

# Powerful New Communication Tools for Your Meetings:

## Engaging Both Sides of the Brain



Here's how to make sure your next meeting is unforgettable.

By Joel Zimmerman

If you're like most people, you leave meetings with notes scribbled on paper. If a flip-chart pad is handy, if the magic markers aren't dried out, and if someone has the energy, you might be lucky enough to walk away with a roughly scrawled list of ideas. During the meeting, ideas whizzed by people who weren't following the train of thought, and crashed silently into oblivion. The creative brainstorms evaporated quickly into small verbal puddles. And a day later everyone asks, "What, exactly, did that meeting accomplish?"

Or, suppose you left the meeting with several sheets of paper that looked something like this:



This example shows part of just one chart we came away with after a recent meeting. This gathering kicked off a strategic planning process for a nonprofit residential school. If a picture is worth a thousand words, such a chart is a fortune in reminders of the ideas, discussion, and conclusions that surfaced during the meeting.

These charts are galaxies ahead of the usual written minutes taken in some meetings.

### Visual Recording & Graphic Facilitation

First, a few definitions:

**Visual recording** is the process of taking "notes" on a topic by using a combination of pictures, words, and symbols. It's not simply drawing a set of illustrations or writing out colorful bullets. Rather, it's a mural-like visual image that captures a dialogue's topics; its flow; the interrelationships among concepts; and the priority, importance, and ownership of ideas. The result is a chart like the one on the left, created in real time, as ideas are generated in a meeting.

**Graphic facilitation** is the process of facilitating a group meeting using visual recording.

## Unlike spoken words, visual representations can communicate potent, lasting auxiliary meanings.

In the nonprofit world, we have a multitude of meetings where visual recording and graphic facilitation can be used to great advantage. Some of them are:

- brainstorming — generating creative new ideas
- team building — understanding the dynamics of work processes and interrelationships
- community meetings — soliciting ideas through a dialogue among stakeholders
- strategic planning — developing a vision for your organization's future.

Graphic facilitation is especially rewarding at highly interactive meetings with indeterminate outcomes. It's not the best method when a fixed, non-interactive message is being conveyed. Nor does it make a comfortable companion for PowerPoint presentations. Like any tool in your communications toolbox, it's perfect for some jobs and not for others.

### It's New, But It's Old

When people first see visual recording, many say it reminds them of cave drawings. The concept is exactly the same: These are stories told in pictures, and they're usually drawn on the walls — well, not literally; they're actually created on paper *taped* to the walls.



The visual recorder makes a graphical record while the facilitator leads the meeting.

Maybe cave drawings stopped being popular because they were so, well, stationary. You could make a terrific visual record of a cave meeting, but you couldn't take it with you. Visual recordings are wonderfully portable, and they're increasingly popular because of the widespread use of digital cameras. We can easily photograph our meeting charts, put them on Web sites, add them as illustrations in articles, and crop out custom-made icons for computerized charts and reports.

The modern-day history of visual recording dates to

the advent of organizational development and team building in the 1960s and '70s, when people became interested in recording, understanding, and harvesting the outcomes of group interactions. Early forms of visual recording sprang up with names like "group graphics" and "mind mapping." The practice matured in the 1990s and 2000s, including the formation of a small but growing professional group called the International Forum of Visual Practitioners.

## The complexity of contemporary issues cries out for better ways to communicate.

### Different Strokes

Psychologists are still arguing about whether we really have a "right brain" and a "left brain" and the extent to which analytical and artistic skills get segregated into those two hemispheres. It's clear to everyone, though, that people have different learning styles: Some people grab information more easily in the form of words and numbers, whereas others do better with visual images. We also agree that for most of us, channel redundancy is an aid for learning and memory. In other words, if we process information through several different channels (such as words plus pictures), we're more likely to understand and retain the knowledge.

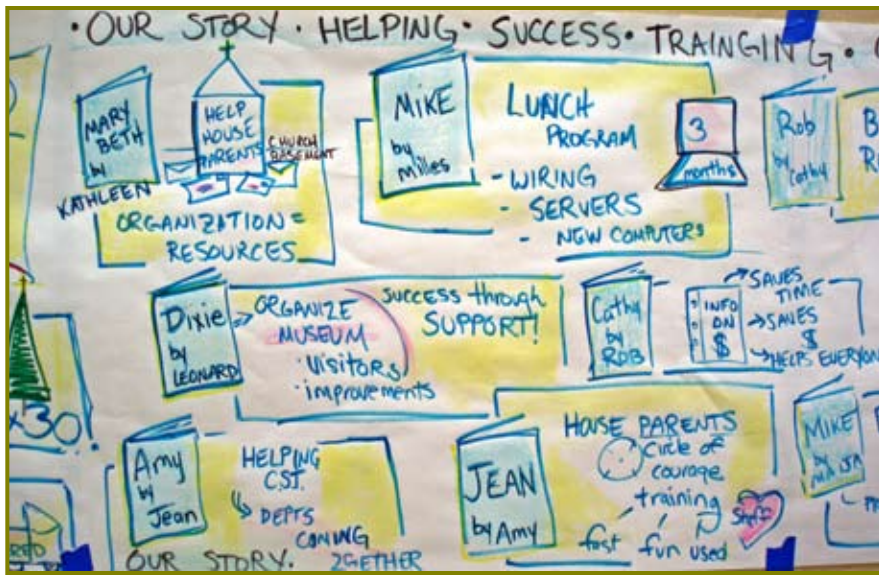


To start the meeting, a visual image was created of the path the group would take during the day's events. By the end of the meeting, the visual recorder had filled in notes about how the group fulfilled the goals set for the day.

It's easy to see, then, the benefits of adding visual recording to a meeting. As words fly around a room, soaking into the brains of different people in different ways, visual recordings add a separate, supplemental channel to capture information. For people who are more visually oriented, visual recordings can be more powerful communication tools than the words they're hearing.

Sitting through meetings, few people are able to concentrate relentlessly on a speaker. Nearly all of us occasionally drift away from the main thought and

*continued on page 14*



These images create a record of an exercise in which people tell stories about other people's successful team experiences.

rejoin the group after a short mental break. If a visual recorder is in the room, he or she often becomes the focal point for the drift. Isn't that convenient, since the visual recorder is making a record of precisely what the meeting participant has been "distracted" away from? The distraction, in other words, is precisely the current topic of the meeting — just in visual form rather than aural — thereby enhancing the likelihood that the person will stay on track with the meeting content.

Unlike spoken words, visual representations can communicate potent, lasting auxiliary meanings. Through the use of colors, shading, placement, size, arrows, shapes, and connections to icons, ideas can be emphasized, categorized, promoted in importance, connected to other ideas, and attributed to certain people. Coming from the hands of a talented recorder, these charts eclipse the value of our old standby, the bullet list, and are galaxies ahead of the usual written minutes taken in some meetings.

When a meeting is over, people look at visual recordings and find it easy to recall the flow of conversation and the thought process

behind an idea. Even people who are primarily "left-brained" analytical thinkers usually find visual recordings add to their ability to recall a meeting's events and make sense of the dialogue.

### No, It's Not Easy

Visual recording isn't easy. It requires two sets of skills:

**Visual recorders need to be artistic.** When you talk to these folks, they tend to downplay the artistic part. But that's easy for them to say — I can draw a straight line, but it's usually by mistake. The little tricks of the trade they develop look easy when they do them, but I've tried and I can't. Good visual recorders develop their own styles, including a rich vocabulary of pictures, icons, shading techniques, lettering formats, and an assortment of shapes and arrows infused with innuendo.

**What's more impressive, they create their recordings in real time.** As we talk, they draw and write. So, the second skill they need is the ability to process information even while their pen is on paper, busily rendering the last minute's ideas. A few visual recorders are talented enough to juggle all three balls, actively facilitating the group, processing the verbal information, and creating the visual record all at once. More frequently, though, visual recorders team up

with group facilitators. By having a visual recorder, the facilitator can do a better job, focusing on the dialogue, stimulating discussion among all participants, keeping the meeting on track, and guiding the discussion — without agonizing over capturing notes at the same time.

### Meetings — Back to the Future

As the pace of information exchange accelerates, it's more important than ever to find ways to make sense of it all. While much of our world has slipped into a comfortable rut of computerized slide shows and bullet-point flip charts, the complexity of contemporary issues cries out for better ways to communicate, exchange opinions, understand relationships among ideas, identify critical insights, and retain information across time and events.

People have become accustomed to "wasting time" at meetings.

People have become accustomed to "wasting time" at meetings, drowsing off in their chairs as the lights dim and the PC projector hums. But the room is very different when a visual recorder begins drawing on the walls. The same fascination that led prehistoric people to draw on their walls — indeed the same fascination we experience when we view those ancient cave drawings in museums today — comes out when the visual recorder goes to work.

What was old is new again. Visual recording is a people-friendly way to add new value to group interactions. ■

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