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Visualizing Your Way To Changing How You Think & Work

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A couple of weeks ago I interviewed John Caswell and Hazel Tiffany of Group Partners on [How Visualization Provides Strategic Ways To Solve Business Challenges](#). This is a guest post by John Caswell.

In 2001 few people understood our work nor why visualization was so important in the business of transformation, change and strategy.

A lot of smart people didn't even think it was an idea worth listening to. But we were stubborn because we were passionate about visualization's power to create meaning...

We've learned a lot since then – and we're still stubborn – but people are wiser and more clued into the power of it.

As you read the stories below please don't think we're against words. we're only against them being used to deceive and mislead. Please don't think we have it in our numbers, only their soporific effect on those who don't use them to do anything.

And don't misunderstand either our use of the word visual. In our book it means using all the visual weaponry at our disposal – everything symbolic, diagrammatic, immersive and viewable that increases the transfer of meaning and purpose between us humans. Used in ways that engage and enlighten us.

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Insurgent.

You're here because in strategy and innovation the agenda: To be successful is unconventional.

Chief Strategist at Bluebird
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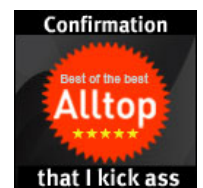
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So why is a visual approach the only way to change the way we think and work?

1. Because We Don't Have The Luxury Of Time

We're rushed off our feet. Way too much going on and anything that takes too long for us to process is going to go by the wayside. As it's unlikely to get simpler anytime soon we'd better do what we can to make it work.

More to the point, in a world eaten up by myriad tasks, commitments, pressures and responsibilities a visual approach simply makes sense.

Fact: It's many times faster to take in a picture of something and understand what's contained in it than it is to read about the thing. And yet until now we've chosen to write down our business

plans and strategies. We've trusted longhand non-visual documents in preference to a simpler picture.

"Surely a picture is too simplistic! It can't possibly have any value."

Or maybe we lacked the tools/skills to create the more visual story. Well, there are no excuses anymore. We've proved time and again that thinking visually about the way we work can make us work differently.

We apply the idea across the entire business of business. Creating rich stories based around visual tools and artefacts that increase the transfer and consumption of data and meaning between humans.

And that's only a part of it.



2. Because People Want To See Sense and Value

"We cannot teach people anything; we can only help them discover it within themselves."

Galileo Galilei

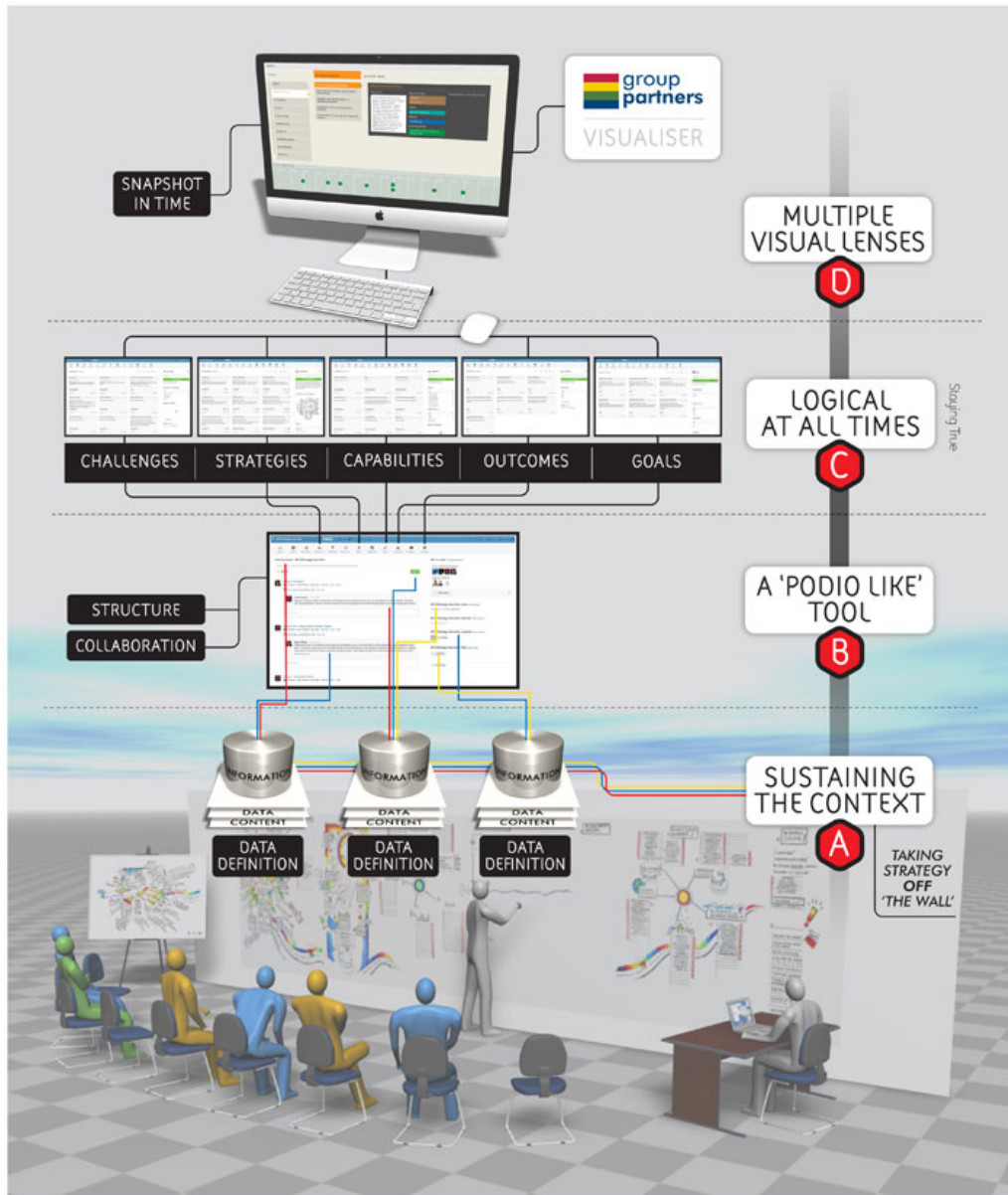
Look at the revolution caused by Apple and Google, the incredible rise in apps and online services – web-based solutions that have replaced almost everything we do at work or at home.

They've all been revolutionised by people thinking about the design and interface from a visual point of view. As a result we now know and vote fast about what works and what doesn't. That

reaction is mainly down to the visual effect – how simple, intuitive and useful the thing is.

This has helped change the reputation of visualization beyond recognition and in a very short time.

Human beings are highly influenced by, and deeply tuned into, their senses. All the senses are linked but at the end of the day we see what we see and we interpret the majority of our world this way. We make more sense of a large amount of data in a well-constructed visual than by reading rote through a long thesis. It's vibrant, and motivates and inspires us.



3. Because People Want To See Beyond The Numbers

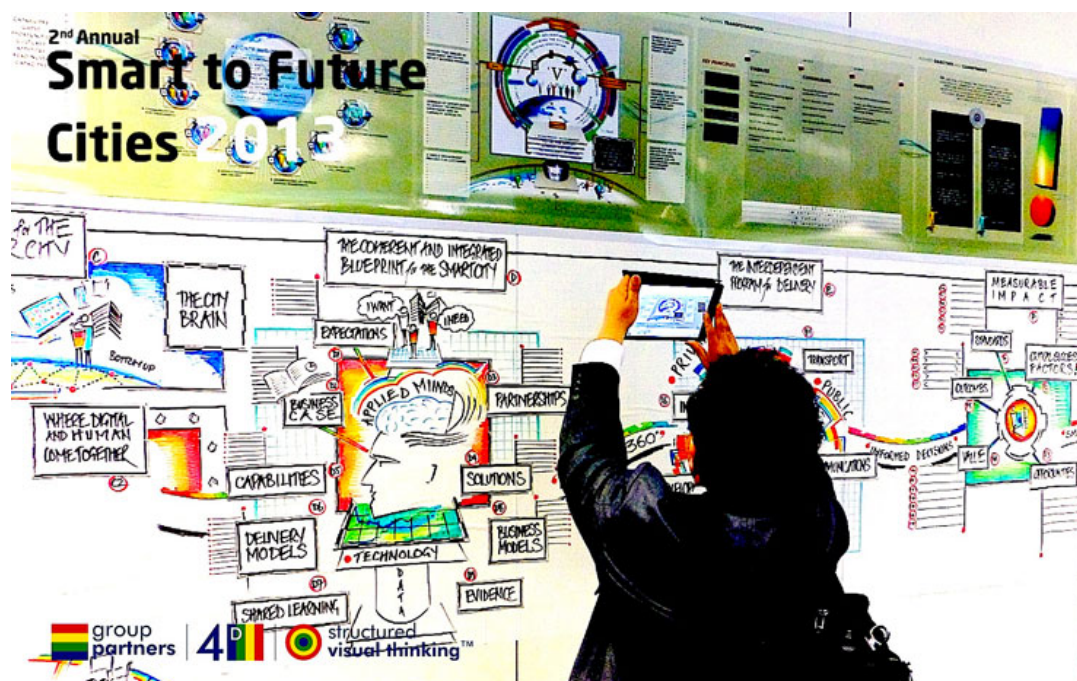
For decades we've defended a ceremonial pursuit of mind-numbing numeric documentation. For too long business planning and strategy have been the preserve of the financially minded and the obscure words and phrases of commerce. Numbers, columns and rows – a partial form of 'truth' fed into spreadsheets. This makes little or no sense to most of the folk undertaking their work.

Profit of course is very necessary for a sustainable business but it's only one facet of the picture –

Yet worryingly these blunt instruments have become the main drivers of business. Spreadsheets and the like have entered into the mythology and have emerged unchallenged as the bedrock of strategies and change programs – and the barrier to countless attempts at real progress.

The enterprise craves to make sense of the numbers but struggles to translate them into anything that will inspire its people. A business will create new slogans, missions and ideas but its preoccupation with written (and predominantly numeric) strategies mystifies people and dulls the spirit to achieve or outperform.

Yet if we don't inspire and engage with the mission we won't make progress.

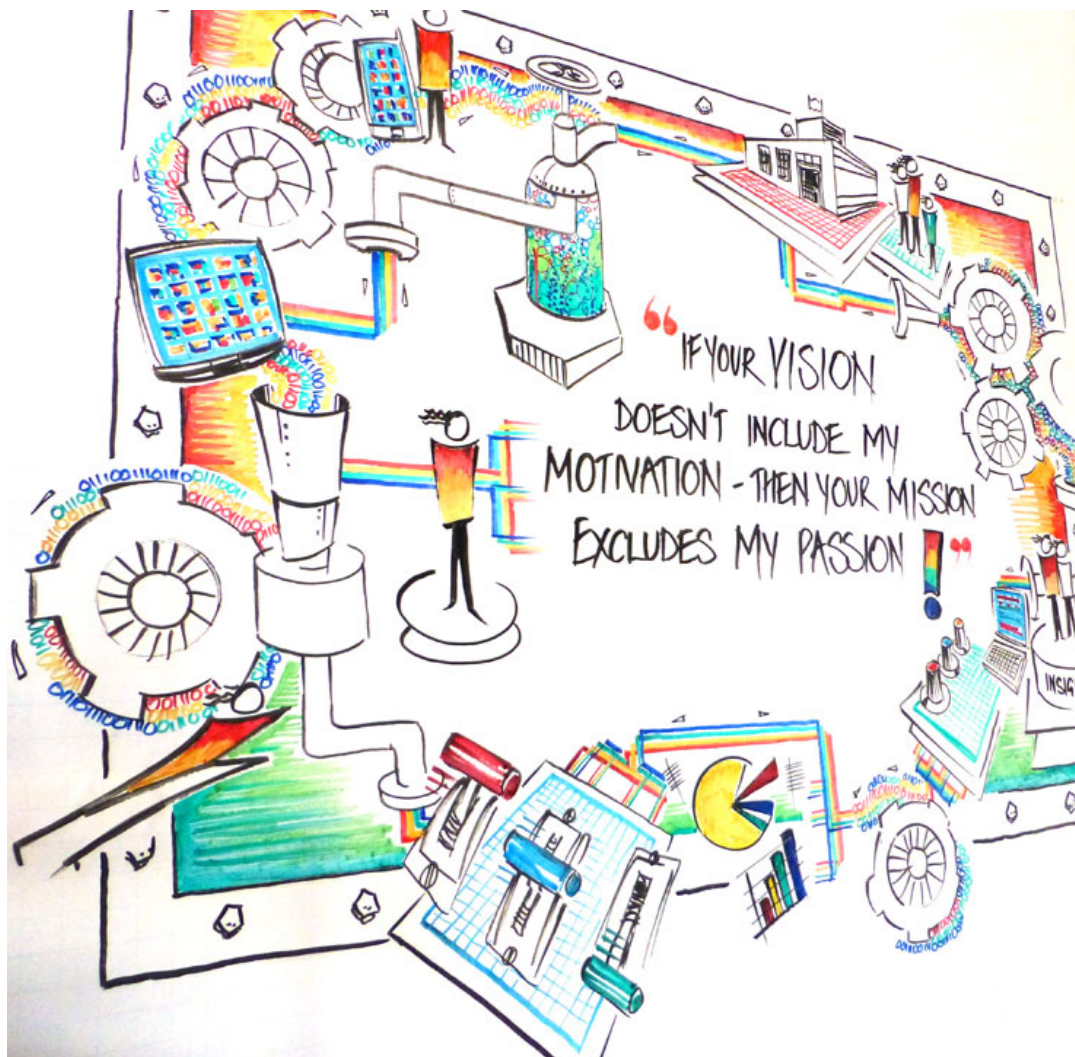


Our eyes are responsible for a significant amount of incoming data.

Everywhere you look, especially when you're someplace new, things are refreshingly different to look at. Sometimes subtle – often memorable and occasionally shocking. New signposts, different newspapers, unusual typography, unique nature, weather, position of the moon, attitudes, smiles, skies, products, faces, properties, landscape, clothing and wildlife. Excitement all the way.

And although there are increasingly familiar aspects to our ever more global lives it's mostly a visual feast – a recharging of our brains to experience the new.

Visual stimuli cause us to rethink so many things, keep us fresh. The result is a work-out for our heads – sharpening up our minds. Paying attention to the visual helps us be better at everything.



5. Because Visualization Makes The Abstract Tangible

I wish I had a \$ for every time I've heard the axiom that a picture is worth a thousand words. I think it's a good start but a picture that's been co-created, contains the right words with shared meaning and best data to augment the right story – well, that's worth a million.

Contemplate this: you have to physically write down how the organization needs to operate; now imagine a picture of it. We know which version people want. Apply that idea to things like Mission, Vision, Customer Experience, Roadmap – indeed anything in the main areas of how businesses work.

We've seen that 'visualizing' conversations, words and thoughts, ideas and concepts are vital instruments for progress. The visual aspect is all about making them real and palpable for human beings.

This is critical if we are to create meaningful change. The very act of seeing ideas translated into real shapes and structures causes genuine ownership and engagement.



6. Because Visualization Adds Fresh Perspectives

Change demands fresh stimulus.

We draw on what we see and hear around the world. We weave in added depth and richness from wherever we can find it. We bring it in to aid ideas and thinking.

Capturing the essence of intangible things like visions and operational models dramatically improves confidence in the creation of business plans. And as they get developed and more deeply thought about they mature.



7. Because We Are All Designers

Drawing has always been with us. Early humans would grab the stick from the fire and draw on the walls of their caves. By committing our dreams to paper we have created everything we now have.

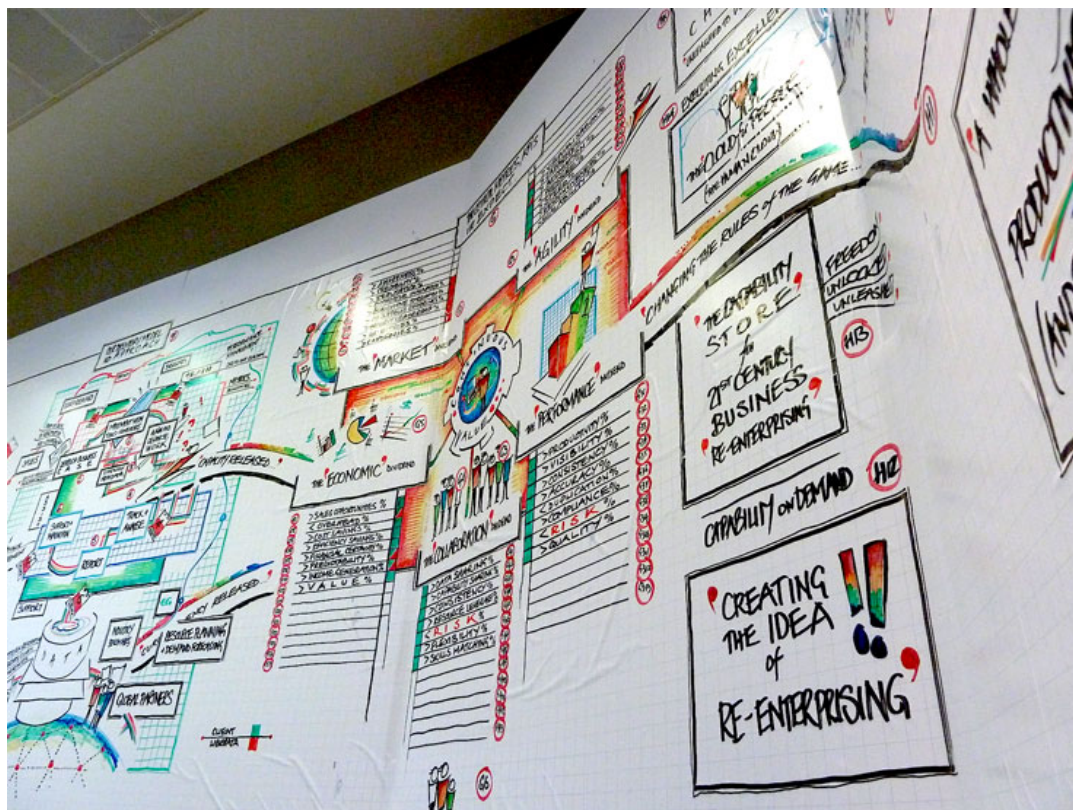
Bringing out our inner designer and using our innate capacity to visualize lies at the heart of how we change how we think and work.

We've seen how people remain blind to some simple realities until they suddenly 'see them' – when they start to design a better conclusion. There's no longer any time nor appetite for processes that are not visually engaging, collaborative or creative.

A visual framework within which to think and work has a special magic – it places all the parts of the puzzle into a context in a way that enables everyone to reach the right conclusion about each piece's place and priority.

Creating meaning like this allays people's concerns. Their ideas become real, and structured to add value and give prominence to them. Built in a way that creates a positive challenge. The tension we build into the framework promotes constructive debate and helps us retain objectivity – identifying the gaps for everyone to see.

We use simply expressed phrases and images to symbolize what we have observed. Because of that we gain a high degree of acceptance of them within the visual construct.



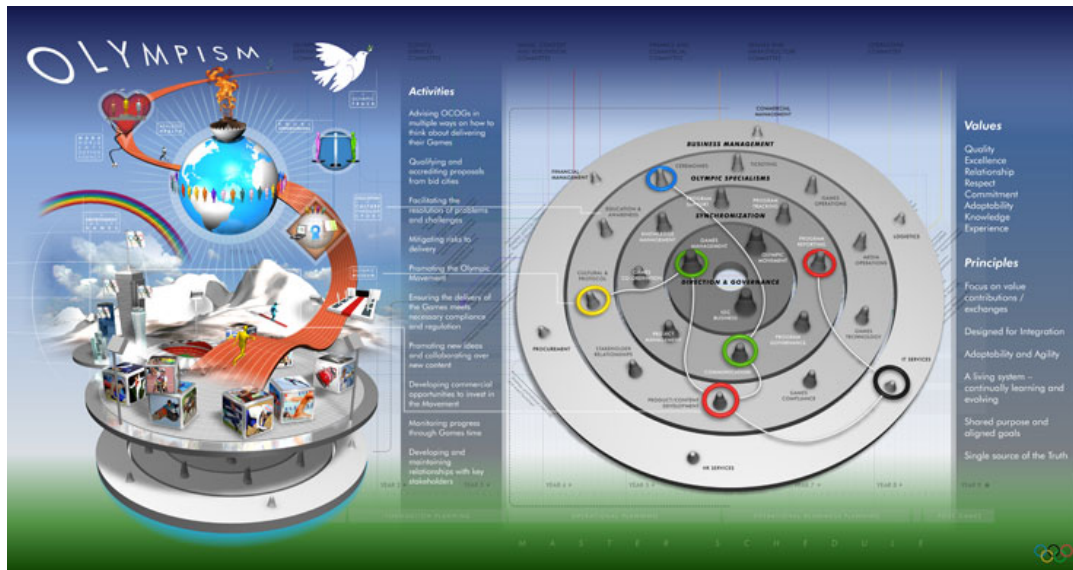
8. Because Visualization Takes No Prisoners

Visual frameworks insist on being right. The whole idea of drawing face-to-face conversations on walls is about the actual creation of shared meaning.

It sounds so simple – too simple – but it's as valuable a thing as we can imagine. Without such shared meaning we go to war.

Put simply

- Discussion – open questioning of ourselves and others is how we humans do everything.
- At the basic level the code we use to live is language. Language is both sophisticated and dumb. We all fall foul of it regularly.
- We draw ideas out of people's heads on a big wall in front of them – in working like this there's no dispute about what was said and ultimately what is actually meant.
- By writing it in a way that can be read, that is non-threatening and accepted by all, that is pleasing to the eye and honorable to the group, the words become a treatise, a manifesto in pursuit of the outcome we are seeking.
- And we are talking about doing it at scale – 8 feet tall by 50-60 feet long and emerging in real time – this makes a big difference to how people think.
- And they get to take it all away in form of e.g. high-res jpegs to use within their own worlds.
- Our frameworks can become interactive tools on smart devices and grow and change as things evolve.



9. Because We Need New Mental Models

“The Definition Of Definition: The wilderness of idea trapped within a wall of words.”

Unknown

We form very fixed and unbending attachment to the words and phrases we use to make our way through business and indeed our personal lives. Yet everyone has differing definitions of words so it's become really easy to have absolute misunderstandings about the simplest of things. While lazy language and unresolved semantics lead people to talk past each other in critical situations.

The lack of shared definition has become the enemy of meaning, communication and collaboration. To break this we have to shift our mental frames.

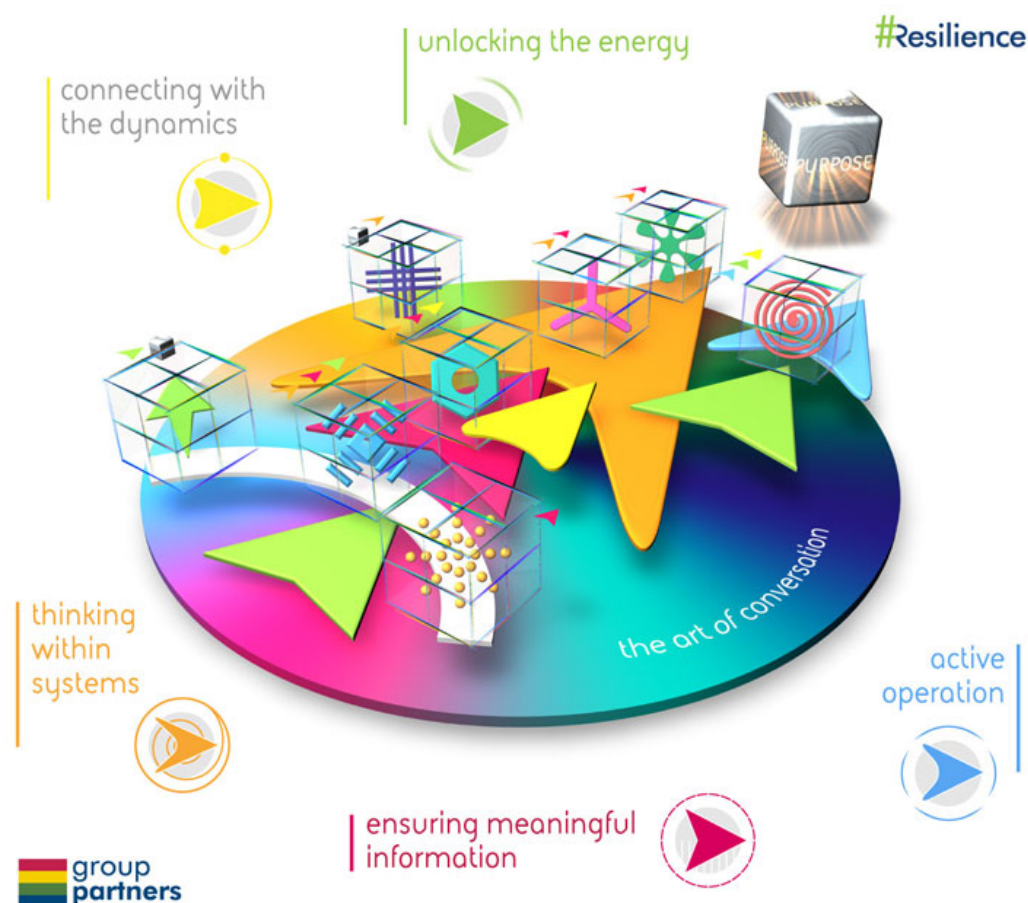
In our world, as the team experiences and contributes, often unconsciously, to a shift in their mental models, their experience of the conversation changes and becomes more memorable.

And these new memories – new stories – are more likely to last because they are of the team's own making. The actual process of thinking and working visually is cathartic and empowering. It creates a safer, more confident space in which to rethink and design new meaning for everyday words and concepts – 'new' words that can now replace their older and less meaningful versions and are now more meaningfully associated with a bigger idea – a more connected and valuable 'system of things'.

People are far less likely to have a differing definition of a visual that they helped to create. And in our logical models anything that doesn't make sense doesn't last long – because it gets seen by everyone.

Changing the way we think & work...

let's avoid solving the wrong problems really well...



10. Because Systems Don't Lie

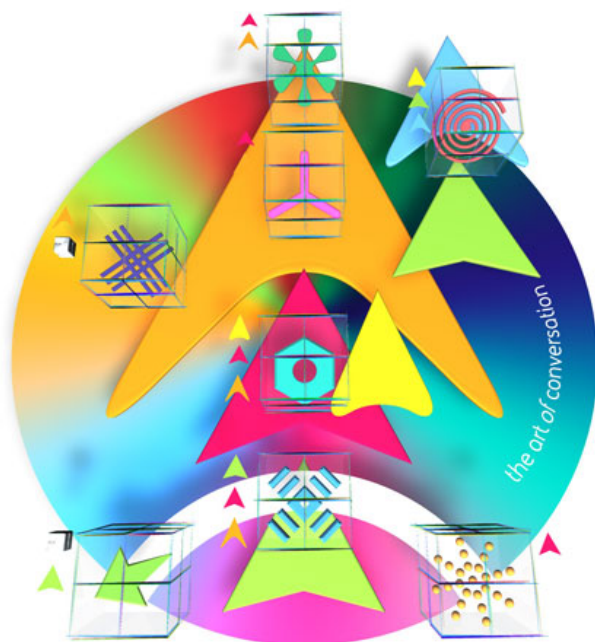
But they can be and frequently are compromised. Necessarily complex, the important systems of business (and how they work) have over time tended to become layered and their faults often papered over. As a result as problems become apparent the effect is dealt with not the cause.

It's become too easy to focus on the wrong bit – meaning the wrong problems have been continuously 'solved'.

Traditional non-visual methods of understanding change have actually enlarged the gap between the issue and the chance of solving it. In our work we are constantly faced with an ignorance of the reality and in a few cases by the stubborn entitlement to denial by those that should know better.

Because there is no clear picture – no visual transparency – people in positions of trust and power can hide behind entrenched positions that no one can bust.

With shared and visual means of transparency and definition that everyone can understand we no longer unconsciously aim at the wrong things and achieve (in many cases) the wrong outcome.



10. Because We Need To Understand What To Do In The Face Of Change

We hear the words agility, sustainability, flexibility and similar bandied about as if just uttering the word will create that condition.

It's a hard world out there, one that's constantly in flux and yet we've built fixed infrastructures and systems with little plasticity. Plasticity is an interesting word in the context of systems and our use of frameworks.

In our sense of the word it means: "The possession of a structure weak enough to yield to an influence, but strong enough not to yield all at once."

A 21st Century enterprise should be aiming to operate within a structure that is resilient. Enabling the business to bend to the dynamics that surround it while at the same time encouraging the right degree of behavioral change.

Our obligation is to translate this picture of change – a different way of thinking and working – to other people by showing them what it means to them. Changing habits and encouraging the new mentality.

We will never talk people into changing behavior without a new picture of a better way of doing things – one they can feel and see for themselves.

11. Because We Need Stakeholder Transparency And A Common Interpretation/Language

For example, in our societies we see successive governments incapable of making change. Often because of long-held subversive and now also corrupt systems safeguarding the few. Systems creaking but with no real method of total transparency enabling wholesale change or an intelligent overhaul.

A business instead of thinking how its solutions, services, products, systems and people could all work in a better – a more continuously resilient – way has probably created concrete and incoherent barriers to the very agility and innovation required for it to survive.

It did this because it could. It did so because it wasn't immediately transparent how it was actually benefitting people. Indeed it probably wasn't. Because nobody could see the diagram, nobody could penetrate the words.

Well-meaning solutions (some not so) have been applied to a problem without really understanding the problem in the first place – then other solutions have been applied to the problem. Problem!

Old meanings, valid and invalid, inform our subconscious and our subconscious controls our behavior. That's why behavior is notoriously hard to change – and why the meaning of words is such an important focus for all transformational change in business and society. Because we are pretty darned good at believing what we want to hear.

Being visual enables us to shift that subconscious and change what we see and hear.

12. Because We Know We Need To Move Beyond The Collusion

In our work we come across so many situations where we hear the leaders tell us that they know the place is messed up. It's been bad for a long time, nobody any longer believes in any plan or vision. Everyone seems in some strange parallel universe – a vacuum. And nobody seems to want to do anything about it.

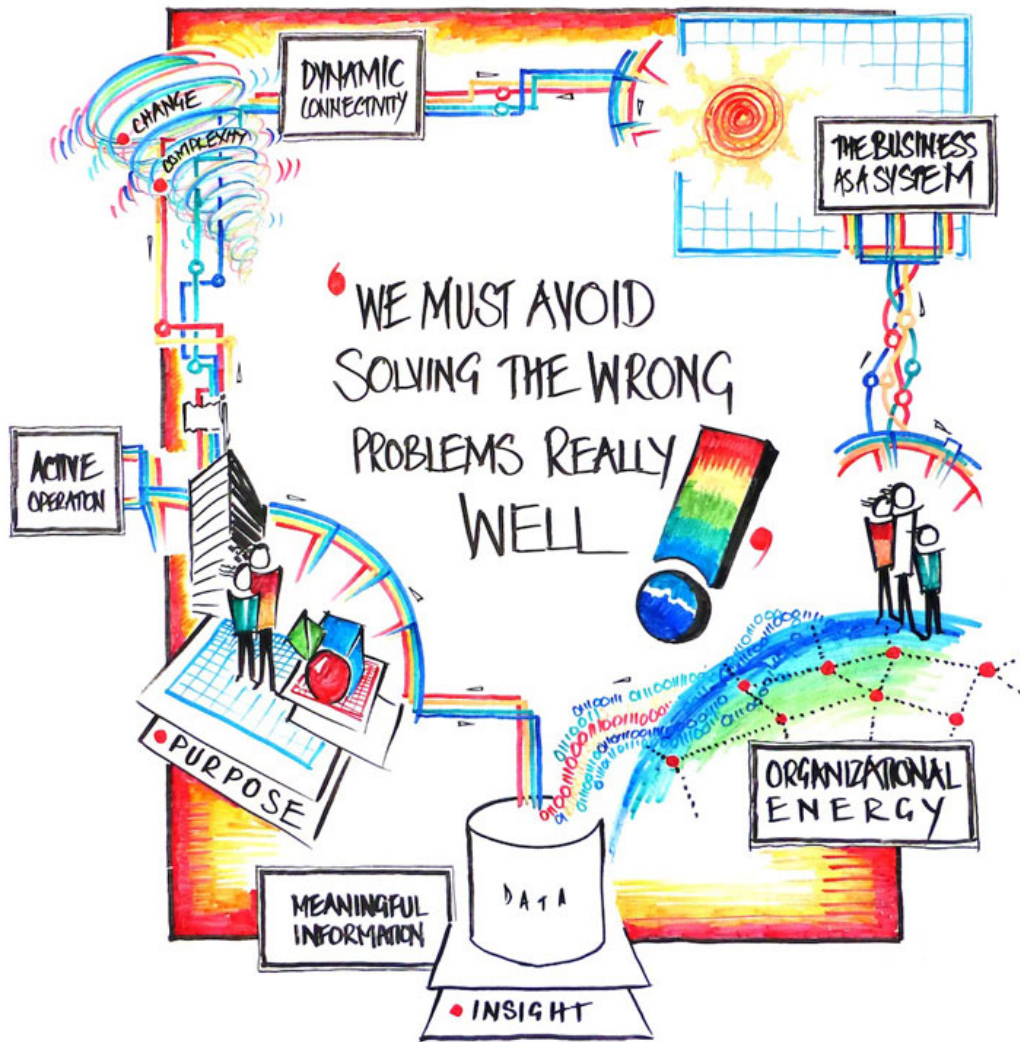
Worse they will defend the current situation rather than putting other people's noses out or calling it a pup.

How come the business of thinking and strategy creation became so ridiculous? Why is it based on impenetrable words – so non-visual? How did it evolve into this crazy process? One that we all know is far from ideal, is at best ad-hoc, that nobody likes, that's unstructured and doesn't work – in fact that's wrong?

We believe that far too little attention has been devoted to this topic – couple that with the legacy of how we designed organizations to defend territory and with a complete lack of whole system thinking...

Now the secret is out. We have to break down the silos, shift our brains to more intelligent and systemic thinking. Only by being visual can we explain this more complex and yet smarter way to think about our need to work differently.

Creating a valid strategy is about real calculation and in any 'true' design if things don't add up or work then they don't add up or work.



13. Because We Need To Positively Disrupt

Someone very smart said if things aren't broke break them.

Just because we've always done things a certain way is the very reason to challenge them with more powerful ways of thinking and working. The way we have designed and operated business has to change beyond all recognition to survive the next hidden wave.

One major example – the purpose of the business. Sounds simple? Well, we've never had one conversation with a client where everyone in the room shares the definition of the company's purpose. Think about the implications of that.

We each have a ton of stuff – bits of information in our heads – but we don't seem to ever share a single coherent picture of it all between us. So in the context of a plan or strategy the absence of a picture creates the very real risk of the business ending up in the wrong place – wasting many cycles of time and money.

Almost every enterprise on Earth has it's fair share of default thinking.

We call it culture or simply procedure – the way things get done around here. It's natural and unsurprising but very high risk for any business struggling to survive the immense pressures of this world.

The words we've all used become like wallpaper – the meanings they hold are now hostages

keeping things as they were – and because they seem so familiar and harmless they go unchecked and unchallenged.

We have to disrupt these traditions if we are to create change – and we must do so in positive ways.

14. Because We've Proven It Works

We've applied a visual approach to changing the way our clients think and work in the course of around 3000 assignments over the last couple of decades. We have people who wouldn't now embark on a program without setting it out this way.

Visualization has an enormous power to surface things that observation and other searches will never find. We honor all the words, phrases and ideas that exist in the heads of the people and translate them visually within a framework of logic.

Our work takes us squarely into strategy and transformative programs. A harsher terrain to prove our point would be difficult to find. Yet the approach has solved just about every business problem we can think of.

Please challenge us to prove it by telling us yours.

We deal with people who are uncomfortable with a whole bunch of uncertainty and defensive, humans dealing with their ego and status built up over many years. It can be dangerous work.

The programs are often complex, layered and highly politicised. Which often hides the root causes of lack of change. Many of the issues remain submerged until visualized. Big problems remain unsolved, no-one knowing what to do because the actual issue is trapped and out of sight.

From Lifeline to Baseline

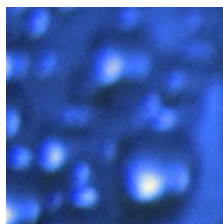
“Visualization brings everything to life. And life brings visualization to us all. Visualization of the complexity of work offers a lifeline to clients exhausted by the failure of more traditional programs for change and value creation. Visualization is now the baseline for how business needs to think and work.” John Caswell



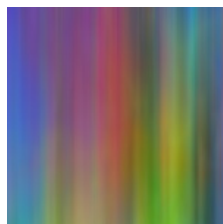
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