

Frequently asked questions

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Who can conduct a Visual Explorer session? Will I be able to conduct the VE session by myself? What if I lack experience?

VE does not typically require a trained facilitator. It is often self-facilitated by a leader or member of a team. Of course most situations can benefit from prior experience and skill at facilitation. VE is somewhat self-correcting and forgiving, such that the default process tends to be a positive one—a good conversation supported by meaningful imagery.

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. To run a VE session is necessary to understand the five general steps in the context of your own situation.

Beyond that the facilitator need only make sure to have any special 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. Experienced change agents are needed when VE is used in a long-term change initiative, and so on.

Does Visual Explorer really work?

VE is effective in a wide variety of situations in part 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.

What do you tell participants when setting up the exercise?

Address the two main questions the group will have: "Why are we doing this activity?" And, "What are the instructions?"

Why are we doing this activity? It is best to say this simply and not over-explain or over-sell the process. For example "We are doing this to have an open and honest conversation about (the topic). We want to explore (these questions)." For groups that are skeptical of VE it is best to give a brief, clear rationale based on addressing some shared issue, with VE as merely one tool for looking at the issue. Don't position VE as some kind of magic bullet.

What are the instructions? These vary according to the group and the specific application. Specific instructions and options are given in the User's Guide, but must be adapted to the context.

What do you tell people who are skeptical of the value of VE?

For groups that are skeptical of VE it is best to give a brief, clear rationale based on addressing some shared issue, with VE as merely one tool for looking at the issue. Don't position VE as some kind of magic bullet.

Is VE a game, or is it a simulation?

VE is not a "team exercise," game, or simulation. There is no single right way to use it. Rather it is a flexible tool most often used to facilitate (not replace) a good conversation.

I work with engineers and scientists. They don't like this touchy feely stuff. How will VE work with them?

Scientists using VE have often recognized this combined effect of image, intuition, and metaphor as related to scientific creativity. People naturally think in pictures. Images are the meeting place of art and science. Once again, it is usually the depth of dialogue achieved in VE that convinces people of the value.

I work with executives. They don't like this touchy feely stuff. How will VE work with them?

VE in fact has a serious feel to it. It is not an exercise but rather adapts well to the purposes at hand. Executives don't like it if it distracts them from their real work. They like it when it helps them grasp their challenges and create new options. Once again, it is usually the depth of dialogue achieved in VE that convinces people of the value

Can we do this faster?

Do not shortcut the sharing of images during the VE session if dialogue is the goal. Paying careful attention to each others' (and one's own) images is important for getting past the "surface" (literally as well as interpersonally). Likewise, several of the options suggested in the instructions—provocative framing questions, journaling, music, no talking during image selection, re-using the images—are meant to lead to a more powerful dialogue.