

# Storytelling in Organizations: The power and traps of using stories to share knowledge in organizations

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*Sharing experiences through stories is emerging in various professions as a powerful way to exchange and consolidate knowledge. Research suggests that sharing experiences through narrative builds trust, cultivates norms, transfers tacit knowledge, facilitates unlearning, and generates emotional connections. This brief aims to look closely at the power of storytelling and compare it to other ways knowledge can be exchanged in organizations. This brief argues that successful use of stories hinges on choosing the appropriate story-moments and being clear on the knowledge sharing goals. In conclusion, the authors share suggestions from the literature on how to best design, tell and listen to stories in knowledge-sharing situations in organizations.*

## **Introduction**

Over coffee, Janet explains to her colleague how she saw their disagreement in yesterday's meeting. In the boardroom, a CEO shares a vision of what the organization will look like in the future. In the elevator, a manager tells a funny anecdote to a group of friends about how he handled a difficult client. Each of these scenes reveals the prevalence of stories in our lives. We all continuously create and share stories of what happened, why, and what might happen next replete with a cast of characters, multiple plots and drama (Bruner, 1992; Weick, 1979). Individually and collectively, stories help us make sense of our past and understand possible futures.

Storytelling is traditional and even ancient means of passing on wisdom and culture. Yet in organizations – particularly business organizations – what is most explicitly valued are harder forms of knowledge that can be classified, categorized, calculated and analyzed. In recent years, however, there has been increasing attention by organizations and their leaders to the role and value of narrative and anecdotal information conveyed in the form of stories. This renewed interest in an ancient genre of communication is perhaps a result of the realization of the importance of knowledge in organizations and the recognition that knowledge cannot be completely abstracted into categorical and analytical forms and is inadequately conveyed in such forms. Instead, organizations seek communicative forms that synthesize rather than analyze. Stories are such a communicative form.

In recent meetings, LILA members have echoed this sentiment. Last July Mike Thalacker shared how Johnson&Johnson is creating an online database full of employee stories. In September SAIC's Peter Engstrom described their approach to capturing knowledge through gathering stories. In these meetings, LILA members raised questions

such as, “How are stories best used to create collective vision? How do stories build and/or renew trust? How are stories best used to transfer prized tacit knowledge?”

With this background in mind, this brief will explore the power of storytelling in organizations, focusing in particular on how storytelling can be a mechanism for sharing knowledge within organizations. The brief first reviews some of the theoretical and empirical benefits of storytelling in organizational contexts. Subsequently, it provides a brief definition of the kind of story that is suitable for our purpose of sharing knowledge. Next, it presents an analysis comparing and contrasting storytelling with other knowledge sharing strategies. Finally, it summarizes some suggestions regarding what makes a good story and suggests when and how the use of stories may be valuable.

### ***The Power of Stories***

Most of us are familiar with the story of copier repair technicians –“tech reps”—at Xerox, whose activities challenged the conventional wisdom of the Industrial Age:

It begins in the 1980s. Looking for ways to boost the productivity of the Xerox field service staff, Xerox launched a study of their work before deciding how to proceed. An anthropologist traveled with a group of tech reps to observe how they actually did their jobs -- not how they described what they did, or what their managers assumed they did. The anthropologist saw that tech reps often made it a point to spend time not with customers but with each other. They'd gather in common areas, like the local parts warehouse, hang around the coffee pot, and swap stories from the field. Whereas a “reengineer” would see this behavior as unproductive and to be eliminated, the anthropologist saw the exact opposite. The tech reps weren't slacking off; they were doing some of their most valuable work. Field service, it turns out, is a social activity involving a community of professionals. The tech reps weren't just repairing machines; they were also coproducing insights about how to repair machines better. This discovery triggered a revolutionary change in how Xerox organized and managed the tech reps – no longer as independent workers but as a social learning unit. (Brown & Gray, 1995)

This story sparked startling new insights into the social nature of work and knowledge. Interestingly, through its telling and retelling to other companies, this story has prompted something of a revolution in management principles more suitable for the Knowledge Era.

Those of us with even a passing interest in sports have probably heard the story of the New England Patriots' long road to becoming Super Bowl champions.

No team in the National Football League has as zany a history of miscreants and missteps as the Patriots, but that February Sunday in the Superdome every ghost was exorcised from their star-crossed history. With one fiery night of passion and victory, the Patriots *rewrote their story* . . . In one of the most exciting Super Bowl finishes ever, the kicker booted home a 48-yard field goal with no time left on the clock to give his team of “no-name warriors” a 20-17 Super Bowl win. . . Those in the know acknowledge that this Patriots team is far from the greatest collection of stars ever to play on one of Boston's local teams. They're not even the most individually talented Patriots team. But this team was described as the epitome of T-E-A-M, as the world saw when, as had been their season-long custom, they eschewed individual introductions at the Super Bowl and entered the field as a 45-man unit. They lived out every bromide imaginable, from building championships with the off-season work, to paying close attention to what the coaches had to say, to putting aside personal goals and aspirations in complete subjugation to the good of the whole. (excerpts from selected *Boston Globe* articles, 01/04/02)

Throughout the New England Patriots' improbable season, the one advantage the players stressed again and again was their sense of team, and the willingness of the bigger names

to put their egos aside for the good of the whole. Thus although the Patriots dominated no team or individual statistical categories, their story has provided every high school and college coach in the country with a new blueprint for team success, which goes against the current mainstream focus on individual star players.

Cases like these illustrate why storytelling is so effective in a variety of domains. Stories can be a very powerful way to represent and convey complex, multi-dimensional ideas. Well-designed, well-told stories can convey both information and emotion, both the explicit and the tacit, both the core and the context (Snowden, 2000).

A quick read of journals highlights the role of storytelling in individual and group change initiatives, therapeutic interventions, and training and development in fields such as nursing, business, education, and psychology. Storytelling has been used in these domains to communicate embedded knowledge, resolve conflicts, and simulate problem solving. Research conducted to date has explored the role of storytelling in problem-solving and action research (Mitroff & Kilmann, 1975), organizational renewal (McWhinney & Battista, 1988), socialization of new employees (Louis, 1980, 1983; Brown, 1982), collective centering (McWhinney & Battista, 1988; Boyce, 1996), sense-making (Boje, 1991, 1995), learning (Helmer, 1989), and innovation and new product development (Buckler and Zien, 1996).

In organizations, in particular, storytelling has been identified as a means to:

**Share norms and values:** Prusak (in Denning, 2001) argues that stories powerfully convey norms and values across generations within the organization. These norms and values derive from the organization's past but also can describe its future.

Buckler and Zien (1996) argue that a key leadership role is to offer a compelling context and robust vision and that this can be accomplished through stories that emphasize the more empowering aspects of an organization's past and place them in context for the future, thus facilitating the identification of future opportunities. In her study of nurses' stories, Brown notes that organizational members express understanding and commitment to the organization in their use of stories and suggests, furthermore, that the extent of a member's familiarity with the dominant story of the organization might indicate the member's level of adaptation to organizational norms and values (Brown, 1982).

**Develop trust and commitment:** Stories can communicate the competencies and commitments of oneself and others. Revealing personal stories can expose one's own competence and commitment to issues, as well as signal one's trust in and willingness to be vulnerable to others. Boston's "Public Conversations" project uses story-sharing methods to build trust and understanding between divided groups such as the Pro-life and Pro-choice leaders (Chasin et al, 1996). At work, stories of commendation or complaint about other people communicate their reliability and trustworthiness to others. Similarly, stories about the organization and management can convey information about the organization's trustworthiness vis-à-vis its employees, which can reinforce or undermine employee commitment. Wilkins (1984) note that generating commitment is a key function of organizational stories and legends.

**Share tacit knowledge:** Stories enable a more efficient exchange of the embedded and embodied, highly contextual knowledge that can help to solve difficult problems

quickly. The Institute for Knowledge Management (1999) describes a story as “*a tiny fuse that detonates tacit understanding in the mind of the listener.*” Often the canonical wisdom and knowledge of the organization, which is built into formal processes, is insufficient to meet the needs of problems that arise in the real world. In such circumstances, the tacit, experience-based knowledge built on practice comes to the fore instead – as in the tale of Xerox’ “tech-reps”. Stories about the work convey such tacit knowledge in a more manageable and absorbable fashion.

**Facilitate unlearning :** Seely Brown (in Denning, 2001) argues that accelerating environmental transformation requires organizations not just to learn but also to unlearn, to rethink how and even why they undertake certain activities.

Acknowledging that there is a tacit, taken-for-granted dimension to everything we know highlights why unlearning is so difficult: we need to unlearn practices and mental frames that we don’t even realize we rely on but which shape our whole perspective. Rational arguments are thus insufficient to accomplish change; an emotional or intuitive element is also needed to convince us at our level of tacit understanding. Stories can be effective in achieving this.

**Generate Emotional Connection:** Denning (2002) notes that stories have the inherent capacity to engage our emotions because they are about the irregularities in our lives, about things and situations that catch our attention by being different from what is expected. Stories of the unexpected prompt emotional responses because they suggest the potential threat of not being in control of our lives, but simultaneously offer a way of understanding and responding to our futures. This emotional response makes knowledge “sticky” (Szulanski, 1996; Damasio, 2000), meaning that it can be easier to retrieve in future situations. For example, hearing the story the New England Patriots unlikely Superbowl championship through teamwork will stick in the hearts and minds of young athletes for years to come when they are the underdogs.

As can be seen from the above, stories are particularly relevant for communicating complex knowledge within organizations – which may include awareness of values and norms, or details of workable solutions to complicated problems. In the rest of this brief we’ll focus on stories aimed at sharing complex knowledge.

### ***The Essence of a Knowledge-Sharing Story***

In organizational contexts, ‘knowledge’ is frequently defined as ‘the capacity for effective action’ (E.g. Nonaka 1994; Senge 1997; Spender 1996). Thus, knowledge *per se* is not directly of interest to organizations; it is primarily in its application that knowledge becomes valuable to organizations. This section considers the nature of stories designed to share or convey knowledge, recognizing that the ultimate purpose of knowledge sharing in organizations is to promote and disseminate ‘effective action’ – either in the performance of specific tasks or in general behavior.

Clearly all stories are narratives, yet not all narratives are good knowledge-sharing stories. For example, most movies tell stories that are designed primarily to entertain and which are only secondarily intended, if at all, to share-knowledge, inform others and/or prompt a change in behavior.

The essence of a knowledge-sharing story is twofold. First, it offers a **streamlined experience**. Good knowledge-sharing stories are elegantly simple. They are designed to make specific points by avoiding peripheral information that distract from the central idea. Like fables and anecdotes, they are stripped of excessive detail. In their simplicity, they can be verbally/ orally mediated. They are “tellable”, portable, highly “tuck-in-able” into everyday functions and activities. It’s easy to tuck in an anecdote about teamwork in a conversation, but difficult to tuck in *War and Peace*.

Second, a knowledge-sharing story offers a **surrogate experience**. When one reads a novel, one often feels as if one is living the experience described in the novel. So too when a story is recounted, the narrative form offers the listener an opportunity to experience in a surrogate fashion the situation that was experienced by the storyteller. The listener can acquire understanding of the situation’s key concepts and their relationships in the same progressive or cumulative manner that the storyteller acquired that understanding. A key point of the surrogacy notion is that even though the listener *did not* directly experience the story situation, it must be possible, even probable, that the listener *could* experience a similar situation. If the situation detailed in a story is too far from the listener’s own reality, or is seen as improbable and unlikely to occur in the listener’s world, then it loses its relevance and its impact.

In summary, good knowledge-sharing stories get their effect from their streamlined and surrogate nature.

### ***The Traps of Knowledge-Sharing Stories***

Despite their power, stories can fall short in achieving their intended objectives (i.e. sharing knowledge so as to improve the performance or change the behavior of others in the organization.) Stories may be inadequate or inappropriate for reasons of form and/or delivery. Some “story traps” include the following:

**Seductiveness:** Stories can be so compelling, so seductive and vivid – either as a result of their rich detail or their eloquent presentation – that the listeners can get absorbed into the “truth” of the story and can have difficulty critically evaluating it as a template for their own experiences. When this happens, the listeners can be distracted from the real purpose of the telling, which is to prompt them to seek analogies and applications in their own work and domains of influence.

**Single point of view:** One of the limitations of stories is that they are told from the perspective of one individual. This single point of view may be less directly relevant to the activities and concerns of many other individuals, and thus loses its power to connect with them. Story researchers have worked on techniques of designing stories that deliberately incorporate multiple perspectives (Cohen and Tyson, 2002). For example, a Roth and Kleiner “learning history” weaves together direct quotations from multiple organizational players in its analysis of an historic organizational situation, which is intended to speak meaningfully to the broad organization (Roth & Kleiner, 1995; Kleiner & Roth, 1997). The popularity of *Tamara* – a play in which dozens of characters simultaneously unfold their stories not on a single stage but in real time as small groups of audience members follow characters from room to room,

floor to floor – attempts to break the single perspectiveness of storytelling (Boje, 1995).

**Static-ness:** The impact of a story is likely to vary depending on its delivery – who is the teller and whether it is shared in an oral or written form. Ruggles (2002) notes that when stories are written down, they suffer many of the same problems that all explicit representations of knowledge face: disconnection from the teller, fixed linearity in the telling, and a certain degree of “petrification” that is required of any snapshot. Such stories are also captured at a given point in time with an audience of that time in mind. In a changing environment, such stories might eventually become distanced from the realities and concerns of the current specific audience. To avoid this shortfall, written versions probably need to be regularly revisited and updated or rephrased to reconnect them with the language and issues of the present. In this regard, Ruggles observes that Harvard Business School has a long tradition of teaching complicated topics using stories, in the form of cases. Many of these cases are used year after year, with appropriate modifications in their discussion and interpretation, but with their core lessons remaining constant (Ruggles, 2002).

### *How Stories Stack Up*

Although stories have been identified as a mechanism for conveying knowledge in organizations, there are also a number of other strategies or modes, which can accomplish similar outcomes. A partial list of other knowledge sharing modes that are broadly used in organizations is:

**Storytelling:** Sharing of knowledge and experiences through narrative and anecdotes in order to communicate lessons, complex ideas, concepts, and causal connections.

**Modeling:** Sharing of knowledge and experience through exposure to both the conscious and unconscious behavior of others, particularly ‘experts’. Examples of modeling include mentoring, apprenticeship, symbolic conduct, and specific demonstrations and opportunities for observation.

**Simulations:** Sharing of knowledge and experience through experiential situations that recreate the complexities of action. Examples of simulations include case studies, role playing, and technology-supported simulations.

**Codified Resources:** Sharing of knowledge through reference to formal, systematic and structured sources. Examples include manuals, SOPs, instructions, textbooks, memos, or data bases in which knowledge has been formally codified.

**Symbolic Objects:** Sharing of knowledge through access and exposure to images, diagrams or objects, which represent or illustrate the underlying knowledge or idea. Examples include a map of a city, the peace sign, logos, or a prototype car.

Typical knowledge sharing situations often involve a combination of these modes. For example, a training session for new employees might call for a veteran to share his experiences (modeling), include some role-playing (simulations), and ask the new hires to consult a handbook of regulations (codified resources). Students’ training and preparation for surgical practice entails formal study from textbooks (codified resources),

discussion and evaluation of past cases, practice on cadavers (simulation), and observation of experienced surgeons (modeling).

DuPont, an industrial company renowned for its on-and-off-the-job safety record, despite operating in a notoriously dangerous industry (chemicals manufacture), uses all these modes to convey to new and existing employees the company norms and values regarding safe working practices. Employees receive instructions for Safe Operating Procedures in their work activities (codified resources). They are prompted to appropriate behavior by prominent signs indicating ‘Hard hat area’ or ‘Safety glasses required’ (symbolic objects), or by seeing their supervisors wearing the appropriate safety gear (modeling). Local workgroups have regular “safety meetings” when they review different aspects of their work and intentionally explore better, safer ways to operate (simulation). When accidents do happen, these are analyzed, documented, and circulated to the whole company, in a narrative describing the accident, the painful outcome, the safe practice violated, and the recommended response for similar situations (storytelling).

Despite the possibility and value of using different knowledge sharing modes in conjunction, each of these knowledge sharing modes may be more or less effective when particular goals are in mind. The chart below synthesizes a comparison of how stories ‘stack up’ against other modes of knowledge sharing when these modes are invoked separately and independently, and assuming similar contexts and amounts of effort.

Typical Knowledge Sharing Goals	Partial List of Knowledge Sharing Modes				
	Storytelling	Modeling	Simulation	Codified Resources	Symbolic Objects
Conveying norms and values	****	****	**	*	*
Building trust and commitment	****	****	***	*	*
Sharing tacit knowledge	**	****	***	*	*
Facilitating unlearning and change	***	****	****	*	*
Generating emotional connection	***	****	****	**	***
Communicating rules, laws, and policies	*	*	*	****	**
others . . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .

\*\*\*\* = excellently suited    \*\*\* = works well    \*\* = works, but limited    \* = poorly suited

The chart suggests, for example, that if a leader wishes to foster a norm of creative risk-taking, strategies that involve storytelling and modeling are likely to be excellent choices while creating a stand alone document or a logo are likely to yield less success. In the field of investment banking where creative risk-taking is valued, stories about “star” investment bankers or analysts abound. Michael Lewis wrote a successful book, *Liar’s Poker*, recounting stories of the highflyers of Wall Street in the late 1980s, while HBS professor Herminia Ibarra found that junior investment bankers, in their efforts to develop a successful professional image, substantially model their behavior on that of successful senior partners (Ibarra, 1999). And then there is the story of Nick Leeson bringing down Barings Bank in the 1990s by taking risks that were a little too creative.

The chart also illuminates some powerful strategies that LILA members have shared in previous gatherings. This past December, Chris Newell of Viant talked about the “life after launch” approach in which developers and group leaders had a chance to collectively air their feelings, tell stories and regenerate commitment after arduous software launches. The success of this approach illustrates how storytelling and modeling can work extremely well to build and rebuild trust and commitment.

The chart also reveals potential limitations of storytelling when compared to other approaches. Though proponents of storytelling laud its potential in areas such as communicating tacit knowledge and facilitating unlearning, modeling and simulation may be more effective strategies, depending on the depth of knowledge at stake and the breadth of the audience. It appears that storytelling may be highly effective for getting simple tacit ideas across to a wide audience quickly. However, in circumstances where the development of deep, skills-based knowledge by relatively few people is the objective, then modeling and simulation can be more appropriate. For example, a jazz musician learns more by observing and practicing ‘at the feet’ of a master than from all the stories about that master musician. A pilot becomes skilled at flying an Airbus A320 by spending time in the flight simulator rather than by hearing stories about how the fly-by-wire technology responds in different situations. Although a new surgeon no doubt absorbs the stories of others’ successes and mistakes, s/he nevertheless becomes skilled by spending many internship hours working closely with experienced colleagues.

An interesting side note in the research suggests that modeling is often the ‘trump card’ for knowledge sharing. One can tell stories about honesty, write policies about it and devise logos that symbolize it, but if leadership is caught lying it “trumps” or negates the impact of all these other knowledge-sharing modes (Martin and Powers, 1983). The effectiveness of modeling perhaps also explains the current interest in communities of practice (discussed in the September 2001 LILA event). Communities of practice present an organizational configuration in which, in addition to offering opportunities for learning through storytelling and sharing a “repertoire of resources” (Wenger, 1998) such as symbols and objects, ‘oldtimer’ expertise is both made visible and is valued for modeling appropriate behavior and skills for newcomers.

### ***Selecting Story-moments***

The previous section showed that other strategies can achieve knowledge sharing goals better than stories. However one of the advantages of stories is their sheer flexibility and handiness. In the flow of work it’s much easier to tell a story than to engage in a process

of mentoring, analyzing case studies, or modeling behavior, all of which take time. Some moments lend themselves more naturally to stories and better leverage their knowledge-sharing potential. A scan of the literature suggest that stories may be particularly useful in the following sorts of contexts:

***Kickstarting a new idea.*** When starting a new project, attitude or behavior – such as product launching, crafting a new vision for a group, or creating a new business unit – stories are compact ways to get things rolling (McWinney and Battista, 1988). The surrogate experience of a story can quickly share the history of initiative, its ethos, and its direction. In moments like these stories are sleek and high leverage ways of reaching a large audience.

***Socializing new members.*** When new members enter into a group or culture, stories are effective ways of communicating guiding values and principles (Miller et al, 1997; Louis, 1980). A leader might tell a story of the founder to new hires to set a tone of innovation. Or a coach might tell about share a story about last year’s successful players to foster a sense of dedication and hard work. Or nurses might tell new nurses stories of what works and doesn’t work with particular patients and doctors (Brown, 1982). Stories are a handy way to share culture and norms in moments with new group members.

***Mending relationships.*** Imagine gathering a group of staunch advocates from the pro-life movement and pro-choice movement together in a room to better understand each other’s perspectives. Sound like a recipe for disaster? For six years a Boston-based project called “Critical Conversations” did exactly that and demonstrated how the telling and listening to stories are powerful in moments of mending relationships (Chasin et al, 1996.) Situations that call for the reparation of loyalty, trust, or commitment are highly suited for stories (Luwisch, 2001). In fact, research in a branch of psychiatry called “narrative therapy” demonstrates how the telling and listening to our individual stories, as well as the stories of others, can repair trust and commitments (White, 1995).

***Sharing Wisdom.*** Peter Engstrom shared some insightful knowledge in a recent LILA meeting:

“In 1969 I was crawling in the mud in Indo-China and people were personally shooting at me. A young marine comes up next to me and asks, ‘Sir, do you want to stay alive.’ I nodded and he said, ‘I am telling you two things. First, stick your head up and look around. If you don’t know from which way they’re shooting at you, then you don’t know which way to run. Second, there are a million things happening out here, but you got to screw down your focus on something you can deal with. Start with something small, then gradually broaden your focus.” And those two rules have stuck with me for all of my life.”

Peter’s story communicated his wisdom in a way that continues to remain vivid to all of us who were there. Moments in which best practices, know-how, and insights are exchanged, streamlined stories are high leverage strategies to make knowledge memorable.

On the other side of the coin, some moments are clearly not suited for stories. Moments when rule-based knowledge needs to be clearly communicated to bound behavior are poor situations for storytelling (e.g. sexual harassment laws, tax codes, etc.) Moments when a group comes together to respond to a crisis and/or achieve a short term goal under

pressure are also ill suited for storytelling as a knowledge sharing strategy (e.g. cockpit team trying to emergency land, an emergency room medical team.) Modeling and symbolic objects may be more useful knowledge sharing modes for *sustaining* an idea, an attitude or a particular desired behavior already established in an organization.

Of course, finding the right story-moment does not ensure success. We might all recall a kickstarting, socializing, mending or wisdom sharing moment in which a story flopped. Perhaps it didn't speak to its audience or wasn't streamlined. In the final section of this brief we will recap some of the major tips from the literature for how to best create, tell and listen to stories.

### ***Leadership Tips with Stories***

We assume that LILA members have a variety of lessons and tips about how they use knowledge-sharing stories in their organizations. So what follows is not a closed list, but rather a partial sketch of what authors in the literature suggest that leaders keep in mind when using stories in their organization to share and generate knowledge.

When designing and telling stories, *be clear on why you're sharing* them – what are the knowledge-sharing aims? Before you tell it, carefully analyze it. Check that the story's subtext is the sort of message you want to perpetuate in your organization (Snowden, 2000). As you tell it, *keep it simple and accessible*. Remember that effective knowledge-sharing stories are streamlined and provide a compelling surrogate experience for the audience.

When telling stories, *try using more than one medium* if possible, and in the process, ensure that the story remain effective – i.e. that it stays vivid and continues to inspire others (Taylor and Novelli, 1991). Another tip is for leaders to *monitor how a story is received*. Stories are moments in which the listener is engaged in creating knowledge. So it's wise to check and gauge how this knowledge is being constructed. And, if it becomes an organizational story, it's important to track how it is passed on person-to-person in the organization. In this way, you can back up positive responses and respond to unforeseen negative ones (Taylor & Novelli 1991).

A final tip for leaders is to *hone their story-listening skills*. Though pressures abound, stories from organizational colleagues give deep clues about tacit fears and undiscussable assumptions (Argyris, 1978). Listening 'below the surface' of the complaints, challenges, successes and general anecdotes of others can reveal guiding principles and vital clues to leadership about employee attitudes and feelings. Sharpening ones story-listening skills can translate into a more accurate map of the collective understandings and commitments of organizational players.

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