

# USING STORYTELLING IN ORGANISATIONS

## Compiled by David England

This Factsheet has been produced to address questions that are being asked by a variety of people.

### WHAT CAN A STORYTELLING DO FOR AN ORGANISATION?

Stories can be used for all manner of purposes in an organisation. Different purposes will tend to require different kinds of stories. Steve Denning (details in website list at end) outlines 8 possible purposes for using storytelling in organisations:

- Storytelling to ignite organisational change
- Storytelling for communications
- Storytelling to capture tacit knowledge
- Storytelling to embody and transfer knowledge
- Use of stories for innovation
- Storytelling to build community
- Storytelling to enhance technology
- Storytelling for individual growth

Similarly, Larry Todd Wilson and colleague identify four types of 'triggers' that indicate situations in which storytelling could be particularly beneficial:

- New or unexpected situations
- Situations that require feelings as well as thoughts
- Complex situations
- Situations in which you need to help people understand 'why'

#### **PURPOSES**

***Storytelling to ignite organisational 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** – In contrast to the conventional approach which views communications as the sending of a message from a communicator to a recipient, storytelling is based on a more 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 (for example, have you ever tried to explain to someone who can't swim how to swim, without actually showing them?). 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-dimensional 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.

## **TRIGGERS**

**New or unexpected situations** – Are you working in an unfamiliar situation and could benefit from the stories and lessons learned of others who have already 'been there'? Do you need to communicate the latest news on an issue? Have you discovered a better way of doing something? Or experienced an unexpected outcome to something you did as per usual?

***Situations that require feelings as well as thoughts*** – Do you need to facilitate acceptance of a new person into a group and also show them ‘how things are done around here’? Do you need to remove barriers to action and motivate people? Do you need to persuade someone of something?

***Complex situations*** – Are you dealing with a situation that involves many aspects or variables? Do you need to help others to bridge a gap between theory and practice?

***Situations in which you need to help people understand ‘why’*** – Do you need to capture lessons learned, and to help people understand why something did or didn’t work out as planned?

## WHAT IS A STORYTELLER?

- \* A storyteller is an artist, an entertainer and an educator. Storytelling is one of the most ancient art forms, stretching back for as long as humans have had speech.
- \* A storyteller uses words to take you on a journey of the imagination. Each person will hear something different as the story is created in the space between the teller and the listener.
- \* Storytellers may tell traditional folk tales, written tales, anecdotes, urban myths, stories from history, religious or moral tales, stories they have created themselves or which have been created for a specific event.  
Some storytellers will create a story spontaneously to suit the audience.
- \* A storyteller tells stories from memory rather than reading them from the book, memorising stories image by image not word for word.
- \* Storytellers may tell a story differently each time they tell it, interacting with their audience, choosing stories and images to communicate with them.
- \* Some storytellers use music, dance, song, pictures or puppets.
- \* Many storytellers offer workshop sessions, which may either teach storytelling skills or engage participants in creative activities linked to the stories.

## **CHECKLIST OF THINGS TO CONSIDER WHEN BOOKING A STORYTELLER**

With an ever-increasing variety of storytellers to choose from, how do you find those who will suit you? Whatever event you are planning, give yourself plenty of time. Many popular storytellers are booked up months in advance.

### **Have a clear idea of what you want:**

- Is this to be a one-off event or a residency?
- Do you want a performance or a workshop?
- What groups will be involved?
- Have any of them special needs the storyteller should be aware of?
- Are you looking for stories on a particular theme?
- Will it be formal or relaxed, a performance in front of a large audience or working with smaller groups?
- How many sessions will there be?
- How long do you want each session to be?
- How much audience participation do you want?
- What venue are you planning to use?
- Do you require the storyteller to work outdoors?

### **When you have an idea of the sort of event you are aiming for:**

- Look in the quick reference section of the Directory of Storytellers, note those who meet your requirements.
- Look in the County listing to see which storytellers are local to you.
- Look through the Directory and pick out storytellers who you like the sound of.
- Phone the storytellers on your short-list to discuss your needs, they may be able to give you more ideas about what you could do or help you modify your plans.
- Ask what they charge and if this includes travelling expenses.
- Expect to pay as much as you would for a facilitator.
- Ask if they are available on the dates you want.
- Ask for a couple of references from people for whom they have done similar work.
- You do not have to make a firm booking at this stage.

If you need any more assistance in finding a storyteller contact the administrator at the Society for Storytelling.

### **When you have decided which Storyteller you want to book:**

- Phone to confirm they are still free and are willing to come.
- Write to confirm date, time, place and fee.
- If you are sent a contract please complete and send it back in good time.
- Include a map and a timetable.
- If you have discussed a potential booking with a storyteller, and decided not to employ them, please contact them in good time so they can release the date for other bookings.

## **GETTING THE BEST FROM YOUR STORYTELLER**

Employing any consultant is an expense and you want your money's worth. How do you ensure success on the day?

### **When you are planning the event:**

- Choose a venue where the storyteller and audience will not be disturbed.
- Think about how you will set up the space so the audience can sit in comfort and see the storyteller clearly. If there is to be a workshop ask the storyteller how they want the room set out. Discuss with the storyteller how long each session is to be.

### **The week before:**

- Phone the storyteller to ensure that they have received your confirmation, map, timetable etc. Ask if there is anything they will need you to provide on the day. Will they be requiring lunch and if so do they have any special dietary requirements? Confirm arrangements for payment.
- If they are coming by public transport check to see if they need collecting from the station and when their train arrives.
- Tell the staff there will be a storyteller coming into work next week and start building a little excitement about the event.

### **On the day:**

- Have a member of staff keep a lookout ready to greet and escort the storyteller.
- When they arrive show them where they will be working, offer them a drink, ask if they need help carrying anything from their car.
- Before they start make sure they have a glass of water, know where the toilets are, check if there is anything else they need.
- Ensure you are ready to start on time.
- If you are introducing them check how they want to be introduced and how to pronounce their name, many storytellers are happy to introduce themselves.
- Show the staff that you value the storyteller's work by including managers.
- Avoid interruptions during the session.
- At break times, if the storyteller has joined you in the refreshment area, ensure they are included in the conversation.

### **Afterwards:**

- Give the storyteller some feedback - what went well, any concerns. .
- Ensure payment is sent promptly.

## STORYTELLING IN ORGANISATIONS WEBSITES

Richard Seel [www.new-paradigm.co.uk/story.htm](http://www.new-paradigm.co.uk/story.htm)

Steve Denning - former program director, knowledge management at The World Bank and author of *The Spring-board: How Storytelling Ignites Action in Knowledge-Era Organizations*. "The website for business and organizational storytelling"  
[www.stevedenning.com/learn.htm](http://www.stevedenning.com/learn.htm)

Golden Fleece [www.storyatwork.com](http://www.storyatwork.com)

Storytelling – Passport to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Larry Prusak, IBM, et al  
[www.creatingthe21stcentury.org](http://www.creatingthe21stcentury.org)

Knowledge management – NHS  
[www.nelh.nhs.uk/knowledge-management/km2/storytelling\\_toolkit.asp](http://www.nelh.nhs.uk/knowledge-management/km2/storytelling_toolkit.asp)

Strategic Planning Society - Strategic Storytelling in Organisations Masterclass, Shell, M&S, Body Shop, IBM and 3M are finding helpful in the art of the Storyteller.  
[http://www.sps.org.uk/workshops\\_2.htm](http://www.sps.org.uk/workshops_2.htm)

Seth Kahan, World Bank - Storytelling and the Modern Organization  
[http://www.sethkahan.com/Resources\\_0BringingBusiness.html](http://www.sethkahan.com/Resources_0BringingBusiness.html)

Knowledge Socialization Project at IBM Research, Executive Summary:  
The Knowledge Socialization project is a research project being conducted at IBM's T.J. Watson Research Center.

The project's goals in brief are:

- To identify how stories can be best included in a knowledge management effort -- how best to collect them, organize them, present them, and provide facilities to search through them and navigate among them.
- To identify how technology can be best applied to the use of stories in a knowledge management effort.
- To identify how the use of stories as a knowledge management activity can be supported and enhanced at IBM.

<http://www.research.ibm.com/knowsoc/>