

5 Ways to Boost Your Leadership Through Visual Communication

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The Colosseum monument in Rome.

Photo: Getty Images

William Warren is an Entrepreneurs' Organization (EO) member in Atlanta and the founder and CEO of The Sketch Effect, which provides a wide array of visual communication services, including animation, live event sketching (known as "graphic recording"), and infographics. We asked Warren how entrepreneurs can leverage the power of visual communication to boost their leadership. Here's what he shared:

As a business leader, do you ever feel like you're in the middle of a gladiator match in Ancient Rome? The business world is your Colosseum, the challenges are your opponents, and every decision you make is the difference between life and death. Your weapon of choice is what will lead you to victory. I'm here to tell you that visual communication is the weapon you've underestimated all along.

Every leader faces complex puzzles and evolving situations that demand creativity and out-of-the-box thinking. The key to surviving, adapting, and thriving lies in your ability to transform abstract thoughts into practical solutions. It lies in bridging the gap between ideas and execution.

Remember our trip to Rome? Imagine trying to explain the Colosseum's grandeur without a picture. Nearly impossible, right? That's what navigating business and executing strategy without visual tools is like.

People have always been visual beings, and we are even more visually wired in the 21st century. Our intuition, therefore, should be to think visually, first and foremost.

And our weapon of choice? There are a myriad of visual tools, techniques, and strategies with which to arm ourselves. And I'm not talking about mere doodles; they're strategic pieces that can tell the story of your company, make sales, discover solutions, foster collaboration, set vision, shape culture, and inform your decisions. After all, visuals amplify the three fundamental factors crucial for effective decision making and problem solving: comprehension, retention, and actionability.

A straightforward guide to incorporating visuals into your strategy:

1. **Picture your end goal:** Dive back into those childhood memories of scribbling. Now, visualize your ultimate business goal and draw it. This sketch serves as a bridge between your mind and your goals, helping you use the power of visualization to trick your brain into assuming they've already happened. In turn, this allows you to be less resistant to change, more able to embrace the future, and more confident going about achieving it. And by drawing your goals, you're taking visualization one step further. Be sure to keep your drawing somewhere you will see it often to keep yourself motivated.
2. **Create a visual scoreboard:** It's easy to get brain fog by looking at spreadsheets and dense PDFs. To give your mind a chance to reset, create a simple visual scoreboard where you can track only the most important KPIs that drive your end goal. Think of it like your favorite sport--we all play harder and are more invested in the outcome when we can see the scoreboard keeping track of our progress. The best scoreboards are front and center, easy to see, and simple--only showing the statistics that tell you if you're winning or losing.
3. **Use visual hierarchy:** Whether you're taking notes, leading a meeting, or preparing a slide deck, it's easy to get lost in the details. To make sense of what truly matters, I suggest harnessing the power of visual hierarchy. The most important things should take center stage in larger, bolder fonts, while the minor details can stay in the background, allowing the audience to quickly take in the most critical ideas. Visual hierarchy is easy to implement and will add a wealth of meaning to your visual presentations.

4. **Draw, rather than explain:** There's no better way to test your understanding of an idea than to draw it. Instead of weaving a complex web of words, pick up a pen and sketch out icons, arrows, and even stick figures to express your thoughts. Putting your thoughts into pictures forces you to simplify and clarify. Next time you need to make a pitch, share your vision, or guide your team through uncharted territory, don't just tell them--show them.
5. **Personify everything:** Want to delve deeper into the hearts and minds of your customers or the core dynamics of your supply chain? Draw them out as people. Sketch a customer on a sticky note and name them, or create a visual map of your supply chain partners. Think of them as characters in a story, each with a unique role. We're hard-wired to think in terms of faces, so by personifying your core stakeholders, you'll be better able to connect with them.

The business landscape today is ever-changing. The Colosseum has stood the test of time; leaders must evolve to remain standing. The key? Visual thinking tools that provide clarity and simplicity amid the chaos and confusion. Often, seeing something can be much more powerful than hearing or reading about it. So, as you venture into the business world, prepare to execute your strategy and conquer challenges with the precision and artistry of a seasoned gladiator by using visual communication as your sword.

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