



Management and Performance Associates – June 2012 Point and Line to Plane

The title of this article makes reference to a book written in 1926 by Wassily Kandinsky. He is credited with painting the first purely abstract art works. Using it here is just a tactic to get your attention, as we believe that a title including the word “meeting” (the topic of this newsletter) would have scared readers away.

Often, in many locations around the world, we hear the following two phrases:

“We have too many meetings”

“We have a lot of bad meetings”

These two complaints have been transformed into mantra just in order to *survive* them. Everybody seems to understand what needs to happen for a meeting to be successful, but few are able to actually pull it off. We’re not even referring yet to what needs to happen *during* the meeting, but before it starts.

It is common knowledge that the success of a meeting is directly proportional to the time devoted toward its preparation. Since there is a lot written about preparation, we will only remind you of the eight questions that need to be answered beforehand so that the meeting can be a success:

1. Is a meeting necessary?
2. Specifically, what do we want to achieve?
3. Who should attend?
4. What is the best time and place?
5. What are the problems and expectations?
6. Which conversations should take place before the meeting?
7. How will decisions be made?
8. How can we ensure agreement?

No kidding. If well positioned, these can be powerful questions. Today’s focus, however, will be different. We’d like to explore a topic not much covered in the bibliography of successful meetings:

The visual focus

Again and again, we walk into a conference room which held a previous meeting. We see a sad

flipchart in the corner, standing alone and empty. We can see that the few hanging pages that are left, show a writing style unworthy of the decisions which were being made. The dryness of the used markers and the selected colors (red and green, mostly) suggest the pulse of a rushed hand which turned to the flipchart as a last resort, given the lack of clarity or consensus.

Most meetings are developed through verbal processes (monologues, dialogues or loud shouting matches) and when and if there is a visual aid, it will undoubtedly be a PowerPoint presentation, better known as “the one responsible for all the yawning.”

There is a much more powerful and effective tool, able to captivate minds and hearts: the flipchart. When supplied with a good amount of paper and markers (in good condition, with a variety of colors and preferably with a chiseled tip) and with the help of the point and the line (courtesy of Kandinsky), the flipchart will help clarify what the words cannot transmit, will avoid misunderstanding and will accelerate the process.

What about if instead of only talking about “the way we should go” we draw two points, and then connect them with an arrow? Each point could represent a name, a date, an amount. Several rectangles distributed in the shape of a pyramid (with names inside) could indicate a hierarchy; in sequential positions, a process. A star with a circle on top gives shape to a person, a table organizes several ideas simultaneously, a triangle highlights the three main points to be discussed and a mandala is enough to capture ideas generated during a brainstorm. It doesn’t require artistic or creative talent, just the willingness to draw some



straight lines, points, circles, with some precision and care.

We suggest you write with black capital letters, using three sizes: the bigger for the title, an intermediate one for subtitles and the smaller for the text. Use colors to emphasize ideas and remember that red, as counterintuitive as it might seem, cannot be seen from a distance.

The Wall Street Journal, in the April 25th, 2012 Marketplace section, featured a cover article titled "Doodles for dollars." The piece highlights companies which are attempting to get their employees, obsessed with technology, to move their eyes away from their gadgets and start drawing their ideas instead. The article concludes that the drawings help everybody to be on the same page and to transmit the speaker's emotion and experience. We invite you to read the article highlighted in the left column.
<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702303978104577362402264009714.html>

If you are a fan of the doodles and feel like encouraging your colleagues to do the same, don't be frustrated if you get only negative responses. In his fascinating book *The Back of the Napkin*, The Penguin Group, 2008, Dan Roam explains that there are three kinds of audiences:

- **The "red pencils"**
 25% of the audience will say:
"No way! I am not a visual person." This is just a façade, as they will contribute with their ideas, in their own way, meanwhile someone else does the drawings.
- **The "yellow pencils"**
 50% of the audience will bring relevant comments to other people's drawings and eventually will jump in, apologizing with something like "I don't know how to draw," adding simple lines to connect and emphasize ideas.
- **The "black pencils"**
 The remaining 25% of the audience will say *"give me the pencil"* and, without questioning, will dance to the rhythm of the point and line over the white paper.

Don't be afraid of the paper. Your graphics, tables, charts and doodles don't need to be perfect. It is about creating simple visual aids to bring focus to the meeting. People will not mind the imperfection; actually they will thank you for your effort to clarify ideas. At the end of the meeting, if you see someone taking a picture of your visual aids you will know that your mission was accomplished.

Finally, don't miss Sunni Brown, the founder of The Doodle Revolution in her TED Talk: Doodlers: unite!
http://www.ted.com/talks/lang/en/sunni_brown.html

See you next time. We welcome your feedback.

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