

19. Stories

Introduction

A great deal has been written about stories in knowledge and learning strategies. **Storytelling** has numerous advantages over more traditional organisational communication techniques. First is that it enables articulation of emotional aspects as well as factual content, and thus allows expression of tacit knowledge that might otherwise be difficult to share. Secondly, in providing the broader context in which knowledge arises, storytelling can increase the potential for meaningful knowledge sharing. By grounding facts in a narrative structure, learning is more likely to take place, and being passed on. This guide aims to provide a set of pointers for using story telling in a workshop format, using the template developed by Sparknow Consulting (www.sparknow.net).

Potential applications of narratives are:

- Team or community-building exercises;
- Breaking down barriers between multidisciplinary or multi-cultural teams;
- Workshop warm-ups;
- Trip debriefs;
- Personal project reviews;
- Entertainment and fun;
- Monitoring systems (see Most Significant Change, Tool 4).

Detailed description of the process

This workshop format was developed by the innovative consultancy Sparknow, and has been used in a range of settings globally. The RAPID team has applied this in workshops in donor agency headquarters, in research study interviews, and with humanitarian aid workers returning from the field. The principle is that everyone can think of (positive/negative) changes of which they have been a part; this enables individuals, pairs and groups to learn about these in a structured fashion.

Table 6: Story template for use in workshop process

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Title of story• Name of original teller• Name of listener/understander• Landscape: <i>set the scene in time and space</i>• Dwelling place: <i>precise location where action occurred</i>• Characters: <i>cast list, descriptive attributes and roles in story</i>• Challenge: <i>problem or task that triggered the action</i>• Action: <i>sequence of events before, during and after your turning point</i>• Turning point: <i>the moment when the change happens</i>• Resolution: <i>ending, including moral, lesson learned or message</i>• Key visual hooks: <i>mnemonics to assist partner retelling the story</i> |
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- Introduce the workshop and theme for storytelling. This could be focused on a specific theme (e.g. change in organisational management techniques), or on a range of themes. The key is to provide a context in which participants think about and select the story they are going to share.
- Get participants to reflect on the change process, and details before, during and after.
- Ask participants to pair up and share their stories.
- Ask each participant to interview their partner, and write down the story, using the story template as a guide. This should enable more capture of detail.

- Ask the pairs to find another pair, and ask each participant in the new group of four to take turns telling their partner's story to the larger group.
- Ask the group to identify any common points or contradictions across the stories.
- Ask each group to present back to the whole group in plenary.

Key points/practical tips

This highlights key factors in using stories for change, whether social or institutional. The story:

- Needs to be simple and powerful;
- Should be in response to demand, and timed with specific opportunities;
- Should provide a solution to both immediate and broader problems;
- Should be targeted at people with the power to make decisions and change things;
- Should play to what is already in people's minds.

Example: Knowledge management at the World Bank

After almost 20 years at the World Bank, Steve Denning used a 10-minute story to trigger change. In his own words (www.destinationkm.com/articles/default.asp?ArticleID=541):

... we were drowning in information, managing it very inefficiently, and if we cleaned it up we would save a lot of money. But it occurred to me that we'd still not be a very relevant organization. The World Bank had been a lending organization most of its life, and we were facing private-sector banks that were lending much more than we were. At that time, people were asking themselves if we had a future at all. So I started to ask myself a different question: Suppose we were to share our knowledge? We had over 50 years' worth of know-how about what works in development and what doesn't. Inside the organization, if you knew who knew what stuff, you could have lunch with them and find out, but if you didn't know them you were in trouble. If you were outside, you didn't have a prayer. But if we were to make it easy for anyone in the world to find out what we know, we could become relevant and useful ...

In response to this situation, Denning told the following story:

In June 1995, a health worker in Kamana, Zambia, logged on to the Centers for Disease Control website and got the answer to a question on how to treat malaria. This story happened, not in June 2015, but in June 1995. This is not a rich country, it is Zambia, one of the least developed countries in the world. It is not even the capital of the country; it is six hundred kilometres away. But the most striking aspect of the picture is this: our organization isn't in it. Our organization doesn't have its know-how and expertise organized in such a way that someone like the health worker in Zambia can have access to it. But just imagine if it had! We could get ourselves organized so that professionals have access to the resources needed. Just in time and just enough.

Denning was named Programme Director and assigned the task of making the Bank a knowledge organisation. The programme caught the attention of the leadership of the Bank, and saw the Bank being re-branded 'the Knowledge Bank' in the 1996 inaugural speech of Bank President James Wolfensohn. This is an example of what Denning (2000) calls 'springboard stories'.

Sources and further reading

- Examples of storytelling in the development sector and further afield, see: www.sparknow.net.
- For more on storytelling techniques and the different possible reasons for using storytelling in organisations, see Steve Denning's website: www.stevedenning.com.
- For a look at how storytelling can be used for effective external communications, see Hovland, I. (2005) *Successful Communication: A Toolkit for Researchers and Civil Society Organisations*, ODI Working Paper 227, London: ODI.