



Tell me a story

Jacqui Kempton

Professional
development services
officer
jacqueline.kempton@alia.org.au

Countless groups around the world share their tribal, cultural, environmental and family histories through story telling. Many Australians would equate this type of handing down of knowledge to the story telling of the aboriginal people of Australia, yet on closer examination, no matter what your ancestry, you may find that it is an activity that you partake in more often than you think.

With greater volumes of communication travelling via e-mail and telephone in the global economy, face-to-face meetings are often costly and difficult due to time differences, distances and even language barriers. However, valuable information may be lost in many organisations when employees move on and take with them precious tacit knowledge — the 'stuff' in their heads that is not written down in a folder or recorded on a database.

Think back to the last morning tea banter, kitchen chat or passageway conversation that you had with a colleague. Do they work in the same department as you? Did you gather valuable information from them through a chance meeting? Or was it just nice to catch up after your Christmas holidays? Whatever the outcome of your meeting, you have strengthened an informal network, one that may come in handy in the future when you need that vital piece of information for your next project.

No matter how hard we try,

no matter how large the 'knowledge economy' becomes, can we replace the snippets of information we glean from stories that are told within an organisation? In 'The power of voice', an article written for the e-magazine *Knowledge Management* by Victoria Ward and Kim Sbarcea, it is acknowledged that 'there is a growing recognition that sharing knowledge is essentially a social activity, that knowledge has a social life and therefore operates beyond formal organisational structures.'

Ward and Sbarcea go on to explain how apart from being a valuable tool for the transmission of knowledge and culture, the telling of stories can be a valuable learning experience. As both the storyteller and an audience member, we can learn about our own reactions, test out ideas in a small, secure group and boost our self-esteem. Participating in the telling of stories also allows us to practice our listening skills, and as a storyteller, our public speaking skills. In addition, we are contributing to the culture of our organisations, sharing our knowledge and knowing that we are passing on skills and techniques to our colleagues.

So, next time you need to give a presentation, report on your latest project, or train some of your staff in a new skill, consider the use of storytelling. Take note of the passing conversations, water cooler 'gossip' and morning tea banter in your work and social situations and realise the importance and application of storytelling in today's world. Learning to distinguish between 'a good yarn' and a valuable story is essential however. A story must have purpose and be applicable to the audience or it becomes nothing more than an entertaining tale. ■

The three steps to a good story:

1. Relate an incident to the audience. Don't make it too lengthy or detailed, just enough information to ensure comprehension.
2. Lead to a point!
3. Link your story to the subject matter. The story that you tell is irrelevant, providing that you link it to the subject at hand.

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