VISUAL LITERACY FOR PROJECT TEAMS

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*L*iteracy means to read and write. Or to receive and communicate information using verbal language (words and numbers). We can use the term *visual literacy* to mean receiving and communicating information using visual language (pictures and symbols).

As a human, you use visual language as part of your everyday life.

Consider the following examples: door signs; app icons; emoticons and maps.

Why do we do this?

Visual language is the compliment to verbal language. Visual language can:

- make information (words and numbers, written or spoken) clearer;
- speed up communication; and,
- help you understand something unfamiliar.

Consider traffic management. Imagine you are driving in a country you have never visited. At some point you will come to a stop sign. A stop sign is a form of visual communication. One look and you instantly recognise what is being communicated and what action you need to take. Even though the intersection is unfamiliar, a stop sign is part of a visual grammar set that you have learnt over time that also includes traffic lights, speed limits, and disabled parking signs, etc.

While societies often agree on a shared visual language for things like traffic management, companies and even more so project teams, often fail to utilise this highly effective means of communicating.

Why is this a good idea?

Projects produce new products, software, business process, job roles, organisation structures and even strategy and visions.

Stakeholders, internal and external, will need to receive new information. Because time is almost always money you need to communicate information as clearly and quickly as possible.

When people receive this information they need to know what it means and what to do next.

Stop and think about the number of work emails, intranet pages, presentation slides, letters and texts you receive. Now add to that all the meetings and presentations you attend. If you are like most people, the vast majority of this communication is spoken and/or written verbal language (all words and numbers).

Why is this?

Firstly it is what we have always done. Secondly, you learned to read and write, but not how to communicate with pictures. Sure you probably did some painting while you were young, but that's not how we do it in the serious world of grown-up communication.

Yet, as we see in the everyday example of traffic management, visual language is an extremely powerful missed opportunity, especially when you need to create a shared understanding of new information.

How can your team tap into the power of visual language?

Fortunately, it's possible to create greater clarity when you communicate by developing a common visual language for your project. Here's how you can get started.

Step 1: People

- Who is impacted by your project?
- Who is responsible for delivering your outputs?

What picture could be used to represent these groups of people? Think in terms of icons, not actual photos. For example, what does a developer look like? What does a manager look like?

Then when you prepare plans, reports, communications and training, you can use these same icons. When people see them, they will learn to recognise which group they belong to.

Step 2: Places

- Where is the change taking place (in terms of geography or within business units or departments)?
- Where will people and information move from and to?

Again, identify icons you could use to represent these places and use them when you communicate within your team and to your stakeholders.

Step 3: Things

- What computer systems are impacted?
- What documents, products and tools do people interact with?
- What about intangibles like trust, team work, etc?

Yes, find icons that can represent these all things too. Search the Internet for ideas.

Visual language example:
Let's take an example project to get a feel for how visual language can be used.

The project
MegaBank is introducing a new customer relationship management system (CRM). Its purpose is to make it easier for everyone in the bank to see who the bank's customers are. They should be able to access this information from their desktop or mobile. Anyone should be able to update this information when they interact with a customer. If this project is successful, MegaBank will truly know who its customers are and how to better meet their needs.

Pretend that your job is to explain how the CRM works in the following use case. You are a financial adviser having lunch at a cafe with a new customer who is retired. You need to use your phone to update the customer's details in the CRM. How could you use visual language to communicate this information?

Step 1: People
• Financial adviser
• Personal customer

Step 2: Places
• Cafe

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Step 3: Things
• Smart phone
• CRM

Below is one possible picture you could draw that shows the relationship between all these elements.

You could use this visual in a briefing session with the CRM vendor, in an email communication or presentation to financial advisers, in your training and support resources and even in short promotional animations to promote the new CRM to your users.

The big picture
It's not hard to imagine that with an entire library of icons like this you can communicate any project-related information clearly and quickly. When your team and your stakeholders see these icons they will learn to recognise

the people, places and things being referred to, just like a stop sign. That's the power of visual literacy. Start using it in your work today.

Blair Rorani helps people get better at capturing, clarifying and communicating information and ideas using pictures. In March 2015 Blair released a book about how to do this titled: *Everybody Draw Now.* Follow @blairrorani on Twitter or visit blair.rorani.com.

Blair will be speaking at the AITD National Conference and facilitating post-conference workshops on 15 May 2015.

Illustrations by Blair Rorani.