

One Role of Story in Knowledge Management

Madelyn Blair, Ph.D.

Pelerei, Inc.

If things continue as they have been, by the year of 2010, there will be 10 million more jobs than there are people to fill them in this country. Now, things are likely not going to continue as today, but the boomers are going to retire. And the knowledge they have garnered through their careers will be walking out the door.

One organization I have worked with decided to try something different to address this.

Here is an example of how we have used storytelling to help new project managers learn how to do their work better by incorporating the wisdom of project managers who have been doing it for years.

Two days before the learning session, the experienced project managers were brought together for a class of their own. They were going to learn how to become master listeners. It takes several hours to first demonstrate the process, describe the conceptual framework that makes it all work, and to practice the skills they need to be able to use during the session with the younger generation of project managers.

They found it hard at first as they had so much to say that listening felt like it was getting in the way. As they practice this new way of listening, however, they began to learn not only the listening skills, they began to learn new things about project management. They thought they knew it all, but when they heard the stories of their colleagues, they discovered there were so many things they did that had become unconscious to them. Through listening to the stories of their colleagues, they began to become conscious of what they knew deep down. And they didn't have to say it verbally, they just began to know. They had become master listeners.



On the day of the session with the new project managers, they were anxious to see what else they would learn as they attempted to help the new project managers learn. The session began with one of the new project managers telling a story about how she managed a complex project. The master listeners began the process of first listening intentionally, then telling the story again to make certain they heard it right. The new project manager corrected things when they were not right, or added things that were not told in the first place. As the master listeners began to explore the story, the new project manager listened to what struck the masters, what was important to the masters, what was skipped over by the masters. At specified points, the new project managers joined the discussion, but mostly they were listening to the master listeners as they explored this story. Suddenly, there was a moment when the new project manager sat back and sighed, shook her head up and down, and began to take notes on her pad.

My talk is about using storytelling in KM.

I'd like to define what I mean when I talk about knowledge management. There are lots of definitions out there, but I think that Karl Wiig's simple definition really captures it well. (This definition came from a conversation with Dr. Wiig in 2002 as a part of the KM Europe conference in London.) KM is about three things:

- Giving people access to knowledge
- Participants of the KM system are willing to learn and share
- Management consciously works to create an environment that supports and encourages knowledge sharing.

What I have to say will relate to these three points.

Most of the early KM work focused on the first part of KM, namely, giving people **access to knowledge**. This is because it is the easiest to show evidence that KM is going on. You build a data base, and you say, "Here, we have knowledge available for everyone." I want to say something about what informs me about this word 'knowledge.'



There are a lot of definitions about this word, and I am not going to add to the list of them. Rather, I am going to tell you one of the things that has informed my understanding of knowledge. One is from social constructionism which says that knowledge occurs between us – it doesn't exist solely in our heads, we do not even create it solely in our heads, but rather it is in our relationships with others that knowledge is created and exists. Think about reading a book and being in relationship with the author even if she has been dead for 100 years, you are still in relationship with her. Social constructionists believe that this new understanding of knowledge will have as great an impact as did the Enlightenment in its time.

That second dimension of KM is a **willingness to learn**. Now this is one that is hard to assess and in most cases is simply assumed. I work with an organization today that assumes people want to learn so much so that they call their KM work with their client community, capacity building. This is a rather arrogant position that assumes also this organization has something of value to share when in fact there is equally valuable knowledge among their clients.

However, even when the desire to learn is not assumed, the incentives offered can be well hidden (that's a euphemism for there aren't any). For example, in one organization with which I work, team learning sessions are set up at the start of a project. But when it comes time for performance reviews, the rewards are related to individual performance. But performance is a reflection of learning as well as action, yet unless the manager is aware of how much the team actually taught and the person actually learned, what do they really know about the learning that went on?

Now comes what I believe is the most important part of any KM system – the **creation of an environment in which knowledge sharing** is encouraged and by extension, an environment in which learning is encouraged.



A few words about learning. Learning must occur in context. There is a wonderful Chinese proverb which says that you can't teach about the sky to a frog that lives in a well. If you haven't any context in which to learn the new knowledge, you really can't learn it. I can't learn to ride a bike unless I have a bike to ride. I can't learn how to sell a product until I know my client's needs. Context is key to learning.

When we are learning, our minds are open. We suspend judgment for a time so that we can take in the lesson. In business, it is important to help groups, teams, units, to come to a level of trust so that the mind is open for learning.

To aid in creating an arena where one can suspend judgment and leave the mind open, specialized groups are formed. They are generally called communities of practice. "A community of practice is a group of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis." (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder, 2002) It is within a community of practice that trust can be built to the point where learning happens with ease.

Stories are at the heart of learning in community. First, stories allow the members to develop relationships with each other. If I hear your story about how you overcame a particular problem, I am able to begin to understand something about you and how you work. I can then share a comparable story back to you so that you can as well learn something about how I work and who I am.

But stories accomplish another important task. They present the context in which the 'facts' are presented. Suddenly, I can see how you related the features of the product to your client's needs. It looks similar to a situation I have encountered, and so I put myself into the same story and learn how I can make the connection, too. Stories allow the listener to become a part of the story and relate lessons to their own lives.



Let's return to the story I opened with. This is learning at its best. All of the lessons are given in the context of the original story – in the context of the work of the person who is supposed to be learning. It is immediately relatable as it is the young person's own story. The context is clear, the lessons are clear, how they apply is clear.

We turn the learning process upside down. We make the masters the listeners, the new person the teller, and the lessons are deep, relevant, and remembered. That is one way in which storytelling is used in KM to fulfill a great potential hidden in our personal narratives – once we have master listeners available.

Some remaining questions

How can organizations measure the ROI on such 'soft' looking processes?

How can the Community of Practice be the locus for using narrative more rigorously?

What do line managers need to know that will allow them to assess the willingness to learn?

Bibliography

Costello, Paul (2003). **Story as the Shape of our Listening: the lessons learnt from listening teams**. Washington, DC: Center for Narrative Studies.

Kline, Nancy (2001). **Time to Think: Listening to ignite the human mind**. London: Ward Lock.

Seely-Brown, John and Paul Duguid (2000). **The Social Life of Information**. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Wenger, Etienne (1998). **Communities of Practice; Learning, meaning, and identity**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.



