

Totem Cards

A tool for Visualising the Invisible

An Introduction

The Totem Cards have been developed by Dr Bettina von Stamm to enable and facilitate the exploration of topics that are otherwise often difficult to discuss and express, such as culture, leadership style and processes.¹ The Totem Cards allow individuals or groups to tackle such issues in a fast, fun, engaging and energising way, resulting in the creation of a truly shared vision, representation or manifestation.

This Approach is suitable, for example to support the...

- Discussion of a topic or challenge
- Exploration of a particular situation
- Creation of a shared understanding
- Creation of a shared vision
- Description of a particular culture, style or approach
- Description of a personal situation
- Comparison of an existing and desired states

Why the use of Totem Cards?

Shaped by our education and profession, by our own preferences and the particular 'lenses' through which we see the world, each of us tends to evaluate, assess and understand situations in our own particular way - which is not necessarily identical to that of others. Depending on where we are coming from, words can have different connotations and meanings. Think about differences in the use of words between America and the UK - if you are in a 'car' in the UK it's an automobile whereas in the US you'd be on a train or tube; similar differences exist between professions, contexts, etc.

However, if we are to collaborate successfully, if we are to develop plans and strategies together, it is important that we truly understand each other and have a mutually understood and shared picture of our starting point as well as our destination.

'Totem Cards' are part of the 'Totem Building', a process that facilitates the elicitation of different viewpoints and perspectives while at the same time avoiding an atmosphere of 'if I am right you must be wrong'.

The feedback tends to,

1. take the form of a story
2. be humorous
3. be remarkable truthful and honest, &
4. despite the above, rarely offensive

Beyond the Cards

While the Totem Cards are the main element in the Totem building process, participants may also use one or more of the following components:

- Metaphors
- Some 3-dimensional, colourful shapes such as a Zolo Set
- Some words

1. This approach builds on the work of Dr Angela Dumas who has used the term 'Totem Building' to describe her process of creating a shared vision in the design management and new product development process. Ref.: Dumas, A. (1994). "Building totems: metaphor-making in product development". *Design Management Journal*, (Winter), 71-82



The Totem Building Process generally consists of 3 steps:

- Identifying or describing the current situation
- Identifying or describing the ideal or desired scenario
- Identifying and committing to specific steps on how to move from the current to the desired situation

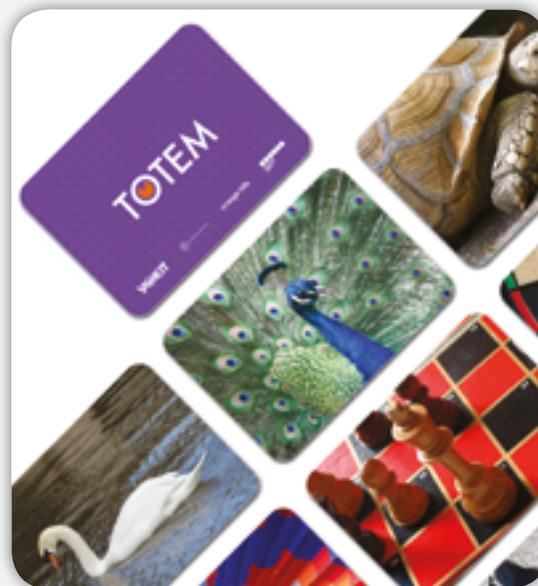
This Process can be followed by individuals, by groups, or a combination of both, depending on the subject under consideration.

The following describes the setup in which individual selection is followed by building a shared view across the group.

1. Each individual selects the cards that best represent the current situation concerning the topic under discussion (there are no restrictions on how many cards to choose but 3-8 cards tend to work best);
2. Everyone in the group shares the cards they have selected and explains why;
3. Resulting from the sharing of individual perspectives a discussion will ensue to explore and understand the different viewpoints;
4. The creation of a shared vision can happen in 2 ways,
 - a. Each group member chooses one card that is most important / essential to them and should become part of the shared view;
 - b. The group selects 5-8 cards that are the representative of the jointly developed shared perspective.

The former might be more appropriate for groups with an imbalance in outspokenness.

Totem Building has proven effective in a broad range of tasks at the individual, team and organisational level, such as identifying leadership challenges, exploring and understanding challenges and enablers of innovation culture, investigate the feasibility of obtaining a certain set of organisational goals, and exploring future research agendas.



Here are a few examples of scenarios in which the totem cards have been used:

- As individuals, identify current situation and challenges; developed a vision of a desired future and what gets in the way of it becoming reality; develop specific steps to create that future (for women contributing and leading in the context of innovation)
- Contrasting participants' existing company culture with that of a highly innovative organisation; identifying specific steps forward; (multi-company workshop)
- Agreeing on conditions that are conducive to radical innovation, contrasting them with existing conditions in the company in question; this helped to identify discrepancies in perception and facilitate a discussion of possible consequences; (bioscience company)
- Eliciting prejudices and differences between 3 (not very well) collaborating professional groupings; turning prejudices and 'annoyances' into collaboration benefits; identifying approaches and tools that might help realise that potential; (architects, contractors, clients)
- Identifying obstacles to achieving a given set of strategic objectives; creating a representation of an organisation that would achieve these objectives easily; agreeing specific steps that individuals commit to in order to help the organisation move from A to B; (business unit of 100 people).

The main 3 arguments for using visuals are,

1. It elicits tacit knowledge and things we assume

When using the words we tend to assume shared meaning - which is often not the case, particularly when we are working in groups of diverse functional or professional backgrounds. With images it is more obvious that they can be interpreted in a number of different ways; this means that someone needs to elaborate and explain in more depth why he or she has chosen a particular picture and what it means to them. By explaining the reasons and motivation behind their choice individuals offer up much more of their thinking, their implicit assumption and their tacit knowledge than they would using words alone. This leads to a better understanding of individuals' starting point, position and reasoning.

The process works similarly well for the creation of a shared vision or understanding of a particular situation, be it a challenge or solution, be it the status quo or a desired scenario.

2. It encourages an open and honest exchange without becoming personal

In most cultures we shy away from expressing things directly that might be perceived as criticism. However, without bringing these issues into the open they easily take on a life of their own, undermining successful collaboration.

Using visuals to express experiences, feelings, positions helps to externalise the issue, making discussions less personal, thereby preserving a greater openness and honesty in the discussion.

3. It enables people to keep an open mind

Using the cards tends to introduce an element of fun and laughter into discussions - which is a good thing as laughter **a** releases tension, **b** keeps the mind open and facilitates connections between different parts of our brain and **c** makes the discussion of difficult or controversial topics easier.

There is a further aspect to visuals supporting an 'open mind': as pictures are open to many different interpretations, the interpretation of others can be a surprise to us, giving us a new or different perspective, creating the effect of 'lateral thinking'.

The Science of Laughter

In a study where EEGs were used to examine brain activity in subjects responding to humorous material, a researcher named Derks determined that brain activity produced a regular electrical pattern. Within four-tenths of a second of exposure to something funny, an electrical wave moved through the largest part of the brain, the cerebral cortex. Specifically, researchers observed electrical activity in the:

- Left side of the cortex (where words and the structure of a joke are analyzed)
- Front lobe (involved in the social emotion responses)
- Right hemisphere of the cortex (intellectual analysis required to understand the joke occurs here)
- Sensory processing area of the occipital lobe (contains cells that process visual signals)
- Motor sections (evokes physical responses to a joke)

Thus, whereas emotions and rational are generally associated with one particular part of the brain, laughter involves a neural circuit that runs through many regions.

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