



■ BY SHAWN CALLAHAN

**Getting workers to tell anecdotes about how they work and who they work with can dig a lot deeper than regular interviews and surveys.**

# Telling it like it is

**“Y**ou ought to be here when Miss McDermott is expected on a visit. The bosses run around like mad all day making sure the place is spotless. Last time they even threw the mops away in their panic, they didn’t have time to put them away... They never dare open their mouth [in the presence of Miss McDermott]. It’s Gill from school meals who does all the talking.”

It’s a workplace anecdote. A worker is talking about their life at work, about how they get things done, who they work with and the like. But it’s more than casual conversation. The worker is providing organisational narrative—a valuable supplement to the traditional approach to interviews and surveys.

The anecdotes collected remain confidential, so here’s another published example.

“When all the odds are against me, you know, I’m trying to help this consumer and everybody is saying no you can’t have an engineer. I won’t let anything go, because I get onto it and go on and on, and then I will start going up the line higher, and eventually somebody will listen and then the job gets done; and somebody rings up and says ‘I’m happy’ and then I put the phone down and

I think ‘Hurrah, we have done it!’ But then why is it necessary to go through all this trouble? It is more of a challenge then and I get more excited.”

Collecting workplace stories like these enables a rich tapestry to emerge reflecting the messy complexity of organisational life.

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Organisational narrative is not storytelling, which is primarily concerned with creating stories to persuade in some way. Instead, it seeks to reveal the true values and themes in operation.

While the stories can be autobiographical or about colleagues, they are always told from the teller’s perspective. They can be quite short, like the ones above, or extend for a number of paragraphs. The transcripts are of the language as spoken, without modification.

Traditional interviews and surveys have their limitations. The questions assume a hypothesis and you tend to find what you are looking for. People rationalise their answers

when asked for their opinion; the messiness of our day-to-day activities is quickly tidied to provide neat answers. People provide the answers that are on the top of their mind, and the questions provide minimal context. How many times have you answered a survey and thought, “It depends”?

As a member of the Cynefin Centre, we have used the “anecdote circle” technique it pioneered to collect thousands of anecdotes across a wide range of organisations. They are collected around broad themes of interest, and insights invariably appear. Every time, we are surprised by what we discover.

The techniques recognise that modern organisations are highly connected, fast-paced and, consequently, complex. Surveys and interviews assume possible solutions and the questions are crafted to explore these assumptions. Working with narrative is more open-ended, allowing for the unexpected.

A project on a company’s ageing workforce

illustrates the point. In researching why people left the company, it developed a view that accorded with the Gen-X stereotype that younger employees are unlikely to pursue a career and stay long-term.

But anecdotes collected from younger employees found the opposite. The organisation had unknowingly developed a strong sense of identity among them and long-term careers were considered desirable.

Perhaps more importantly, the anecdotes became powerful communication devices in convincing senior management of this new perspective. The evidence of anecdotes from the shop floor or frontline can be difficult to argue against.

Normal interviews and surveys don't have to be abandoned. They can work effectively in conjunction with organisational narrative. A traditional survey might highlight a potential problem area, such as pinpointing dissatisfied employees. Narrative can then be used to get a richer understanding of the issue, especially if it is complex.

Conversely, narrative can be the starting point, with interviews and surveys used to drill into an issue. The two approaches go hand-in-hand.

The capturing of anecdotes is called the discovery phase. The Cynefin Centre has developed a complete method and range of ways of eliciting anecdotes such as naïve interviews, anecdote interviews, participative observation and future backwards.

Discovery is followed by sense-making, where themes, values and archetypes are extracted and the results are used to understand the nature of the issues the organisation faces.

The final step is intervention design where complexity principles are applied to develop a range of interventions.

**My first anecdote** circle remains a vivid memory. In developing a knowledge strategy for a scientific organisation, eight natural resource scientists were brought together to record their stories. The theme was research funding and the opening question was "When have you been most frustrated or elated in gaining research funds?"

There was a deafening silence. I held my nerve and said nothing, and to my great relief,

## Story upon story poured forth and, when I wrapped up the session, they adjourned to the pub to continue the conversation.

the grey-haired fellow on my right took a deep breath and said, "Oh alright then, I'll go first." He told of how he had to manipulate the system to receive his last funding grant. After that, the group was relentless. Story upon story poured forth and, when I wrapped up the session, they adjourned to the pub to continue the conversation.

This was a typical anecdote circle, with no more than 10 people sharing common experiences. They either perform the same role, had worked on projects together, or formed part of the same cohort of up to 150 people within the organisation. They were peers who demonstrated an important dynamic of anecdote circles: by hearing the stories of colleagues, they remembered their own stories. All it took was an environment conducive to storytelling. It was just like a good dinner party discussion.

The facilitator's role is instrumental. They pose the questions to get the circle started, but must be careful not to turn it into a group interview. The circle is working if the group is telling each other stories rather than telling them to the facilitator. The facilitator must minimise their own impact as much as possible and be careful not to lead the group.

This is different from a focus group, which is more concerned with opinions and judgments than anecdotes. Whenever the facilitator hears someone state their opinion, they must jump in and ask, for an example, for their experience—an anecdote. Groups quickly become self-regulating. Someone in the group might remind a colleague, "Yes, that's your opinion, but what would be an example?"

Simply asking people to tell stories rarely results in stories being told. The participants are unsure what is meant. It is better to ask questions like, "When have you been most frustrated or elated?" or "Tell me about the good old days and how it is different now?" These types of questions immediately conjure stories because they provide an emotional hook for recalling the past.

There is also an intriguing paradox to consider: if you force the truth, you get lies, and if you allow lies, you get the truth. The content of the stories is less important than the meaning they convey. We frequently encourage people to tell the experiences of their colleagues—"Yes, this wouldn't happen to you, but do you know of anyone it has happened to?"

**Anecdote circle techniques** include timelines, "ditting" and alternative histories.

Timelines are a great way to get a circle going. The facilitator draws a timeline and asks people to place events on it in relation to the theme being investigated. For example, in a lessons project, you might mark out the project's key events and ask for stories around each one.

Ditting is the natural phenomenon of story one-upmanship. One person tells their story,

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and another person has a better one, and so it goes. Ditting should be encouraged because it creates significant energy in the group and is a natural story generator. Listen for boastful or slightly unbelievable stories and then ask, "Can anyone do better than that?"

With alternative histories, the group is asked to identify turning points and tell the story as if an alternative scenario unfolded.

Each technique is designed to foster as many anecdotes as possible and provide alternative perspectives.

The logistics of anecdote circles are simple. Each session runs in a room for 60–90 minutes and is recorded. The audio files are sent to a transcription company and returned

to the project team in word-processing format. The anecdotes are taken from the transcripts ready for follow-on workshop activities (sense-making and intervention design).

Individual stories are not analysed. Rather, they are all considered together in an innovative workshop environment to make sense of the macro patterns that emerge.

The most common mistake for new facilitators is the compulsion to ask question upon question, turning the anecdote circle into an interview. Facilitators must be patient, resisting the urge to fill silences with another question, and be ready to rapidly change tack. If a question doesn't resonate, a simpler question, such as "How long have you been

in your current role?", might make the group more comfortable with the process.

Every now and then a group will get stuck and be unable to recall stories. This is the time to get someone to draw a timeline and ask people to single out important events so new stories will emerge.

Another common mistake is to include people from multiple levels in an organisation's hierarchy. The reason for this guideline was made clear in one anecdote circle where the managing director joined. While one of the junior staff was retelling an experience, the managing director blurted "That's not what happened!" Everyone clammed up and the session was effectively over.

**Organisational narrative** techniques have been used on a wide range of themes including knowledge strategy, occupational health and safety, ageing workforce, trust, cash economy and innovation. In each case, they have revealed insights that were unlikely to be discovered using traditional techniques.

Through the stories we tell each other, narrative taps into our ability to deal with the grey and complex issues that are the very real concerns of business.

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