



"Working Together Works"

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Learn how incorporating visual expression into the workplace brings out creativity and innovation among group members.

Making Art of Work

Dale Schwarz

Organizations would do well to create art rather than simply hang it. Art is one infrequently used approach that can help organizations enhance innovative thinking, decision making, and transition and change. Art provides access to difficult organizational issues. This approach involves using simple drawings, images, and visual metaphors as a powerful means of communication. It can help individuals, teams, and organizations tap into their imaginations, freeing their creative genius.

Picture this

A team of ten people works on a collage illustrating what they need from other team members to become a cohesive team. In the past, not everyone contributed to discussions; people felt excluded and unseen.

To change that dynamic, my co-facilitator Guillermo Cuellar and I first created a learning environment by using a variety of interventions in which people could feel free to experiment. Among these, we encouraged people to experiment with their

visual expression and reminded them that there is no right or wrong way to do the art; creativity is about just making it up. Second, we asked each team to consider what they needed from each other to be most effective in their jobs and to be a cohesive team. We then turned them loose to create a collage on one large sheet of paper reflecting this theme.

A shift occurred while making the collage. Some cut out images from magazines. Others added their own drawings. They joked about how they didn't know how to draw. In a way this leveled the playing field, as most of them had little artistic skill. But it didn't matter. Here they were working together, all fully engaged in the task and having fun. Each person had the opportunity to include his or her image in the collage. As I observed them, it was as though I were watching an orchestra play.

Examining what they had created, they were amazed that in the end these separate images looked unified. They began to appreciate what they had created as a group. They noticed an

emerging theme about connection. There were images with circles of people, and images of wires connecting many hands. They listened carefully as each team member pointed out their images and spoke about their contribution. Everyone felt seen and heard.

The group realized that what had taken place was a new experience for them—one of overcoming an obstacle and working collaboratively with ease. As one person put it, “Having the pictures and symbols makes it easier to talk about difficult topics. They are no longer so charged.” One man said, “I feel a warmth among the group. I think it can be identified as community.” They returned to their work site feeling the triumph of success and a sense of renewal; they had overcome a dynamic that had once been an obstacle. This new awareness began to change the way they interacted on a daily basis.

Images as catalysts

Research shows us that 60 percent of people process information visually. Symbols are a form of visual expression used extensively by major corporations. Their logos are visually simple but incredibly powerful. When we see those Golden Arches, our brains register McDonald’s. The Swoosh? Nike. A bitten apple brings Apple Computers to mind. Just by looking at the landscape of logos around us we can grasp the power of symbols. They not only evoke recognition, but they also capture meaning and emotion. This meaningful form of communication needs to be harnessed and used more extensively within organizations, not merely externally

as a marketing tool. “Making art of work” offers us a different way to use symbols and images.

Drawings help us identify and examine issues that are not easily articulated through language alone. Evoking images and symbols helps us effectively access different information than verbal, logical thinking does. When working with images, we access our right-brain thinking and connect with information that would not otherwise be available to us. Images take us to the heart of the matter by using visual metaphors that provide a leap from one thought to another. They have multiple levels of meaning that are simultaneously perceived and therefore enable a fuller understanding. Because metaphors span mental boundaries, they help us break through the compartmentalized thinking patterns that we often depend upon to solve problems.

from this approach because they would feel inhibited or assume it takes talent to make simple drawings. I have found this not to be the case. The fact that most people are not adept at drawing and creating art turns out to be a plus. Because the activity is not based on talent or ability, people feel they are on a level playing field. They are free to make stick figures, symbols—whatever has meaning for them. The only requirement is the willingness to experiment.

The art of conversation

The story at the beginning of this article is a composite example of how we work with groups. I help people use art as a point of departure to gain insight, work more effectively and joyfully, and learn about their creative process for professional and personal development. Sometimes groups making art together reenact their

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Because images are concrete, we can communicate to others by showing what we mean. Working with images helps people express spiritual and deeply held values in ways that are hard to articulate. When groups work with images, they spontaneously evoke visual archetypes and themes that build resonance and common ground.

Can’t draw a straight line?

You may already be thinking that many people would shy away

dynamics while they create images. Once the art is completed, having the “art-i-fact” for the group to view and talk about makes it possible to reflect upon and discuss the content of these dynamics. The art is observable data. For example, if some team members claim a lot of space on the paper for their images as compared to others who place their images on the edges, this is observable information and can be discussed. The art provides us with a tangible record of the



Schwarz facilitates a group as members discuss their artwork.

process we have just gone through while creating the image.

The art process can be used to address a broad range of group issues, from helping solve a problem to coming up with a new idea to express feelings about a work dynamic or interaction. This spans the continuum that Roger Schwarz defines as basic to developmental facilitation (*The Skilled Facilitator*, Jossey-Bass, 1994). For a team, working on a particular problem while reflecting on its problem-solving process enables the group to gain skills so they can address these issues on their own in the future. Our aim is to help groups build capacity to enhance their effectiveness.

Guiding groups through these experiences requires a skilled facilitator because although this process of making art in the workplace appears to be very simple, it is actually complex. Often what starts out as a basic facilitation transforms into

developmental facilitation. It is not the creation of the art that is challenging, but rather knowing how to create a respectful learning environment, and managing the results once the art is complete and the discussion begins. Art has the potential of taking people very deep because it bypasses defenses and rationalizations. Therefore, it quickly gets us to the heart of the issue. For example, in our consulting group, we took ourselves through a guided art experience, and in less than one day we formulated a new product line.

Outcomes d'arte

Your group may be planning a new product or service. By using art intervention groups can achieve their goals and develop skills and qualities that translate to future situations. We use a wide range of interventions. These include having groups argue on paper, later processing their disagreement; drawing symbols of successful and

unsuccessful projects in order to learn by contrast what the group does well; and making masks to connect with the creative self.

Among the benefits are:

1) Increasing risk-taking capacity.

- Experiments in art creation have no negative consequences. Therefore, they offer an ideal risk-free laboratory for research, development, and

experimentation. This behavior helps to free the mind and open new avenues of thinking and behaving.

- Not knowing the outcome or final result of the creation—allowing it to emerge and staying with the process—requires the release of control. This can feel risky, but can help us develop the capacity to ride the unknowns of organizational life.

2) Fresh perspective and innovative thinking.

- With art we can practice *beginner's mind*. “In the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert’s there are few” (*Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*, Shunryu Sukuki, Weatherhill, 1970). Engaging in a new and different art medium where we may not have expertise engages our playful human nature and enables us to see in new ways,

make fresh connections, and generate new ideas.

3) Developing team, mentoring, and supervisory relationships.

- Creating art is about building a relationship with the materials, the process, yourself, and others. It is a visual conversation. The more we know and trust ourselves, the more we can trust others and enhance relationships.

- We can develop compassion for ourselves and others through addressing the inner critic. Inevitably, while making art, the voice of the inner critic gets louder, e.g., “My picture doesn’t look right. Other people know how to do this better than I do.” Taking responsibility for and grappling with this part of ourselves, we are faced with our judgments of self and others. Growing our compassion helps us take ownership for

our actions and lay less blame on others.

A place for making art at work

One of the ways organizations can support these interventions is to have a dedicated space. While these activities could take place within existing work settings, ideally I would like to see corporations establish environments that I call Creativity Fitness Centers™. These Centers are physical environments located on-site in workplaces where individuals and teams gather to generate ideas, enhance creativity and innovation, solve problems, and build community. These spaces are outfitted with art materials, books, and music—materials to stimulate the imagination—along with work areas for individuals and teams. A trained facilitator is available to lend support for the participants’ creative process. The facilitator has activities and ideas to help him or her use these materials to engage

their project or team building needs. Creativity Fitness Centers are based on the premise that changing the space and the activity helps to change the conversation.

To have a different kind of conversation about issues we face at work, we need to use different tools. By making art of work we can fully tap into our creative resources and expand our views. The organization is a canvas, and its palette of colors is limitless.



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