

CAN THEY PICTURE IT?

The communication guide. One plan, every audience, and a workforce that does not all share a language.



If they cannot **picture it**, you have not communicated it

A programme is a communication device. It is only ever as good as the picture it puts in someone's head. The plan that lives in one head, or in software only the planner opens, is not a plan. It is a liability waiting to generate a claim.

This is not a soft point. When the Get It Right Initiative ranked the root causes of avoidable error in UK construction, three of the top nine were failures of communication: poorly communicated design information, poorly coordinated design information, and ineffective communication between team members. They sat directly alongside inadequate planning and late design changes at the top of the list. (GIRI, Strategy for Change.)

When contractors actually measured it across 25 live projects worth 942.5 million pounds, poor communication was named a significant cause of error alongside planning and design coordination. (GIRI and CITB, 2026.) Across the industry, avoidable error is estimated to cost 10 to 25 per cent of project value, somewhere between 10 and 25 billion pounds a year. One large industry survey put around half of all rework down to poor communication and poor project information. (Autodesk and FMI, 2018, an industry study.)

The thread through all of it is simple. Getting everyone to understand the plan is the talker's job, not the listener's. This guide is how you do that job: for the manager, for the site manager, for the trades, and for the large part of the workforce who do not have English as a first language.

The rule this guide is built on. Communicate in the right form, to the right level, by any means possible. The test is simple. If the people doing the work, or the customer, cannot picture it, you have not communicated it yet.

Why the person who knows the plan is the **worst placed to explain it**

There is a reason good planners are often poor communicators, and it is not laziness. It is a well-documented cognitive bias called the curse of knowledge. Once you know something, you cannot easily imagine not knowing it.

Economists named it in 1989: a person with knowledge cannot accurately reconstruct what someone without that knowledge is thinking. (Camerer, Loewenstein and Weber, Journal of Political Economy.) The cleanest demonstration came a year later. In a Stanford study, people tapped out the rhythm of a famous tune on a table while a listener tried to name it. The tappers predicted the listeners would guess right about half the time. The real figure was 2.5 per cent, three songs in a hundred and twenty. The tapper hears the whole tune in their head. The listener hears disconnected knocks. (Newton, 1990.)

That gap is exactly what happens when an experienced planner explains a programme to the people who will build it. In their head the sequence sings. To everyone else it is a wall of bars. The cure is to accept where the responsibility sits. The sender owns the clarity, not the receiver. (Heath and Heath, Made to Stick.)

Safety guidance says the same in harder language. The HSE treats every important message as something created, sent and received, with failure possible at any stage. It names making assumptions about what the receiver already knows as a primary cause of communication failure, and it requires a feedback loop: confirm that the information has been received and understood. (HSE Human Factors Briefing Note 8, Safety-Critical Communications.)

The rule. If someone has not understood, that is the talker's problem to fix, not the listener's.

Show, do not just tell

There is a solid body of evidence on how people actually take in information, and it points the same way every time: pair clear words with a clear picture, and cut everything that is not doing a job.

Two channels, not one. The mind processes words and images through separate but connected channels. Information carried in both is remembered better than information carried in one, because it leaves two routes back to it. (Paivio, dual coding theory, 1971.) Pictures, on their own, are also remembered better than the equivalent words. (Nelson, Reed and Walling, the picture superiority effect, 1976.)

How to show it. Decades of controlled studies on learning from words and pictures give a short, practical set of rules. People understand more from words and pictures together than from words alone. Put the label on the drawing, next to the thing it describes, not in a separate legend. Strip out anything that is decoration rather than information. And cue what matters with an arrow, a colour or a bold mark, so the eye goes to the right place. (Mayer, multimedia learning principles.)

Respect the size of working memory. People can only hold a few things in mind at once. A cluttered, text-heavy board overloads that small space and comprehension falls. Good visual design works by removing the avoidable load, fewer elements, clear grouping, one idea at a time, which leaves room for the actual content. (Sweller, cognitive load theory, 1988.) For step-by-step work, a diagram that shows the action, with an arrow for the movement, beats a picture of the finished state. (Tversky, Heiser and Agrawala.)

What not to believe. There is no good evidence that people are fixed visual, auditory or kinaesthetic learners, and matching a message to a supposed style does not improve understanding. (Pashler and colleagues, 2008.) Ignore the round numbers that drift around this subject too, that 90 per cent of information is visual, that the brain reads images thousands of times faster than text, or that we remember a tidy 10 or 80 per cent of what we read or see. None of them has a credible source. The honest case is simpler and stronger: a picture paired with a few clear words helps everyone.

The same plan, in **three different forms**

A director, a site manager and a bricklayer each need to see something different before they can act. The plan does not change. The form it is shown in does, every time.

Who you are talking to	What they need to see	The right form
Directors, clients and project managers	The shape of the whole job, the critical path, and where the risk and the money sit	A Gantt or milestone view
Site managers	What is coming, what must be ready, and what is on them now	A short look-ahead, two to six weeks, plus a written list
Trades and operatives	Where to be, what is in front of them, and what good looks like	Pictures, sequence sketches, marked-up drawings and logistics boards

The trades are where most communication breaks, because they are handed the manager's tool. A bricklayer will not read a Gantt or a list, and should not have to. Pictures, logistics boards and marked-up drawings are what reach them, and they have a second quiet advantage: they cut straight through language, which matters more than ever on a modern site.

The test. After you have communicated, ask one question. Can this person now picture what they have to do, and when? If they cannot, you have not communicated. You have talked.

A bar chart shows when. Trades need where.

A Gantt chart tells you when an activity happens. It does not tell a trade where to be, in which room, doing what, today. On site you are not managing activities so much as managing flows of work through space, and a bar chart struggles to show that. (Ecole de technologie superieure, Montreal.)

Put location back in. Location-based methods fix this. A line of balance, or flowline, draws each trade as a single line moving through the building, so a crew can see its own line, the crew ahead, and whether it is about to catch up and clash. Takt planning sets a steady beat and divides the work into zones, so the plan becomes a simple grid: this week you are in zone 3, next week zone 4. These show where, not just when, which is how a trade actually experiences the job. (Kenley and Seppanen, location-based management; Lean Construction Institute on takt.)

Build it on the wall. The most reliable way to get buy-in is to build the plan with the people who will deliver it, in the room, on the wall. In collaborative planning the team works backwards from a milestone with sticky notes, one colour per trade, so everyone can see the whole job and where their work sits in it. (Seppanen, Ballard and Pesonen, 2010.) The same idea scaled up is the Big Room, or obeya, a space set up around shared visual boards so decisions are made in front of everyone. (Lean Construction Institute.)

Let the building draw itself. Four-dimensional planning links the model to the programme, so the building assembles itself on screen, phase by phase. People watch the sequence rather than decoding bars, which makes clashes and out-of-sequence work obvious before they happen. (Designing Buildings.) At the sharp end, the tools that reach the trades are the simplest: a clear logistics drawing, a sequence sketch or 3D image, a look-ahead board, and a marked-up drawing. On one well-studied trial the crews barely touched the 3D model but actively used the marked-up drawings, which is worth remembering before you over-engineer the medium.

What it buys you. On a field trial of a visual, board-based planning system, the share of weekly tasks completed as planned rose from 33 per cent to 62 per cent as the visual control came in, and the supervisor reckoned he could roughly double the amount of work he could properly oversee. The trial was short, so treat it as a strong direction rather than a settled number. (Sacks and colleagues, 2013.)

Visuals are the one language **everyone** reads

A modern UK site is multilingual. Communicating the plan well is not complete until it reaches the workers who do not have English as a first language, and that is a large and growing part of the workforce.

Around 10 per cent of the UK construction workforce are non-UK nationals, rising to about 35 per cent in London, on the most recent official breakdown. (ONS, 2014 to 2016.) University of Reading research puts it higher still on London sites, characterising up to half of the on-site workforce as migrant, many speaking little or no English. They also tend to cluster in the most physically dangerous and least experienced roles.

The stakes are safety, not just productivity. The inability to communicate quickly by spoken word is one of the major barriers to managing health and safety on site, because people must react fast to verbal instruction in a hazardous, fast-moving place. (Bust, Gibb and Pink, Loughborough, 2008.) Internationally, workers without the local language are consistently over-represented in accidents and fatalities.

It is your job to be understood. The duty sits with the employer, and the law is explicit. You must provide comprehensible information. It does not have to be in writing, or even in English, as long as the instructions, the risks, the safety measures and the emergency procedures are clearly communicated to every worker. Checks should be carried out to confirm the information is understood. Health and safety law does not require a worker to speak English. (HSE, employing migrant workers.)

What actually works is visual, and most of it you are already reaching for to communicate the plan:

- ☐ **Pictorial method statements and visual work instructions.** Drawings and photographs in place of dense text. In a UK study, understanding from pictorial images was always higher, with some scores up by 20 per cent against an 85 per cent comprehension threshold. Images can be read differently across cultures, so test them, and use them to supplement other communication, not replace it. (Hare and colleagues, 2013.)
- ☐ **Standard safety pictograms.** ISO 7010 is a registered set of safety signs designed to carry their meaning with as few words as possible. A shared visual vocabulary builds familiarity across a mixed workforce.
- ☐ **Visual and multilingual toolbox talks.** Pair a spoken briefing with images and demonstration. HSE-recognised methods include a buddy system pairing a fluent speaker with a worker who shares their first language, an interpreter, and simple, clear English with supervisors trained to use it.
- ☐ **Translation tools, with their limits understood.** Apps help, but site terminology, slang and noise defeat them, and a machine cannot confirm understanding. Pair them with a demonstration and a check-back.
- ☐ **Visual logistics and sequence drawings.** A logistics plan, a phasing image or a marked-up drawing conveys where to be and what to do faster than any written instruction, and it cuts straight through language. This is the same tool that communicates the plan to the trades, doing double duty.

There is a neat proof of the principle. When a visual, board-based planning system was trialled on a large multinational site, its interface was run in four languages at once, because the workforce needed it. Build the plan to be seen, and you have built it for everyone.

THE CHECKLIST

Run your communication **against this**

Before the next planning meeting or briefing, run it against the marks below. Tick only what is honestly true. The empty boxes are where the misunderstanding is going to come from.

BEFORE YOU COMMUNICATE

Pitch it to the audience

- ☐ **You know who you are talking to.** You have decided whether this is for managers, site managers or trades, and you are not using one form for all three.
- ☐ **You have assumed nothing.** You are not relying on the audience already knowing what is in your head. The curse of knowledge is the default failure.
- ☐ **You chose the form before the meeting.** The medium is decided on purpose, not defaulted to whatever the planning software prints.

THE FORM

Right tool, right audience

- ☐ **Managers have the shape of the job.** A Gantt or milestone view showing the critical path and where the risk sits.
- ☐ **Site managers have a look-ahead and a list.** A two to six week make-ready view plus the written actions that are on them.
- ☐ **Trades have pictures.** Sequence sketches, 3D images, marked-up drawings and a logistics board, not a Gantt or a list.
- ☐ **The plan is visual and location-based.** Where the work happens is shown, not just when. Built on the wall with the trades wherever possible.
- ☐ **It is uncluttered.** One idea at a time, labels on the drawing, the unimportant stripped out.

ACROSS LANGUAGE

Reach the whole workforce

- ☐ **Information is comprehensible without fluent English.** Instructions, risks and emergency procedures land for every worker, by whatever means works.
- ☐ **Pictorial method statements and standard signs are used.** Visual work instructions and ISO 7010 pictograms carry the safety-critical content.
- ☐ **A buddy or interpreter is arranged where needed.** A fluent speaker who shares the worker's first language, or a professional interpreter.

CONFIRM

Close the loop

☐ **You checked, you did not assume.** You asked the person to play the plan back, rather than asking 'understood?' and taking a nod.

☐ **They can picture it.** They could say what they have to do, where, and when. If not, you go again.

SOURCES

Where this comes from

This guide is built on Andy Pritchard's own method and on current published evidence. The principal sources are listed so you can place the thinking and check it.

Constructing Culture, the Live Programme and Collaborative Planning Method (Andy Pritchard's own practice): communicate in the right form by any means possible, the talker's job not the listener's.

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This guide is given away in full by Constructing Culture Ltd. The method is Andy Pritchard's own, proven on his own projects, and the evidence is published and cited so you can weigh it for yourself. Where a figure comes from a single study or an industry survey, that is noted, because an honest guide names the strength of its own evidence.