

Visual Explorer™ Step by Step Instructions

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There are typically five steps in a VE session:

1. Frame
2. Browse
3. Reflect
4. Share
5. Extend

1. Frame

First, select the general topic of the conversation. For some groups the topic will be a given, for example, “it’s about stating out vision.” Some groups may need to consider the one specific topic (among many) that is timely and will lead to a fruitful conversation, for example “what it’s been like to be part of this team over the past year.” It may be that the leader or facilitator of the group uses VE to “dig deeper” into the issues at hand, for example “What stands out as this group’s key challenge? What are the root causes of this problem?” Part of the agenda of a meeting could be to first explore a range of possible topics and then focus in on one for a deeper conversation using VE.

Next, create one or more framing questions based on the topic. These are the specific questions (or statements) posed to the group that will guide their browsing and selection of images. For example, “What do you think this group’s new strategy should be? What will it look like in practice?” (These may be more like “framing statements” when not explicitly in question form; for example the frame might be “Pick an image that says something to you about what the new strategy should be.”)

Of course all this depends on the nature of the group. Who is going to be in the room for the VE session? Will each person find the framing questions meaningful? Are they a collection of individuals or a team? A group of trainees in a classroom might start with the question “How am I creative?” A true team might explore further by adding a second question, such as “How are we creative as a team?”

It can be very effective to have two, or more, framing questions that box in the topic. For example you can ask: What are our strengths as a team? AND Where could we improve as a team? Each person would then pick an image of each. There is much power in the juxtaposition of contrasting images.

The next aspect of framing is presenting the activity to the group. You need to 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 steps below, but must be adapted to the context.

*** Option. Additional resources are available to assist the facilitator of a VE session. These are in the form of PowerPoint slide shows with instructions, handouts, and worksheets. But simpler is often better.

*** Reflection: Each person thinks about the topic, and takes a few moments to write or reflect about his or her personal perspective on the topic and the framing question(s). These notes can include anything that’s relevant to that individual—observations, answers, emotions, points of confusion, and so on. Group members can use journals, notepads, or the Visual Explorer Worksheet. These notes are private but lead to the selection of an image and point of view to be shared.

It’s tempting to skip or hurry this step, but it can be effective as a way to begin to switch mental gears into a more reflective and attentive mode. Ask people not to talk starting with these moments before browsing. Cue the music.

*** State any norms for the privacy of the conversations. For example, some groups will need to abide by the norm of “what is said in the room stays in the room.”

2. Browse

A key step in any VE session is browsing through the images. The facilitator spreads out the images so they can be easily viewed by people as they walk around. Typically the images are placed on the floor or table tops or both. Some people like to line them up square, and some like to scatter them. This is based on MBTI type and lumbar flexibility but otherwise does not matter. VE images have even been hung on walls for browsing but that takes more effort. Placing the images can be done before the meeting if a separate room or hallway is used for browsing. There is something helpful in people having to rub shoulders to browse.

One or more of the participants can help you spread out the images, and pick them up later. If you put them out early people will comment on them and step on them, which can be fun, it’s up to you.

Card sizes are more compact for browsing and can even be used on a desktop. The digital version of VE allows online browsing.

Browsing is an R-mode activity. The browsing of images, especially since no text is involved, draws powerfully on the right side of the brain. This is good, since it aids the perception of patterns, intuitions, and emotions. Therefore, no talking. Any kind of verbal language tends to turn down R-mode and turn up L-mode. Instrumental, upbeat music is good, Mozart works. They can start talking again once they get into the small group conversations.

*** Browse the images until you find one that is about your answers or reactions to the question. The connection of the image to the question might be literal, rational, or emotional, or a hunch. You may not even know why you picked it at first. Keep the framing question in the back of your mind. Relax, browse and pick. Take your time. No talking.

Probably because of R-mode, this is the step where even the skeptics begin to like it a little bit. The images are provocative. Browsing can be a relaxed but alert “flow” state. People tend to get rushes of emotions and intuitions. Conscious, rational responses to the framing questions start rolling around with the pre-conscious ones. Metaphors suggest themselves. Sometimes the choice of an image is likewise pre-conscious, and sudden, something grabs you, so that it feels like “the image picked me.” All this leads to multiple meanings for the images going on at the same time. Much of the power of VE is in the fluidity of multiple meanings in a highly visual context.

Scientists using VE have often recognized this combined effect of image, intuition, and metaphor as related to doing science. People naturally think in pictures. Images are the meeting place of art and science.

*** Option: Upside-Down Images: When spreading the pictures for browsing, turn a few of them over (at least one for each person participating) so those images are hidden. As group members select images, each also selects one of the hidden ones without looking at it. Near the end of the group conversations, look at the hidden image, and interpret them. We sometimes say: “What if these images portray what is missing or neglected or overlooked?” Curiosity runs high about the hidden images. Even if most group members don’t get any insights 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. Don’t treat this as mystical—it is projective—and, the facilitator is welcome to turn over deliberately provocative images. Better to treat the “upside-down images” as fun, as play, and then harvest any serious insights that arise.

3. Reflect

Reflection—as in quietly observing, while also thinking and analyzing, in a fully attentive way—happens deliberately at several points during the VE session including (ideally) both before and after browsing, and (optionally) at the end of the conversations.

*** When you have picked an image, spend some time looking at it. (The Worksheet is optional here.) Write down a few notes about what you see. What is it? What is happening? What is unknown or vague? Why were you drawn to this image? And last, after close attention to the image: How does the image connect to the framing question? Once again, it's tempting to skip or hurry this step. There is some built-in time for most of the group while the last person picks her image. But it can be quite effective to hold people in this attentive R-mode state and spend time with the image, not glossing over the details, but taking time to observe the image itself. Challenge them to see what is in front of them, beyond first impressions.

At these points of reflection, it helps to ask for No Talking. Note writing is good, but simply some time for quiet observing, thinking and reflecting can suffice.

4. Share

Using the images, share the images and have conversations about the topic and questions, usually within subgroups. Three to five people in each subgroup works well. The larger the group, the more time it takes for all to share. Subgroups can be randomly assigned; or, composed of those who finish browsing at the same time; or, by groups of people who don't know each other as well; or, by deliberately creating diverse groups.

Make a simplified version of the following steps available to the group on a flip chart or as a handout or slide [[link to resource](#)]. Let the groups manage themselves using some version of these instructions, with the facilitator moving among the groups and helping as needed.

*** The group (or sub-groups of 3-5) sits in a circle. One person at a time shares his or her image(s) as follows:

First: "Share the image and describe the image itself (forget about any connection to the question for a moment). What is it? What is happening? What do you notice?"

Second: "What connections do you make from the image to the question? How is the image a response to the question?" (Repeat these two steps for each image held by this person.)

Third: Each person in the group responds to the image(s) offered by this first person. Each response may also have two parts: "What do you see in the image? Do you see the same things that other's see? What stands out to you? AND THEN: "What connections do you make from the image to the question?" After the first person has shared their images around the group in this way, he or she thanks the group, and the conversation moves on to the next person and their image(s). Continue until everyone has shared their images.

*** 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.

*** Don't solve problems for each other. Don't give or ask for advice. Keep attention on the images, questions, and answers. Explore multiple perspectives and possible meanings.

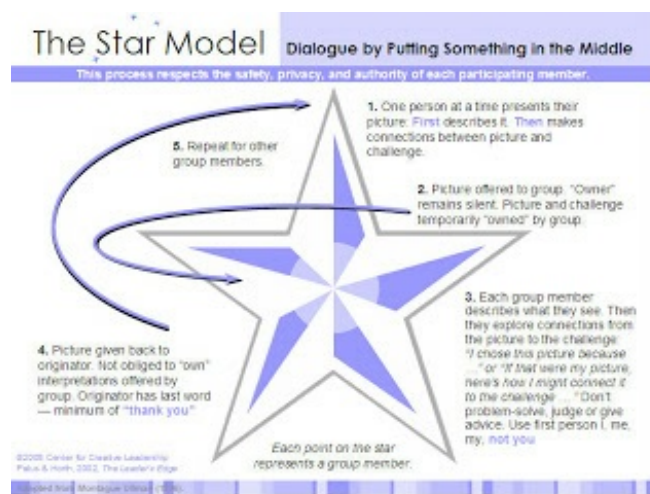
*** As time permits, the group should continue talking after the last person has shared their images, discussing patterns and themes and implications. The facilitator should be available to answer questions about the VE process but should not exert too much control over the groups. It's all right if the groups slightly modify or improvise on the instructions.

*** As they finish, group members should make notes about insights from the conversation, including any shifts in perceptions, insights, or feelings about the topic. (The Visual Explorer Worksheet is for this purpose.)

We call this the Star Model for mediated dialogue.

5. Extend

When the initial round of conversations with the images is finished, a momentum is often present, and it works well to extend the conversation in whatever direction is important to the group. The most significant images and metaphors can be reused in ongoing problem solving, invention, and communication. The images lend themselves to cascading to other groups in the same organization, especially in digital form.



*** Debrief the activity, and continue the conversations as desired.

Some key questions to debrief with include: How was that conversation? What happened? What was valuable about the process? Content questions might include: 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 are options to make the session more useful to participants in the longer term. For example:

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

Save the images to use as prompts when the group reconvenes.

Prioritize the most interesting connections or insights. List actions steps for each one.

For example, a newly formed team participating in a VE session listed all the metaphors that surfaced during the dialogue that described their mission. It used this list to refine and communicate its mission to outside sponsors, and among its own members.

At another organization, input from a number of VE sessions provided a starting point for a vision statement.

*** Many participants will want to keep the images they selected. They often show up on bulletin boards or office walls and spark further conversations. A set of the images in digital form is available at [link] in collaboration with iStockphoto.com.

*** Use scissors, glue, poster paper, markers, and additional images from magazines and other sources to construct a collage—a composite representation of the topic—using the VE images selected. A dialogue that uses the collage as an object can be deep and productive.