

## The greatest story ever told

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**IBM has taken its cue from the methods of passing down ancient legends via storytelling to distribute knowledge to its 100,000 employees around the world.**

*By Kim Sbarcea*

Throughout the history of mankind, ancient cultures have used story telling to teach and transmit knowledge about historical generations and a society's culture. Metaphors have been used to create a profound understanding of the set of values and common culture integral to the survival of a society.

The Christian religion is based on story, perhaps the greatest story ever told. The parables of Jesus Christ contained in the New Testament, and the story of Christ's life, death and resurrection, transmitted and reinforced common stories and values which have become the foundation of Western society and history. .

The stories of Mulla Nasrudin have echoed throughout the Middle East from medieval times. The Australian Aboriginal culture use Dreamtime legends to record and hand down through generations complex meanings and knowledge.

The human capability to tell stories that entertain and teach is an old skill which is being rediscovered by organisations. This rediscovery has been strongly driven by the rapid growth of virtual communities in cyberspace.

Within organisations and on the Internet, chat rooms and email have made modern communication more personal, immediate and conversational. Many of the characteristics of oral cultures are re-emerging. Through storytelling, an organisation has the power to create its own stories which can help to define its culture and psyche.

One of the professionals at the forefront of the art and use of storytelling in organisations is Dave Snowden of IBM Global Services. As the UK-based director of the Institute for Knowledge Management for Europe, Middle East and Africa, Mr Snowden is responsible for guiding ongoing research into storytelling skills and using these skills within IBM and externally with clients.

The knowledge management (KM) market is a very lucrative one with analysts expecting the market to grow to \$4.5 billion in 2000. Mr Snowden is cynical but accurate when he says that KM has attracted a feeding frenzy from technology vendors and "hot topic vultures" which breed in large corporations.

The potential danger is that investment in KM will go towards supporting what Mr Snowden believes is a fundamentally flawed model, that of the organisation as a well-oiled machine which identifies prescriptive models and efficient behaviours that can be rolled out consistently and reused.

This model ignores the fact that companies are like ecologies - unique and ever-evolving environments made up of interdependent and often irrational relationships which respond to changing circumstances. The mechanistic model has little time for stories about mistakes, bad management or anything humiliating or unflattering to the organisation and senior management.

But to Mr Snowden, it is often the "bad" story, the one about lost business or business which the company could have done without, that is the most valuable for corporate learning.

## **ANTHROPOLOGY TECHNIQUES**

Within IBM Global Services, storytelling has a rich history and is used to disclose knowledge. Mr Snowden tells the story of how staff from the Knowledge and Differentiation Program (K&DP), founded in 1997 at IBM, worked in a joint team with IBM staff responsible for international bids.

Using techniques derived from anthropology, such as observation, the task was a major lessons learned project with the aim being to improve international bid effectiveness. A series of workshops selected a number of previous projects and assembled the original bid teams for these projects.

A facilitator was appointed to each team and relaxed the group to the point where the real story of the bid process started emerging. Mr Snowden said he believes that it is critical to prevent the teams from telling their story in a linear time sequence as we often impose a pseudo-rational model on the past with the benefit of hindsight. For successful teams, this could mean downplaying luck and serendipity and emphasising good planning; for an unsuccessful team, the reverse could apply.

Observers sat with the teams and noted every decision made or implied by the stories. Decision information flow diagrams were produced which pinpointed decision clusters and participants were asked, "When you made that decision, what knowledge was needed?". The result of the workshops was a model of the decision process and associated information flows for a bid, along with a central register of supporting knowledge assets.

As Mr Snowden pointed out, the use of storytelling in this example elicited knowledge disclosure which may not have been revealed by standard interview or questionnaire techniques. Storytelling allowed the exploration of "might-have-been" scenarios as well as what actually happened.

A far greater range of knowledge was available for exploration; not just the knowledge that individuals used, but also knowledge that might have been used.

Some manipulation can be introduced to the workshop environment. For example, asking a successful team to construct a story of failure will identify points where a minor change would have resulted in an alternative outcome for that team and more knowledge assets might be revealed. This technique may also prevent successful teams from ignoring the role luck may have played.

An alternative would be to have unsuccessful teams construct stories of success, as Mr Snowden firmly believed that failure is often a more valuable corporate lesson.

He suggested videotaping a story workshop and identifying the knowledge disclosure points such as judgement, decisions and problem resolutions, as observers are prone to distorting what they see and hear.

## **VALUE IN STORIES**

A further illustration of the successful use of storytelling within IBM concentrates on the value of stories in communicating knowledge. Training is often difficult within a large corporation,

particularly if there are more than 100,000 professional staff needing to be trained on common products as with IBM.

Conducting training in a physical setting is not always practical but moving towards a virtual environment also carries its own problems such as the loss of intimacy and "one to one" relationships. Storytelling was used in the IBM internal training program by capturing the anecdotes used by trainers in existing non-virtual courses. The underlying values and unarticulated rules of behaviour implied by the anecdotes were identified and extracted and these were checked against the organisation's desired values and rules.

A soap opera format was then constructed using archetypal characters. Scenes from the story were used at the start of each training module which was delivered as a voice recording with a single narrator and reinforced by cartoons. As Mr Snowden noted, participants increased the speed with which they went through the training modules; the cartoons and subtext improved their comprehension of the training messages; and participants wanted to know what happened next to the characters!

Think of your own organisation. Is there a lack of storytelling which may imply a controlled environment? Is there a story about your CEO who, like the CEO of Amazon.com, sits in a cubicle rather than an office, thereby transmitting the story of equality and reducing costs?

The most important thing Mr Snowden will tell you is that knowledge is always volunteered; it cannot be conscripted. People will share knowledge in trusted environments and shifting your organisation towards a volunteer community is not an easy task. You will still need to meet the demands, expectations and measures of the old mechanical model, but during the transition you have the opportunity to be involved in the creation of a new way of thinking.

Storytelling is a vital part of this new way of thinking - it is a natural and low cost knowledge disclosure mechanism.

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### ***Acknowledgements***

This article first appeared in IDM on 1/3/2000.