



# The Power of Image in Facilitation

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Facilitators today serve clients who are overwhelmed by an overload of information. Being in touch with the world via phone, fax, email and teleconferencing maximizes our clients' opportunity to serve their populations with up-to-the-minute information. A business and service climate that is driven by rapid response and high productivity assumes that our clients are able to process and retain information in an efficient effective manner. Often, however, this is not the case.



We as facilitators can better serve clients in the Information Age by introducing them to the power of graphic and verbal images in processing information and retaining decisions and points of consensus that emerge in meetings and planning sessions. To do this we can develop skills that are based on image theory, and which will enable groups and individuals to maximize their creative potential.

The Power of Image in Facilitation includes an awareness of Image Theory and its implications for group process as well as individual creativity. The techniques of Information Charting,

Creating Graphic Images, Tapping Inner Imagery, Image Shifting, Image Shaping and the Kaleidoscope Design Strategy are practical ways that we as facilitators can enhance our facilitation to better serve the needs of our clients.



Graphic and verbal images have an extraordinary power in communication and facilitation because they form a connection among the cognitive, emotional, and volitional dimensions of processing information. They have an instant way of revealing relationships while tapping into memory and associations. Images are the language of the deeper self.



It is critical that a facilitator know the power of graphic and verbal images, for as we design the format of a meeting or a program; as we decide the design of a room arrangement to host a meeting or training session; as we decide how to make effective presentations; or the form of the product that will emerge in a planning session, visual and verbal images play an important role. Space design creates harmony and determines

interpersonal dynamics. Time design influences where energy will be focused. Information design integrates information and emotions and taps into memory. In presentations graphic images speak to the “design mind” of the participants and maximize the creative potential of all involved.

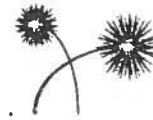
Effective use of visual and auditory images can move a group or an individual beyond intellectual interest in a topic to identifying with the concerns expressed and to acting on those concerns. The product of a planning session, when expressed in visual images (charts or organizing graphics) can commit to memory the decisions that were made. When visual and auditory metaphors are used (trees, waves, rainbows, fish), the consensus of a group can stimulate the creation of a story. This shared story, when rehearsed over time, can become shared mythology which gives life and energy to decisions and action. This dimension of myth and story can motivate a group’s action over long periods of time.



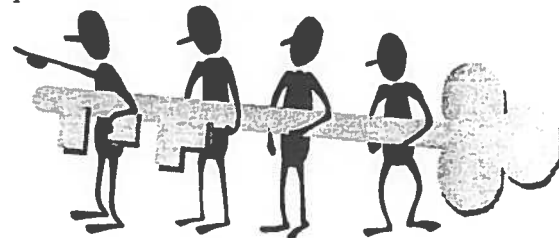
L.R. Beach<sup>1</sup>, in his writing on Image Theory points out that and visual images have multiple functions: 1) Prophetic 2) Poetic and 3) Normative. A prophetic image can move people to action, as Martin Luther King intended with his prophetic image, “I have a Dream!” In facilitation, a group can be guided to create a slogan to

<sup>1</sup> L.R. Beach, (1990), Image Theory: Decision Making in Personal and Organizational Contexts, New York: John Wiley and Sons.

accompany its intended actions. This slogan will be remembered and will spark energy to implementing the actions that are associated with it



Poetic images create associations. The mention of “Camelot” might bring to mind the time of King Arthur, but also the time of John Kennedy. The poetic images of “The Blue Marble” to describe planet earth; “MacWorld” to describe a world connected by computers and fast food; and “Big Blue” to describe IBM are verbal poetic images that can quickly communicate a complex reality and bring to mind a visual image. In facilitation poetic images that are visual and verbal can quickly bridge ideas to action. Asking a group which of the intended actions will be the “key” to unlock all the other actions creates focus to the deliberation, and allows the group to discern its priorities.



Visual and auditory images are expressed in multiple forms: metaphors, graphics, stories, songs, body expression and poetry. A facilitator can guide a group to create these art forms as a way of committing plans and decisions to memory while infusing artfulness and levity into the process.



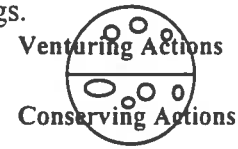
Images have been classified by those who have developed Image Theory as Visual, Mental and Cognitive. Visual images stimulate the imagination externally through the visual path. Through design and color these externally projected images connect with images that are held internally to spark association and to create meaning for those participating in a facilitated session. Because of the power that images have to influence thought patterns; room designs, decor pieces, program designs, visual aids and time designs have a critical impact on a facilitated session .



Mental Images are held within the subconscious and influence how we process information. This system of images can become an “inner teacher” and can guide the decisions that we make. Dream work, journal writing, and creative imagery exercises are means by which this image system can be surfaced. As facilitators we can call upon inner imagery to guide our growth and development.

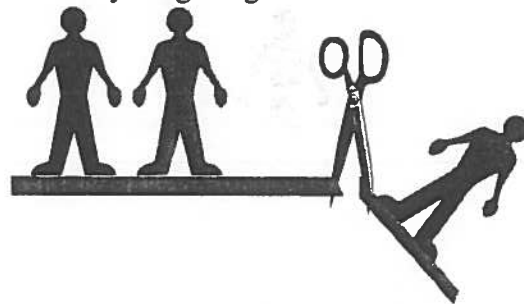
Cognitive images are a combination of graphic imagery and rational information. By holding information in a graphic, relationships that exist in the information can be revealed and emphasized. A facilitator can work with a group to create cognitive images to

hold the products of decision-making and planning meetings.



Kenneth Boulding<sup>2</sup>, in his groundbreaking writing on Image Theory, laid out the following understandings: 1) We think in images as well as in information 2) Images are created by messages 3) Images govern our behavior 4) Images can change 5) Changed Images Create Changed Behavior.

The concept that images are powerful in governing the behavior of individuals and groups is important to us as facilitators as we observe behavior during formal meetings as well as informally in casual conversations. Individuals operate out of self-images, and often these self images are negative and limiting. “I’m just a salesperson, low man on the totem pole. My opinions don’t count.” These are comments that reveal a negative self understanding. “Management doesn’t respect our suggestions. We have to fight like tigers for everything we get.”



Hearing these remarks during pre-session data gathering interviews, a facilitator can discern the images that are

<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Boulding, (1956), The Image. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.

guiding the behavior of individuals and groups before the facilitated session begins. Careful preparation takes into account these images and the role they will play in influencing what goes on in the session. An intentional facilitator can discern what messages need to be communicated through the choice of words, process methods, decor, room design and time design. These messages might shift limiting images and shape new images that will release creative interaction.

The shifting of limiting images and the shaping of releasing new images is not reserved to participants in facilitated sessions. As facilitators who are aware of our own growth, we can examine the self understandings that are governing the behaviors that limit our own effectiveness as facilitators. We can name those self-images and discern new images that will catalyze our personal development. We can create multi-modal messages that intend to shape images that will release the behavior that we desire for ourselves. This practice on ourselves is essential if we are to be effective in affecting the development of positive self images of others.



Dr. David Cooperrider<sup>3</sup> in his research in Image Theory expresses the concern that in the culture of the United States today

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<sup>3</sup> David Cooperrider, (1990) Appreciative Management and Leadership, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

we are living in a toxic social climate of cynicism. As a result of being bombarded by negative messages that are projected by the media, a majority of the clients that we serve might have a negative image of the world and the future. It is critical to take this perspective into account as we design procedures that are meant to stimulate creative thinking and motivate hope filled action.

Cooperrider and others point to the power of the heliotropic response...not only in plants, but also in human behavior. Positive images release positive action. A skillful facilitator can discern from the dialogue within a group, the individual strengths as well as the latent vision of the group. Procedures designed to release this vision and capitalize on the strengths will tap depth motivation that has the potential of breaking out of the bondage of cynicism and inertia.



Elise Boulding<sup>4</sup>, in her writing on Image Theory points out that in every culture there is a nucleus of images. These images are related to the belief system that nurtures the value system that is embraced by the culture. This value system protects and strengthens the nucleus of images that govern behavior. “The Sun Never Sets of the British Empire”, “White Man’s Burden”, the character of Chinese calligraphy that expresses China as “The Center”.

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<sup>4</sup> Elise Boulding, (1990), Building a Global Civic Culture, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.

These are examples of culturally held images that have guided action in past eras. As we facilitate groups that are composed of a dominant culture, we need to take into account the culturally-held images...past and present...that can be latent or active in influencing self-understandings. In serving multicultural groups, an awareness of the power of culturally held images can inform our choice of words and process.



As facilitators we play a critical role in giving form to the future. As we serve organizations, companies, schools, neighborhood associations and other “small groups of concerned citizens,”<sup>5</sup> we enable people to stand in the present and give voice to their images of the future. Fred Polak<sup>6</sup> in his writing on the function of image points out that human beings have the unique capacity to be “citizens of two worlds: the present and the imagined. Out of this antithesis the future is born.”<sup>7</sup> Posters and bumper stickers proclaim, “If you can imagine it, you can do it.” As facilitators we can enable groups to form positive hope-filled images of the future and to put those images into action.

<sup>5</sup> From a quote from Margaret Meade.

<sup>6</sup> Fred Polak, (1973), The Image of the Future, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass (translation of original)

<sup>7</sup> Polak,, p. 1.

## References and Resources

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