

# Storytelling: A Practical Method for Facilitating Knowledge Management

Shauna M. LeBlanc  
James Hogg  
University of Central Florida

## Abstract

Knowledge management serves to capture, store, and organize knowledge and experiences within corporations so it is available for future reference. Perhaps the most difficult part of knowledge management is identifying the tacit knowledge within an organization. Storytelling possesses great potential as a tool to uncover tacit knowledge within an organization, yet little has been done to synthesize literature related to storytelling in knowledge management. Research questions to be answered include: What is knowledge management? Why would knowledge management benefit from the use of storytelling? And how can storytelling be implemented into knowledge management to uncover tacit knowledge? Examples of success stories of storytelling in knowledge management will be presented and recommendations for future research will be provided.

## Introduction

Could the application of storytelling be a useful component of knowledge management? If so, *why* would storytelling be a good tool in knowledge management? *How* can storytelling be used in knowledge management? Knowledge management is essentially a teaching-learning interaction. Storytelling can be broadly defined as orally communicating ideas, beliefs, personal histories, and life-lessons (Groce, 2004). It is one of the most prevalent forms of communication and it possesses great potential as a teaching-learning tool. It is no wonder that it is currently being used in some companies as a knowledge management tool.

According to Arlene Dohm, a writer for the U.S. Department of Labor's *Monthly Labor Review*, there are some 64 million baby boomers (over 40 percent of the U.S. work force) who will likely retire in large numbers within the next decade. One-half of companies interviewed by *The Conference Board*, a business membership and research organization, "feel that the departure of mature workers presents potential knowledge vulnerabilities. About one-third have conducted workforce-planning studies and identified potential knowledge areas where they could be vulnerable. One-half of those interviewed have some form of mentoring program in place to share and transfer knowledge" ("America's," 2005).

The following is a review of literature relating to the *what*, *why*, and *how* of storytelling in the management and transference of knowledge within organizations. Examples are provided of the success of the use of story at NASA, EduTech, Bristol-Myers Squibb, GE, Disney, Nike, Wendy's, FedEx and English Nature to promote knowledge transfer. The literature reviewed was analyzed and compared according to relevance, quality, reliability of sources, validity of information, trends and issues, and credibility of author's research/information.

There are some trends regarding the use of story in knowledge management to foster the sharing and transfer of tacit knowledge. Besides fostering inter-generational communication, knowledge management can be used to improve the meaning of information in business. According to recent theories, backed up by relatively new medical technologies, storytelling is a natural way of learning, and more specifically a more natural way for the brain to process information. Of course, there are some skeptics who question the real value of stories in the workplace, but the literature shows that companies who are using stories are finding it very valuable for the management and transfer of knowledge.

## What: Storytelling and Knowledge Management

There has been an ongoing interest in storytelling as a component in knowledge management over the last few years, but it has never really become a major focus. Storytelling has been touted as the best way to make the

leap from information to knowledge, and as the best way to capture and transfer tacit knowledge (Reamy, 2002). “Storytelling is the skilled delivery of stories used to present anecdotal evidence, clarify a point, support a point of view and crystallize ideas. A story can present material that research data can not. Stories use verbal pictures to spark interest, add variety, and change the pace of a discussion. Stories make dull speeches sparkle. Storytelling is the connecting device between data and reality. Stories can share a “truth” that data cannot. Knowledge managers use storytelling as a device and tool for sharing knowledge” (Stuhlman, n.d.).

To say that there are several definitions of knowledge management would be an understatement. Denning (2000) says, “there is no agreed upon definition of knowledge management, even among practitioners.” In a CIO Magazine article on the ABC’s of knowledge management (KM) Meridith Levinson writes, “Succinctly put, KM is the process through which organizations generate value from their intellectual and knowledge-based assets. Most often, generating value from such assets involves codifying what employees, partners and customers know, and sharing that information among employees, departments and even with other companies in an effort to devise best practices.” Upon “Googling” the term, three pages worth of definitions return, Vicki Powers (2004) used a definition that in a *KM World* article, “[K]nowledge management is – because of people’s experiences – a variety of things that fall under that broad umbrella of KM, including knowledge capture, knowledge stories, communities, Knowledge Desktop and codifying documents.” This review will synthesize several resources to describe how the experiences of people that, according to Powers (2004), can be called “knowledge stories” that can be used within an organization as knowledge management tools.

“To some people – people in business, people in management, people running public sector organizations – storytelling might seem like an odd subject to be talking about at all. The thought that narrative and storytelling might be important ideas in organizational thinking in the coming century might seem even odder” (Brown et al., 2004). It may come as no surprise, therefore, that there is some controversy surrounding storytelling as a method of transferring knowledge in business. The idea of storytelling being used in business “causes some disquiet among practical businesspeople, information specialists, and even many in knowledge management” (Reamy, 2002). The images of groups of businesspeople squatting around a campfire swapping stories and wasting time as executives tell bad stories and unload their fears and anxieties does not appeal to some knowledge managers (Reamy, 2002). This criticism is likely a result of a misunderstanding of what storytelling can do for knowledge management in companies, and more importantly, the techniques involved in implementing storytelling as a tool. For example, Seth Kahan uses a technique called “jumpstart storytelling,” which “harnesses diverse ideas and fosters discussion about what’s important – constructive conversations” (Dysart, 2004).

“... [T]he potential of storytelling as a viable teaching-learning tool can be recognized only if its inherent nature is clearly understood” (Roney, 1996). There is some research that supports this “inherent nature” of storytelling. This research suggests that people learn best with stories because “organization of information in story form is a natural brain process” (Caine and Caine, 1991). As educators then, knowledge managers who use storytelling are, as Bruce Perry (2000) puts it, practically neuroscientists because the brain is more receptive to information in story form. Storytelling is a useful tool for knowledge management because people learn things easier via stories – they convey meaning, convey tacit knowledge, and are a natural way of learning and interpreting information.

#### Why: Benefits of Storytelling in Knowledge Management

Stories put *meaning* into information, stories *convey tacit knowledge* more easily, and stories are a more *natural* way of learning than the usual charts and facts that are presented in knowledge management. There are a number of benefits in using storytelling in knowledge management. Several leading companies are “turning to mature workers to ensure future growth and productivity. These companies recognize that a maturing workforce can positively impact customer satisfaction and profitability, but not without effective initiatives designed to make it easier for different generations of workers to work better together,” (America’s,” 2005). This inter-generational cooperation can be accommodated with the use of story to foster communication and knowledge transfer.

To answer the question of why knowledge management should incorporate storytelling Reamy (2002) says, “Humans have been telling stories as not only a form of entertainment, but as a way to make sense of the world for a very long time—probably almost as long as they have had language. So it is not a surprise that we continue to use this powerful medium in the corporate environment.” Stories are used in three ways, according to Reamy, (2002): (1) in informal education and training where stories provide guidance and lessons in the advanced or more sophisticated

application of basics, (2) the foundation for many formal and informal communities that form within an enterprise, and (3) what Stephen Denning calls “springboard stories,” which are used to create a new paradigm by not only introducing new ideas, but getting people to actively promote the new idea.

### *Meaningful Information: Facts vs. Stories*

Stories have been told since the beginning of time—from the walls of cave men and the tombs of Egypt to modern-day dinner table and campfire stories. “People primarily think narratively rather than analytically or argumentatively” (Stone, n.d.). When people tell a story it is because it means something to them (the teller) and they think that it might mean something to the audience (the listeners). Stories as metaphors are intrinsic to the construction of new knowledge and at the heart of the acquisition of felt meaning (Caine and Caine, 1991). Although some skepticism surrounds the idea of stories in business, it should not be discounted altogether; and neither should executives discourage people from telling stories in the workplace. Stone (n.d.) says that in order to understand storytelling as a tool, one must recognize that people are “already telling stories all the time” at work.

Stories make information—especially large amounts of information—easy to understand. Storytelling as a means of knowledge management creates experience in context and nurtures creativity (Schwartz, 2004). In 2004 West et al. cite Pennington and Hastie (1991) and Schank (1990) as saying that past research demonstrates that one of the aspects that make stories effective is that they are easily stored in memory. “[N]arrative communicates a more meaningful sense of reality than the abstract and summative formations of most business plans” (Stone, n.d.). When it comes to purely listed, factual information, Swap et al. (2001) say that stories promote elaborations and connections to the listener’s personal experience, evoke clear visual images, are more memorable and, hence, “more effective carriers of knowledge than less vivid, purely listed information.” Reamy (2002) also says that if information is put into stories as clusters or chunks, it is easier to pay attention to the information being given.

On his website, Steve Denning says the origin of his interest in organizational storytelling “was simple: nothing else worked.” As a manager in the World Bank in 1996, he “had been trying to communicate the idea of knowledge management and to get people to understand and to implement it. At that time in that organization, knowledge management was a strange and generally incomprehensible idea. I used the traditional methods of communicating with no success. I gave people reasons why the idea was important but they didn’t listen. I showed them charts and they just looked dazed. In my desperation, I was willing to try anything and eventually I stumbled on the power of a story” (“Steve Denning,” n.d.) Denning continues on the success of story at World Bank, “In 1996 in the World Bank, story had helped galvanize staff and managers to imagine a different kind of future for the organization and to set about implementing it. Denning continued to use stories to reinforce and continue the change. The efforts were successful: by 2000, the World Bank was benchmarked as a world leader in knowledge management.”

According to Kathleen Melymuka (2004), “Stephen Denning discovered a powerful leadership tool: storytelling” that he found “often succeeded in inspiring and motivating people when cold, hard logic failed.” Escalas and Bettman and McGregor and Holmes note that “memories are more easily stored and retrieved in story form, particularly when they encompass a goal, action, and some kind of resolution (qtd. in West et al., 2004). Storytelling has great potential for making knowledge meaningful in business. Swap et al. explain three ways in which stories can be used:

- the availability heuristic,
  - According to Tversky and Kahneman (qtd. in Swap, et al., 2001), “...when an event is made more available from memory, there is a strong tendency to believe it is more likely to occur or to be true elaboration,...
- elaboration,
  - [to]...the extent that people reflect upon and integrate information with what they already know, they will remember it better.”
- episodic memory,
  - “Stories are clearly episodic in nature.” Episodic memories come from memorable experiences.

In summary, availability heuristic, elaboration, and episodic memory are good ways to use stories in knowledge management to turn factual information into something that is memorable; stories can be attached to something people already know; and they can create an experience that is easy to remember.

### *Storytelling and Tacit Knowledge*

Tacit knowledge is “knowledge that we do not know that we know” (Hughes, 2002). According to Nonaka and Takeuchi, “. . . knowledge of greatest value to an organization—expert knowledge—is often tacit” (qtd. in Hughes, 2002). Tacit knowledge can be difficult both to convey, and to acquire in most organizations. It is important to acquire tacit knowledge from those people who have seniority and who have been with the company or in the business for some time. Storytelling is an effective way of getting tacit knowledge out so others can use it and refer to it. Acquisition of knowledge involves experience—which storytelling has always existed to provide (Schwartz, 2004). Stories of experiences or trials and errors, for example, would likely benefit those who have not had much opportunity to acquire such experiences or the knowledge that results from those experiences. “Storytelling is a way of capturing what’s unique, and what’s unique per individual is tacit knowledge” (Post, 2002). It is possible that using storytelling to convey tacit knowledge can improve an organization because “one aspect of knowledge management is about sharing experiences so others can learn from them, and then using that learning to improve the organization” (Sumner, 2005). According to Harold Rosen, “. . . once set loose, the storytelling impulse enables the most unlikely people to deploy unsuspected linguistic resources and strategies” (qtd. in Rooks, 1998). Expert, tacit knowledge within an organization can easily be conveyed through storytelling.

### *Storytelling: Natural Way to Learn*

The intent of knowledge management is to educate people for the greater good of the organization and, when educating people, it is important to understand how they learn. Research says the brain works by detecting patterns in information, which is why stories are so useful in the teaching-learning interaction. “One of the brain’s best tricks is to extract meaningful patterns from confusion” and storytelling is an “excellent way of accomplishing this task” (Liston, 1994). Learning is a brain-based activity and factual information causes the brain to fatigue more quickly because it is not the brain’s most “natural” way of learning (Perry, 2000). Stories give meaning to information (as mentioned before) because, as Roger C. Schank says, the “human memory is story-based” (qtd. in West, Huber, and Sam Min, 2004). If the question is why stories work so well in knowledge management, then the answer—simply—is that “our brains seem to be wired to easily and almost automatically organize information into stories” (Reamy, 2002). Liston (1994) relates brain function to learning. She says when we attempt to educate people “we extract the ‘facts’ from the plethora of information, in an effort to clarify the ‘important’ information; conversely, it seems, that an understanding of brain functioning indicates we would better enable students to learn if we presented masses of information and allowed the learner to detect patterns.”

### How: Tips for Success

Stories serve as metaphors because they make information more meaningful and understandable and transfer the difficult-to-uncover tacit knowledge within organizations by appealing to the natural learning process of the brain. “Metaphors allow an entry point into an issue that might seem too intimidating to confront head on” (Post, 2002). The final question is *how* to implement storytelling as a knowledge management tool.

On his website, Stephen Denning (2000) summarizes his technique called “the Springboard Story,” which is a story that “enables a leap in understanding by the audience so as to grasp how an organization or community, or complex system may change.” This technique has been called a “powerful communication tool” by the readers of his book, *The Springboard*. Reamy (2002) recommends organizing a central group to administrate the storytelling and to create a reward system for employees who submit stories. Different kinds of stories can be used for different situations and Melymuka (2004) provides a chart for creating stories to match situations in the information technology world, which could very easily be applied to knowledge management. The chart explains that for certain purposes, stories can be used to invoke specific kinds of responses. Larry Todd Wilson was cited as having identified four situations where storytelling could be helpful: new unexpected situations, situations that require feelings as well as thoughts, complex situations, and situations in which you need to help people understand ‘why’ (“Storytelling,” n.d.). Support for the effectiveness of applying storytelling to these situations is provided by McDaniel (2004), “. . . stories are vessels for storing and communicating complex ideas” and “. . . can be very efficient in helping one to learn unfamiliar material.”

There is some word of caution when using stories in knowledge management, “artificially constructed stories ultimately will be less effective than true ones” (Swap, et al., 2001). In other words, stories should not be made up to teach a lesson or strategy—they should be real stories from real experiences. Storytelling can be counter-productive when the story told is not true (Denning, 2000). Denning also cautions that use of the Springboard is not for all audiences. In his book, Denning explains that “not all stories have the ‘springboard effect’” and it only “worked well with particular audiences.”

Perry offers a technique for incorporating story into curriculum (or knowledge management) called the bob-and-weave technique. “Engage [the audience] with a story to provide the context. Make sure this vignette can touch the emotional parts of their brains. This will activate and prepare the cognitive parts of the brain for storing information. Information is easiest to digest when there is emotional ‘seasoning’ — humor, empathy, sadness, and fear all make “dry” facts easier to swallow. Give a fact or two; link these facts into related concepts. Move back to the narrative to help them make the connection between this concept and the story. Go back to another fact. Reinforce the concepts. Reconnect with the original story. In and out, bob and weave, among facts, concept, and narrative.” This technique of moving back and forth through these interrelated neural systems, weaving the information together is, according to Perry, the most effective way to present information.

The website for i.d.e.a.s. Learning, an Integrity Arts and Technology company who’s core competency is storytelling, says, “Educators and trainers have always known that you have to start with what a learner knows, and use that to build a bridge to the new knowledge or skill you want them to acquire. Turns out, that whether you tell them the story or they think it up on their own, there is a story at the core of that new learning! The point is to give the learner the story that will carry them toward the objectives rather than leaving it up to chance. The story has to provide both the context for the new learning, as well as the vehicle to get them there” (“i.d.e.a.s. Learning,” n.d.).

## Success Stories

Internal magazines have been effective in eliciting tacit knowledge for NASA and EduTech. The employees at EduTech have “written stories about their experience and hope that future teams will learn from their mistakes about ‘what not to do’ by reading these stories” (Post, 2002). “Certain industries are more concerned with the impending “brain drain” stemming from the withdrawal of some mature workers from the workforce. The technology and pharmaceuticals industries generally express worries about the development of new products and services and anticipate a drain in experienced engineers, key account sales representatives, and senior managers” (“America’s,” 2005).

Bristol-Myers Squibb adapted the successful practice of storytelling “from NASA’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory to provide time for senior or tenured people in the organization to share tacit knowledge with others through storytelling.” (Powers, 2004). Melinda Bickerstaff of Bristol-Myers Squibb says, “We are really focusing on tacit knowledge—the stuff underneath that is really difficult to get at. A company that can figure out how to do that and begin to share with others in the organization will be the company that’s really ahead.” (qtd. in Powers, 2004).

A growing number of companies are using storytelling to increase employee’s morale, get mission statements across the workforce, recruit new staff members, and praise existing ones. One Nighttime Pediatrics Clinic hired Rick Stone, president of StoryWork Institute (Orlando, FL), to identify stories that reflect the core value of the company. StoryWork is a national company that has developed training programs dealing with storytelling for teambuilding and leadership. The partnership resulted in the development of “Nighttime Stories,” a book of yarns told by staff and patients of the hospital (Holden, 1999).

This highlights that storytelling has a place in the corporate world, and the CEO of GE, Jack Welch, could best exemplify this. He is a great storyteller and he has encouraged his managers to hone their storytelling skills. Storytelling is an effective tool that could be used to direct and inspire subordinates. This is because it evokes both visual imagery and emotions among the listener. It is a fun way of communicating concepts and ideas within an organization (Dennehy, 1999).

Another company that utilizes storytelling is The Walt Disney Company. Bran Ferran, executive vice president for Walt Disney Imagineering, believes that the web is a great medium for storytelling and he also believes that each job is primarily a storytelling job. He asserts that chief information officers (CIOs) could accomplish their jobs more easily and efficiently if only they could become more effective storytellers. He believes that IT departments could serve as a storage space for memories; information technology should be used to convey the

company's sense of community, history and accomplishments. Companies should also realize that the Internet could bring numerous benefits and building an intranet would allow a company to extend these benefits within the organization (Jahnke, 1998).

At 3M, strategic narratives and storytelling are a better alternative to using bullet points in strategic planning. Planning by narratives is a lot like storytelling. The plan must tell how the company can overcome obstacles and win. The conclusion requires a logical, concise argument that is specific to the situation and leads to desired outcomes. The story should include the industry's economic factors, its key success factors, and the force that drives the change. The story should introduce a dramatic conflict and should reach a solution that ends the story in a satisfying manner (Shaw, Brown, and Bromiley, 1998).

At an express carrier company in Great Britain, Parceland Worldwide, senior executives have developed a corporate story that is designed to communicate the business plan and motivate its personnel to meet the firm's objectives. The storytelling approach would humanize the strategy, make the business plan easy to remember, and help generate practical ideas that would help improve productivity (Jackson and Esse, 2006). Organizations use words to define themselves to the market and also to their own organization. In 2006, Blair noted a few companies that do so. FedEx has a long mission statement that is conveyed through words and storytelling. Wendy's and Nike use words and storytelling as a way to convey their mission statements. If you are convinced that you would like to use stories in your company, Blair notes a few elements to keep in mind:

- Be clear about what you want to explore through story
- Make sure that everyone's story can be told
- Decide how you will elicit the stories
- Consider how some of the stories can be told to the whole group
- Take time to process the stories
- Consider the types of stories you want
- Believe in the power of the stories

Storytelling improved the ability of English Nature to share and reuse knowledge from its constituents through the use of reverse-storytelling and listening skills when working with farmers, landowners and partner organizations. English Nature armed with an ever-growing arsenal of teaching and springboard stories understands the power of the story (Donaldson, 2005). Harris and Barnes (2005) say stories can entertain, teach, delight, frighten, or inspire. They are tools of leadership. Stories can reach across boundaries of culture, profession, and age. Storytelling is effective in leadership. If a company is trying to improve conditions, to inspire employees to work harder and longer, or to communicate a complex idea in a clear and powerful way, the solution is to tell stories.

Strategic management also uses storytelling as a tool to enhance communication. Applied correctly, storytelling can do more than inform employees about an initiative; it can add context and encourage acceptance. According to Snowden (2001) story is a very powerful tool; it's the most sustainable of communication techniques. It's not just about communication, it's about understanding a corporate culture and providing a means whereby real learning and innovation takes place.

### The Verdict

Could the application of storytelling be a useful component of knowledge management? Yes, storytelling could be very useful in knowledge management, and for some companies has proven to be a very worthwhile investment. *Why* would storytelling be a good tool in knowledge management? Storytelling could be useful in knowledge management because it makes information meaningful, makes tacit knowledge more explicit, and puts information into more natural learnable chunks. *How* can storytelling be used in knowledge management? Committees can be assembled in organizations with the objective of getting the tacit knowledge and making it more explicit. Storytelling techniques can be used to convey the usual facts and figures to make them more meaningful and easier to learn.

Current research says that storytelling could potentially have a very valuable impact on business, but more companies need to try using it and report on their successes and/or difficulties with it. Although there were no reports of unsuccessful attempts at implementing stories into knowledge management, it cannot be assumed that there were no unsuccessful attempts. Storytelling as a means to understand the world and to spread information has a

long and rich history, it is and it is highly likely we will see this trend in learning and teaching making headlines as the latest and greatest tool in knowledge management.

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