7.0 Practice Guide – Capability Area #3: Experiential Learning

Informal/Formal Storytelling and Work with Narrative
Tips for using the art of storytelling in an organizational setting

Rationale:

In many government offices, professional communication styles tend to be formal and "business-like." Staff members work with massive amounts of information and cannot always remember or access important material. However, more are beginning to acknowledge and support storytelling as a way of learning and problem-solving. In fact, storytelling can be considered an important business skill to be developed. Why? Because stories are an ancient human communication tool that are common across cultures. People remember stories. Stories can relay grassroots insights, reflections, challenges and potential solutions in memorable ways, setting the stage for problem-solving and learning.

Work with narrative is a key component of the BC Forest Service case study presented in section 3 of the guide.

What is storytelling?

Informal storytelling is particularly effective for complex work. In some situations, stories are shared without any recorded content (e.g., in a lunch-hour worst-practice storytelling session). In others, there may be a retreat where challenge-related stories fold into problem-solving sessions. In others, story elements are captured and mined for patterns and trends (see Practice Guide 2.0, Measuring Success). There is a learning curve, but this work can become much more powerful and cost-effective than some traditional tools such as employee surveys.

Formal stories transmit values and lead people into the future. A story about *values* exemplifies the storyteller's values in action, is relevant to here and now, and is moving and believable. A story that catalyzes *action for the future* is about a positive outcome, captures basic information about direction, and provides context from the past and present. These stories are minimalist, evocative and resonate with listeners.

When?	**What are the benefits?**	**Pitfalls to avoid:**
Can be used as a tool for learning before, during or after Can be particularly helpful when something has changed, when a large initiative is beginning or when something important has been learned	o Leaders convey direction effectively o Specialists help others by sharing lessons learned effectively o Tacit knowledge shared across a larger group o Social networks and social capital strengthened o Environment feels more human, less bureaucratic	o Stories are based on knowledge developed at the top of an organization without adequate input or reflection o The storyteller includes misinformation uses the story primarily for personal power, status or benefit o Stories are part of only a one-way communication culture o Stories lack fit with the culture; some of the roots of discomfort are explored here: http://www2.parc.com/ops/members/brown/storytelling/Intro8-enemies.html

To learn more:

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Wiig, K. M. (2004). *People-Focused Knowledge Management.* Burlington: Elsevier Butterworth-Heinemann.

Bailey, T. (2007, July 17). *Tell Us Your Story: Cultivating an Organizational Storytelling Culture*. Retrieved October 23, 2009, from Slideshare: http://www.slideshare.net/whatidiscover/tell-us-your-story

Cognitive Edge. (n.d.). *Anecdote Circles*. Retrieved October 23, 2009, from Cognitive Edge: http://cognitive-edge.com/method.php?mid=41

Brown, J. S., Denning, S., Groh, K., & Prusak, L. (n.d.). *How we found ourselves in the world of storytelling*. Retrieved October 23, 2009, from Storytelling Passport to the 21st Centrury: http://www2.parc.com/ops/members/brown/storytelling/Intro4a-How-Larry&JSB.html

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Anecdote. (n.d.). *Whitepapers*. Retrieved October 23, 2009, from Putting stories to work: http://www.anecdote.com.au/whitepapers.php