

## WORKOLOGY

## Getting the message: Seeing what people say

**GRAPHIC RECORDINGS** are a creative way to let people see what others at a meeting are saying



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After a rigorous one-day leadership meeting recently, one of the participants slipped graphic recorder Sara Heppner-Waldston a note that read: "Thank you for showing me what I heard. You've changed my ideas about conversation."

Heppner-Waldston had spent that day with coloured pens and large sheets of paper, rendering in drawings the essence of the discussion, which revealed to the women attending the session that risk-taking and learning through action were integral to their success.

While this skill might not replace taking minutes on a laptop or the facilitator's feedback, there is increasing interest in bringing into meetings, keynote addresses, strategic planning sessions or retreats someone who is able to visually render what's being said. This way, those who attend never go away wondering whether their contribution has been forgotten.

"We don't capture just the words, we capture the energy in

the room," Heppner-Waldston said. "The idea of this work is to capture the essence of dialogue visually."

At Bishop's University last week, dean of Student Affairs Bruce Stevenson hosted a "world café" dialogue session during leadership week, where Heppner-Waldston focused on leaders of the past, present and future. She had been invited back, Stevenson says, after the success of last year's graphic recording on the meaning of leadership.

"We wanted to have some way to capture our conversation, to do something new," he said. "What we found is that it also created a lasting reminder of the key concepts from that brainstorming session. Our goal is that students realize that everyone can become a leader. It has been very effective."

At the beginning of each session, Heppner-Waldston explains briefly her role as a "voice on the wall." Then, using blackboard-sized sheets of paper, she stands at the front or side of the room, drawing as the conversation ensues. One chart, for instance, might illustrate the introduction and the first presenter, while another shows the panel discussion. As people talk, she draws, using colours, icons, progressions, sometimes metaphors.



Please see VISUAL, Page G2

Graphic recorder Sara Heppner-Waldston has growing list of corporate clients.

# VISUAL Graphic displays organize people's thoughts and inspire

## CONTINUED FROM G1

At the end of the day, the walls are filled with graphic rendering of what went on. It works she believes, because "different groups in one meeting often have different ideas of what's going on. Not only does this put everyone on the same page, but it organizes people's thoughts – and it's inspiring."

Her function is to listen and render what she's heard into graphic form.

"Eighty per cent of people are visual," she said. "This helps them get to the point, to see their thoughts or conversations. The fact that I make it look good is a bonus."

Once she has brought the charts back to her home office, they are touched up then scanned or photographed. Clients will then get a jpeg for their website or their report. Some might use the rendering in lieu of a report; others use it as a screen saver. The original is the property of the client, who will sometimes mount the charts at the office to reinforce the elements of the discussion.

At Bishop's, for instance, the charts were laminated and put up in the student centre.

"It's eye catching," Stevenson said.

"Every time students walk by, they read concepts about the leader within. They have become art pieces for the residences."

A graphic designer by training, Heppner-Waldston discovered graphic recording by chance. The mother of three young adults, she had freelanced for more than a decade when she began to question her career, realizing that graphic work meant a lifetime of sitting behind a computer.

"It wasn't creative enough," she said.

So she started painting murals, and was heartened by the response as the picture grew.

This, combined with the tip from a friend who had met someone doing graphic recording in England, changed her life.

"I checked it out and said, 'I have to do that,'" recalled Heppner-Waldston. "It has been my path ever since."

So determined was she to connect to this new career that a month later she attended a graphic recorders' conference in Lake Tahoe, Nev.

"It was my daughter's 16th birthday, but I made the cake and left," she said. "It was so out of character for me."

There, she met like-minded people, spent time in training with mentors.

With graphic recording, you're listening and seeing, she said.

"The gift of it is you have to be completely present."

She can work at sessions that last two hours or five days, and counts Concordia University, the Human Rights Commission of Canada, KPMG, Merck Frosst, the Ontario and New Brunswick Ministries of Health, the Ottawa Police Service and Oxfam Canada among her clients. Her business, Saragrafix, has quadrupled since she began four years ago; last year she was averaging four to five jobs a month.

Even in tough economic times, Heppner-Waldston believes companies will be looking for different and creative ways to tackle their challenges. Not only is the hand drawing attractive and welcoming to people, she believes it helps them remember what's going on. She has never come across a participant who is reticent to put their ideas on record.

"People usually feel the opposite of shy," she said. "They want to know that they've heard."

The International Forum of Visual Practitioners will hold its next annual meeting in Montreal in August. For information check [ifvp.org](http://ifvp.org)

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