The Graphic Facilitator’s Guide

How to use your listening, thinking & drawing skills to make meaning

Brandy Agerbeck

The Powers of Graphic Facilitation

Graphic facilitation is a powerful tool. Again, I picture the Powers like a set of lenses. They help concentrate a group inward and notice details, nuance, things previously unseen—like a microscope. Like a telescope, they focus outward to better understand the big picture and the larger context of the conversation.

From the most basic text on a flipchart to the most elaborate murals, the following three Powers are present every time a graphic facilitator maps a meeting:
Have you experienced meeting fatigue? Been in a meeting and thought, “Uh, why am I here?” Sure, sometimes meetings are only meant to disseminate information, but often they are convened to seek input. Perhaps you have felt that your input wasn’t heard, valued or acted upon.

We each listen in the meeting, but we each listen through our own politics, agenda, pressures, distractions. We retain a fraction of what we hear, most of it connected to our own responsibilities.

A graphic facilitator is the public listener, the human resource dedicated to collecting all those voices, inputs and ideas—and recording them. Whether we work internally or externally to the group, we should Listen with Outsider Ears. The graphic facilitator should listen to the conversation unencumbered by politics or responsibilities. Often, our lack of specific content or industry knowledge allows us to more easily see the patterns in the conversation and distill the ideas with less jargon or industry speak.

We often enter a meeting thinking about what we need to say, to speak our peace. When you express your idea, the graphic facilitator captures and writes it on the piece of paper. Once you can see that you have been heard and your input will not be lost, you can more readily listen to others. You can contribute more to the whole meeting.
Little work is done in isolation. And individual work is often later shared. We all want our work to matter. To be understood. To be valued by others.

Our maps facilitate shared understanding. We capture all the individual voices in a conversation and integrate them into a collective image. Our maps become a record of the shared experience of the meeting, retreat, workshop or conference.

A graphic facilitator aids understanding through her or his abilities to organize the information being shared, and synthesize it into a clear whole.

These drawings are made live, so the understanding can happen immediately and be built upon. Pardon the cliché, but everyone is literally on the same page.

We assemble in groups to work on common objectives. We can accomplish more than we could as individuals. The group has its own function and identity separate from the individual identities and egos. Our maps represent the group identity and progress.

Often, groups don’t come to complete consensus on all priorities or decision-making during the meeting. The shared experience is embedded in the images created, and help the group continue the work. These maps can be referenced to further build understanding and make informed decisions.

While this book concentrates on shared, group experiences, the ideas can also be used one-on-one, to share your thinking with another person in an organized image as a communication tool. Two people can co-create a map to think through their ideas together. You can use these principles to clarify your own learning and thinking, working alone.
Seeing is making the work visible, transparent. Touching is making the work tangible, concrete.

Transparency and tangibility are important both at the meeting and after the meeting.

In the meeting, everyone watches their conversation take shape. Everyone can see the work made tangible on the map. Everyone can find clarity within the complexity through a well-organized drawing.

The process of the group is recorded in the maps. The group can track their progress during the meeting and can reflect on it afterwards.

Over the course of the meeting, the number of drawings accumulates. On a day that is filled with plenary discussion, I can fill four to five pieces of paper, roughly four feet tall and six feet long. That is over 100 square feet of output per day. It is difficult to doubt the productivity of a meeting when you see the walls covered in the work.

Our work and ideas can be tied up in conflict and internal politics, or simple miscommunication. The map acts as a mediator. It is an object that everyone can focus on outside of themselves and away from each other. You may see Jack as the root of the problem going into the meeting. Once the problem gets written up on the map, you can see the problem from a new perspective, and hopefully distanced enough from Jack to make it less emotionally charged and more easily solved.

We make time, we shuffle schedules and sometimes we travel far and wide for a Very Important Conversation. These VIC’s occur and then you head back to your day-to-day work. What do you remember of that meeting? How important does it feel?

If your VIC had a GF, you have the images they create to use as an artifact. Your team can use the maps as
a reference and as a snapshot of where you were on that date. You are all better-equipped to build on the momentum of the meeting and take your work farther, faster.

Lastly, the maps are large, colorful and engaging. They are unlike anything that typically lives in our workplace. These drawings are refreshing and help everyone see their meeting in a new, colorful light.

At the end of a strategic planning session with a hundred hospital administrators, a woman stood and waved toward the walls covered in their maps: “I am so thankful for the color on the walls and seeing our work look so bright and vibrant. It makes me feel like a kid again and I didn’t realize how much I missed it. I’m going to take some of this color back to the hospital with me.”

She was quite emotional when she shared this, and it certainly struck my heart. Beauty does feed us.

These Powers are Universal

I have worked across industries and sectors, with companies tiny, enormous, brand-new and tried-and-true. My experience tells me graphic facilitation works for anyone who values being listened to, teams who want to understand each other—those who want to see their work made transparent and tangible.

Yes, there are individual people who aren’t receptive to it. If that person is the decision-maker on hiring you, you won’t get in the door. There are endless other doors with decision-makers ready to welcome you and your skills. I rankle when I hear a colleague say, “Only non-profits get what we do” or “Government agencies don’t understand our work.” Every company or organization is made up of people who want to be understood and to make meaning of their work. I am more likely to fault my colleague for not being able to describe their role and its value clearly. It is difficult to put into words, and the best way to really understand the value of graphic facilitation is to experience it. I have seen success from my colleagues in every industry and sector.

Yes, you should get to know each client’s specific needs and their organization’s culture and norms. Be adaptable to how a school board may need something different from you than a Fortune 500 leadership team. From my experience, we are far more alike than different. Enjoy the universalities and be receptive and flexible to work with the differences.
Focus These Powers on Your Process

While I believe every client or participant can appreciate graphic facilitation, not every event or process is the right fit. Though many, many are. This book is process-agnostic. We could fill a bookcase designing for each and every methodology in an Encyclopedia of Graphically Facilitated Processes. And those volumes still wouldn’t be able to describe each unique situation. In these 298 pages, I can’t tell you how to specifically map a World Café or how to capture an Open Space event.

I believe that by remembering these Powers and guiding yourself with the following Principles, you will learn where and when you can best serve your clients.

Please visit GraphicFacilitator.com to learn more and buy your copy of the book.