

Graphic Facilitation Focuses A Group's Thoughts

Supporting Effective Agreement

by Geoff Ball, Ph.D.

This article originally appeared in the April 1998 issue of Consensus, a newspaper published jointly by the Consensus Building Institute and the MIT-Harvard Public Disputes Program.

Did you ever wish there were a better way to capture and organize a group's ideas during a meeting than by taking endless notes on flipcharts?

Well, now there is. It's called "graphic facilitation," and it's growing in use and popularity. In a nutshell, graphic facilitation involves recording and organizing a group's ideas with graphics and icons on large sheets of butcher paper.

The real appeal of graphic facilitation is that it's more than just a fancy way to take notes; it's a technique for helping groups reach consensus and resolve disputes.

In an environmental regulatory agency, for example, employees in the inspector general's office and in one of the regional offices were continually at odds with each other. Over time, the conflict between the two offices became so acrimonious that a number of employees in the inspector general's office came down with stress-related psychosomatic illnesses. To begin resolving the difficulties, a fellow dispute resolution practitioner and I were called in.

The conflict centered around the agency's process for making multi-million dollar investments in infrastructure projects -- projects that typically took nine years from start to finish. The regional office was responsible for doling out money to contractors and overseeing the projects. The inspector general's office was charged with looking for instances of "waste, fraud, and corruption" that occurred in the course of the nine-year process.

The inspectors felt that regional office employees should be open about any waste, fraud, or corruption they observed, "since we're all on the same team." Regional office workers, on the other hand, whose own job-performance reports depended on what the inspectors found, felt that the inspectors should have to do their own searching for irregularities.

To help the two offices resolve their differences, my colleague and I chose to use

graphic facilitation. We knew that graphic facilitation would enable us to create "rich pictures" of this complex situation that would allow people to discuss specific issues without losing the context. We knew that if we could get employees to help us develop a visual image of the problem, they could then better focus on discussing the solutions. To use a favorite phrase of David Sibbet, a pioneer in the field of graphic facilitation (and president of Grove Consultants International, a San Francisco firm that advises clients dealing with organization change), we knew that graphic facilitation would cause people to say, "Oh, now I see what you mean."

To get the information we needed for a graphic representation of this agency's problem, we met with employees from each office separately. After the meetings, we created graphic representations of each office's version of the nine-year construction process, using colored markers on 4-foot-by-12-foot sheets of butcher paper. (Usually, graphic facilitation is done in real time, as the group is speaking.) The graphic representations consisted of words and graphic icons linked into a flow, showing the various steps in the process. In each version, we identified the places where each office said the "blood" was in the process -- where the conflicts occurred.

We then brought the groups together and asked them to look at each other's graphic maps. They realized that the maps were nearly identical and that the "blood" was in the same places. Their belief that the other branch saw things very differently just dissolved. In less than 10 minutes after reviewing the maps, employees of the two offices had jointly chosen a portion of the nine-year process to work on, together.

Without the aid of graphic facilitation, I don't believe the two offices ever would have moved beyond accusations and blame.

What is graphic facilitation?

Graphic facilitation is a type of "explicit group memory" -- a way of capturing the thoughts of group members in real time and making those thoughts available to the whole group. Practitioners of graphic facilitation (called "graphic recorders" or "graphic facilitators") use felt marking pens and large (4-feet-high and 10-to-15-foot-long) sheets of butcher paper, sometimes in combination with pre-made templates, for organizing group members' thoughts. The templates can be either loose and free flowing or relatively tightly structured.

Graphic recorders or facilitators usually are not mediators; typically, they work as a team with a mediator.

Group Graphics is the name of graphic facilitation concepts and materials developed by David Sibbet. It is a teachable system of graphic facilitation that includes archetypal templates and an icon language. Graphic facilitators use its templates, icons, and other elements to illustrate the connections among and the flow between ideas. This helps participants capture thoughts for later reflection and use.

Like most technologies, graphic facilitation undoubtedly has a number of antecedents. Let me go over the ones I know.

In 1968, I suggested in a professional working paper that "explicit group memory" could address a number of problems faced in group discussions. Specifically, I suggested that a "structure sketch," consisting of words clustered and linked on a large sheet of newsprint, could assist groups in working on complex topics.

Soon thereafter, David Sibbet attended a workshop at which I used a graphic template called a "rainbow diagram." Sibbet recognized that the power of group memory could be increased substantially by adding a specialized set of icons or graphic images to the structure sketch. Sibbet, who has both strong artistic and conceptual abilities, developed a series of templates that could be used to structure ideas. From 1972 to 1977, he offered workshops on his technique to fellows at the San Francisco-based Coro Foundation, where he was director of training. In 1977, Sibbet started a consulting firm with his trademarked graphical system as a primary focus.

At about the same time, an architect named Joe Brunon developed a similar graphic approach for working with groups, called Generative Graphics.

In 1980, Sibbet, Sandra Florstedt, and I conducted in San Francisco what we believe was the first public workshop on Sibbet's system. In the early 1980s, I gave a number of workshops on graphic facilitation, including several at the National Conference on Peacemaking and Conflict Resolution. Then, given Sibbet's offerings, I limited myself to using graphic facilitation in my dispute resolution

practice. Sibbet's consulting firm continues to offer services, products, and training in graphic facilitation and recording and training.

The number of skilled graphics practitioners has grown substantially over the years. Last year, more than 30 graphic facilitators and recorders gathered near San Francisco to celebrate the incredible richness of approaches that have grown from our early work. What we started as a set of creative strategies for increasing group productivity is now its own field.

How graphic facilitation helps

Graphic facilitation supports the resolution of conflicts by going beyond a solely verbal approach. Graphic facilitation helps manage the complexity of group discussions. It reflects back the expression of multiple perspectives, makes connections between thoughts, provides a way to store information, describes a complex flow of activity, energizes a group, helps a group maintain sufficient focus to work together, and provides an explicit structure for thinking.

Here's another example: In a master plan development process for San Francisco International Airport, noise and traffic issues were the subject of conflict between the airport and its neighbors. At one point in the process the planners created a list -- using technical, "plannerese" jargon -- of 36 different mitigations for airplane noise. For the public workshop at which these mitigations were to be discussed, we converted the "plannerese" into 36 icons. During the meeting, we used the icons to explain the mitigations and facilitate discussion about them. We found that people stored a great deal of information "under" the graphic icons -- in other words, the graphics triggered memories of what planners had said about the mitigations. As a result, participants did not get hung up on the technical terms, and were able to use the icons to indicate their priorities and make suggestions for other mitigations.

I find that members of a group, given a template (or good examples) and some encouragement, can create graphic images themselves. In one of the best workshops I can remember, small groups of eight to nine people created stunning and humorous graphics that presented their vision of the future of their movement. It was incredibly energizing and allowed a lot of insights to be shared quickly and powerfully.

Graphic facilitation is a powerful tool that should, I believe, be in the tool kit of all conflict resolution practitioners. If you don't feel comfortable doing graphic facilitation yourself, there are professional graphic recorders who do this work extremely well. At the same time, do not dismiss this tool because you "don't draw well enough." A few simple and easily-learned icons, some straightforward templates, and a large piece of paper can add a great deal to the effectiveness of your conflict resolution work.