



Using Visuals to Build Teams

By David Magellan Horth and Charles J. Palus

Here's an approach from the Center for Creative Leadership for breaking down barriers and addressing complex challenges. Sometimes, a picture—or how a person interprets it—can capture the crux of the matter.

These days, organizations and the people who lead them face seemingly insurmountable challenges: lingering economic uncertainties, accelerating technology and globalization trends, shifting demographics, mergers and acquisitions, and the overriding requirement to move with speed.

We are taught in business and engineering schools to approach such challenges through logic and analysis. But after nearly a decade of research with executives and leadership teams from companies around the globe, the Center for Creative Leadership has come to believe that traditional analytical tools are far too limited for this complex world. The kinds of issues that organizations now face don't yield to such approaches. New, creative, nontraditional ways are needed that will enable us to examine issues in a different way—helping a group to reach a shared understanding more quickly and aligning teams behind a common goal.

If there is one given, it's that when there's a complex problem or an opportunity to be exploited there are often as many perspectives on the subject as there are individuals involved. It's important to hear those points of view in order to get a full reading of the size and shape of the issue you face. But when the time comes to take urgently needed action, those same people need to be clear in their understanding of the issues and aligned in their purpose.

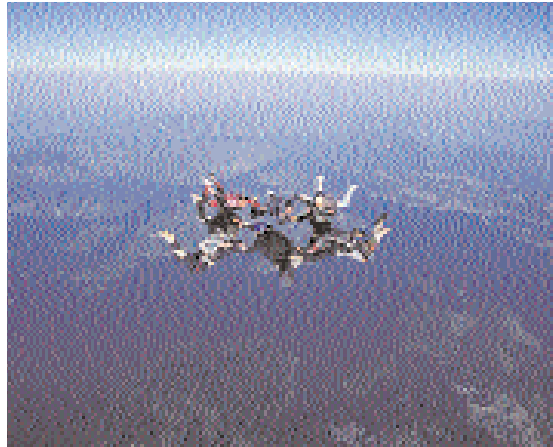
If our traditional tools don't help us do that, how do we go about gathering the information, knowledge, and experience we need and aligning groups? The answer, we believe, is found in dialogue.

Opening the dialogue

Dialogue gives us a way to uncover new information and new perspectives. It provides a way to share and explore, and to develop unexpected solutions and a shared point of view about how to proceed. In organizations nowadays, meaningful dialogue seldom just happens. To solve complex problems, we need new approaches for moving below the kinds of surface discussions that take place.

One seemingly unlikely approach for doing that is through photographs and other images. Here at CCL, we developed a tool called Visual Explorer to help break through barriers, build teams, and meet complex challenges. It's being used by educational institutions, not-for-profit organizations, and *Fortune* 500 firms.

Visual Explorer is an example of a nontraditional tool to stimulate dialogue. It was created in response to research that showed that effective leadership in the face of complex challenges demanded some way of paying closer attention to the nuances of those challenges and tapping the multiple perspectives of



A popular image in the set features a group of skydivers, parachutes still closed.

all stakeholders. Given the pressing nature of those challenges, some kind of tool was needed to facilitate reflective dialogue—at the drop of a hat—with protagonists who had no previous experience practicing and applying it.

In designing such a tool, we set about carefully selecting more than 200 photos and drawings as potential metaphors for the issues and complex topics that organizations and people face. The main criterion was that the image could be readily interpreted in many ways so that it would provoke discussion. We sought images that were diverse in many ways, including ethnic diversity and diversity in the content of the pictures and the media used. For example, we selected black-and-white images as well as color, facsimiles of paintings as well as photographs, and images of a contemporary nature, as well as those from ages gone by. That way, the pictures would have a wide range of

appeal to diverse audiences with different backgrounds, knowledge, and life experiences and, therefore, different, often subtly different, interpretations of each image.

Having an image represent a complex problem is similar to having a three-dimensional version of it; it can be turned and examined so that each facet of the problem comes to light and can be explored more closely and discussed. The image leads to new ways of looking at a shared problem and, in doing so, facilitates a deepening dialogue about it.

For example, one of the more popular images in the set features a group of skydivers, parachutes still closed. They're in the process of forming a human circle in mid-air. One person might select this picture because she or he views it as a metaphor for risk taking. Another might see this picture as a metaphor for high-performing teams. Another person takes a close look and notices that each sky diver is wearing a

business suit and relates that to the need for risk taking but in a sensible and business-like way. Yet another observer notes that one of the sky divers is struggling to break into the circle and relates that to the reality that some people may be left behind as the organization adopts a more risk-taking approach to business. Another person might wonder about the photographer taking the picture and relates that to the need for leadership to step away from the intensity of the challenges at hand so to adopt new perspectives.

Another image features a giant tortoise. One person might see it as a metaphor for something that's out of date; another might interpret it as a metaphor for robust longevity.

Each of those observations and interpretations about the images is fuel for an enriched dialogue about the shared challenges at hand.

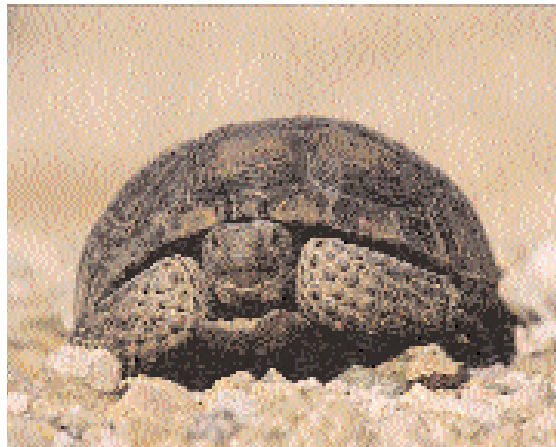
Enlightening metaphors

In a typical session using Visual Explorer, participants study the images and pick one that stands out to them in its importance or possible implications. Then they capture and share their thoughts about the images they selected. Using the tool, groups can collectively explore a complex topic from a variety of perspectives—for shared understanding in preparation for making choices and taking action. Individuals can share insights about who they are and what's important to them.

We've used Visual Explorer extensively at CCL in the Connected Leadership Project—an initiative that looks at leadership as a collective process—and in our Leading Creatively program. For example, we used the tool in our work with a group of high-potential employees in a high-tech organization who were about to step into the executive ranks. They were invited to a leadership workshop to address a critical challenge the company faced: how to accelerate the cycle time for developing and introducing new products to the market. We asked each of the participants to choose an image that in some way provided a metaphor for the issues they were wrestling with in their part of the organization. Our specific instructions to them were to “select an image that in some way speaks to you about your challenge. If you can't find an image that seems to fit, perhaps there's an image that you're drawn to or perhaps is picking you.”

With the images selected, we began a dialogue about them in small groups, allowing each person to gain insights about his or her own challenge from the observations and interpretations of others. We then used the same images to explore their connection with the overarching challenge of time-to-market.

With that group and others, a critical step in sharing the images and developing



A metaphor for something that's out of date or a metaphor for robust longevity?

meaningful dialogue around them requires that as people share their observations of a picture *not* selected by them, they must take temporary ownership of it—as if they had selected the picture and “own” the challenge described by the person who selected it. The facilitation language we use includes such statements as, “If this were my picture, I would notice....” Or, “The connection I would make is....” We encourage the participants in the dialogue to always stay in the first person, using “I, me, my” language. That enables the person who originally selected the picture to remain engaged, yet detached from the image and the thoughts, knowledge, and experiences it represents, while new perspectives and ideas are offered by others.

With the aid of Compendium, a computer-based dialogue facilitation tool developed by Verizon and now used widely by CCL and others, we convened the broader group to explore and reframe the time-to-

market challenge into the specific strategy development, alignment, and execution issues the company faced in its turbulent business environment. The images formed a touchstone for rapid recall and continuing dialogue about a strategy model the team developed. An image of two viaducts winding into the distance was used to convey the team's high-potential, collective thoughts on strategy. One image of a massive number of bicycles of the same model and another of a large old tree with a complex root system were used to convey the group's thoughts about strategic alignment. An image of a complex clover-leaf road system was used to capture their thoughts about maintaining strategic alignment.

The model the team developed and the pictures they selected were presented to a senior executive who visited the workshop, serving as a multi-dimensional tool for facilitating a deep and meaningful dialogue about the role of the senior executive and the workshop participants in developing and implementing emergent product strategies. In that way, not only had the group of high-potential executives developed a model for thinking about the original challenge, they had developed their strategic thinking capabilities in a way that helped them effectively engage with a senior executive whose main role was strategy development. The process enabled the participants to make a useful contribution to the strategy development process for the organization and to develop a clearer handle on their own role in its development and execution.

Real-world business settings

Verizon. The visual metaphors selected for the tool are equally powerful in real-world business settings. The global telecommunications company Verizon

Communications has used images to help it address some of its most hard-core business issues. That effort has been led by Yolán Williams, a senior staff consultant for leadership development, part of a Center of Excellence that supports the company's succession and talent-management initiatives.

"I experienced Visual Explorer in a creative leadership course and was taken by the power of the images and by how quickly they move you beyond surface chatter into deep dialogue," says Williams. She went on to use the tool with groups at the new Verizon company that were dealing with the challenges of merging Bell Atlantic and GTE into a brand-new firm. Williams concentrated her efforts in those lines of business with a particularly high opportunity to make a difference. She found that the images provided powerful, visual metaphors that helped teams see and understand issues more clearly and quickly moved them into meaningful dialogue and problem solving.

"We dealt with serious, customer-effecting problems—true hard-core business issues," says Williams. "It was amazing what insights people got from picking an image they resonated with. Photos and images get you to an empathetic and effective domain much more quickly for a richer portfolio of exploration."

Williams says that images are particularly helpful when a team is stuck on an issue and needs a new perspective to help it see and understand the parameters more clearly. Images have also proved helpful, she says, for individuals who have an issue or a problem that no one else has experienced. "If you have the problem and no one else does, how do you get others to understand? Unless you're the best



Using visuals at the 2001 Friends of the Center European Forum, Switzerland

speaker in the world, people don't resonate at the emotional level and join you," she says. "An image gives people a way to attach to a problem, and suddenly people are leaning forward and exploring how they can help you. It's just brilliant."

Whether the tool is Visual Explorer or some other carefully chosen set of images, this approach can work with merger teams. Williams says that at Verizon, it has become a "happy contagion" that has spread into more traditional teambuilding applications. "We hold back in a team because it can feel risky to open up to folks you are with every day," she says. "But when you ask someone to pick images of who they are and who they want to be, you move beyond that. So now we think not just about the person, but about those images."

Perhaps the most telling of all is the personal and lasting impact that images can have. "I still remember the first three images I ever selected," says Williams. "They were a photo of the hands of a baby and a grandfather, symbolizing my family and what is rich and right in my life; various clocks and timepieces symbolizing the challenges of prioritizing and balancing work and family; and a 'perfect storm' image of a small boat tackling a large wave with an uncertain outcome. I had these

hanging in my office for two years."

An insurance firm. A large, U.S.-based insurance and financial institution has been using Visual Explorer as a tool for teambuilding within work groups. Katie Davis, a consultant and trainer with the company, has found that visual images are a great tool for building trust and alignment when teams come together to resolve problems and tackle opportunities.

"It's not unusual for individuals in a workgroup—

even those that have been together for a long time—to be ill-at-ease with each other," says Davis. "Using photos and images brings safety. You're not talking about me. Instead, you're talking about a picture. That's safer for folks and inspires confidence."

Photos can also level the playing field and give everyone a voice, Davis points out. "When you have a discussion in a group, typically there are the people who jump in and dominate and there are the people you never hear from," says Davis. "Using this format creates the expectation that everyone will share."

Davis says images are also useful to help teams define and develop a shared understanding of a concept. She likes to ask members of a group to select a picture that represents a quality of their dream team—transferring the characteristics that people describe on paper and then hanging the papers on the wall.

"We then distill those and get down to the five or six core values that are held by the team," she says. "It's also a powerful tool to help define what a word such as *honesty* means and to build a common understanding."

Davis points to one work group that used images to define what accountability

meant to them. Participants prepared a summary of their session, as Davis asked each team to do, and came back to the information time and time again as they addressed real-world challenges. They began to call each other on not living up to the principles they established as a team and to use their shared experience to resolve business issues. They also agreed to share accountability and take on more work so that the company could save money by not filling an open position in their work group. “Nothing I could’ve done with them could have gotten them to that point without the image tool,” Davis says.

New York University. Sonia Ospina, a PhD with the Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service at New York University, has used visual images successfully in her classes and seminars and in her work with the Leadership for a Changing World program—a partnership of the Ford Foundation, the Advocacy Institute, and the Wagner School that is designed to recognize and support outstanding leaders in not-for-profit organizations.

“The Leadership for a Changing World initiative brings together community leaders from across the United States four times a year to share their experiences in grassroots organizations and to learn from each other,” says Ospina. “We used Visual Explorer in an introductory session when we brought our first group together, serving as a way to start a conversation among the participants about their work and to express something important about their community leadership—who they are and what’s important to them. I found that it helped us move well beyond a traditional introduction and brought much more substance to our dialogue.”

Ospina has also used the tool as an icebreaker in her classes at NYU, asking students to pick an image to help them introduce themselves and the work they do. She has used it in large plenary sessions to draw out common themes. And she has found that the approach

transcends cultural barriers.

“I used images in a workshop for individuals involved in the social services delivery system in Ecuador,” she says. “I found that it was very cross-cultural in its impact, and the participants loved the idea of choosing among the various possibilities. It allowed them to jump deeper, faster. By the end of the exercise, people learned about each other in a way that made them feel they really knew each other more.”

Whether you work with a public or nonprofit organization, a small business or a *Fortune* 500 firm, it’s a given that you will face new challenges every day. They might involve tough business issues or the need to build a coalition or break down personal barriers quickly.

Regardless of your specific challenge, a key factor in solving it most effectively is to pay close attention to the nuances involved and to tap into the perspectives and resources of all the stakeholders. That means generating a rich dialogue. Using a tool such as Visual Explorer can help start a dialogue to tackle complex problems creatively—first by exploring and making shared sense of the complexity of the issue and then by developing the shared commitment and purpose needed for effective action. TD

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