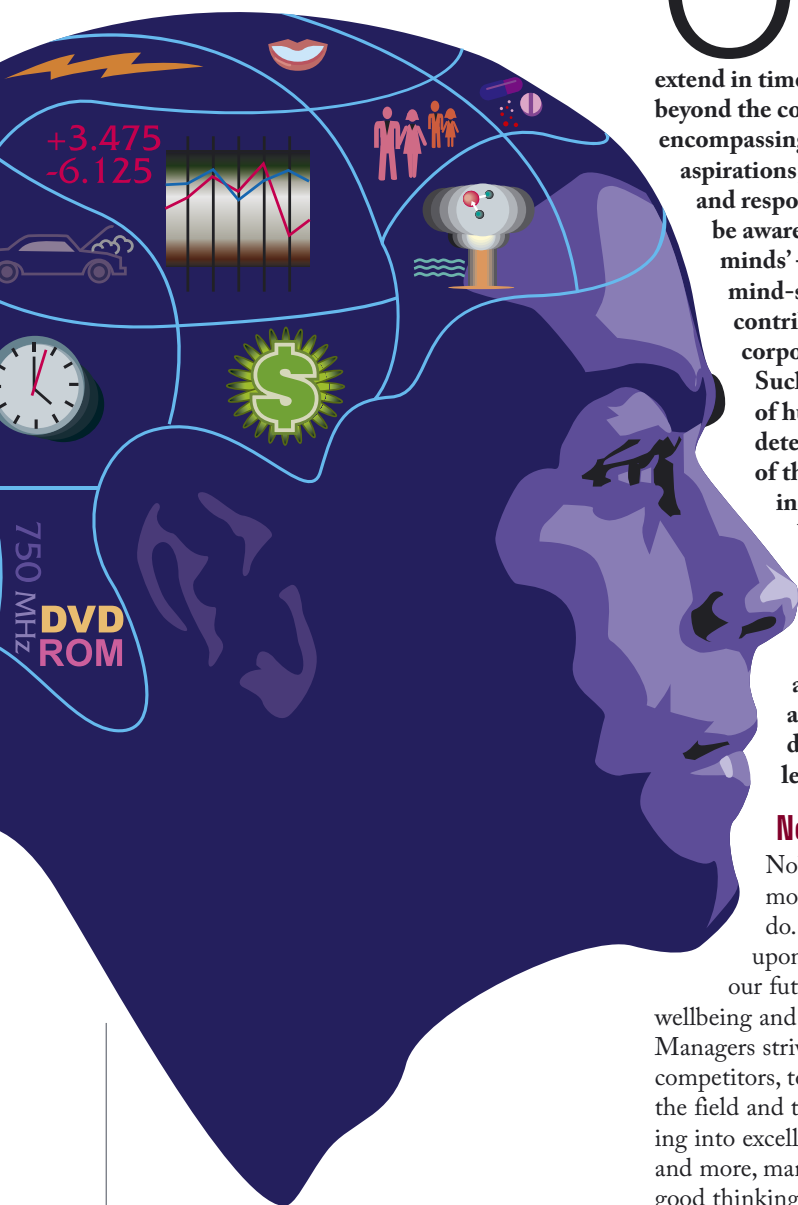


# Leading minds

**John Varney** introduces LogoVisual Thinking (LVT), a creative methodology that develops the thinking skills of managers



**O**ur minds are curious things. They are about much more than our brains. Minds extend in time and space far beyond the confines of our bodies, encompassing our memories and aspirations, our relationships and responsibilities. We can be aware also of 'corporate minds' – a sort of shared mind-space to which many contribute and from which corporate actions arise. Such minds shape all of human affairs and determine the future of the planet. Can we individually elect to become leading minds that take responsibility for influencing how others contribute and what outcomes are sought? Can we develop the minds of leaders?

## Need for thinking

Nobody needs to think more than managers do. After all, we depend upon managers to shape our futures, to ensure our wellbeing and to create wealth. Managers strive to out-think their competitors, to innovate ahead of the field and to turn good thinking into excellent results. More and more, managers recognise that good thinking is not confined to

the boardroom and that they need to tap the creativity of their entire workforce. Corporate innovation and competitive performance depend upon effective leadership thinking.

## How do we learn thinking?

We trust that managers are good thinkers, and yet managers (like the rest of us) have been taught how to think according to the prevailing predispositions of the education system. This system is just waking up to the fact that, in so far as thinking is concerned, it has not been very effective. Education has been heavily biased towards preparing people to pass examinations, based substantially on memory and set formulae, and not to any great extent requiring enquiry or original thought. Historically at least, any errant originality has been quickly brought into line.

## Thinking in schools

In response to the new requirement for schools to teach thinking skills, one initiative has been to introduce a methodology known as LogoVisual Thinking (LVT) to teachers and advisors. The initiative has had impressive results: the methodology improved the teachers' own thinking, improved their relationships with the students, improved behaviour and enhanced group dynamics and individual participation. The method also catered for differing abilities, and proved useful not only in teachers'

own design work but also in managing their schools.

Teachers found the methodology useful for design, for decision-making, for investigation and for assessment. Students, too, rated it highly and found its use liberating – it made learning fun and produced better results. Not only did they retain more information, but they acknowledged that their understanding was better.

### What works in organisations?

These results confirm what has been discovered in 20 years of developing and using LVT in the organisational context. People with no previous knowledge of the method can readily be brought into a relationship to think together – gathering information, solving problems, developing plans, deciding actions and so on. LVT seems to work well at every level: from frontline staff looking for process improvements through to senior managers developing scenarios and strategies, and for everyone seeking to improve their teamwork and communications. For facilitators it provides a powerful way to enable people to help themselves.

### What's new?

If this is such a panacea, you may ask, how come it has not been discovered sooner? Well, in parts it has been. Some techniques have been around a very long time and others have emerged recently – for instance, many people will have had experience of doing something like brainstorming using Post-It notes. Disney used index cards in story-boarding. Most people will have tried Mind Mapping®.

What is new is the grouping of such diverse fragments into a coherent methodology, and the introduction of a kind of rigour that begins to illuminate and

extend people's thinking capacity. Instead of just skimming the surface, people find they have the ability to plumb mental depths.

LVT depends on the simple principle of making individual ideas into objects (by writing the ideas onto cards of some sort) and then organising them in a way that makes sense to those involved.

## There is something special about letting people actually touch one another's thoughts

From there it is possible to reflect until a change of meaning occurs. It is thus a sense-making process. People create meaning from their own raw material, and they do this themselves. That way they own their results, and there are no issues about transfer or communication between them. In making sense together they also iron out misunderstandings and build relationships.

Of course, there is a little more to it than that. There are refinements of the process and the context, as well as a multiplicity of applications, some of which have evolved over many years. Although it is easy enough to work successfully with totally inexperienced groups, it is worth investing in the training available to get facilitators, as well as key individuals and teams, up to speed. Indeed, there is no end to what can be learned about and through the methodology, just as there is no end to what and how humans can learn to think.

### What tools are available?

A favourite medium is magnetic dry-wipe hexagons, called MagNotes. They come in different

sizes and colours as well as other shapes, according to what process you are using. They are displayed on steel-based whiteboards, which means you can write, and change what you have written, on both shapes and background.

Mobility and flexibility allows for people changing their minds – important when you want them to feel happy with open-ended enquiry in which there are no right or wrong answers, perhaps no answers at all. Their work, in a sense, always remains a work in progress.

It might seem that all this could be done on a computer. Indeed, there are software packages that mimic the magnetic tools. However, there is something special about letting people actually touch one another's thoughts. Subtleties of relative positioning develop meanings that are felt but cannot be expressed readily in words. Bodily intelligence comes into play as people 'think with their hands'. Computer equivalents are ideal for personal work, for some group applications and for capturing the outputs from sessions that have used physical media. Computers compute, but only minds can think!

Once everyone's ideas are out on the board, they become shared material from which to fashion solutions. The results can be captured digitally as photographs or computer models, as well as being translated into more conventional plans and reports.

### What can I use LVT for?

You will begin almost immediately to find ways of clarifying your own thinking on difficult and complex issues. Beyond that, you will find ways of relieving your mind of clutter by simply externalising half-thought ideas and projects. Once out there, you can address them as new ideas occur or invite others to explore your thoughts. With a little practice, you will then be able

to confidently share your thinking processes with others.

The methodology comes into its own when used to facilitate the thinking of groups. Processes can even be structured to engage quite large groups in thinking together about a topic. This is especially valuable when many stakeholders need to find common ground or to share the fruits of the thinking process.

Applications are numerous: from exploring complex problems to building future scenarios; from defining common purpose to seeking innovations; from authoring to business planning; from problem solving to process management. Almost any domain that requires intelligent thinking will benefit from the application of the methodology at appropriate points.

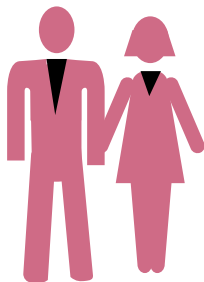
### What is the process?

In itself, LVT has five distinct stages. These are:

- Focus the question
- Gather ideas
- Organise the material
- Integrate to reveal the underlying pattern
- Apply accordingly.

Here is an example of how this process worked with a typical management team of around a dozen people, in the context of a strategy-innovation workshop. An off-site venue was carefully chosen and great care taken to set the scene and make people feel relaxed, socially at ease and purposefully playful. Although the team had no prior experience of using LVT, a brief introduction to the ground rules enabled them to readily embark on the issue in hand with minimal facilitation.

- 1) A question was carefully articulated, to focus the enquiry on the future the team aspired to create. Buying into the question enabled them to buy into the outcome.



- 2) The gathering stage saw the team divided into syndicates, in order to collect diverse perspectives on what success would look like to them at a future date. Everyone took part and contributed their ideas to make a random display. The fact that LVT did not require them to agree gave voice to quieter people, and allowed for a great deal of freedom that enabled marginal and minority ideas to enrich the mix.

- 3) The organising of ideas continued immediately after the gathering, each group sorting their ideas into meaningful clusters. This was a critical part of the process, involving profound negotiation. Everyone engaged in making sense of the subtle relationships of ideas, intuitively assigning significance to relative positioning – lots of animated discussion and arm-waving. Titling then encapsulated the meaning of each cluster as articulated by the participants.

- 4) The Integration: this consisted firstly of the groups sharing what they had done, in order to appreciate the diversity of perspectives. Then they abstracted the titles from MagNotes onto a new board to create a single shared picture of future success. This revealed a system structure from which it was possible to translate aspirations into objectives, and to work once more in parallel to develop strategies for achieving them.

- 5) The apply stage consisted of exploring and agreeing how the strategies needed to be communicated in order to feed into the business plan.

The core LVT process took no more than a total of two or three hours within a workshop of 48

hours duration. It was effortless and enjoyable, and its effectiveness freed up time for the wider personal and inter-personal development processes that contributed to attitudinal shifts, and prepared the team to commit themselves to entrepreneurial challenges. That these were linked with shared sense-making meant that individual aspirations were awakened in a way that fed directly into the team's businesses planning process.

Now let's add a bit more detail – enough to help you get to grips with the methodology.

- 1) Focus: The facilitator may have a good idea about the question people need to focus on, but it is always worth checking this out with the participants (we assume here that selecting the right participants – usually those who have a stake in the outcome – has been part of the wider process). Participants will generally have more knowledge of the issue at hand than the facilitator and, in any case, need the opportunity to clarify, refine or re-focus the question to address the underlying concerns.
- 2) Gather: There are some simple principles (often overlooked by novices). Write clearly so others can read it; write one idea per MagNote; use full clear statements, not buzzwords; use a verb; be specific, not comparative; make a random display. Another vital principle is that everyone writes their own – the facilitator should avoid more than a cursory engagement so that ownership remains with the participants. It is important here also that people hold back on judgement and do not try to agree – different perspectives will build a richer picture

and make any underlying contradictions or challenges visible to all.

- 3) Organise: This is usually a period of energised conversation, in which everyone is engaged in making sense of the subtle relationships of ideas as they intuitively assign significance to relative positioning. The simplest way of making sense is to begin by looking for pairs of ideas that seem to relate. You are advised to avoid pre-determined categories and grouping ideas according to simplistic key words, as this just recreates past mental models. Let the ideas themselves tell you where they want to be. Clusters of ideas will emerge and, when everyone is happy with the groupings, they can be encircled and given fulsome

## Let the ideas tell you themselves where they want to be

titles that summarise the content. Again, include a verb and make sure the title is a response to the original question. Take care at this stage, as the 'titling' is itself an abstraction of meaning from the diverse content. The quality of the titling is therefore critical to the sense-making process.

- 4) Integrate: The pattern can best be revealed by writing the titles onto new MagNotes placed on a fresh board. Now we can begin to explore the relationships between the various items.

At its simplest, we may just look for cause-effect relationships and produce a systems model. However, we can also employ various means of challenging ourselves to think more deeply, so that we grasp much more of the dynamics of the complex whole we are exploring. When we are happy that we have understood, we can move on. Facilitators should take care at this stage not to do the work for the group, and to push people to stretch their own thinking to new levels.

- 5) Apply: At the end of the day we want to be able to act effectively. This means we need good strategies and plans, and that we need to be prepared for what is to come. The planning of action is in itself a preparation, and the clarity and alignment that engaging in the LVT process has given us will greatly enhance our capability.

We have described here a typical process that can be concluded in a little over an hour. Be aware, however, that there are many possible processes and provocations to think anew and that, as thinking gets deeper, the processes can be extended. ■

For more information or to acquire professional tools and software, go to <http://www.emcsite.com/lvt/business/products.asp> or <http://www.inspirationresources.com/cishop/default.asp>

## Advantages of the LVT methodology

- It is immediately engaging
- It aligns stakeholders to their common purpose
- It gives ownership to the participants
- The process enables everyone to contribute to the form as well as the content
- It gives voice to the silent and restrains the dominant
- It encourages exploration of meaning
- It allows new insights to emerge
- It frees the facilitator to manage the process from a deeper level

## LVT comes of age

Over the last 20 years LVT has been used extensively to excellent effect, especially in the management context. Now the results of this development period can be shared with practitioners of all kinds – from teachers in schools to learners in boardrooms – and leaders wherever they are. Basically LVT is intuitive, but there is also a rigour that contributes to quality results. If you want to find out more about the many different processes and countless applications of LVT, there is a published guide for organisational applications and another for educators.

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