

Share your story

Prof. Tom Davenport of Babson College wrote that "pretty much everyone interested in knowledge management knows that storytelling can be an effective knowledge-sharing technique, largely because it conveys context, causal relationships and emotional content more effectively than most other modes of communication."



Steve Denning introduced storytelling as a knowledge-management tool at the World Bank in the late 1990s. He explains that nothing else worked: "I showed them charts and they just looked dazed." Denning aspired to nothing less than organizational transformation, using story-centric KM to create a common knowledge framework that would drive bank decision-making.

Storytelling has existed for thousands of years as a means of exchanging information and generating understanding. Similarly, it has always existed in organizations – otherwise known as “the grapevine”.

Storytelling can be broadly defined as orally communicating ideas, beliefs, personal histories, and life-lessons. Storytelling is one of the most prevailing forms of communication and it possesses great potential as a teaching-learning tool. It is one of the best ways to make the leap from information to knowledge, and provides an effective way to capture and transfer tacit knowledge.

When used effectively, storytelling offers numerous advantages over more traditional communication techniques:

- Stories communicate ideas holistically, conveying a rich yet clear message, and so they are an excellent way of communicating complicated ideas and concepts in an easy-to-understand form. Stories therefore allow people to convey tacit knowledge that might otherwise be difficult to articulate; in addition, because stories are told with feeling, they can allow people to communicate more than they realize they know
- Storytelling provides the context in which knowledge arises as well as the knowledge itself, and hence can increase the likelihood of accurate and meaningful knowledge transfer
- Stories are an excellent vehicle for learning, as true learning requires interest, which abstract principles and impersonal procedures rarely provide
- Stories are memorable - their messages tend to “stick” and they get passed on
- Stories can provide a “living, breathing” example of how to do something and why it works rather than telling people what to do, hence people are more open to their lessons
- Stories therefore often lead to direct action - they can help to close the “knowing-doing gap” (the difference between knowing how to do something and actually doing it)

- Storytelling can help to make communication more “human” – not only do they use natural day-to-day language, but they also elicit an emotional response as well as thoughts and actions
- Stories can nurture a sense of community and help to build relationships
- People enjoy sharing stories – stories enliven and entertain.

Stories can be used for all manner of purposes. Different purposes will tend to require different kinds of stories. Below are some possible reasons for using storytelling:

- **Storytelling to ignite organizational change.** Experience has shown that storytelling can be highly effective as a change agent, even in change-resistant organisations. Telling an appropriate story can stimulate people to think actively about the implications of change and to projecting themselves into visions of the future, enabling them to better understand what it will be like to be doing things in a different way, rather than being given vague, abstract concepts about it
- **Storytelling for communications.** Storytelling is based on an interactive view of communication. Because the listener imaginatively recreates the story in his or her own mind, the story is not perceived as coming from outside, but rather as something that is part of the listener’s own identity. The idea becomes the listener’s own
- **Storytelling to capture tacit knowledge.** Tacit knowledge can be a multi-layered and multi-dimensional thing and as such it is often difficult to articulate. Stories can provide a way of allowing people to express and share tacit knowledge in rich and meaningful ways, rather than being forced to articulate it in more “structured” ways that can detract from its value
- **Storytelling to embody and transfer knowledge.** Similarly, a simple story can communicate a complex multi-dimensioned idea, not simply by transmitting information as a message, but by actively involving the listeners in co-creating that idea. Furthermore, as a story is told and retold, it changes, and so the knowledge embodied in it is constantly being developed and built upon
- **Use of stories for innovation.** The use of storytelling in innovation and knowledge creation can encourage people to move away from linear thinking towards a more multi-dimensional view, to see new connections between things, and also to marry scientific logic with a more creative or intuitive approach
- **Storytelling to build community.** There is something about stories that brings people together and fosters a sense of community. Storytelling is non-hierarchical, it unlocks feelings and emotions as well as thought processes, and hence it helps to build relationships and trust
- **Storytelling to enhance technology.** People often find it difficult to communicate about technology. Users can have trouble articulating their needs and expectations, while experts can have difficulty “talking in plain English”. Wherever there is a gap in language and understanding, storytelling can provide a bridge, by communicating the real essence of what each party is trying to get across
- **Storytelling for individual growth.** Storytelling is a skill, and one that draws on a number of other key skills, mostly relating to interpersonal communication. The development of these skills is an important component of most knowledge management programmes

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
- Monitoring systems (see Most Significant Change)

Detailed description of the process

The story template format below has been used in a range of settings globally.

- Title of story
- Name of original teller
- Name of listener/understander
- Landscape: set the scene in time and space
- Dwelling place: precise location where action occurred
- Characters: cast list, descriptive attributes and roles in story
- Challenge: problem or task that triggered the action
- Action: sequence of events before, during and after your turning point
- Turning point: the moment when the change happens
- Resolution: ending, including moral, lesson learned or message
- Key visual hooks: memory aids to assist partner retelling the story
- Vision for future

Resources

- Steve Denning: Story telling <http://www.stevedenning.com>

Contact:

Roxanna Samii
 Manager, web, knowledge and distribution services
 Information and communication division
 IFAD – Rome
 Tel: +390654592375
r.samii@ifad.org



Enabling poor rural people
to overcome poverty

Via del Serafico 107, 00142 Rome, Italy
 Tel.: +39 0654591, Fax: +39 065043463
 E-mail: ifad@ifad.org
www.ifad.org, www.ruralpovertyportal.org