoleon started the march with 422,000 and returned with only 10,000. Why did that happen and how can it never happen again? That's what leaders need to know to guide their decisions.
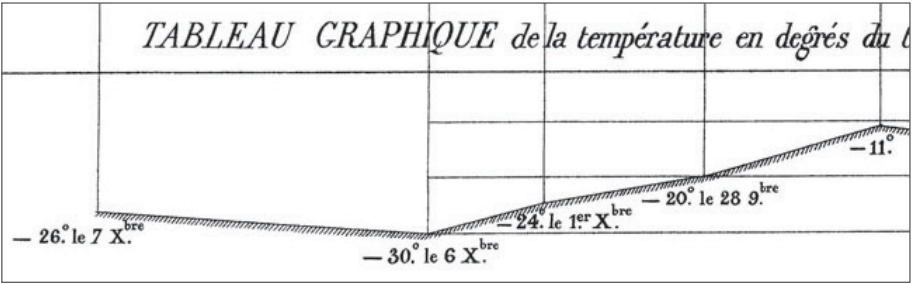
▲ Strip away visual distractions from the main story

This chart is important but potentially confusing. It's of falling temperatures that only apply to the black line of the retreating army, already decimated from 422,000 to 100,000.
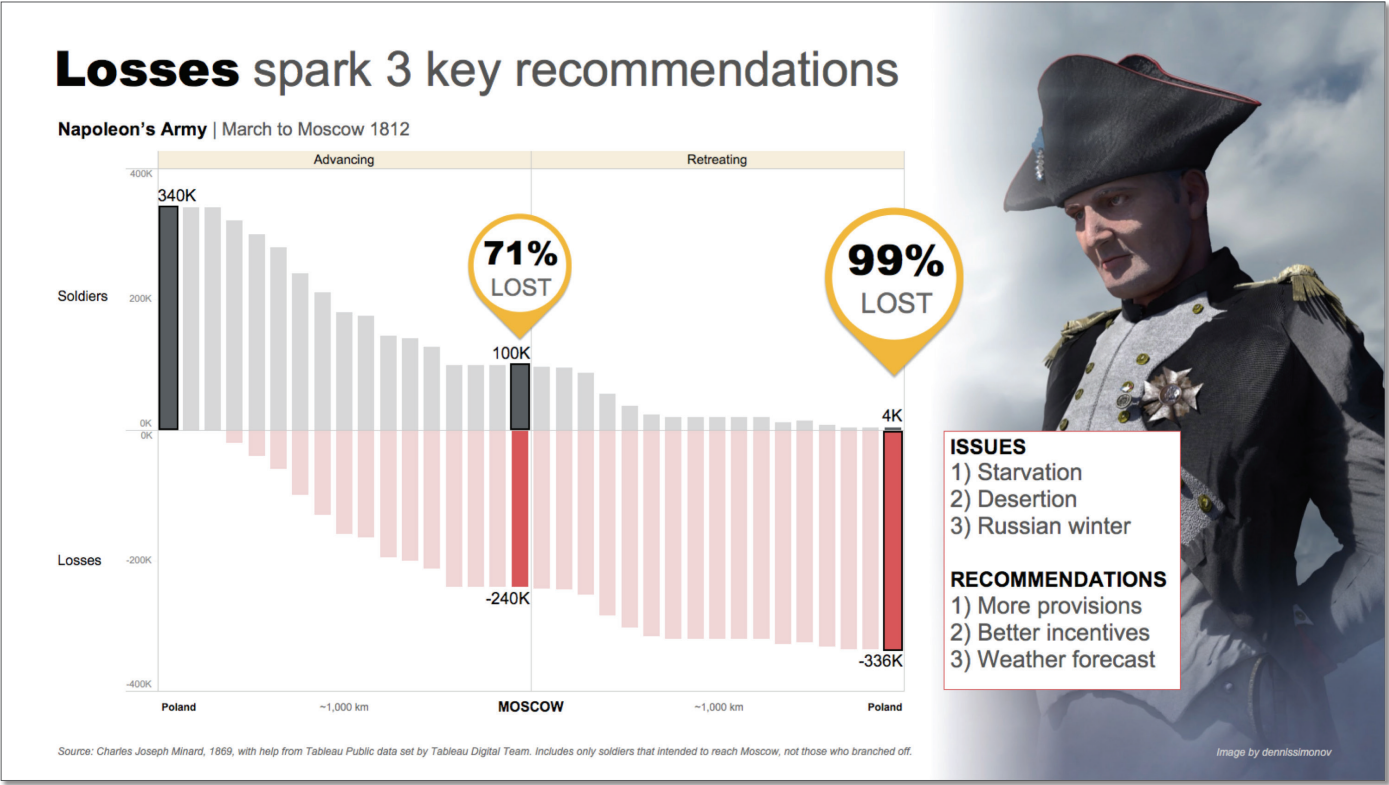
Communicate with a clear headline, image and callouts that complement the visualization

When the audience for a chart shifts from analysts to executives, it's an opportunity for reimagining how to show the data. The extensive detail in Minard's chart isn't necessarily needed, especially the names of rivers and towns, the daily winter temperatures, and the extensive notes on the data source and methodology. The executive version instead distills the story into a simple headline, a basic bar chart, and the visage of Napoleon looming over this disaster. As an (albeit extreme) example, the findings are condensed into very short bullet points.

Showcase the key data point

This callout now makes it impossible to miss the point. The headline and even Napoleon's face draw attention to the callout. Extraneous data has also been stripped away for this "99%" calculation, specifically soldiers that did not set out on the full march (now footnoted).
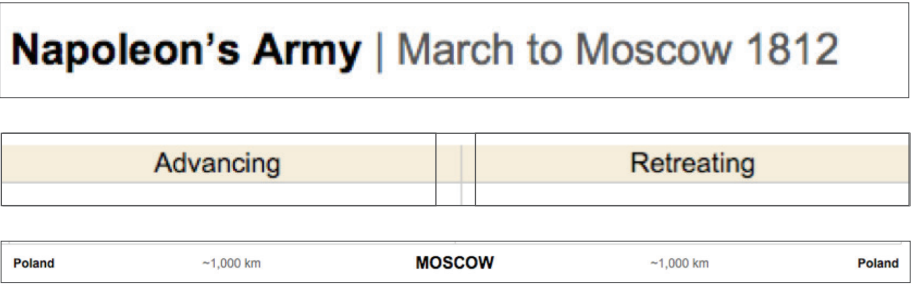
▲ Simplify the labeling to what's essential for the story

The map-like style of the original is synthesized into "Advancing" and "Retreating" with Poland as the endpoints and Moscow as the literal turning point. The story is now clearer.