Drawing Together

Idea In Short

When a group is stuck in abstract debate, invite people to draw their experience before explaining it. Drawing Together gives participants five simple symbols for representing a transition or challenge: circle, rectangle, triangle, spiral, and star person. Each person makes a brief visual account, then shares it with a partner and the group. The facilitator should stress that drawing skill is irrelevant and that symbols are prompts, not a diagnostic code. Use the structure when people need to surface feelings, assumptions, and connections that are hard to express in linear discussion. End by asking what the images reveal about possible next steps, not by judging which drawing is correct.

A team discussing a major transition may repeat the same arguments because each person is using different images of what is happening. One leader sees a clear path toward a goal; another sees a fragile foundation; a third senses that the change is cyclical and unresolved. Drawing Together gives the group a shared set of simple symbols and asks participants to represent their experience visually before explaining it. The practice can make tacit assumptions easier to notice and creates a different entry point into a difficult conversation. It is not a test of artistic ability or a shortcut to consensus. Its purpose is to help people describe what they see and listen to how others interpret the same challenge.

Use symbols as prompts

The structure introduces five symbols: a circle for wholeness, completion, or the self; a rectangle for a foundation or source of support; a triangle for goals and aspirations; a spiral for change and transformation; and a star person, an equidistant cross, for relationships and connections. The facilitator can draw each symbol and explain its suggested meaning. Participants may use them literally, combine them, or add their own visual details. The symbols establish a common vocabulary without dictating a single interpretation.

After hearing the invitation, participants draw a story about a transition or challenge they are

experiencing. A simple image might place a goal beyond a spiral, show a foundation supporting several relationships, or depict a completed circle beside an unfinished one. The facilitator should allow quiet time before asking anyone to share. The pause gives people a chance to find a visual expression without competing for airtime. It also prevents the host from shaping the story through premature interpretation.

Let the creator explain

Participants first share their drawings in pairs. A useful listener asks open questions such as “What is happening here?” or “What does this symbol mean to you?” They should not assume that a triangle always represents ambition or that a spiral means progress. The agreed symbol meanings are starting points; the artist retains authority over the image’s personal meaning. This rule protects the exercise from becoming a projective test in which others claim to infer motives or emotions.

The group can then share images in plenary and look for themes, differences, and questions. A drawing may show the same transition as both an ending and a beginning. Two colleagues might use the same symbol to express confidence and uncertainty. These differences do not need to be reconciled immediately. They can reveal where the group’s mental models diverge and what information or conversation would help people understand the situation better.

Make the setting simple

Participants need paper and markers or a digital drawing surface, plus a way to display their work to a partner or group. A low-pressure invitation helps: “Who needs words when we have symbols? Let’s use five symbols to tell a story about a transition or challenge we are experiencing.” A host should explain that stick figures and rough shapes are welcome. If people worry about being judged, the facilitator can model a simple drawing and narrate it without claiming to be an artist.

The official practice takes around 50 minutes. It includes an introduction, a short explanation of the symbols, individual drawing, pair sharing, and group reflection. Online, participants can draw on paper and show the result on camera or use a shared digital canvas. A digital space can support collaboration, but avoid requiring everyone to learn a complex tool during the session. The medium should not become a barrier to expression.

Draw out meaning without forcing a conclusion

Facilitators can ask what the drawings make visible that was hard to say in ordinary discussion. They can invite participants to notice whether the group's images emphasize goals, foundations, relationships, or change. These questions help the group describe patterns without ranking contributions. Avoid statements such as "The spiral means resistance" or "Your picture shows that you are not committed." Such claims go beyond what the drawing can establish and can make participants less willing to share.

The practice can be followed by 1-2-4-All to generate options, or by What, So What, Now What to move from observation toward action. If participants surface concrete risks or facts, capture them for follow-up. A visual exercise should complement investigation, not replace it. The group may need data, customer input, or a decision conversation after it has surfaced its assumptions. The drawing helps determine what deserves attention next.

Drawing Together is useful in strategy changes, team transitions, service redesign, and situations where people use abstract language without understanding one another. It can also reveal that a group's challenge contains multiple experiences that cannot be reduced to a single narrative. Research in visual thinking and design supports the use of sketches as tools for externalizing ideas, while studies of team learning emphasize the importance of psychological safety when people share uncertainty. 1, 2, 3

Turn images into a next step

At the end, ask what participants want to do with what they have learned. The next step might be testing an assumption, talking with a group that has been left out, clarifying the purpose of a transition, or agreeing on what support is needed. A host can document themes while leaving individual images with their creators. If the drawings include sensitive information, ask permission before photographing or sharing them.

Drawing Together works because it makes space for a kind of explanation that is not always available in a fast verbal exchange. The symbols reduce the blank-page problem, and participants' own stories make the images meaningful. When a team treats each drawing as an opening for curiosity, visual expression can help colleagues compare their understanding and find a productive path forward.

- 1Why sketching helps you think
- 2The value of visual thinking
- 3Psychological safety and learning behavior in work teams

Summary

Drawing Together changes the channel through which a group explores a challenge. A handful of common symbols helps participants externalize their experience, while personal interpretation gives each drawing meaning. The structure can reveal differences in what people notice and make an abstract transition easier to discuss. Its usefulness depends on treating drawings as invitations to ask questions, not evidence to interpret on someone else's behalf. Give participants enough quiet time to create, then let them explain their own images. Close by identifying an insight or experiment the group wants to carry forward. The point is not artistic quality; it is a broader conversation about what people see and what they might do.