

Creating a Visual Record

One of the simplest tools for helping committees or groups come to decisions is providing a visual record. A visual record is a listing that everyone can see that contains key discussion points and especially the various options.

It may seem redundant to create a visual discussion record either on flip charts or projected from a laptop if minutes will be distributed after the meeting. However, having a record of what is being proposed and that everyone can see is helpful in a number of ways.

First, our short-term memories generally cannot hold all the pertinent points. Human brains can hold three to seven items in short-term memory. The average is five. That means that after four ideas, thoughts, or items have been heard, some people in the room won't be able to remember all of them. Although our academic tradition values verbal defense, creating a visual record enhances our collective ability to deal thoroughly with a topic.

Some meeting participants will be reluctant to agree with something they have only heard without seeing. This is related to learning styles and although most successful academicians can function well in multiple modalities, many people are better able to discuss and contribute when there are visual as well as auditory cues.

By eliciting ideas and opinions and posting them in the front of the room, the discussion and debate can be focused on the ideas and away from the originators. This consideration of the options on their own merits may even prevent some of the verbal conflict that arises as group members seek to defend their choices by attacking other people. In heated debates, a meeting leader or facilitator can help maintain a civil and productive atmosphere by literally referring to the posted choices and directing the discussion toward the ideas and away from personalities.

People often rehash their ideas because they are not sure they were heard the first time or that the meeting notes will include the points they raised. Having a brief bulleted list of points raised in the deliberations can reassure people that they have been heard and do not need to reinforce or repeat what they have already said.

Writing the choices, decisions, options for all to see ensures a level of precision that is often missing when a verbal statement is given. It also ensures that the individual taking the meeting minutes does not have to try to interpret, remember, rephrase what has just been said verbally.

A visual record is most helpful when a key decision must be made and a group must decide among options. The list can contain the options, pros and cons of each, and the like. Usually the visual record is created by the designated recorder or meeting facilitator.