

STORYTELLING

What is Storytelling?

Stories form an important part of working life: some are carefully crafted and serve a particular purpose; while others are “anecdotes”, which naturally emerge from conversations that exists in every workplace.

Why use Storytelling?

Naturally emerging anecdotes are of potential value when shared, reflected upon and sometimes captured - people telling one another about their experience of a particular topic or issue will produce far richer information than can be collected in a conventional interview. Storytelling creates a more relaxed environment for people to share their experiences, especially if the information is difficult to express, sensitive, or contentious.

When and how would you carry out Storytelling?

There are numerous ways of bringing people together to tell stories about their experience but a few key principles are worth noting:

- It is generally better to bring people together to focus on a defined topic or issue
- Diversity in the group will produce richer outcomes. Select participants with care and make sure they are briefed for the session
- Too much preparation by participants will not be good. You don't want them to write stories in their head beforehand
- Be clear about the ground rules for the session and suggest a few starter questions (prompts) to get people on their way.
- Vary techniques so that people don't get bored or stuck
 - Break participants into smaller groups, if appropriate, but ensure you make time for each group
 - Focus on the extremes of experience – both good and bad. Ignore the everyday experience and look for success and, most important, for failure
 - Focus on talking about things that happened and about personal experiences of the event or situation. Out of this, facts and data will emerge.
 - Look for moments when people become passionate about the subject. This is a good sign that someone is getting to the heart of matter. Be mindful that emotions can be strong and you may need to facilitate at some point.

Decide how you'll capture the outputs: notes, recordings, or video. Whichever method you choose, ask the tellers of tales to note down a title for their anecdote or anecdotes on a post-it or flip chart put up for that purpose. It will help sort out the notes afterwards.

What to do after the Storytelling has been completed?

A Storytelling session should end with thanking the participants for attending, and agreement about the documented outputs, e.g. how widely should they be shared? Is there anything which is confidential? Any learning about the Storytelling process, questions, and approach gained by the facilitator should be shared with other facilitators to develop and improve this tool. Circulate all the outputs from the session to group members for any wider publication. This respects their participation.

Elements of a well-functioning anecdote circle

Extremes	People should be talking about best and worst moments, not about everyday things. What you are looking for is the boundaries of experience, not the midpoint. And importantly, these extremes must include the negative as well as the positive. It is much easier to get "success stories" out of people than it is to get stories of failure and disappointment; but it is the latter that is usually more fruitful.
Events	People should be recounting things that happened, not lecturing or giving opinions or complaining. You are looking for stories, which are a qualitatively different type of data than any other kind of statement. All stories describe events; if nothing happens, it is not a story. This is a major obstacle and one that can produce bountiful amounts of opinions, statements, facts, and instructions - but no stories. Whether you get stories or not depends on how you frame the things you ask people to do. It can be as simple as making sure to ask "was there a time you felt proud" rather than "what were your accomplishments". Always frame your introductions to natural storytelling in terms of events - times, moments, experiences, instances, things that happened, and so on. Avoid mentioning things that don't have a time element, like conditions, beliefs, rules, expectations, memory, and so on.
Emotions	In every situation there will be some issues that people are going to be at least a little passionate about. If that isn't happening you haven't found the issues yet. Sometimes it takes a while for people to open up and start talking about what really matters to them. You need to find a balance between using techniques that help move this along and just having patience and letting things take time. You can help people too much. Sometimes you will get all of your useful anecdotes in the last quarter of the anecdote circle's time. That's fine, as long as it happens.
Experiences	You want to hear about people's real experiences, not what they believe they should be saying, or the company line, or what they heard on the news. You need to cut through all that to get to what has actually happened to them, because that is where the real potential of narrative disclosure is realized. You also need to convince people that you really do want to know what their experiences have been and that their perspectives are valuable to you. You can do that in how you talk about what the anecdote circle is about and why you need the perspectives the people in it have to offer.
Exchanges	Naturally occurring storytelling lives in a habitat of conversation. It is not a "thing" you ask for but an emergent property of discourse. Whether you get emergence or "things" will depend entirely on how you present the anecdote circle. Watch your language. Never "ask" for a story. Never tell people "we want your stories" or in any way refer to a story as a thing. What you want people to understand is that you want them to talk together about the past, about times and events in the past, about things that happened to them, about their experiences. If that happens, there will be much better anecdotes produced than if people believe they are "producing" anything

Techniques for encouraging storytelling

The real purpose of storytelling is to get people to disclose knowledge and beliefs that they themselves might not have been aware of. The people doing the disclosing don't need to know the real purpose of the exercises; you just need to understand the purpose and be able to recognize whether what you are doing is working or not. With all of other techniques here, watch how people respond, and if the technique isn't working, try another one.

Ditting	<p>Using ditting as a technique takes advantage of the propensity of people to always want to "better" what someone else has done.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It's also a motivating factor to get people to tell more stories, and to get more people to talk instead of holding back. • It's not necessary or even advisable to ask people to top each others' stories. It's better to just talk about how ditting occurs naturally, and then lead into a storytelling session without further comment. <p>You can combine ditting with the best/worst moment exercise, describe ditting before asking people to talk about their best then worst moments.</p>
Archetypal Storytelling	<p>Archetypal storytelling uses fictional characters to represent the identities of real people. This technique is most useful for sensitive topics in which you need to help people reveal things that they don't want to own up to or admit.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The first step in facilitating archetypal storytelling is to derive some character archetypes. A good way to do this is to pull one person from each group after some storytelling has taken place, and ask them to talk together about some of the characters in the stories they each heard in their own groups. • When the archetypes have been derived, groups can be asked to tell anecdotes from the point of view of different archetypes. <p>As with ditting, you can do this after another exercise provides some starter anecdotes - for example, a group might already have a good "best moment" anecdote, and so you could ask them to retell that anecdote from the point of view of two opposing archetypes (e.g., hero and villain).</p>
Feature Shift	<p>The feature shift technique involves retelling anecdotes with aspects changed. This is most useful for going deeper into the issues behind anecdotes that are told. It is particularly recommended with a group that is telling anecdotes, but the anecdotes tend to be superficial without much disclosure.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask people to choose an anecdote that has already been told, and then to retell the anecdote with one feature of the story changed, e.g., shift the setting to one that is superficially different but metaphorically similar in some way, like from a factory floor to a military submarine. • How does the story play out in a different setting? Which elements are the same/different? How might the story end differently? What deeper truths about the real story come out in a different setting? • Encourage people to tell more anecdotes as the shifted stories remind them. Let the conversation diverge into new threads if it wants to. <p>The point of these exercises is not to nail down all alternative ways of telling a story, but to give people a fictional space to explore topics that will be meaningful in later sense-making or knowledge exchange.</p>
Alternative Histories	<p>Using alternative histories to bring out anecdotes involves making a change to an anecdote, as in the "feature shift" technique, but in this case you are changing the plot of the anecdote. This technique is especially useful if people are not willing to explore failure or disappointment. It is also useful if people are obviously holding a lot of assumptions in common but not bringing them out in the open.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To do alternative histories, start by asking people for a success story, and ask what could have caused it to be a failure instead. At what turning points could things have happened to change the outcome? At what points were major decisions made, and what would have happened if those decisions had been made differently? You can also do this in reverse - how could a failure story have changed to become a success story? • If people would like to, have them draw out turning points in the story on a flipchart, and draw lines to other outcomes they can then talk about.
The Three Facilitator rule	<p>After hearing a few stories around a particular theme, it is human nature to begin to form perspectives/views around the issue. Bias can be introduced by the facilitator in prompting and asking probing questions, by their level of interest in specific stories, body language, or by engaging and encouraging certain participants. Therefore, it may help to allocate three facilitators to a storytelling group. Whilst one is facilitating, another is observing and noting the level of bias. The third is close by, removed from the group. Once the main facilitator begins to demonstrate bias, the observer calls it out and the facilitator is switched with the reserve facilitator. The process continues, with each facilitator in turn observing the next.</p>