

# Storytelling

## What is storytelling?

Storytelling is quite simply the use of stories in organizations as a communication tool to share knowledge. Traditionally, organizational communications have had a tendency to be somewhat dry and lacking in inspiration. Storytelling uses a range of techniques to engage, involve and inspire people, using language that is more authentic (everyday language as opposed to “textbook buzzword speak”) and a narrative form that people find interesting and fun.

Storytelling has of course existed for thousands of years as a means of exchanging information and generating understanding. However, as a deliberate tool for sharing knowledge within organizations it is quite recent but growing very rapidly, to the extent that it is becoming a favoured technique among an increasing number of management consultants.

## What are the benefits?

Simple stories can illuminate complex patterns and deeper truths – one should never underestimate the power of the particular. The process of telling your story – and seeing it touch other people – can be empowering. Being touched by the stories of others makes a difference to bonds of trust, as well as insights. In addition the weaving in of narrative elements into more traditional reports not only captures the reader’s attention but also sends a strong signal that many voices and perspectives are valued.

Storytelling experiences can create

- shifts in attitudes and behaviour;
- shared understanding about future ambitions and direction;
- a sense that the “whole person” (the heart and the mind) has been engaged at work;
- lasting personal connections that survive the immediate situation;
- re-usable processes and raw materials;
- story selection which identifies those stories that move beyond anecdotal and become small stories which illuminate bigger themes.

Beyond these more basic interventions, you might be facing more complex challenges, for example developing a policy or strategy, a country programme or undertaking an evaluation.

In this case it will be necessary to adopt a more sophisticated approach, combining methodologies or embedding narrative elements into your processes in more systematic or strategic ways.

Storytelling is not suitable for every situation. Methodologies should be selected by practitioners with due care to the wider working context and intention. Some methods need time to be accepted as part of the organizational culture; patience and management backing is asked for.

## What makes a “good” story?

Larry Prusak (see further resources) defines 4 attributes of a good story:

- **Endurance:** Good stories endure. They may change a little – or even a lot, but the key lessons remain the same. They also need to be succinct enough for people to remember.
- **Salience:** Good stories are relevant to their audience, they have a point, and they have emotional impact.
- **Sensemaking:** Good stories explain something, make sense of something. Perhaps they show you how to behave in a particular situation, how to resolve a problem, or why something happened the way it did. They have a prescriptive normative value: do x and y will occur.
- **Comfort level:** To be effective, stories must make sense within the context of the listener's experience – they need to ring true.

Steve Denning (see further resources) adds:

- **Fact versus fiction:** Storytelling can be counter-productive when the story told is not true. A story can be factually accurate while being authentically untrue and many corporate communications take this form, particularly those that are told more as a public relations exercise than as a means to promote genuine learning.
- **Oral versus written stories:** In the written word there is a distance between the speaker and the spoken, and so in an organizational context, it can lack some authenticity. Practitioners have found that oral storytelling has a greater impact than putting stories into booklets or videos or online. This doesn't mean that written stories can't achieve good effects, but that they work in different kinds of ways.
- **The “happy ending”:** Steve Denning (see “Resources and references” below) reports having had no success in telling a story along the lines of: “Let me tell you about an organization that didn't implement knowledge management and it went bankrupt.” In other words, focus on the positive.
- **The “hero”:** A story needs to be told from the perspective of a single protagonist, someone who everyone in the organization can instantly understand, empathise with, resonate with their dilemma, and understand what they were going through.
- **The “plot”:** A story needs to have a certain strangeness or incongruity – something that is remarkable and therefore grabs attention. (“That's remarkable that you could get an answer to a question like that in such a short time frame”). But it is nevertheless plausible (email exists, the web exists).
- **A beginning, a middle and an end:** A story needs to embody whatever it is you are seeking to get across as fully as possible. Don't leave loose ends.
- **Timing:** A story should be as recent as possible – older stories can work, but the fresher the better. “This happened last week” conveys a sense of urgency.

## Are there any other points I should be aware of?

- Storytelling is not a panacea – it doesn't always work. Storytelling can only be as good as the underlying idea being conveyed. If that idea is unsound, storytelling may well reveal its inadequacy.
- Even when the underlying idea is good, there are times when storytelling is inappropriate or ineffective. For example: routine situations in which nothing new, unexpected or different happened; or situations that require objectivity in reporting.

- Storytelling does not replace analytical thinking. It supplements it by helping to give it context and meaning. Abstract analysis is often easier to understand when seen through the lens of a well-chosen story.
- Try to avoid telling a story for the first time at a high-profile, high-risk occasion. Test the story in advance on a variety of similar audiences, so that you know exactly the effect that the story will have.
- When using the knowledge contained in the stories of others to support your own decisions, consider how you will balance that anecdotal knowledge with evidence-based knowledge: how will you assess and integrate the knowledge from stories?
- We are all storytellers and spend much of our lives telling stories whether we realise it or not. However we can all get better at storytelling, particularly at using stories to achieve specific effects. Understanding how and why storytelling works and learning what kinds of stories work in different situations, and what kinds of effects different kinds of stories have, can enable us to be more adept storytellers in an organizational context.

## How do I go about it?

If you are not the naturally born storyteller, there is a procedure to build your story.

### **Method for working in pairs**

1. Close your eyes for a moment and think of a moment in response to a particular question that may be set for you, or which you may set for yourself, e. g. the moment at which you felt proud to be part of a community, the moment at which you had to take a difficult decision, a moment when you were stuck in a project and did not know where to turn. Make prompt notes on a postcard, thinking: "what do other people need to know about my story?"
2. Find a partner and introduce yourselves.
3. Take it in turns to tell your story, describing the events before, during and after that moment of change. Do your best to transport your partner to that time and place by creating strong visual images linked in a clear sequence. Write nothing down.
4. Conducted as a conversation, the partner acts as scribe and interviewer, ask any question that helps you both achieve a deeper understanding. The partner digs deeper; probing for more detail around each part to ensure the story builds to a strong satisfying conclusion. Please note: Every story is about a change from one status quo to another. Be clear by the time you finish what the change implicit in each story is, or at least the change you most want to communicate.
5. End by naming the story and writing the names of the co-authors.
6. When the ingredients have been assembled in this way, spend time rehearsing the new teller, so that they can tell the story from the heart.
7. As the final test, the teller can give permission for their partner to tell their story to a broader group. This helps ensure that the story is memorable to someone else and that the essential meaning has been retained. Alternatively, the story facilitator could name the story and introduce the teller so that the partnership is maintained and acknowledged in a different way.

### **Variation for working as an individual**

An individual wanting to deepen recollection of a particular episode can use this way of doing. Try finding someone to tell your story to. Rehearsing a written story by telling it out loud often illuminates imperfections and helps you write more fluidly.

## Variations for working in larger groups

Pairs can share their stories, and then pairs join up to make a group of four and all four stories are told again. One of these four stories is then selected to work on in more detail, and the template is introduced at this point. Instructions from the facilitator can invite a “truthful” retelling, or invite people to feel free to develop a more fictional version of the story. Using this structure to create a group story around a flipchart for example – factual or fictional e. g. allegorical – can be an energising process, unleashing creativity and encouraging lively conversation. When introducing the chosen story back to the other groups, the teller should briefly recount the subjects of the other stories shared privately in the group. If capitalization of experience is important, you may wish to record the key points of the first four stories on postcards before choosing one story to work on in more detail with the template. If a story is sensitive you might construct “factional” stories. Combining facts with fictional embellishments creates “Faction”. It can be particularly useful when you are seeking to either write a story that carries group resonance (for example a “who we are” story, articulating organizational culture) or to communicate difficult truths to your audience, for example when communicating the detail of an experience where lessons were learned the hard way and hence certain details have to be modified to protect the identities of those concerned.

## Different story techniques

### A) Objects and displays – triggering memories and finding hidden histories

Objects and displays can create a very physical experience, a way for warm or surprising personal memories to be collected and passed on. When telling a story you can use objects to trigger memories of specific experiences. Objects – unlike printed words on a page – have the power to both evoke and contain stories, conveying symbolic qualities. As symbols for an idea or experience they are easy for the memory to recall and can make deeper conversation possible. As tangible things it is possible to make collections, exhibits and displays from them. Making patterns visible arouses people’s interest in the subject matter they relate to.

### B) Postcards – gathering a wide range of ideas and insights

A way of collecting and recording insights and condensed stories this method uses the common postcard as a metaphor, a way to keep connection between the picture evoked by the story and the messages addressed to others which come from it.

### C) Jumpstart stories – an interactive way to start an event and build connections

Providing a physical forum for fast exchange and selection this is a transformative way to begin any event or gathering. The process introduces each person to other participants in a meaningful way, establishing warm connections through a common experience.

### D) Half a story – looking forward from the present

Groups use an unfinished story to shape possible paths to the future, logging any risks and opportunities encountered along the way. This is a “light” way to respond to possibly difficult challenges.

### E) Future story – forming a common vision and planning collective action

Shifting the date and looking back from the future – talking about the future as if it has already happened – supports groups constrained by unproductive or “stuck” patterns and enables the

psychological shifts necessary for change and positive action. It can create a benchmark to look back on when the actual date arrives.

#### F) A story in a word – finding the meaning in words

Words from mission statements, charters, core project documents, can be used as a trigger for personal stories that illustrate those words in action. This creates a deepened shared understanding of the qualities of the words, and strengthens bonds.