

## Creating Connection and Initiating Inquiry – Using Images in Facilitation Work

By Tammie Plouffe

It's not exaggerating to say we're exposed to hundreds of images daily. Digital and print media both use images to attract, and keep, our attention.

Why? Smart marketers know that images engage us quickly and powerfully. Quickly, because the brain processes visuals faster than text. Powerfully, because visuals evoke emotion, communicating more content faster than words alone.

Imagine photos of children laughing, lovers kissing or a person sitting by a grave stone. These images instantly ignite emotions, releasing connection hormones that trigger our imaginations to create stories and causing us to react. We've all experienced this physiological process which happens in just seconds.

In addition to affecting us immediately, images stay with us longer. Research shows after three days, we retain 10% of what's heard and 60% of what's seen. This physiological response happens regardless of language or cultural norms and is why one picture can tell a story, as well if not better, than a thousand words.

This response is also what makes images effective in facilitation, where connection and retention are necessary for real learning and sustained behavior change to occur.

### The Age of the Photograph

Effective speakers and educators know images aid in engagement and retention. This practice is called Information Visualization. If you Google "Periodic Table of Visualization Methods" you'll find a chart of 102 visualization methods graphically represented like elements. There's **V** for Venn diagram, **Fl** for flow chart, **Dt** for decision tree, **Mi** for mind map and 98 more, including **Ri** for rich picture.

A rich picture can be a drawing, infographic or photograph—important given how prevalent photos are today. It's estimated that 3.8 trillion photos were taken in all of human history through mid-2001, but 1 trillion photos were taken in 2015 alone. That number is projected to grow to 1.2 trillion in 2017. Clearly, we love taking, viewing and sharing photos.

Research confirms it. Posts with images receive 94 percent more visits. Pinterest generates more traffic than Google+, YouTube and LinkedIn combined. Sixty-seven percent of consumers say images matter more than product information or customer ratings.

Photography is essential to the human interaction required to make the digital economy work, and marketers have taken note. Facilitators, who rely on human interaction for organizational and leadership development, should take note, too.

## **Harnessing the Physiological Power of Photographs to Create Connection**

If you're a successful facilitator, you're undoubtedly an effective communicator. You probably use images in presentations, handouts and other materials. But have you considered photos as a tool for facilitation and training itself? It's a concept that's as effective as it is simple.

Remember the physiological effect of images? When emotions ignite, connection-building hormones, serotonin and oxytocin, are released. Serotonin creates feelings of connection and allegiance. Oxytocin reinforces feelings of trust and safety. This potent hormonal brew works to quickly make people feel connected and safe—ideal for learning.

When there's connection and trust, individuals open up, putting more of themselves in their responses. This is the difference between speaking in generalities, i.e. we need to improve morale; and speaking in specifics, i.e. employees want flexible scheduling. As writer James Joyce wisely observed, "In the particular, lies the universal." In other words, when people get specific, other people relate. People open up, are more expressive and share more personal insights—all of which improve the quality of communication, creating a richer dialogue.

## **Connection Is Essential to Effective Dialogue**

Connection is the glue that binds a group together and creates the space for effective dialogue. Here, a group can work together to surface patterns, identify insights, imagine alternatives and uncover original solutions—solutions that could only result from the integration of those people and their ideas in that moment. This quote by Mary Parker Follett brilliantly articulates this idea.

*"I do not go to a committee meeting merely to give my ideas. If that were all, I might write my fellow members a letter. But neither do I go to learn other people's ideas. If that were all, I might ask each to write me a letter. I go to a committee meeting in order that all together we may create a group idea, an idea which will be better than any of our ideas alone, moreover which will be better than all our ideas added together. For this group idea will not be produced by any process of addition, but by the interpenetration of us all." ~ Mary Parker Follett, The New State*

In other words, connection inspires people to do more than present their ideas (advocacy); it makes them more receptive to having their ideas questioned (inquiry), and integrated into new possibilities and solutions.

## **Using Insight-Building Questions to Initiate More Inquiry, Less Advocacy**

While it's clear how images can be a catalyst for connection, it takes insight-building questions —what, why and how —to get a group into the rich dialogue necessary for real learning.

Because meaning is drawn from personal experience, two people can have different but relatable perspectives of the same situation. Asking insight-building questions gets participants out of advocacy mode, i.e. promoting a single position; and into inquiry mode, i.e. examining all positions to find the

best one. When a group is able to assimilate the insights of multiple ideas, the result is an integrated solution that's better than any single idea on its own.

This is ideal for facilitators, who are often called upon to help groups grapple with complex issues for which there is no clear solution. To do this, they must get people to tap into their emotions, and share personal, diverse perspectives. Not even the best facilitator can just snap their fingers and make this happen. But thanks to the physiological response they evoke, images can definitely help.

### **Connection + Insight-Building Inquiry = Learning**

Understanding the physiology behind how images create connection and foster dialogue shows how this tool can quickly shift people out of advocacy and into inquiry, fostering a shared understanding and readiness to learn. Because the response is physiological, this occurs regardless of language or culture, which is especially valuable in a multi-cultural workplace.

Once you see this process in action—take a look at the attached sidebar/infographic for an example of a design using images to facilitate a process—it's easy to imagine how you could use images to facilitate the exploration of a variety of complex organization development topics involved in leadership development, building teamwork and collaboration, setting strategy and planning, leading change and developing emotional intelligence.

The greatest ideas are indeed the simplest, and using photographs in facilitation is no exception.

**About the author:** Tammie Plouffe is a professional Organizational Development Consultant and Executive Coach for Innovative Pathways ([innovativepathways.com](http://innovativepathways.com)) and partners with MHS Assessments ([mhs.com](http://mhs.com)) and Discovery Learning International ([discoverylearning.com](http://discoverylearning.com)). Tammie is focused on assisting business leaders in developing innovative and lasting solutions to leadership and organizational challenges. She is co-author of Image Insights®, a facilitation tool designed to accelerate collaboration and energy on complex topics.

### **Using Images in Facilitation—A Four-Step Guided Process**

Example of a design using images to facilitate a process.

**Learning Objective.** Explore what effective leadership looks like; identify and define leadership qualities.

**Resources:** Deck of 200+ photographs, displayed around the room, and a handout of insight-building questions: *What does leadership mean to you? How does it feel to be led by an effective leader? Think of the most effective leader you have ever worked with. What did they do that made them effective? What top five things do you think are most important when leading people?*

**Process Steps:**

1. **Focusing.** Participants focus on the objective, ask themselves the insight-building questions and individually reflect.
2. **Resonating.** Participants choose two images—one that depicts effective leadership and one that depicts how it feels to be led by an effective leader.
3. **Insight Building.** Participants break into smaller groups, share their images, noting patterns and themes. The group writes down themes that surface and make a collage of everyone's images.
4. **Taking Action.** Each group shares their images and themes with the larger group, which explores all images selected, noting themes. The group creates a list of identified characteristics of effective leadership.

**Result:** This shared experience creates a common language and understanding around what effective leadership looks like and forms a connection for future learning.