

All on the same page

by Elizabeth Auzan

When discussing diversity, it's always difficult to make an exhaustive list of what constitutes this concept. Using words tends to create rigid categories, not to say silos.

One way to overcome this challenge is to use a graphic representation with colors that are not associated with race for example. In the above diagrams, geometrical shapes represent different entities which can be interpreted in different ways according to one's perspective.

There is no suggestion of gender, race, religion, social status, physical appearance, age etc. which are typically used to categorize people. There is thus no identification, no contextualized resentment.

These entities can then be represented in different, very *simple*, graphic contexts which immediately bring home the reality of what the groups experience in social or professional situations from exclusion to inclusion. We can *see* how it must feel in the different contexts.

Images appeal to what is commonly referred to as the right brain. Although this term is not scientifically satisfactory, it points out that the different functions have been observed to be located in different parts of the brain. Functions considered as "right-brain" include creativity and intuition as well as reflex-mode actions such as taking a shower. This part of the brain looks at the big picture and conjures up images. It works very fast. The left brain deals with rational tasks based on procedures and works in a focused, linear fashion using words and is necessarily slower.

Dan Roam, in his book *Blah, blah, blah. What to do when words don't work*, deals with the power of visual thinking and compares the right brain to a humming-bird which flies over the forest and takes in the whole forest. He compares the left brain to a hungry fox crossing the forest in search of food. Focusing on one single activity and the desired outcome means that the fox sees only what is absolutely vital to serve his end.

Both sides are necessary for a balanced life and both approaches are necessary for a balanced, effective team.

In a Western-centric society, education is very focused on left-brain achievements and metrics to evaluate them. Measurable performance is the norm. The unspoken assumption is that if it is not measurable it is of no value.

This tendency creates an environment where it is assumed that there is only *one* (left-brain, logical) way to solve a problem, that there is only *one* right answer and that one must find that answer however long it takes. If one fails to find that answer then it is a source of shame and brings criticism from one's hierarchy. This, in turn, creates a silo mentality where competition replaces collaboration. It is not surprising that this environment is dominated by testosterone thereby leaving little space for women or non-alpha males and stifling creativity and innovation under compliance and jargon.

Our experience is now telling us that this environment is no longer viable in our fast-moving, hyper-connected world.

Corporate jargon has already taken this on board and we are served bland PPT presentations using big words such as entrepreneurship, transparency, respect, collaboration, innovation, diversity etc. If top

management is not convinced and committed to walking the talk and transforming the official discourse into concrete action then the situation cannot change.

Developing right-brain capacities through visualization techniques is one way to challenge the status quo in order to cope with and integrate new paradigms.

We have already seen in the infographic representing the transition from exclusion to inclusion how complexity can be clarified and simplified. In business schools, innovation challenges include brainstorming techniques such as the Deep Dive where visual facilitators support groups and help them clarify and express their ideas in drawings and metaphors. These drawings are then used as a basis for presentation where the *story* can be told, human to human, without innumerable and complex slides to distract the audience. Of course, this is an enormous challenge for left-brainers who feel exposed with no screen to fall back on. However, the spontaneity and presence of the presenters using simple, hand-drawn images establishes better rapport with their audience.

But clarifying and simplifying issues is not the only way visualization techniques, which stimulate the right brain, can be used in business situations.

I would like to share with you four real-life examples of visualization techniques in business situations in which I was personally involved and then explore how opening up to right-brain activities is a great way to be not only more innovative but also more inclusive.

We have often heard or used the rhetorical question “Are we all on the same page?” But what if everybody was *literally* on the same page? What if we could bring that metaphor to life?

Visualization techniques and right-brain thinking are by nature inclusive and non-gender based as I hope the following examples will show.

Graphic recording

A trained graphic recorder, standing at a wall, draws a large-scale map of the event on paper. This work evolves as the discussion advances. The resulting drawing is a source of reflection for the participants who can see, in real time, the work they have just accomplished.

For the graphic recorder, all voices have the same value so there is no pre-established corporate hierarchy. Participants feel listened to by a neutral ear. They can come and share their memories or commentaries.

I, personally, always encourage them to take up a marker and add their own comments. Possibly, people who have not felt able to voice their thoughts or who have had additional thoughts can then feel empowered to express them. The phrase “all on the same page” has been materialized. The map is often put up in the office as a souvenir or photographed and used in internal communication.

Collective painting for team-building and motivation

Imagine 120 senior managers from a global company in the same large room dressed in protective overalls and mobcaps, without shoes but feet covered in protective slippers. Hands are hidden in latex lab gloves. They come from very different parts of the world but at this precise moment there is no differentiation between sexes or status.

No one yet knows what they are going to be asked to do dressed in this way. They are on their annual retreat and have already been encouraged and coached to present their values and innovation challenges in graphic form.

Now imagine 12 groups of ten people standing in a long line in front of a 12m long, 1.3m wide sheet of paper. On the paper is a DNA structure in pale grey. Each group has one linear meter to play with. The instructions are to color in the DNA structure in blue and green and then decide collectively what the group wishes to portray of its learnings from the past two days and its hopes for the future. They are given acrylic paint, brushes, sponges and buckets of water to do so and 20 minutes to realize their “masterpiece.” An artist is on hand for any last-minute technical advice.

The sheer energy and enthusiasm this exercise engendered was spectacular. People got excited, shouted ideas to each other, encouraged each other, found artistic ways of expressing their solidarity and even played around covering a hand in paint and patting others on the shoulder to leave a bright-colored handprint.

They had 30 minutes to play. Time constraints are important in this type of activity in order to avoid left-brain critical interference which blocks creativity.

When time was up and the whole group of 120 stood back to admire their collective work, there was silence as it hit them clearly and immediately that they all were on the same page both literally and metaphorically. E pluribus unum, so to speak!

An ambitious team-building exercise

After taking notes and graphically recording some sessions of a corporate retreat involving 150 people from all over Europe, I drew a large-scale (4.5m x 1.35m) graphic recording of the desired outcomes which had been expressed during a workshop. This included a visual representation of each country involved (from their own communication material), a metaphor I suggested and the remarks I had noted down. Again, there was no hierarchy in these anonymous remarks. My mural was carefully cut into 15 equal pieces that corresponded to 15 trays of white wall tiles and on which each team of ten had to reproduce a separate piece of the original drawing.

The challenge was to make sure the edges were exactly in the same place as the original since the tiles would subsequently be made into a mural in the reception area of a center of excellence. Everybody was dressed in the same T-shirts specially printed with the event name. They were given special markers of the same colors used in the original and given 30 minutes to finish the challenge. There was immediately a high energy level despite the fact that they had been working all day. Everyone was in the same boat and everyone was able to contribute to the project. And everyone had fun – and it worked! Unfortunately, for confidentiality reasons, the final mural cannot be shown here.

One of the learnings from this type of activity is that having fun while completing a serious task is not a contradiction in terms. On the contrary, it fosters engagement and collaboration and creates a more attractive working environment that is being recognized as important for workers, in particular Generation Y.

Art ateliers at IMD business school

Programs at IMD target leaders, senior managers and high potentials. There is recognition that in today's fast-changing world, exclusively top-down, left-brain approaches no longer work. There is much focus on mindfulness. Visual and creative tasks require concentration and focus that are important in the concept of mindfulness and something we have difficulty in achieving in a society which promotes multitasking.

Now, while one can sing and wash one's hair at the same time in the shower, these are right-brain, reflex-mode activities and both will be done with 100% of our capabilities even though the singing might not win us a place on The Voice.

It is admitted today that it is not physiologically possible to multitask left-brain activities such as writing a report and negotiating a contract over the telephone *simultaneously*. What happens is that neither activity is done 100% correctly as the brain struggles to skip from one to the other as quickly as possible. This induces fatigue and frustration because the process is neither effective nor efficient. Eventually this can lead to burn-out.

In the art ateliers, visual facilitators organize collaborative drawing exercises and painting workshops. The exercises take place in a multipurpose space with sports equipment pushed to the sides and the floor covered with a plastic protection. Participants are requested to take off their shoes, switch off cell phones and to sit on the floor. For the painting exercise they are given plastic aprons to protect clothing from the acrylic paint. The men often have problems tying the apron strings behind their backs. Most participants are apprehensive at first since they are way out of their comfort zone whatever gender, religion, nationality they are. One very overweight gentleman found it difficult to sit on the floor and so was given a chair and thus *included*. These exercises help flex the right brain. We debrief on how helpful right-brain activities can be in business if only to create focus. When asked, for example, if they have thought about emails or professional concerns during the exercise, participants are surprised to note that their concentration was such that no interference from other tasks was felt.

So, to recap, how can visualization techniques support efforts towards inclusion in the workplace?

- Right-brain activities, such as reading a graphic recording or taking part in painting activities require no prior training and do not discriminate in terms of gender or physical capacity.
- Images are universal, can simplify and clarify complex situations and open conversations and discussions between different stakeholders.
- Images invite storytelling, another universal phenomenon. While a graph gives precise, fact-based, apparently irrefutable information, a story can be adapted to the audience, made longer, shorter, more metaphorical.
- Corporate jargon is eliminated and conversations can be genuine, spontaneous, creative, human. PPT effects and perfect, clip-art elements are too far removed from reality to touch human sensitivity.
- The involvement and focus during visualization activities shut off left-brain rational criticism of experimental approaches and leave space for creative innovation in the same way as a child is absorbed in a game. This capacity is absolutely independent of gender, previous knowledge or skill sets. In fact, in brainstorming, it is often the craziest idea that turns out to be the most effective.
- In order to voice ideas or opinions freely, a non-judgmental, collaborative environment needs to be fostered and including visuals helps this happen.
- Integrating visual techniques introduces the notion of playfulness into a professional context. Although every generation can profit from breaking the silos which dictate what is appropriate in a work context and what is not, introducing a more open-minded, exploratory environment

can attract Generation Y talent who find traditional and hierarchical structures suffocate their creativity and independence. Generation Y can also be interpreted as Generation Why? And, indeed, they certainly challenge the status quo.

Although we note that diversity and inclusion have become major concerns in the corporate world, the road from awareness or political opportunism to concrete implementation is not always smooth and easy.

Strategy statements and top-down decisions are a start. The condition *sine qua non* is commitment from all concerned, starting with top management. New recruitment procedures and communicating about opportunities can help to make sure that “right-brainers” are given a chance to show how valuable they can be in a team composed mainly of “left-brainers” but engaged in innovation.

Visualization techniques, engaging in right-brain, non-competitive activities allow diverse groups to engage in genuine conversations and collaborate with equal opportunities. However, one must not imagine that they are infallible.

One cautionary tale. A top manager brought in visual facilitators to support a team looking to find new solutions to a long-standing issue. The manager welcomed the facilitators, assured them they had carte blanche, then left, pretexting more urgent matters to be seen to immediately. The team had a great day exploring crazy ideas and drawing them out in large-scale documents.

The energy level was intense and the team was set to present to the big boss who had promised to review the work accomplished. At the end of the afternoon, he made his entrance, walked up to the pinboards, glanced at the results of a whole day’s work, took a red marker and drew a thick line through most of the proposals saying they were stupid. The team was shocked and demoralized. Three people left the company within the next few months.

The moral of this story, pretty obviously, is that any visual and/or right-brain approaches to work must make sense in terms of desired outcomes and be supported throughout the decision-making chain. The activities need to be framed, prepared accordingly and be part of a comprehensive strategy. Otherwise, it is better to avoid them and at least be consistent and aligned with existing company culture. Used for purely cosmetic purposes or to appear trendy or politically correct they can backfire.

In conclusion, visualization techniques, well prepared and as part of a more global approach to exploring different ways of increasing efficiency in the workplace by including diverse points of view and experiences can be a great tool to help break down silos and develop a more collaborative atmosphere conducive to a more attractive workplace and an innovative mindset.

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Elizabeth is founder of Thinking Partner, a graphic facilitation service providing visual support for conferences, seminars, team-building events or innovation brainstormings. She also coaches in authentic presentations. She is interested in continuous learning and cutting out the blah-blah from presentations and meetings by using visuals, preferably hand-drawn, to encourage authentic communication.

She works in English and in French.

Clients include Nestlé, Deloitte, Geneva Chamber of Commerce, Medtronic, IMD, PMI. Win, ITU, Lift Conference.

Elizabeth trained as an ICF coach in 2006 before discovering the power of visualization to clarify and simplify communication as well as connect on a deeper level. Since training in graphic recording in 2009 she has helped organizations express and share ideas in visual form. She puts to good use her coaching training in active listening.

She is regularly invited to Pluribus Diversity & Inclusion workshops to capture key highlights.

Elizabeth is currently based in Lausanne, Switzerland.