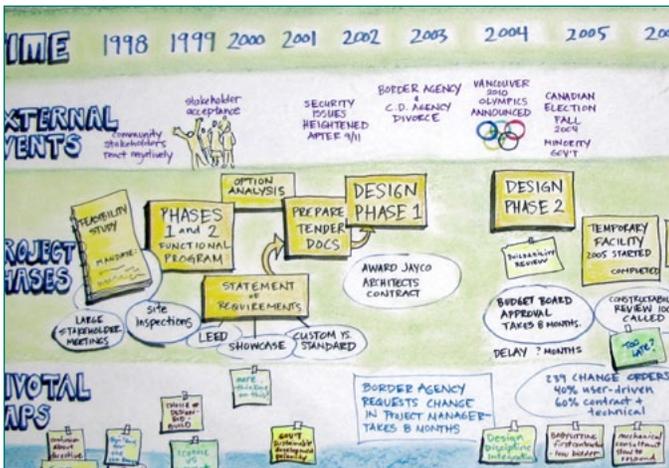


Visual Change Management

Borders and Timelines: Dealing With Conflict



Detail: "Timeline Mural"

A large public sector agency asked us to partner with them and a dissatisfied client, to resolve a conflict between them. The conflict over past work had resulted in an open multimillion dollar insurance claim, and threatened their future relationship with this valued client. We used graphic processes in combination with more traditional group process techniques to facilitate understanding and resolution between the two teams.

We coin the phrase "visual change management" to describe the way we use visuals in our organizational development work. Our two month role with them resulted in a better working relationship, agreement, and an end to the claim.

This article is excerpted from "Graphic Facilitation and Art Therapy". Here, Winkel describes her process with the client.

In this case study, "Borders and Timelines" I describe a teaming forum, as the client liked to call it, to indicate their focus on building communication across teams. In preparation, I conducted a series of individual interviews with key players involved in this multi-year construction project.

During the process of each preliminary individual interview, I drew a small mural to document the interviewee's experience and perspective while working on the project. I then used this material to create a master timeline—a 14 foot long wall mural—to provide a focus for the teaming forum dialogue. My role as a Visual Change Management consultant spanned a two month period.

My act of drawing during the interviews, creating a master draft timeline of common themes, and then producing a final timeline functioned as a mediation process with the groups. The project was initiated by a large Canadian agency responsible for managing, building, and providing services at border crossing facilities between the United States and Canada.

From initial design and construction of a temporary facility through design, construction and occupancy of the permanent facility, the project took about 15 years to complete.

The overall satisfaction rating was among the lowest ConAg had ever received, at about 1.2 of a possible perfect rating of 10. But the level of dissatisfaction about the current project was a clear threat to future business relations between these two agencies.

Interviews

One of the project managers was interviewed first; he had created quite a bit of controversy for the project team during his tenure from 1999-2002. According to his teammates, he had a confrontive, prickly style interpersonally, although upon first impression, I found him quite likeable.

The interview began with a "conversation guide" designed by the facilitators with approval from the client team. It outlined questions to be answered during each interview, such as "What milestones stand out for you over the span of the project?", "What external events impacted the project?", "What challenges did you encounter on the

project (processes, personnel, communication, culture, organizational)?”, “What went well?”, and “What were the ‘elephants in the room’ that were never discussed?” I knew from experience that less formality was preferable, so I often used humor at the beginning of each interview to relax interviewees. It was important for each individual to share what was important to them, not simply the “facts”. Much as an art therapist might explain the process of art-making in a first session with a client, I explained that I was going to draw what I heard from them on the whiteboard during our time together. I would photograph it, and bring it back to my studio later to use it to create a draft timeline for the teaming forum event.

The first interviewee avoided the conversation guide questions altogether. He was anxious to talk about his experience in his own way. Although he had been removed from the project many years previous, his strong feelings were still very close to the surface. An additional priority of the interview was my building enough of a relationship with the interviewee in order to gather the nuances of how the conflicts had developed. I stood up and started drawing on the whiteboard. I drew a line across the middle from left to right and explained that I wanted his timeline, his experience on this project.



Detail: “Timeline Mural”

As I was drawing, the interviewee got up a couple of times and pointed to parts of the drawing to emphasize or make corrections to my pictures. The graphics intrigued him. His face got brighter when I captured his ideas on the board. Some of my figures looked like cartoons of his co-workers, which made him laugh.

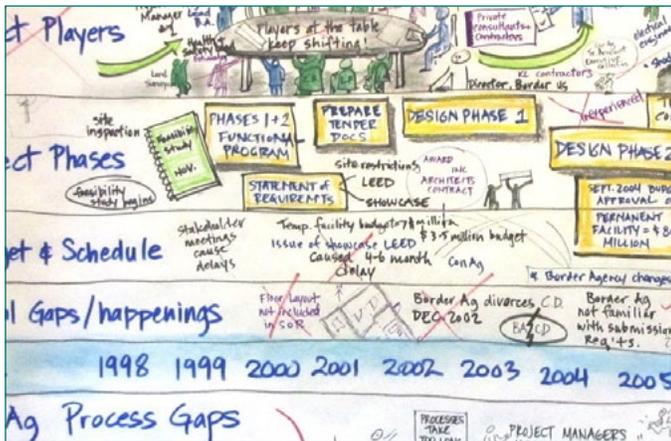
By the end of the interview he seemed lighter, as if unburdened by a weight he had carried for a long time. I suspect the interview had been therapeutic for him. He said he felt like the whiteboard drawing made things clearer and allowed him to see the project from a broader perspective. Through the drawing, he saw the significance of his contribution. At the same time, the Graphic Facilitation process revealed the enormity of the project’s scope. The whiteboard was covered with the names of a dozen project managers, dozens of consultants and contractors, engineers, and financial officers.

There were several significant external events co-occurring during the time he worked on the project, such as the attack on the twin towers in New York City on September 11, 2001, federal and local elections, and the announcement of the winter Olympics in Canada. These events impacted the project by globally raising construction costs and altering security issues throughout North America. Through Graphic Facilitation, the interviewee was able to see that he was a small cog in a very large wheel and that there were many complex forces over which he had no control. While he may have contributed to problems on the project, much of it was beyond his or anyone’s abilities to shape. I believe he felt relief for the first time in years regarding his role on the project. His body relaxed in the chair, his demeanor shifted from defensive to open. He stayed two hours with us instead of the one hour we had scheduled. My co-facilitator and I spent the next few of weeks completing the other interviews.

Synthesizing Information

Next, I began to synthesize information from individual interviews to create a timeline draft for the teaming forum. Back at my studio, I spread photos of each individual timeline around my studio walls. Rereading the accompanying notes as I went along, I tried to consolidate trends and themes. I was struck by how profoundly the external events influenced the project. The attack on the twin towers, for example, instigated many new problems for the creators of this border facility project: Post-9/11, the open atrium lobby in the building design seemed less of a good idea. With an open design, pepper-spray, if released, would spread to innocent bystanders and staff throughout the building. The announcement of the Olympics in Canada, and later, the summer games in China, caused escalation in construction costs due to demand for

workers and materials, making project timelines impossible to maintain. Most interviewees took on more than their share of personal responsibility for the impact of these events on the project. Graphic facilitation helped them put the locus of control back where it belonged and off their shoulders.



Detail: "Process Gaps"

Problems with the Draft Mural

These two sections focused on inherent organizational processes that might impact future projects negatively, as they had with this border facility project. The draft mural was about 10 feet long, roughly drawn, with attention to content rather than aesthetic appeal. I sent an electronic photo to the four lead client representatives. The following day I got a phone call from the public relations manager of ConAg, saying that they had just met with the Border Agency Assistant Director and the Project Lead, and that they all had serious concerns about the mural.

"They really don't like the twin towers drawing" (draft of the timeline mural from which the detail of "Twin Towers Burning" is excerpted is not reproduced here)

While I was aware that 9/11 was an emotional event for many people, I was surprised at the strength of the clients' reaction to the image, nearly ten years later. I had not anticipated it. I had hit a nerve. As an art therapist, I am aware of the confrontive possibilities and dangers of concrete imagery,

but for a Graphic Facilitator, it is of course challenging to know that the client doesn't like your imagery. When faced with this situation, it is important how the Graphic Facilitator negotiates the resolution of the conflict with the client. Maintaining some personal detachment from the image itself is usually necessary. It is important to remember that the image essentially comes from the group, not the Graphic Facilitator "artist" and it is theirs to manipulate and work out. In this case, I had to weigh the opinions of the client with what I had heard from the interviewees. I likely would have handled it differently, in a less conciliatory manner, if I was conducting a therapy session. The tension was about deciding whether to reinforce what the client wanted versus confronting their processes and their denial. This is a delicate balance, in Graphic Facilitation as in art therapy.



Detail: "Twin Towers Burning"

The public relations manager continued: "We may need to ditch the whole mural". "Why?" I asked. "It hits too close to home," she replied. "We don't want to draw attention to 9/11". Her fear appeared to be a foreshadowing of the meeting to come and I sensed her anxiety about the upcoming teaming forum. It was the public relations manager's job to take her client's concerns about the mural seriously, and to let me know how I should fix them. I imagined she was experiencing some disappointment that her client, the Border Agency, was upset. I suspected her confidence in me was at stake as well.

The teaming forum event was only a week away, so I was feeling quite nervous. I suggested we meet in person to plan the teaming forum, and that we put the mural issue on hold until then. I agreed to remove the twin towers image.

My co-facilitator and I arranged to go the clients' office to meet with the people from the Border Agency. We brought the draft mural with the twin towers image cut out of it. (I literally took a sharp knife and cut the image out of the mural.) The new 6" hole in the mural seemed symbolic to me of what 9/11 had come to mean. "Ground Zero", the name given to the hole in the ground where the towers used to stand, was a void symbolic of the anguish and grief for many lives forever changed or lost. It also marked the beginning of an era of increased security pressures on borders, particularly in the United States. We knew we were in danger of dumping the whole mural as we started the meeting. My co-facilitator and I talked openly about the purpose of the mural. We recalled to our clients how we had come up with the idea together. We suggested that the timeline mural was worth keeping. We told them that the mural would provide visual support to help the group stay focused. I asked them to try and describe what they didn't like about the mural along with the 9/11 detail: "There are too many pictures, too many words, it's too overwhelming. How will the group be able to make sense of it?" Questions about the purpose of the mural were again expressed. "How could it be helpful in the meeting", they queried? With escalating anxiety, they finally asked if the timeline could be produced in a more standard computer format, one more familiar to everybody and easier to read.

A Resolution of Sorts

As clients' fears expanded, I knew that it would take some effort to assure them that the mural timeline was indeed a critical tool. Countering their fears with my calmness as I might in an art therapy session, I described how I could alter the mural to address their concerns. I suggested we simplify it by deciding together what details should be removed. I offered to redraw the mural twice as large, with less information and with cleaner lines. The danger here that the Graphic Facilitator may assume narcissistic "ownership" of the mural as would an artist, and therefore, may have problems changing it, was overcome through the essential recognition that the mural "was owned" by the client.

I knew I needed the client representatives buy-in if the teaming forum was going to have a mural; their involvement in the process would be crucial. I handed out markers and asked them to stand up and come to the mural, which was hanging on the boardroom wall. "Please use the markers to stroke out everything you would like removed from the final timeline." After some cajoling, they cooperated, and actually started to have fun. Attendees talked with me and with each other as they worked. Looking at the "External Events" section, one asked "Why don't we move this section over here?" (pointing to a segment higher up on the draft timeline). "Let's take out all of the players; we don't want to name names. Let's put the two agencies' processes together in one section". They consulted each other about the mural alterations in a friendly way.

Twenty minutes later, we had a revised timeline mural, but, importantly, now it was co-created by the clients and by me as Graphic Facilitator. The interview data was still included, albeit with some changes. It seemed workable now to all, and was something the clients could accept. Although they couldn't visualize the final product, I could. I took a deep breath when I realized that together we had made it through the potential morass of tossing-the-baby-out-with-the-bathwater. My impromptu exercise of inviting them to directly participate in defining the mural, helped clients contain their anxiety, and gave them some power. It was a mini-teaming forum of sorts, much like a family art therapy session where sometimes clients (children and/or parents/caregivers) may project onto the therapist. Was this what had happened with this mural? When the therapist is able to reflect back skilfully, through an art directive, the family can regroup in a new way, often realigning based on their discovery. That's what it felt like for me with this group. They projected their anxiety onto me, and when I gently reflected it back by giving them the opportunity to take control, they welcomed it and were able to continue on.

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