

The Art of Story – “An Ancient Tool for Modern Projects”

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Abstract

In our modern fast paced society, technology has given us so many new ways to share information with tools such as email, smartphone, social media and skype and so many reasons not to take time out to *reflect*. Too often we communicate electronically, we tabulate, we diarise, we list, we number, we bullet point, however too seldom in the modern world do we engage in face to face informal discussions where we share *knowledge*, too seldom do we *reflect*. We sit bolt upright in uncomfortable chairs around rectangular tables, in dull grey vinyl boardrooms and we recite line by line information in the form of meeting minutes which have been on the agenda for weeks. Are we engaged? Are we actively listening? Do we remember anything when we walk out of the room? Do we take this explicit invaluable *knowledge* and use it to add value to our work for decades to come? In my experience, I would say no and that a large percentage of this *knowledge* and lessons learnt is lost in translation. The paper I have written talks about how we can improve the way we *practice* Project Management through reflection, and how art of storytelling can be used as a tool for modern Projects. In addition, I explore how we can become more powerful leaders by using *story* as a way to *reflect*, share knowledge and get our message across, it has been said that if “*a picture is worth a thousand words, a story is worth a thousand pictures*” (Dan Pink). It is this improved *practice* of leadership through reflection and storytelling which will improve *performance* at an individual, project and organisational level.

Introduction

In recent years I have been involved with several, large scale technical and complex projects. Some have been very well planned and others not so much, however they all share similar characteristics which are people. The very nature of people is complex because of the many diverse personalities we encounter from day to day and the vast amounts of data and information available and the shortage of knowledge required to deal with this complexity and control projects these days. In my experience as a Project Manager, some of the biggest issues we face are associated with leadership, knowledge & people. For example, people move from one project or one organisation to the next to start on a new project, sometimes mid-way through a project when the organisation realises that they have under resourced the job (again) and the new people have to hit the ground running with little project knowledge. This is not to say that information is not available because today there is an abundance of information, we are talking specifically about information which can be used which is knowledge or in simple terms, “knowing” how as opposed to “knowing what”. Now these issues are of a social nature so in order to effectively manage them we need a social solution which is leadership. Good leaders bring people together, they connect and engage with people and are able to share, acquire and transfer knowledge quickly. When I think about all the great leaders over the years, Winston Churchill or Abraham Lincoln for example, they are

all good storytellers who use spoken word to communicate (I guess the options were limited in those days). These people were not tweeting messages to win the hearts of a nation, they were telling stories. Thinking about these kinds of leaders it is impossible to ignore the power of story and how it can be applied to project management today. How storytelling can be used as a tool for leaders to critically reflect on their own performance and lessons learnt in order to improve performance or use story to empower themselves and others because stories excite people, capture imaginations and require active listening. *“The right intentions combined with a truthful and engaging story create the spark that ignites performance”* (Wortmann, 2006)

Body

Imagine sitting around a rectangular table and having meetings minutes recited to you in a dull low monotone voice for hours on end or staring at power point slides filled with and with information that is not relevant to you. Now imagine sitting around in a circle on cushions by the campfire, watching the flames change shape, feeling the heat from the fire on your cheeks and sharing stories filled with metaphors, humour, memories and magic. Which would you prefer and will you listen more carefully to the power point presenter or the storyteller? To give some context to my discussion I would like to reflect on a real project experience. I have been involved with several challenging projects over the years and in particular one project stands out which had leadership issues affecting the performance of people and therefore the project. The project was a large, high profile, complex and technical in nature and a bold undertaking by a growing organisation on a mission. The organisation had limited resources and knowledge to deliver the project so began to recruit heavily to build a team. At the time this seemed to be a solution to the resource problem, however we only realised that was an incorrect assumption at a later date when the project was not performing which was too late. Some of the issues were build quality, delayed programme and in particular client confidence (Or lack thereof) because they had many unanswered questions and continued to witness a team that had lost their way. To counteract these issues the organisation followed their reactive instincts (as opposed to reflective instincts) and employed yet another external person brought in from industry, this individual was several hundred thousand dollars per annum and was to be the saviour of the project and the organisation but ultimately led to its failure. The individual was highly intelligent, reclusive, had many years' experience in a technical role and could rattle off data and information on queue. So after several weeks and then months I remember that the project performance had not improved at all, the individual in question had all the qualifications and all the experience locked away inside their mind but no way to share it with the team, this knowledge could be described as tacit or *unspoken* (thesaurus.com entry). Amidst a flurry of emails, text, tables, minutes, confusion and a project leader locked away in an office with the door closed the team still had no direction, no motivation or vision and the project continued to underperform, things were going from bad to worse – there was no effective leadership, in fact there was no leadership at all. To set the scene a little further it should be noted that there were actually more resources than actually required, we had an engineer for every package and a site supervisor for every engineer, the organisation just kept employing more people! Looking back the issue was not that these

people had no capability, they had no *leadership*, they did not have a clear directive and their strengths were not exploited nor used to benefit the project or empower the leader. An example that comes to mind is around an African woman, who had several multi-billion dollar project experiences as a construction professional however due to perceived cultural, language and social barriers she was not utilised. This poor individual was placed in a corner into a task based role and her talents completely wasted. This woman could have had a profound impact on the project if only the leader had empowered her to her full potential, this one of many similar examples ingrained in my psyche from this project.

This is where storytelling, an ancient art form, could have been used as a reflective tool to improve leadership. If only the senior leader on the project had the awareness to reflect at the end of each day, identifying what went well and what did not and improving practice at each iteration. For example, leaders today are in the age of information but not always information which can be used, it is critical to choose the right method of communication as a leader which will connect and empower the team. Choosing to lead with a story can paint a picture which will have people thinking long after the meetings and lunchroom conversations are over. The Australian Storytellers Guild (www.storytelling.org.au) describes storytelling as the “Oldest oral art” which was the only form of communication which taught us who we are, where we came from and how to interact with each other. In the book “The leaders guide to storytelling”, Stephen denning talks about the power and influence leaders can gain by using narrative, some of these examples are listed below with my interpretation of how they could have been applied to my example project to create an improved outcome (sorry about the bullet points);

Benefits –

Stories improve Leadership

- Building trust through communicating who we are, for example telling a story about a turning point in our lives with an optimistic message. *The leader of the project could have connected with the African lady this way which might have instigated a story about all the major projects she had worked on making the leader aware of her talents.*
- Getting people to work together collaboratively, using narrative and discussion to connect people and build teams. *The leader could have used this method to bring people together on the project.*
- Acquiring and exchanging knowledge through story to empower team and individuals. *This would ensure that all available talent is being exploited for the best performance.*
- Sharing our vision through story and creating a shared commitment from the team. *Use this for motivation and getting everyone aligned with the organisational and project vision.*
- Stories require active critical listening as the listener must consider the meaning of the story and make sense of it which forces the listener into a state of active thinking. *This would have empowered the leader by engaging their audience.*

- Stories encode information turning it into explicit or findable knowledge which is shared with the team. *The leader can use this to share their wealth of knowledge by making it into tangible artefacts which can be put into practice by the team.*
- Stories are dynamic, stories can change to suit the context based on different interpretations. *This leader can adapt their story to suit the context or audience without changing the message.*
- Codified information without findability is a waste, so codify information through story so it can be shared and not lost. (Codified describes the transformation of information into knowledge.) *A means for the leader to exchange information in a way that the team will understand and be able to use to improve performance.*

Storytelling as a reflective tool

In the book “Strategic use of stories in organisation communication and learning” Terence Garguilo talks about some tools and techniques which demonstrate how story can be used for reflection and learning, some of these are listed below followed by my own interpretations;

- We can reflect on our experiences by reliving them through story, this could be described as walking through the feelings, emotions, sight and smell of the time. *The leader could have used this as a daily exercise for ongoing reflection and performance improvement.*
- We enter our past experience as a bystander, thus creating our own interpretation, our own unique story. *A way to find a story to share knowledge.*
- Story is a tool for thinking, like a dream where we relive the images and sensations to find meaning. We use stories as reflective mirrors to bounce our thoughts off into different perspectives. *The leader would use this to promote collaboration and open discussion in the team.*
- Stories create an environment of sharing, we share lessons learnt and learn from others through story. *This is critical so that we don't keep making the same mistakes and re-inventing new knowledge which is already available in the team because knowledge is expensive.*

Storytelling as model for reflection –

During recent discussions and an academic lecture with one of the top knowledge practitioners in NASA we explored a couple of models and approaches to tell a story, the most effective and simple interpretation that I remember is the 5 step model described below,

1. Problem – What are the challenges?
2. Situation – What is it we were trying to do?
3. Approach – What direction did I take?
4. Outcome – What went well, what did not?
5. Lessons – How will I do this better next time?

I use this model as a simple way to reflect by asking myself 5 simple questions. I find that by asking myself questions it draws out answers I would not have known. This method is fun,

encourages reflection and instigates other stories. EM Forster the writer once said, “*How do I know what I think until I hear what I say?*” This sums up the process of active listening to ourselves and making sense of what we say. The leader of my example project could have used this model as a simple tool to promote reflection. This could be put up on the wall in the office somewhere for all to see.

Implications –

Storytelling is very effective however it is a social process and does come with some implications. For example, if we are ignorant and do not have the capacity or willingness to build relationships and share knowledge we might find it difficult. If we are shy and reclusive it might be hard. Although while it might be harder for some it is not impossible, humans have been telling stories for thousands of years, it is not something that is nurtured or taught it is nature as in the ability exists naturally in human beings and only improves the more we practice. If we use story as a tool and practice we will eventually get better. Stephen Denning talks about storytelling being contagious and occurring naturally in social settings and how telling a story can spark others who share a similar passion. In his book, *Secret language of leadership*, he also mentions how this informal, social setting of storytelling can get people from diverse cultural backgrounds work together. He talks about how people differ in values but through story can find values that they share. This concept would have helped the leader of my example project to get the best out of the Talented, Female, African, Construction Professional. In addition, storytelling is profoundly social therefore best shared in an informal setting like over coffee, a meal or in the hallway however unfortunately these informal settings are not always permitted in organisations or on projects. In addition, conflict can also hinder and restrict the available opportunities to share story, if there is tension between two parties the story might never get started, as professional’s we need to have the ability to rise above it and maintain open lines of communication with people at all times.

Conclusion

So to conclude my reflection I’d like to consider how the art of story could have improved performance at an individual, project and organisational level. At an individual level the Senior Project Manager would have been able to become a much better leader by reflecting on their own performance. They would have had much more power and influence by connecting with each individual which could have sparked the kind of performance required to deliver the project successfully. “*Stories connect everyone in every society*” (Ed Hoffman, NASA)

At the project level, I believe the project would have been higher performing and more productive if the leader had shared the relevant knowledge (with the team) required to deliver a complex technical project which would have meant not having to employ so many staff, saving money. In addition the client could have benefited from keeping informed on progress and key project issues (even if some of the information was a little creative).

At an organisation level, the use of story would promote a “story culture” within the wider organisation which in turn drives a culture of knowledge sharing and reflection. I honestly believe that this project could have been successful if the art of story was used.

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