

# Story telling: an old skill in a new context

*Practical techniques for knowledge disclosure, communication and cultural intervention in a new age of uncertainty*

---

*For now we see through a glass darkly; but then face-to-face: now  
I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.*

1 Cor.13.12

This is an outline of a workshop being run for the Library Association at the University of Warwick, 24th to the 25<sup>th</sup> November 1999. It is designed both to provoke some questions at the session itself, and to give an indication of the breadth and power of story telling as a key skill in achieving organisational change.

This will not be a theoretical workshop, although the thinking behind the approach is rooted in ideas and models drawn from Cultural Anthropology, Comparative Religion, Complexity Theory, and Cognitive Psychology - not to mention Hollywood and the Nursery! Using case material it will illustrate the concepts by reference to story telling engagements led by the speaker over the past two years. Attendees will be able to take away pragmatic models that can be used in the here and now to provide measurable benefit to their organisations.

## **Why is story telling important?**

Story telling is a uniting and defining component of all communities. The quality of story telling and its conformity or otherwise with desired organisational values is one measure of the overall health of an organisation. Stories exist in all organisations. Managed and purposeful story telling provides a powerful mechanism for the disclosure of intellectual or knowledge assets in companies, it can also provide a non-intrusive, organic means of producing sustainable cultural change; conveying brands and values; transferring complex tacit knowledge. Too many management theories are based on mechanical models of the organisation, which fail to recognise that success is best achieved by treating the organisation as a complex ecology, whose workings cannot be fully predicted. In this workshop the use of story telling will be explored in respect of different business purposes. This will provide a pragmatic approach to the use of the age-old ability of communities to convey complex knowledge through story telling, which will provide readers with tools, and concepts that can be readily applied in their own organisations.

Story telling and other related skills in tacit knowledge disclosure and dissemination, are key to preventing Knowledge Management becoming just a fashion item in corporate thinking: temporally in vogue but soon to be abandoned. Following early success stories, knowledge management has attracted its share of charlatans and snake oil salespeople. For many it is just a cynical marketing device to sell more technology or consultancy days into organisations that, in turn are increasingly suffering from *initiative fatigue*. Properly understood, Knowledge Management represents a more fundamental shift in thinking. That shift is from a mechanistic, linear understanding of the organisation, to an organic multidimensional model. The emphasis is on creating resilient, robust and self-sustaining communication programmes to enable organisations to face conditions of increasing uncertainty and complexity.

## **Collaboration and inter-dependency**

Different types of community exist within organisations. Some of these are formal: Organisational structures; special interest groups; competency networks. Others are informal: trusted networks, 'favour banks'; inter-dependent groupings. The latter are often the most important and the ones on which communication is natural, low cost and immediate, however they are invisible to the wider community. Such communities also develop highly complex but information rich private languages using common stories of that communities' experience. Story provides a means by which we can link the formal and informal communities, without compromising the power of such expert languages.

Well-intentioned efforts to make such communities visible, or render them explicit fail and increasingly desperate attempts to enforce knowledge exchange by the use of carrot or stick are doomed to failure. Too many knowledge programmes are endeavouring to achieve the cognitive equivalent of raising the entire bulk of an iceberg above sea level - if you are content with 10% visibility it has natural equilibrium, to raise more than 10% produces energy consumption and cost that is out of all proportion to the benefits planned. In the presentation a basic model for different types of community, associated communication patterns and (in some cases) technology support will be explored.

## **Old skills for a new age**

It is early days in understanding the use of stories in a modern business, and the presentation will reflect both early thinking and some experimental projects. However the results are sufficiently good that we now know that there are major benefits to be achieved from the use of stories, and the development of story telling skills. Like St Paul we see as through a glass darkly to a more profound truth.

Moreover, organizations are beginning to understand that story telling is not an optional extra. It is already exists as an integral part of defining what that organisation is; what it means to buy from it; what it means to work for it. Tom Stewart of Fortune Magazine, himself a great story gatherer and storyteller, summarises this well. In commenting on an IBM lessons learnt programme conducted by the workshop leader and described later, he says "If stories are powerful, and if stories are going to be told - true and false, official and underground, flattering and humiliating - then leaders and managers need to be part of the process. First, suss out how story-rich the place is. A lack of storytelling, Gardner says, betokens an environment where management is too controlling. Ask yourself whether the stories-about the founder, about the guy who got canned, about why the boss got her job-are ones that tell people to shut up or step up, that include or exclude. Is there room for mistakes in the company story?" (Stewart Fortune Magazine 1998)

Stories provide an opportunity to make a micro intervention in such ecologies to achieve a macro effect. Stories are already a necessary part of an organisation's life. They are told around the water cooler, confidentially whispered in the lift, distributed via e-mail. The opportunity exists to use this natural mechanism to purposeful effect.

## **Illustrative Cases**

The following cases will be used in whole or in part to indicate practical uses of story telling.

### ***A Lessons Learnt Programme in a multi-national project environment***

This case came out of the need to learn lessons from the past history of the company and apply them to the future. Projects studied typically lasted between nine months and several years using large teams drawn from different business units and cultures. As a result there was little continuity of staff between projects and there was no knowledge of what would enable a 'good' project in the future. The project resulted in the creation of a radically different communications strategy based on simple rules and teaching stories. The result was a self-organising best

practice transfer mechanism, which was more cost effective and more lasting than conventional approaches as it tapped into the existing networks and capabilities of the organisation.

### ***Creating an awareness of, and gaining commitment to Organisational Change***

This approach has been used successfully in several companies, and comprises a three-stage approach designed to allow an understanding to develop of the different types of knowledge transformation involved in communication. This then progresses through the creation of narrative stories to a teaching story. At this point the participants have created a series of living artefacts that not only enable their understanding, but allow them to explain it to their staff and other audiences to gain commitment without the need for wholesale, expensive and often ineffective training and culture change programmes

### ***Understanding how a brand is interpreted by staff and effecting positive change.***

At the forefront of thinking on customer knowledge exchange this project used story telling as a means of understanding what knowledge customers and staff had of the brand values of a major retailer. Having constructed a taxonomy of the knowledge, stories were constructed for both staff and customer communities that could be interjected to natural ebb and flow of day-to-day business as an alternative to explicit mission statements, training courses and advertising. This approach also allowed the stories to be constructed differently for each community, while maintaining the desired value propositions.

## **Structure of the workshop**

The workshop will combine presentation of theory and cases, with story construction exercises for participants. Key concepts will be illustrated using film excerpts.

The workshop will roughly follow the structure laid out below, but participants are welcome to open new areas, explore interesting diversions through interaction with the leader.

1. Illustrative use of story and metaphor to create a common understanding and language at all levels of an organisation. Basic concepts in story telling. The difference between an anecdote and a story. A really good story.
2. Exercise one – creating the raw material
3. Rule extraction from multiple anecdotes - the application of complexity theory to create a context for story construction. Story decomposition and reconstruction. Simple steps in story construction. Story schema. Case studies on the use of story circles as a knowledge disclosure mechanism and as an alternative method for communication and understanding of brand value both internally and externally. Use of story to create brand awareness and associated behaviours in staff and customers.
4. Exercise two – creating a basic story
5. Ethics in the use of story. Story telling in virtual communities. Models of community and their relationship to types of knowledge flow. Use of actors, Mullah Rabin tactics (you'll have to be there to understand this one). Legitimate use of fiction. Current and future technology support for story capture, construction and distribution.

## **Supporting material**

Delegates will receive copies of articles, check lists and other material relating to Story together with a reading list. Follow up questions; comments or ideas are more than welcome to the e-mail address below.

[snowded@uk.ibm.com](mailto:snowded@uk.ibm.com)