

The Missing Links

By Carol Russell

Abstract

Story is used to enhance knowledge management in a British government department.

Background

Members of a British government department were looking at how they managed knowledge in their organisation. They had commissioned a knowledge audit and invited two consultancies to carry out the audit: one to look at how knowledge was being managed electronically, and the other to look at how knowledge was being passed from person to person. I was hired after the initial reports were written.

Purpose

The consultancy that was tasked with looking at how knowledge was managed interpersonally was also tasked with creating a knowledge sharing strategy for the entire organisation. As part of their strategy, the consultancy commissioned me to create a story to be performed at the annual conference that would launch the strategy and effect buy-in, as well as run two workshops on story elicitation techniques prior to the conference.

Process

After reading the reports from both consultancies, I attended a meeting with the client where the strategy and its launch were discussed. I was also given a period of one and a half hours to run a short, story workshop. As I sat through the meeting it became clear to me that because there were many offices all over the country, the people who worked far away from the centre of the organisation felt cut off from the rest of the

organisation. It was also clear that there were strong feelings of frustration and that there was very little trust in new initiatives within the organisation.

This information formed the basis of my strategy for the story workshop. I used two story prompt statements: “Give me an example of a time when you felt connected to the knowledge at the centre of your organisation and that connection made your job easier;” and “Give me an example of a time when a lack of knowledge made your job more difficult.”

The structure of the story I was commissioned to write came from the stories told in this session. As it became clear there were many missing links, I arranged to contact a number of the tellers by telephone to get more background and detail on the stories they’d told. At the end of the workshop the client who had commissioned the audit came to me and told me a story about a time when the CEO had been “wrong-footed” by a lack of knowledge. She then set up a meeting for me with the CEO who was happy to have the story of his misfortune used to illustrate the importance of knowledge sharing in the organisation.

I then spent a week interviewing people by telephone and e-mail. Once all the stories were in I chose four of the stories which best demonstrated the effect of missing links.

The first story in the chain was the CEO’s story...a story where lack of knowledge led to a chief government advisor being misled. Due to the sensitive and deeply revealing nature of this story I felt that it was important to set it in a clear, but fictional context. After looking at the way the British government was structured I realised I could use the concept of clans as a substitute for government departments in a

fictional kingdom. So I gave that story the feeling of a fairytale. Giving the CEO's story a fairytale-like feel allowed the moral of the story to be evident, while protecting the CEO from undue criticism.

The second story in the chain involved people going out on a limb and successfully running a project for which there was no previous organisational precedent. This story had a real life setting.

The third story was about how learning networks can help in the management of Knowledge and was written from the point of view of the commissioning client in a real life setting.

The final story was structured as a dilemma tale... a story with no end. It formed an invitation to the organisation as a whole to work together to manage the knowledge within the organisation.

Before the story was performed at the annual conference, I ran two story elicitation workshops. They were so over-subscribed that we had to work in the corridors.

At the annual conference I used a West African call and response to start the story in order to bring the attendees together, giving their energies to the story and the performer.

Impact

The story was performed at the annual conference for all the staff. During the performance it was evident from the audience response that the story touched many chords. Afterwards, I was approached and the initial feedback from conference attendees was that the story highlighted the problems they had faced and it made them feel as if

they had been heard.

Another outcome from the initial feedback was that, although the identities of the original storytellers had been protected, they were such strong personalities, known throughout the organization, they were still recognisable.

Months after the story was performed the knowledge management team reported good buy-in for the knowledge management strategy. A few years later the organisation came back to the consultancy and commissioned a series of lessons learnt storytelling workshops. From those workshops, story was called upon again as tool for disseminating information around the organisation.

Lessons

- The best stories always make themselves known. I say this because the strength of the personalities who had shared their stories with me stayed in the story. Most people in the organisation recognised all the main characters of the four stories. These were strong corporate stories.
- Warning stories can often serve the purpose of creating, or supporting, an environment for change within an organisation.
- When story is successfully introduced to an organisation as a whole, at one time, trust in the technique is enhanced. The organisation is more likely to look at the other ways in which story can help them.
- Running the “story elicitation for the purposes of managing knowledge” workshops before the performance of the story introduced me to just over 10% of the workforce, indicating a strong interest in story.
- Stories are valuable lessons learnt tools.

Tips

- Take the time to do a little research on the organisation before you attend the first meeting.
- Find subtle ways to show that you have done some homework, e.g., ask questions. When clients feel that you have an understanding of their industry, or area, they trust what you have to say about your area of expertise, and they feel that your suggestions are tailored to their needs.
- Try to remain open. If an idea for how best to present or position story within an organisation comes to you, log it, but remain open to new ones.
- During story elicitation give some part of yourself. This enables the interviewees to give more of themselves as they don't feel too vulnerable. A word of warning, though...giving of yourself has to be situation appropriate, therefore nothing too intense.

Contributor

Carol Russell trained at the Jamaica School of Drama as an actor/teacher and graduated with a Bachelor of Education. Since returning to Britain she has spearheaded the use of traditional West African and Caribbean stories as specific tools to facilitate and promote change. Since 1996, Carol has worked with a growing number of corporate and public (government) sector clients in Britain, specializing in knowledge management, change management, and managing diversity. She is also a novelist, a screenwriter, and a member of BAFTA (British Academy of Film and Television Arts).

