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Focus

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Sharing Knowledge by Storytelling

Joe had a grand retirement party after 30 years with the company, and everyone celebrated his contributions to the building contractor's success. After retiring, Joe moved ahead and happily spent more time with his grandkids and golf clubs. The company, unfortunately, slipped backwards as its senior managers spent time dealing with unprofitable projects and upset owners, suffering huge cost overruns. Jack, the VP-Operations, realized too late that the person he had selected to replace Joe lacked the detailed knowledge and personal relationships necessary to effectively manage the work Joe had handled. Jack eventually followed Joe out the door, but not by choice.

Companies face two distinct knowledge transfer challenges.

- The first is transferring the wealth of institutional knowledge from older workers to the next generation.
- The second challenge is learning from experience and adapting to a changing environment.

Using narrative – telling stories – is the most effective way to transmit knowledge. Humans have used stories for thousands of years to pass down values, wisdom, and culture. Yet despite this long tradition and our rich storytelling history, people often resort to boring lectures or tinder-dry technical material when what's needed is something memorable. The researcher Gary Klein noted, "We value stories because they are like reports of research projects, only **easier to understand, remember, and use.**"

The knowledge-sharing story is called the workhorse of narrative. When you tell a knowledge-sharing story, you include some details, add creative embellishment, but leave out much of the experience to provide a brief, coherent account that meets the current context.

Knowledge-sharing stories focus on unexpected events because there's no story when everything goes as planned. The artful storyteller adds interest to the tale by including human context because the "human" part of the information transfer is what grabs our attention and helps imprint the lesson in our memory.

Consider which is more effective:

- *This:* "Failure to keep the pressure relief valve unobstructed may result in the loss of air vessel integrity if a compressor overpressure condition

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occurs.”

- *Or this:* “One day me and Jimmy were working on that Clovis job, and we got a call from the project manager saying to spruce things up because the owner was coming to look around. Things were kinda messy, so we jury-rigged that old DoubleBlast compressor with a hose to blow off some trash. All of a sudden we heard a screech and then ka-blooney! That air tank blew up and you should’a seen Jimmy run for cover! I’d never seen him move so fast before! ‘Course if he hadn’t laid that board on the pop-off valve the air tank never would have busted.”

A good story can change the world because it changes a life, often many lives. Moreover, sharing knowledge through stories makes everyone’s time at work better. Tell a story, improve results, and have fun!

Tom Wagner

We help clarify options so our clients
identify the Right Questions
and solve the Right Problems.

Call us at 800 422-1374 to learn more.

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