



A LILA skinny by

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April, 2002

Sharing Knowledge Through Storytelling

Storytelling: What is it?

Storytelling is an ancient and traditional way of passing on complex, multi-dimensional information and ideas through narrative. Of course, stories have many purposes and styles; of particular interest here are 'knowledge-sharing stories'. Knowledge sharing stories convey in a holistic form, all the essential details of a critical or exemplary situation—both information and emotion, both the explicit and the tacit, both the core and the peripheral context. Well-designed, well-told stories can help others learn from past situations to respond more effectively in future situations. Such stories come in different forms and with a variety of labels e.g. cases, anecdotes, examples, histories or simply 'experiences'.

Why is it important?

In the past, information that could be classified, categorized, calculated and analyzed often was most highly valued in organizations. But much important organizational knowledge, wisdom and insight cannot be abstracted into categories and calculations. Organizations wanting to retain and share this essential but less structured information find that stories, anecdotes and narrative examples can be valuable.

For example,

- Stories can *convey organizational norms and values* across generations by emphasizing empowering or unique aspects of an organization's past and placing them in context for the future.
- Stories of complaint or commendation about people, management or the organization itself *reveal the competence, commitment and trustworthiness* of those parties. Offering revealing personal stories

can convey one’s own trustworthiness, as well as signal one’s trust in others.

- Practice-based stories about past work experiences can help *share the embedded and embodied, highly contextual knowledge* necessary to solve difficult real-world problems unaccounted for by formal organizational procedures.
- Rational, logical arguments rely on having a common frame of reference or mental model. Stories help us *unlearn and replace inadequate or outdated mental models* by appealing to us at an emotional or intuitive level instead.
- Stories that highlight unexpected occasions can *prompt emotional and immediate responses*; they expose our lack of control over our lives but also offer a way to understand and respond to our futures.

In recognizing the power of convincing stories, we should not, however, overlook their ‘dark side’; that these very same properties also allow stories to be used as tools of deception and manipulation. For example, stories can also be used to effectively perpetuate biased or dated perspectives, or to lull their listeners into comfort, apathy or resignation, rather than action.

How is it used? Story stories

Here are some stories offered by LILA members about the role of stories in their organizational experience. Both the members’ stories and the roles of stories in them illustrate how stories can be a vivid force in organizational life.



Sath Kanagarajah, of Sacre Cuore Center for Learning, shared a story that highlighted how stories about organizational roles can develop beyond the individuals behind those roles. “The occasion was a reorganization that dismantled the roles of Associate Presidents (AP) who were previously considered powerful ‘regional CEOs’ in their countries. A new, less powerful role was devised for these senior individuals, which brought them into contact with less senior technical colleagues. One AP having a problem with his electronic ‘search agent’ called IT support for help. The tech guy was initially hesitant to meet the AP who had developed a tough reputation but, in the end, the two had a great conversation. The tech guy learned that the AP wasn’t really as autocratic as others had made him out to be, although the AP had always acted aggressively because he felt he had to fulfill the ‘regional CEO’ stories; fulfill people’s expectations of that powerful role. We ultimately learned that even though these APs had lost some of their organizational power and prestige, they still had a big impact personally.”



Noting that time is often in short supply, **Kent Greenes, CKO of SAIC**, advised LILA members to seek out good stories that help one to impart

knowledge quickly. “In BP, one Japanese region wanted to build a new retail market, so we suggested they do a ‘peer-assist.’ In the peer-assist, peers came from all over the world to offer options to build gas stations better and faster before plans were finalized. The home team didn’t want to spend much time on it but we convinced the leader that the peer-assist should take two days. On the first day, the home team showed the peers their station sites and shared their plan and their challenges. When they asked for peers’ input, the quality and amount of input from the peers was very low. They all were thinking it was too mature a retail market for our typical new entry approach, plus there was a ‘gas war’ going on in that region—but nobody dared say so. That night after dinner we went to karaoke bars then to a Japanese bath...we all had to get naked, of course. The next morning, the amount of feedback, storytelling and sharing was phenomenally different from the day before. The peers honestly and openly shared their skepticism and their own tough experiences. I tell this story because you’ll remember it...getting naked in Japan, etc. It’s all about getting over interpersonal barriers so that you can share your knowledge truthfully.”

Kent Greenes also emphasized that knowledge sharing stories are not about what ‘we’ think is important, but what ‘I’ think is important. They contain what’s important to the person telling the story and that’s what makes them valuable. “At BP, you’d think we’d have refined shift handovers, but it wasn’t so. Handovers at one oil rig were correlated with plants shutting down, which wasn’t good at all. We asked the people with hands-on experience what they’d discovered about the handover process. After hearing several process technicians’ stories and sharing those across the organization, the operators modified their procedures in a way that fundamentally changed the way shift handovers were handled. In some cases the new procedure was more costly, but it radically reduced plant shutdowns so it was cheaper in the long run. Each technician’s story gave us a context to make sense out of each unique perspective of the handover process. Capturing an insight or experience that someone offers in a story can help you think about things differently—but listeners still need to use their own brains!”



Emily Rudin, CIO of Viant, tells of an experience involving two rival IS divisions, which showed how stories enable people to build the connections and trust necessary for sharing knowledge. “When I found everyone very uncommunicative and uninvolved during an off-site retreat, I requested anyone to tell us a story. Nothing. So I told one about how I went to China and adopted my little girl. After that, one man told a story about his pet rat escaping while on a plane to Paris and causing chaos. Then another man told of his skydiving activities. That amazed them. For two hours, people told stories that had nothing to do with work. They continued talking through the coffee break. They had finally made

connections through their storytelling. Now stories from this off-site experience have become embedded in the culture of the IS organization and unify the divisions.”

Using stories effectively

Sharing knowledge effectively through stories requires attention to the design of the story (*story-crafting*), the delivery of the story (*story-telling*), and the response of the audience (*story-listening*).

Story-crafting

Effective knowledge-sharing stories are intentionally crafted for the prospective audience. A good knowledge sharing story should be both simple and accessible, offering a “**streamlined, surrogate experience.**” Like fables and anecdotes, the story is stripped of excessive detail and designed to make specific points. **Rudy Ruggles of Cap Gemini E&Y** describes knowledge-sharing stories as “idea-wrapping”; the story should ‘wrap’ key ideas selected from an individual’s total experience.

The intended audience should determine the appropriate level of detail and technicality. Simplicity makes a story easy to remember and easy to introduce in different circumstances. For the best impact, the story situation also should be accessible and relevant, addressing an issue close to the listener’s own reality. It should be possible, even probable, that the listener *could* experience a similar situation.

Good knowledge sharing stories are also **open-ended rather than closed**. Closed stories signal the finality of the knowledge or insight. Open stories signal “you *could* look at it this way” but don’t exclude alternative interpretations. Sometimes this is accomplished by incorporating multiple “voices” or perspectives in the story. Open-endedness encourages listeners to reflect on and apply the lessons or insights of the story in their own context.

Story-telling

The impact of a story will depend on its telling – who tells the story and whether it is shared in an oral or written form. But storytelling also must account for the size and heterogeneity of the potential audience.

First person stories often are experienced by audiences as more passionate and more authentic. However, made-up stories are easily recognized as inauthentic. Rather than claim a false experience, tell the story in second person but focus it on a single clear protagonist.

Stories that are **written down** can reach a larger audience but they suffer problems in their disconnection from the teller, linearity of the telling, and their petrification in time. Written stories should be regularly revisited and

updated or rephrased to reconnect them with the language and issues of the present.

The **use of more than one medium** can be valuable in helping a story to stay vivid and reach a larger audience. The incorporation of video clips of stories being told can capture many unspoken nuances, making the speakers' knowledge more real to the listeners.

Story-listening

It is critical for storytellers to **monitor the reception** of their stories. The audience is engaged in creating knowledge while listening, so storytellers and leaders should gauge how this knowledge is being constructed. However, **Rudy Ruggles** warns against believing we can 'manage' stories in organizations, especially if they are sufficiently open-ended for people to learn from them. He points to urban legends, such as the Nieman Marcus cookie recipe story, showing how stories get adapted through their telling. But by tracking how a story is passed on person-to-person in the organization, one can back up positive responses and respond to unforeseen negative ones. Responses to stories can also reveal clues about the audience's capacity to learn from the story. Such insight should inform the design and content of future stories.

When to use stories?

The value of stories for conveying knowledge rests in their flexibility, handiness and portability. However, their use must suit the knowledge sharing context. Situations where stories can be particularly effective include those involving *building trust, socializing new members, and conveying simple but potent ideas to many people.*

Alternative knowledge sharing techniques—e.g. mentoring, simulation, modeling behavior, or reference to codified resources—can be more effective than storytelling in some other knowledge-sharing situations. For example, reference to codified resources is appropriate *when rule-based knowledge needs to be clearly communicated* to bound behavior (e.g. sexual harassment laws, tax codes, etc.), or when participants must *coordinate their actions in a crisis or urgent situation* (e.g. cockpit team trying to emergency land, an emergency room medical team.) Modeling behavior and the use of symbolic objects (e.g. logos, signs) can be more useful knowledge sharing modes for *sustaining an idea, an attitude or reminding people about a particular desired behavior* already established in an organization.

For more on this topic click on the following resources on the LILA website:

[“Storytelling in Organizations”](#) a brief by Deborah Sole and Daniel Wilson.

[“Storytelling: Framing the Topic”](#) David Perkin's introductory slide presentation.