

Crafting Anecdote-Eliciting Questions

Eliciting anecdotes is at the heart of any narrative-based project. Encouraging people to volunteer their much loved stories hinges on creating a safe environment, establishing trust and asking effective questions. The following guide describes how to craft good questions which will call forth an enthusiastic story-filled response.

These steps should be conducted by the core team.

Step 1—confirm the objectives of the anecdote elicitation exercise

Narrative projects typically have one or more themes. For example, a project might be interested in leadership or how trust affects decision-making. It is important to keep the project objectives broad to extract the widest set of anecdotes and avoid a specific hypothesis.

Example project objectives include:

- How does trust affects decision-making?
- How do our leaders operate?
- Does staff understand how their efforts contribute to generating value to the business?

Step 2—create the language used by the participants

The questions should be phrased in the language of the people who will be asked the questions.

If, for example, the project objective is, “How do our leaders operate?”

You would brainstorm the words staff use for leaders. This might include roles such as:

Team lead	Manager	SME
Partner	Bid manager	Band 10
Executive	Senior management group	Advisors

Use these words in your questions.

You might also brainstorm example of what leaders do in the organisation.

Step 3—use emotional words in the question

Eliciting anecdotes rests on the questioner’s ability to help people remember their past. Past events are frequently linked with strong emotions and using emotional words help people to conjure those memories.

Here are some emotions you can use in your questions—where possible select the more extreme version. Think of these emotions from a personal perspective; for example, imagine prefacing the questions with a phrase like: when have you felt ...

frustrated	excited	proud	pity
elated	joyous	despondent	rage
angry	confident	courageous	remorse
exhausted	nervous	accepted	sad
awed	depressed	disgusted	surprise
timid	fearful	embarrassed	worried
disappointed	shocked	amused	unhappy
kindness	friendship	happy	respect
honoured	hopeful	jealous	appreciated
stressed	relaxed	close	distant

Step 4—building the question

According to Michael Wilkinson¹, people remember events when they can see an image reminding them of situations. Combine this idea with the idea of adding emotion and you have the two building blocks to craft good questions.

As suggested by Wilkinson, first start with an image-building phrase:

“Think about ...”

“Imagine ...”

“If ...”

“Consider ...”

For example,

Think about a time when you were provided advice from your manager.

Add an additional sentence or two to enhance the image.

This might have been done formally in the office or perhaps outside the formal environment.

Then add the open question with the emotive words.

When have you been despondent, elated or perhaps just surprised by what you were told?

Notice there is a spectrum of emotions which increases the chances of a memory being triggered by the question.

¹ (Wilkinson 2004)

Some additional thoughts to consider

After asking the opening questions the facilitator, especially in an anecdote circle, should rely on the group to trigger memories. If a facilitator asks too many questions the session turns into an interview.

In my white paper, *How to use stories to size up a situation*², I point out how ‘when’ and ‘where’ questions are more effective in eliciting anecdotes than ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions, which tend to draw out judgements and opinion. When crafting your open questions, emphasise the ‘when’ and ‘where’ questions.

Callahan, Shawn D. *How to use stories to size up a situation*. Anecdote Pty Ltd 2005
[cited 14 March 2005. Available from
http://www.anecdote.com.au/papers/Narrative_to_size_up_situation.pdf.]
Wilkinson, Michael. 2004. *The Secrets of Facilitation*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

² (Callahan 2005)