Storytelling: The most basic form of knowledge management

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This post [2] by Rebecca Shore [3] originally appeared on the K4Health Project [4] website. Shore writes about the power of storytelling and how it resonates with the receiver of knowledge. Storytelling is especially salient for KM approaches in the ASSIST Project as facility-level teams aim to learn from each others' successes in the implementation of an improvement activity.

Knowledge management (KM) is something that helps all of us do our jobs. Whether we identify it as KM, the processes by which we organize, disseminate, package, and share information is KM. As a public health professional, before I worked for the K4Health project, I had never considered KM or really knew what it meant. Storytelling always appealed to me as a communicator, but I never considered it as a KM method.

In fact, Ma and Keppell (2004) [5] explain, “stories are a fundamental form of knowledge and communication and are particularly suited to knowledge management.” It makes me think back to before writing when history was transmitted through stories. Much of what we learn and pass on at work or institutional memory comes from stories colleagues or supervisors tell us. Stories are also extremely important to getting the message out about our work. Though storytelling in itself is KM and an important process to the KM life cycle, it is also a great means for helping explain what KM is.

Being a better storyteller can mean being better at KM. Telling a good story can mean the difference between a message actually being heard or not. The Knowledge Sharing toolkit [6] goes over many different KM applications for storytelling such as problem solving, trip and project debriefs and even monitoring systems. So we know it’s important, but how do we make storytelling more of a norm at our project and organizations?

Recently I attended a session at this year’s NTEN conference [7] where Amanda Hirsch of Good Things Consulting [8] and Gregory Foster of Consumers Union [9] spoke on this very concept in “Cultivating a culture of storytelling at your organization.” In this session, the presenters spoke more about how an organization can tell its story. Though more about communications than KM, the session did cover some great ideas for including storytelling into all the things you do to make it a more natural part of the work that you and organization does.

One really interesting question that was echoed a couple of times during the presentation was about how you get technical or program people to do storytelling? In the world I work in this can be a challenge. A great way to share the findings of the work we do in-country is to share stories. Often the people in those countries are overburdened with work and don’t have the time or feel empowered enough to tell stories. Hirsch explained a few ways to get them to tell their stories:

1. Find ways to collect their stories for them, for example a questionnaire or interview.
2. Use standing meetings to get updates that can then be turned into a story.
3. Explain the real value of storytelling.
Another idea that was really interesting to creating this culture of storytelling was to include a storytelling element to every team meeting. This will make storytelling more normal. For example, having a few minutes set aside each meeting for someone to tell a quick story. Telling a story is not hard, but telling a good story can be a challenge. Another way to get more people on board is to find an important ally—someone people look up to who is enthusiastic about storytelling at your organization.

Creating a culture of storytelling within your organization will allow you do great KM as well as better explain who you are and what you do. Storytelling used to be one of our only forms of communicating important information. Though not flashy and new, storytelling has value in our society and can have a profound effect on processes in your organization.

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