

The Power of Story

BY JESSICA FOX AND DON COHEN

“I know what I have given you. I do not know what you received.”

When he wrote these words, Antonio Porchia, an Argentinean printing press owner in the 1930s, wasn't thinking about project management. But he articulated a major knowledge-sharing issue that is the source of many project problems: how to communicate our intentions so that the information received is the same as the information given.

One answer is conversation—the back-and-forth of statement, question, and response that gradually brings talkers and listeners to a shared understanding. Stories also offer a way to share knowledge effectively. While the storyteller's intent and the listener's interpretation will not be identical, a good story reliably communicates essential knowledge so it is not only understood but absorbed and embraced.

Narrative is one of the oldest knowledge-transfer systems in the world. Religion knows it. Politicians know it. Fairytales know it. Now, knowledge management practitioners are coming to know it, too. But why are stories such a powerful knowledge-transfer tool? And what kinds of knowledge do they transfer?

Joseph Campbell, the mythologist, defined stories as serving four major functions: the mystical, the cosmological, the sociological, and the pedagogical. The mystical function of narrative lies in its ability to open up emotional realization that often connects with a transcendent idea such as love or forgiveness. He calls this realization “mystical” because it connects the self with the universal.

What Campbell calls the cosmological function of stories relates the self to the outside world, focusing on action, on understanding cause and effect and our role in it. For the cosmological function of stories “to be up to date and really to work in the minds of people who are living in the modern scientific world,” Campbell notes, “it must incorporate the modern scientific world.”* We must continually tell stories that demonstrate our current vision of the world.

The sociological function of stories, Campbell explains, helps maintain and validate the social order of a society. Stories pass on information about power relationships, taboos, laws, and the inner workings of communities. Countries and religions have stories that serve this function and so do organizations and project teams, where stories about project work communicate information about behaviors and attitudes that are expected and rewarded or frowned upon and penalized.

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Functioning pedagogically, says Campbell, narratives guide individuals harmoniously through the stages of life in terms of their world today, with its current goods, values, and dangers. These are stories that deal with life transitions and guide us from one stage to another.

Stories powerfully serve these functions partly because of two great strengths: their ability to engage listeners personally and emotionally and their use of metaphor. And it turns out that these two things are related.

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Because stories almost always tell about a hero or group of people facing a challenge, listeners see the events of the story through those individuals' thoughts and feelings. We tend to identify with the hero and live the story through him or her. Think about the tragedy of the Apollo 1 fire. A lot of essential technical information about what happened was captured in reports that followed the accident. But the *story* of what happened communicates the sorrow, pain, and guilt of the accident, the human failings that contributed to it, the passionate determination of the survivors to do better and to go on. Hearing the story today helps NASA engineers understand their limitations and what's at stake in their work, and it inspires them to work harder and better. Stories get us as close as we can to learning from experience without actually having the experience.

As the interview with storyteller Jay O'Callahan in this issue of *ASK* makes clear, metaphor—images that suggest a range of meaning—makes stories powerful and rich. Metaphor is part of what makes listeners active participants in stories, and they must engage with and interpret these images that work on the show-don't-tell principle. An image that has to be explained, Campbell says, is not working. You would never say, "He was a deer in headlights, and what I mean by that is that he was stunned, scared, and caught unaware."

Metaphor frees us to interpret stories individually. Stories, metaphor, and narrative activate our innate impulse to search

for meaning. As listeners, we play with them like kids on well-constructed jungle gyms. We feel as if we are extracting meaning ourselves, and we are—stories don't force a single, simple conclusion on us. But a good story guides us, so that what we learn is what the story wants to tell us, but adapted to our own needs and interests.

Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* demonstrates the transformative power of living through a story. Ebenezer Scrooge's nephew, Fred, and his employee, Bob Cratchit, try to talk him out of his stinginess to no avail. Even the ghost of his former partner, Jacob Marley, can't convince him to change his ways. Only directly witnessing the drama of his past, present, and future gives Scrooge an emotional understanding of the meaning of his life powerful enough to change him.

Although we are not all so fortunate to have the ghosts of our past, present, and future create a personal holodeck for us to journey through, a good story can come close to giving us a sense of lived experience. The technical information we need to do our work probably comes from other sources, but stories tell us how we work and—even more important—why we work. ●