



Visual Explorer

**Picturing Approaches to
Complex Challenges**

CENTER FOR CREATIVE LEADERSHIP

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Picturing Approaches to
Complex Challenges

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Center for Creative Leadership
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Greensboro, North Carolina 27438-6300
www.ccl.org/publications



CCL No. 723

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Acknowledgments

We are deeply grateful for the help, advice, and insight of a number of colleagues who contributed to the development of *Visual Explorer*: Robert Burnside, Cheryl De Ciantis, Bill Drath, Victoria Guthrie, Laurie Merritt, Kate Panzer, Sharon Rogolsky, and Lee Stine.

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What Is *Visual Explorer*?

Visual Explorer (VE) is a resource for groups seeking to explore complex topics. It's a way to make sense of complexity as the foundation of effective action. In some mission-critical situations many different perspectives are present, information and other resources are lacking, and yet the group harboring these perspectives needs to be coherent in its purpose and clear in its understanding in order to take urgently needed action. How do people find coherence leading to action in such circumstances? Through dialogue.

VE is comprised of 224 high-quality color images that meet certain key criteria for supporting constructive dialogue. For example, the images represent diverse subjects ranging from simple farming to space travel, from birth to death. Different kinds of people from around the globe are represented in the pictures. The images also invite examination—they are visually interesting in some way and encourage good conversation. Our experience in working with the VE images is that people enjoy browsing through them, picking them up, and spending time looking at them. The images at the core of VE provide a channel through which mediated dialogue can occur. For the latest in VE uses, including applications stories, tips, and tactics, visit <http://cclve.blogspot.com>.

What Does *Visual Explorer* Do?

The underlying objective in using VE is for group members to collectively explore a complex topic from a variety of perspectives in order to strengthen a shared understanding and prepare for taking more effective action. It's one part of a larger developmental process. It doesn't create decisions or suggest actions, but rather helps groups understand more fully the context and the perspectives that surround the decisions they make and the actions they take related to a specific issue.

How Does *Visual Explorer* Work?

Before the VE session, the group using it as a resource identifies the topic it wants to explore and about which it wants to converse. Each member of the group selects an image from the VE collection that he or she intuitively or literally connects to the topic. For example, one person might choose a picture of a wind storm and think *Our project is a lot like this hurricane*. As they relate the connections between the topic and the image, group members tell their own stories or create metaphors about the topic from their own points of view. Likewise, they hear the perspectives of others. The conversation brings about a more thorough and shared understanding of the topic, which can lead to further action (establishing a vision, reaching a decision, assigning critical tasks, and so on).

When Does *Visual Explorer* Work?

In general VE is most helpful when a group is engaged in these, or similar, activities:

- 👁️ seeking patterns in complex issues and making connections
- 👁️ seeking a variety of perspectives
- 👁️ asking new questions
- 👁️ eliciting stories and creating metaphors
- 👁️ tapping into personal experiences and passions
- 👁️ articulating what is known to the group
- 👁️ creating or practicing dialogue
- 👁️ building on ideas
- 👁️ surfacing and channeling emotions and intuitions
- 👁️ exploring the landscape of a complex set of issues
- 👁️ imagining alternatives
- 👁️ sparking humor and playfulness.

Here are some examples of how VE has worked to help groups address complex challenges. The examples come from our own work with clients and from stories passed to us from other VE users.

During an exit interview a parting employee reported to the company's human resources department that there were communication and morale problems within the company's production department. In an effort to get a reading on the group the production manager used VE during a staff meeting. After distributing the images around the room he asked each person to pick an image that might help answer the question: What is standing in my way to a fulfilling career or to being happy in the production department? The group generated a list of core issues and several action items. Several department members reported it was one of the best discussions the group had participated in.



During a departmental business planning session, a group was required to process an immense amount of data and data-driven analysis throughout the day. VE was used to balance the analytic approach with an intuitive one. The VE session was conducted toward the end of the planning meeting. Group members approached the VE session with one of two key questions: What have we overlooked? or What do we need to pay attention to that we haven't already? The VE session confirmed some deep values within the group and provided a surge of energy at the end of a tiring strategic session. Group members felt more

connected to their values in a profound and intuitive way, which helped them renew their commitment.



J. was planning a retreat for the group she managed. She wanted to feature storytelling—there was a rich history behind the group’s work that the newer people didn’t know much about. She also wanted the group to tell stories about where it was going and what the future might look like. She began the retreat using VE, asking each person to select three images: one connected to the past, one to the present, and one to the future. She also asked each person to pick among a set of images that had been turned facedown, but not to look at that image. She saved those pictures until later, when group members turned them over and asked themselves: How might we get blindsided?



R. managed a group of engineers that was trying to become more creative as a team. He wanted the group to appreciate its strengths. He asked team members to bring to a staff meeting some memento or something they made that represented the moment when they were at their creative or artistic best. At the meeting each team member picked a VE image that stood for what R. had described as “the creative strengths or highlights of our group.” The next day R. noticed many of the mementos and VE images remained with the team members, finding a place on desks and office walls as a sign that they had reconnected their creativity with their individual strengths.

These situations and examples indicate how powerful VE is in helping groups meet many kinds of objectives. But it’s not the only tool a group needs for such initiatives and, in fact, should be coupled with other tools and activities if the group wants to achieve such goals as:

- ④ bringing an issue to a close
- ④ making a decision
- ④ determining a logical framework
- ④ confirming the validity of patterns
- ④ measuring and analyzing alternatives
- ④ resolving conflicts
- ④ dealing with differences
- ④ documenting or communicating the insights generated by the dialogue
- ④ setting a course of action
- ④ articulating a single vision.

Organizations typically have a system for achieving these kinds of goals. Usually they lack systems for carrying out deep exploration of the issues behind the goals and for integrating that exploration with analysis and decision making. Helping to make this connection is where VE comes into play.

Who Can Run a *Visual Explorer* Session?

Most managers and many group members can handle the demands of a basic VE session. In most cases it will suffice to follow the brief instructions in this manual and to provide some basic directions to the participants. The VE facilitator's job is simple and unobtrusive: to support dialogue among the group. It usually requires only a beginner's level of facilitation skill. He or she can even participate as a member of the group. Beyond that the facilitator need only make sure to have the skills that match the purpose of the VE session. For example, to conduct strategic planning the group needs a facilitator with some experience in leading a strategic planning session. Situations that may lead to conflict need a facilitator who can handle conflict.

Does *Visual Explorer* Really Work?

VE is effective because it's so simple. It doesn't get in the way of the group's conversations or perspective seeking. But its unobtrusiveness and simplicity can be misleading. A dose of skepticism is to be expected and can even prove useful in any process that seeks, as a VE session does, to question assumptions. As long as the group's selected topic is relevant and carries a sense of urgency, so that the dialogue is about things that matter most, almost every participant experiences some value from taking part in the VE process.

How to Use *Visual Explorer*

VE can work in a wide variety of contexts. It can work by itself, or as part of a larger group process that addresses an issue or challenge. To use VE in the context of a larger design, it's effective to place the VE session in the middle of the design. For example:

1. Direct the group to revisit or experience the issue firsthand or to review key information about the challenge.
2. Conduct the VE session.
3. Analyze and refine the perspectives and ideas that emerge, and then appropriately conclude.

You can conduct this sequence during a series of staff meetings, for example, during a group retreat, or as part of a developmental program.

Before You Start

Here is what you need before starting a VE session.

- **A minimum of 90 minutes** devoted to the VE session itself.
- **A facilitator** to set up the context for the session, to explain how VE is used, and to keep the conversation moving forward.
- **A clear beginning statement of the issue or challenge** the group will explore in the VE session. This statement can be produced during a facilitated group conversation just before the VE session. It's also helpful for the group to review any data that pertain to the issue just before the VE session.
- **The set of VE images.** It doesn't matter if a few are missing (some usually "walk away" from each session). For most purposes one set of about 200 VE images suffices for a group of up to about 30 people.
- **Paper, pens, and pencils**—tools that group members can use for taking notes.
- **An area to display all the images and allow browsing.** You can use the floor or tables.
- **Space for break-out groups** of three to five people and space for a dialogue that involves the larger group. Smaller groups may want to temporarily arrange their chairs in circles with no tables in the middle.
- **A way to project, post, and/or hand out instructions** for the break-out groups.
- **Instrumental music and a sound system** (such as a CD or tape player) in the area where people are browsing the images. Choose instrumental music (vocal accompaniment can distract from the visual, intuitive act of browsing) that is quiet but upbeat.
- **Tools for capturing key parts of the group's dialogue.** You can assign designated note takers, use easel sheets, or set up a computer with a projected display.
- **Scissors, glue, and poster board (optional).** Some VE users, including ourselves, have reported success in asking the group to make a collage of their images as a collective representation of the challenge they face.

Preparing an Effective VE Session

By following a three-stage process, facilitators can ensure that the VE session they conduct will be meaningful to the participants. Briefly stated, the three parts of the process are select, frame, and probe.

1. **Select** a topic. Choose a topic for the group to explore (for example, *our strategy*). If there isn't an obvious topic related to the group with which the facilitator is working, such questions as *What stands out as this group's key challenge?* or *What is at the root of this group's issues?* can be used to better define a topic.

2. **Frame** the key questions. Frame the topic in terms of one or more questions or statements around which the VE session will revolve (for example, *What do you think this group's new strategy should be?*).
3. **Probe** the questions. The third part of the preparation process is to translate the questions into one or more VE probes. For example, the facilitator might ask group members to choose an image that represents the direction they think their organization should go and/or how it might get there. The probe should suggest that everyone in the group has an important perspective on this topic and that perspective is valued by all the members of the group. A probe can be stated in alternative ways so that all the group members can understand it. Probes can be solicited from the group.

Preparing for the VE session using this process increases the likelihood that the session will be more effective in leading the group to meaningful dialogue, insights, and innovation. On the following page we offer some sample approaches to common issues that groups bring to VE sessions.

The questions and probes used in a VE session are determined by the nature of the group—whether it's oriented as a team, for example, or as a collection of individuals. A group of trainees in a classroom might start with the question *How am I creative?*; whereas a true team might explore further by adding a second question, such as *How are we creative as a team?*

If sensitive topics are discussed, set ground rules about the degree of confidentiality that will apply afterwards. Some groups, for example, use the rule *What's said in this room stays in this room.*

Conducting the *Visual Explorer* Session

Each person writes some notes about his or her personal perspective on the topic and the question put before the group. These notes can include anything that's relevant to that individual—observations, assessments, emotions, points of confusion, and so on. Group members can use journals, notepads, or the *Visual Explorer Worksheet* (see page 17). These notes are private. The choice to use them belongs to the participant.

Set out the images before the meeting begins or during the note-writing period. Spread the images on the floor or on large tables in a way that group members can easily browse through them. The space should be small enough so that people tend to rub shoulders but large enough so that the images do not overlap.

Remind members of the group that no talking is allowed while they are browsing the images. (It is during this period that the instrumental music can be played.)

Each person selects one image that captures something significant about his or her own perspective on the defined topic. When directing group participants it's helpful to use such

Sample Topics, Questions, and Probes

<i>Topics</i>	<i>Questions</i>	<i>Probes</i>
Organizational Climate	What is the climate of our organization? How is your morale these days?	Choose an image that conveys something you see as positive about our climate; and choose a second image representing something negative in our climate.
Key Challenges	What is the most important challenge this group faces and needs to resolve?	Choose an image that in your view communicates something about the single most important challenge we face.
Creativity	In what ways are you creative? What is your art?	Pick a picture that reminds you of when you feel most creative, or select a picture that describes how your work is artistic.
Customer Service	What is good customer service?	Choose a picture that shows what might be missing from our approach to customer service.
Client Needs	What do you, our client, need from us?	Choose one picture that shows how we are meeting your needs and choose another picture that shows how we are <i>not</i> meeting your needs.
The Unexpected	What could happen that we aren't expecting? What are we missing?	Choose a picture that points to something important that could catch us by surprise or indicates information or perspectives to which we have not paid attention.

language as *select an image that seems connected to*, *select an image that reminds you of*, or *pick a picture that is a metaphor for or that stands for*. Remind participants that the connections they see may be literal, figurative, or emotional. Suggest that they don't think about the selection process too much, but that they intuitively choose.

OPTION Ask each person to choose more than one image (for example, one each representing the past, present, and future; or one for strengths and one for weaknesses). Another possibility is allowing participants to pick more than one image in answering a single question. Keep in mind that if participants select more images the entire VE session will run longer. Alter the instructions accordingly.

OPTION Use the *Visual Explorer Worksheet* (see page 17) to guide participants' reflections. The worksheets can be collected and the contents used in a summary, a report, or as a part of further research into the topic. There must be full agreement with the participants of how the data—including their identities—are used. A serial number is provided near the corner of each image that you can record for referencing the image to the data.

Using the images, conduct dialogues about the topic and questions within subgroups. Three to five people in each subgroup works best. Make a version of the following steps available to the group as a handout or prepare them for an overhead display, or both. Let the groups manage themselves using some version of these instructions, with the facilitator (you) moving among the groups and helping as needed.

- One person starts by (1) describing his/her own selected image: What's obvious? What's unclear? Then, (2) she/he makes connections of the image with the topic.
- Still working with this same person and his/her image(s), the others in the group describe (1) what they see in the image, and (2) what connections they might make to that image (*If that were my picture I might notice or connect . . .*). Don't solve problems that arise or give advice. Explore perspectives and possible meanings.
- Repeat this process for each person in the group.

Note: In cases when each person picks more than one image about more than one question, it still works best to have each person completely process all their images with the group before moving on to the next person.

Allow at least five minutes per person during the small-group discussions. Let the groups know at the start how much time they have and keep them informed about their time throughout the process. If time permits, the group can discuss any patterns or overall connections that

emerge from its dialogue. The facilitator should be available to answer questions about the VE process but should not exert too much control over the groups. It's all right if the groups slightly modify or improvise on the instructions. Discourage any problem solving or finger pointing, and keep the focus on the images and connections. Groups that finish early can continue their dialogue or move on to the next step.

As they finish, group members should write down anything they want about the topic after having had the dialogue, including any shifts in perceptions, insights, or feelings about the topic. (Participants can use the *Visual Explorer Worksheet* on page 17 for this purpose.)

Debrief the process and continue the dialogue with the whole group. Some key questions to guide this part of the process include: *How was that conversation? What happened? What was valuable about the process?* Content questions might include queries such as: *What did you discover about [the topic] from your group? What different points of view were expressed in the small groups? Which images really stood out?*

Within this basic sequence of a VE session, there are several options a facilitator can use to make the session more useful to participants. For example:

OPTION Record or transcribe the discussions, preserving the metaphors, the insights, and the images for future reference.

OPTION Many participants will want to keep the images they selected. They often show up on bulletin boards or office walls and spark further conversations. To preserve the set of VE images, participants can make a color photocopy of their images for their individual use.[†]

OPTION The group can use scissors, glue, poster paper, markers, and additional images from magazines and other sources to construct a collage using the images selected (make color photocopies of the images to avoid depleting the VE collection). A dialogue that uses the collage as a focusing tool can be a useful exercise during a VE session.

OPTION When spreading the pictures for browsing, turn a few of them over (at least one for each person participating) so that those images are hidden. As group members select images, ask each of them to also select one of the hidden ones without looking at it and not to look at it until later. At some point during the dialogues, invite participants

[†]The images used in Visual Explorer are held under copyright by Getty Images, Inc., and are not licensed for further commercial use or publication outside of the VE session.

to look at the hidden image and try to interpret it in various ways (depending on the topic before the group). Curiosity typically runs very high by that point in the session. Even if most group members don't get anything profound from the hidden pictures, a few will. Don't try to control the discussion, but be aware that it may provide an opening to issues that the group had previously avoided.

Ending the *Visual Explorer* Session

VE sessions typically end on a high note. Celebrate, if appropriate, and appreciate what just happened. It's important for groups to build on the energy generated during the session and to work toward solutions and decisions that arise from this directed dialogue. Each group is different, but most want to take further steps related to the topic addressed during the VE session.

For example, a newly formed team participating in a VE session might list all the metaphors that surface during the dialogue and that describe its mission. It could use this list to refine and communicate its mission to outside sponsors, to constituencies, and among its own members. Another group might use the question *How am I creative?* in a VE session to kick off a quarterly planning retreat. That particular topic can infuse the subsequent agenda in a positive way.

Following are suggestions for steps that a facilitator can take to capitalize on the insights and communication arising from a VE session.

- Make a list of the most interesting connections or insights. List possible actions for each one, and then prioritize and assign the top-ranked tasks to the appropriate individuals or small groups. Because VE often reveals what people are passionate about, you can ask group members about their commitment to specific actions and match them to those tasks.
- Scan key images—pictures from the VE set that sparked especially insightful or passionate dialogue—and use them to create a slide show. Participants can use that show to communicate to co-workers the content of the meeting and the nature of the decisions made there.
- Use the qualitative data from the VE session to inform a process for rigorously defining or conceptualizing an organizational initiative. For example, the VE information could provide a starting point for a vision statement or suggest a new model for customer services.
- Save the images to use as prompts when the group reconvenes. Remind the group where its dialogue left off. Ask the group what qualities from the dialogue it wants to build into how it conducts subsequent meetings. That process will help the group create norms that will in turn help the group maintain a dialogue among its members.

The Story Behind *Visual Explorer*

VE helps create shared understanding within a group about a particular challenge by means of a process known as *mediated dialogue*. The word *dialogue* in this sense refers to a way of having conversations in which people attempt to get at the roots of what they each assume and believe. That kind of conversation sets the stage for making better decisions and taking more effective actions. As an introduction to the theory behind VE, the following discussion describes what CCL has discovered in its research into mediated dialogue and its use of VE.

Creative Leadership

It's useful to see leadership as a process of creating shared sense from complexity and chaos. This view takes some of the weight of leadership off the person in charge (the leader) and puts it on the group—people thinking and acting together. As a result of our research into this process and our work with VE, we have identified six creative leadership competencies that enable group members to create sense together in the face of complex challenges. Each of the skills is evident during a typical VE session.

1. *Paying attention*: developing the discipline of temporarily slowing down in order to look closely at a situation; effectively using different means of perception.
2. *Personalizing*: tapping into unique life experiences and passions to provide insight and perspective on shared challenges.
3. *Imaging*: building literacy in the making and use of images to make sense of data and to communicate effectively.
4. *Serious play*: developing skill in generating knowledge through exploration, experimentation, bending rules and testing limits, levity, and sport.
5. *Collaborative inquiry*: creating the ability to sustain productive dialogue in addressing complex issues within and across community boundaries such as functional areas in an organization, generational borders, and others.
6. *Crafting*: learning to synthesize issues, objects, events, and actions into integrated and meaningful results.

Metaphor and Story

There are two “styles” of human thought: verbal (analytical) and nonverbal (intuitive). The verbal, analytical thinking style tends to be dominant in organizational settings; but the nonverbal, intuitive style, which gets its strength from image, pattern, and texture, is often neglected. VE can help both kinds of thought work in concert so that individuals and groups can draw on all of their resources to explore the territory of a complex challenge.

The visual-verbal devices of metaphor and story can be found where analytical thought and intuitive thought meet. A metaphor describes a thing as if it were another, different thing. A story also describes, but it is different from a metaphor in that it describes a thing in the context of other things and over a course of time.

In the typical meetings and conversations common in business and other professional settings it's difficult to make metaphors or build stories. VE enables the prolific creation of metaphors and stories that help build shared meaning in a group or organization.

Putting Something in the Middle

Group conversations are often necessary to meet an organizational challenge, but not all conversations rise to the level of a dialogue. One reason is that talk directed toward an end often depends too heavily on analysis and verbal acuity. Another problem is that people tend to link the ideas a person expresses to that person. When talking about controversial issues the message can get confused with the messenger.

VE lets groups “put something in the middle” of a dialogue. A VE image in the middle enhances the nonverbal, intuitive thought process, and it projects ideas that arise in the conversation onto images rather than onto individual people. The images themselves are new to the group and so have no prior “baggage,” forming a neutral, safe territory. The result is that people are less constrained by language and entrenched opinions, and are more able to perceive, handle, and re-create the ideas that arise.

It's not necessary to understand all of this theory and research to conduct an effective VE session. But this background can be relevant and helpful to any facilitator who wants to extend and integrate mediated dialogue into a development initiative.

Visual Explorer Worksheet

1. Describe the challenge, question, or issue you face (or your group faces) as the topic of this session. Summarize briefly. For example: What is it? What is working well? What's not working? Where are you stuck? What is the bigger picture? The root cause?
2. Before the dialogue: Describe the image you selected. What is it? What are the details? What is the whole? What attracts you to this image? What is unclear or ambiguous? What questions does the image invite?
3. What are the connections between the image and the topic at hand? What kind of story does it tell about the topic or your point of view?
4. After the dialogue: Did any fresh perspectives or new insights arise from the dialogue? What metaphors may be useful for you or your group for understanding this topic? What are the implications for taking action?

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Ordering Information

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Visual Explorer

Picturing Approaches to Complex Challenges

In mission-critical situations many different perspectives are typically present, information and other resources are frequently lacking, and yet the responsible group needs to be coherent in its purpose and clear in its understanding in order to take urgently needed action. How do people find coherence leading to action in such circumstances? Through dialogue. *Visual Explorer* facilitates dialogue and help groups reach a shared understanding about specific challenges. It includes 224 carefully chosen color images that invite examination and explication, and thereby acts as a resource for groups seeking to explore complex topics. Groups using *Visual Explorer* can collectively explore a complex topic from a variety of perspectives, building a shared understanding in preparation for making choices and taking action.

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