

A practical guide to facilitating storytelling and story listening

The Ultimate Guide to Anecdote Circles



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Warm regards,

Shawn Callahan, Andrew Rixon, and Mark Schenk



Shawn Callahan is one of Australia's most experienced narrative practitioners, with hands-on experience in conducting narrative projects for organisations including IBM, Department of Defence, NAB, Australia Post and BHP Billiton. A consultant and researcher for more than 15 years, Shawn has undertaken learning and change projects on a variety of topics.



Andrew Rixon, PhD, gained his first exposure to story and narrative whilst working in Boston during the dot.com boom (and crash). He found himself hooked after attending some of the first workshops on storytelling conducted by Dave Snowden and Steve Denning at the Institute for Knowledge Management.



Mark Schenk has broad experience in the organisational dynamics, knowledge management and narrative. He is a regular speaker and author on a range of topics relating to KM and narrative, and has completed numerous client projects in these areas. Mark has extensive experience in developing knowledge strategies and in growing and sustaining communities of practice.

How we've arrived here

Storytelling.

Storytelling is a powerful tool for organisations for learning, change, and even evaluation.
We are all storytellers, and organisations are full of stories.

In some ways, there can be nothing more natural than sharing stories and experiences. Just think about what you do when you relax with your family and friends – you share stories. Our work with organisations has taken us on a journey through the systematic use and application of story in organisations. This guidebook for Anecdote Circles is a result of that journey.

As with any journey, there are guides who help to navigate. Our journey into the practice of Anecdote Circles has been influenced and guided by a few key people, including; **Dave Snowden** and **Sharon Darwent** from the Cynefin Centre (now known as Cognitive Edge); **Brian Bainbridge**, with his introduction and continued conversation on open space technology (over yum cha); **Viv McWaters**, with her subtle forms of persuasion to get us involved in improvisation as a way to continue learning about facilitation and story; and finally **Bob Dick**, our wise counsellor in many aspects of narrative techniques.



Anecdote is a consulting firm that specialises in helping organisations to tackle complex problems like organisational change, learning and evaluation using story-based techniques.

What's our purpose?

Stories.

Business people love stories, but most of them just don't know it yet. Luckily, many of the world's leading business thinkers and business leaders point to stories as vital in understanding issues like organisational learning, cultural change, leadership and evaluation.¹⁻⁸

Using story-based approaches assumes one important element: stories. Storytelling is in our nature, but it seems that many of us have lost or forgotten the gentle art of listening to and telling stories, especially in organisations. **How can you elicit stories? How can you help people share their stories? How can you facilitate Anecdote Circles? How can you become a skilled story listener?**

This guide is for anyone wanting to review the ways to foster story listening and storytelling. In particular, we focus on the art and science of running Anecdote Circles. In writing this guidebook we have drawn upon our collective experience running hundreds of Anecdote Circles and

we distil here our practical know-how, which covers the seascape of skills, tricks, tips and exercises useful in running successful, fun and inspiring Anecdote Circles.

For us a seascape is an apt metaphor, because running narrative projects is like navigating an uncharted and unpredictable sea. The end-point is unknowable in detail. We will tack back and forth as we discover new routes and avoid looming disasters. At times it will be exhilarating, while at others it will be uncomfortable, even uneasy. Those on the journey will learn about themselves, their fellow travellers, and the seas that they traverse.

In this guide we will cover the following:

Preparing for the voyage

– Designing and developing story themes and story-eliciting questions

Setting sail

– The physical space, guidelines and the warm-up

The long haul – Being a story listener and supporting the group

Surviving stormy weather

The return – The warm-down.

Why bother with Anecdote Circles?

What's really happening?

Interviews and surveys are no longer sufficient to find out what's really happening in your business. Organisations are becoming more complex every day and, as the number of connections increase, understanding root causes becomes impossible. We need a way to make sense of the messiness we face.

Interviews and surveys typically come laden with pre-determined thoughts of what the investigators might find, and interviewees and survey respondents seem to fall into a mode of response based on what they think the enquirer is wanting to hear.

Stories and anecdotes reflect the messiness, reveal values and beliefs, and when told in a group, create an informal environment of exploration that invariably reveals insights one could never predict from the outset. Anecdote Circles are how we discover these stories. But that is not all.

Anecdote Circles are more than a story-elicitation technique; they are an intervention in themselves. Some might say you shouldn't start to run Anecdote Circles unless you are really serious about change. Once an anecdote circle process is started, the change has already begun.

ANECDOTE CIRCLES CAN BE USED AS A PROCESS:

- to overcome the limitations of traditional interview and survey approaches
- for team and relationship building
- for learning lessons in project teams
- for conflict resolution
- to help collect stories for evaluating intangible, difficult-to-evaluate projects.

The philosophy behind Anecdote Circles

A few words before we embark.

An anecdote circle differs from a focus group in one specific way: there is a lack of focus. Yes, we explore themes, but we are not testing a hypothesis or searching for a single correct answer. An anecdote circle is less concerned with the group's opinions and judgements; rather, it seeks to elicit experiences, anecdotes and stories.

To some, Anecdote Circles may appear like Seth Godin's amusing turn of phrase, 'Yak shaving'.⁹

Yak shaving is the last step of a series of steps that occur when you find something you need to do.

"I want to wax the car today."

"Oops, the hose is still broken from the winter. I'll need to buy a new one at Home Depot."

"But Home Depot is on the other side of the Tappan Zee bridge and getting there without my EZPass is miserable because of the tolls."

"But, wait! I could borrow my neighbor's EZPass..."

"Bob won't lend me his EZPass until I return the mooshi pillow my son borrowed, though."

"And we haven't returned it because some of the stuffing fell out and we need to get some yak hair to restuff it."

And the next thing you know, you're at the zoo, shaving a yak, all so you can wax your car.

Common sense tells us to avoid shaving yaks. While we agree you can waste heaps of time on such sidetracks, there is a time and place for yak shaving: you can discover many useful things on these journeys. Who would have known that pillows can be stuffed with yak hair? And everyone needs a pillow on a journey, right?

Anecdote Circles encourage a semi-controlled yak shaving, and this is their strength. Each anecdote told triggers memories of past events that, in many cases, haven't been thought about for years. The stories, in turn, reveal the values of the tellers and through them the values of the organisation they work in. Yak shaving turns out to be an essential process.



Preparing for the voyage



“The want of a chronometer for the voyage was all that now worried me. In our newfangled notions of navigation it is supposed that a mariner cannot find his way without one; and I had myself drifted into this way of thinking. My old chronometer, a good one, had been long in disuse. It would cost fifteen dollars to clean and rate it. Fifteen dollars! For sufficient reasons I left that timepiece at home, where the Dutchman left his anchor. I had the great lantern, and a lady in Boston sent me the price of a large two-burner cabin lamp, which lighted the cabin at night, and by some small contriving served for a stove through the day.”

Joshua Slocum (1900) ‘Sailing Alone around the World’

As in all expeditions and voyages there is a need for preparation. Preparation provides for those things that we expect to happen during the voyage and helps us deal with surprises. Ironically, **preparation also helps us improvise.**

**IN PREPARING TO RUN AN ANECDOTE CIRCLE
WE TYPICALLY FOCUS ON THREE KEY ASPECTS:**

- Designing effective themes
- Selecting participants and the invitation
- Crafting story- or anecdote-eliciting questions.

Designing effective themes

While Anecdote Circles lack focus, they do have a general direction which is provided by the themes we choose to explore.

We try to keep the number of themes to a minimum, as the discursive nature of the enquiry expands to fill the allotted time. We've found that three or less is a good number for a typical 90-minute anecdote circle. The themes that you choose inform the design of the story-eliciting questions.

SOME EXAMPLES OF THEMES WHICH WE HAVE EXPLORED ARE:

- Staff morale
- Achieving the best from staff
- Risks and rewards
- Workplace safety
- Talent management
- Leadership.

 **Exercise:** To generate a set of themes, invite the project team to individually brainstorm as many issues they can think of that are relevant to the planned investigation. Then assemble the team around a whiteboard and brainstorm, as a group, all the issues of interest. Cluster the issues and name each cluster. These cluster names become the name of the themes.

Selecting participants

An anecdote circle normally sees a group of people (from four to 12) come together to share their experiences around one or more themes.

The participants might have performed the same role in the organisation, worked on projects together, or formed part of a larger cohort of people within the organisation.

These people are often peers.

 **Tip:** It is important that the participants share a common identity or experience. For example, if you are tackling a company-wide issue such as aligning brand and customer service, then you might select people who identify as customer service specialists or people responsible for developing the brand strategy. Conversely, if the boundaries are tight and define a project team, then people who identify with the team should participate. Bringing participants together who are peers can bring an anecdote circle to life. Participants will have a common level of experience and understanding and they will often find their stories sparked to remembrance on hearing the stories of their colleagues.

Diversity is essential for selecting participants.

Ensure the participants consist of a mix of characteristics such as age, gender, length of service, race, role, seniority, cynics and enthusiasts, and influential and well networked participants. As a rule of thumb, aim towards engaging about 10% of the target population in your selected group of participants. Of course this heuristic breaks down as organisations get larger.

 **Anecdote:** It is important to avoid including people in the Anecdote Circles from different levels in an organisation's hierarchy. We remember one anecdote circle in which we included the managing director, his direct reports and a couple of people from the next level down in the hierarchy. In the middle of a junior staff member's retelling of an experience, the managing director blurted out: "That's not what happened!". And with that short outburst, the session was effectively over! Everyone clammed up. It is important to remember that these sessions work best when only peers are present.

The invitation

Ideally it's best to seek volunteers to participate in Anecdote Circles and an open invitation can be effective. The following anecdote circle invitation provides an example of the style of language and content which you might include in preparing an invitation to join and participate in Anecdote Circles.

Sometimes a more directive approach is needed, especially when people are reluctant to 'volunteer' to attend. The style and tone of the invitation can help to encourage and foster interest around the anecdote circle event.

Example invitation

Dear <Name>,
We would like to invite you to join us exploring <theme> by participating in a 90-minute Anecdote Circle scheduled on <date X> at <time Y> and at <venue Z>. This is an important activity for <company name> as it provides an opportunity to explore and share your collective experiences around important issues which will impact the development of <the chosen theme>.

An Anecdote Circle consists of a small group of people gathered to recount experiences around <the chosen theme>. An Anecdote Circle can look and feel much like a dinner party discussion. During the 90-minute Anecdote Circle you will be invited to share your anecdotal experiences with your colleagues across a range of themes that relate to <the chosen theme>.

The experiences you share as a group will remain confidential. The Anecdote Circle will be recorded and transcribed and we will remove any names or other identifying references to honour and preserve your confidentiality.

We hope that you will find this opportunity to share your experiences with your peers enjoyable and insightful. Most of all we hope that you will take this opportunity to help us work towards better understanding the working experience of <project theme>. Your open and honest participation is essential to our success.

For further information about the event or our project, please contact <contact name and number>.

Warm regards,
<name>

Crafting story questions

Collecting anecdotes is at the heart of any narrative-based project. Encouraging people to volunteer their much loved stories hinges on creating a safe environment, establishing trust and asking effective questions. The following four steps describe how to craft good questions that will call forth an enthusiastic story-filled response.

Step 1

Confirm the themes of the anecdote-elicitation exercise.

Keep your themes at the forefront of your mind when developing your questions. Aim to develop two or three story questions for each theme.

Step 2

Use the same language as the participants.

Phrase the questions in the language of the storytellers.

For example, the project objective might be **“How do our leaders really operate?”**.

Brainstorm the words that people commonly use for leaders in the organisation. This might include roles such as:

Team lead	Manager	SME
Partner	Bid manager	Band 10
Executive	Senior management group	Advisors

Use these words in your questions.

You might also brainstorm examples of what you think leaders do in the organisation.

Step 3

Use emotional words in the question.

Eliciting anecdotes rests on the questioner's ability to help people remember their past. People frequently link past events with strong emotions, and using emotional words helps people to conjure those memories. Ensure that you include both ends of the emotional spectrum in the question so as not to influence the direction people choose to answer. For example, don't just ask "When have you felt disappointed?". Rather, ask "When have you felt disappointed or pleasantly surprised?".

Here are some emotions you can use in your questions – where possible select the more extreme version. Pose these emotions from a personal perspective; for example, try prefacing the questions with a phrase like "When have you felt...?".

When have you felt...

frustrated	excited	proud	pity
elated	joyous	despondent	rage
angry	confident	courageous	remorse
exhausted	nervous	accepted	sad
awed	depressed	disgusted	surprise
timid	fearful	embarrassed	worried
disappointed	shocked	amused	unhappy
kindness	friendship	happy	respect
honoured	hopeful	jealous	appreciated
stressed	relaxed	close	distant

Step 4

Build the question.

People remember events when they can picture an image reminding them of a specific situation.¹⁰ Combine this idea with the suggestion of adding emotion and you have the two building blocks to create good questions.

FIRST START WITH AN IMAGE-BUILDING PHRASE:

“Think about...”

“Imagine...”

“If...”

“Consider...”

For example, “Think about a time when you were given advice by your manager.”

ADD AN ADDITIONAL SENTENCE OR TWO TO ENHANCE THE IMAGE:

“This might have been done formally in the office or perhaps outside the formal environment.”

THEN ADD THE OPEN QUESTION WITH THE EMOTIVE WORDS:

“When have you been annoyed, ecstatic or perhaps just surprised by what you were told?”

Notice there is a spectrum of emotions, which increases the chances of a memory being triggered by the question.

 **Tip:** Use ‘when’ and ‘where’ questions. In our paper ‘How to use stories to size up a situation’¹¹ we point out that ‘when’ and ‘where’ questions are more effective in eliciting anecdotes than ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions, which tend to draw out judgements and opinion. When crafting your open questions, put emphasis on the ‘when’ and ‘where’ questions.

Simply asking people to tell stories rarely results in stories being told. In fact people are often confused when you ask for stories, thinking they might have to concoct an event or perhaps demonstrate Hemingway-level storytelling. Consequently, we suggest you avoid the term ‘story’ and use terms like: examples, illustrations, experiences.

 **Tip:** Once you have crafted your anecdote-eliciting questions, try them out on a small group to see their response. This can help further develop your story questions as well as helping you understand how to ask them. Having clearly developed and delivered anecdote-eliciting questions can help to take some of the anxiety out of asking the questions.

 **Exercise:** Check out your local ‘playback theatre’. Playback theatre is a form of improvisation theatre where stories are invited from the audience and then enacted by the ‘improv’ actors. It’s a great place to see both how the director/facilitator asks questions to elicit stories as well as how he/she interacts with the audience to create a safe atmosphere for stories.

Setting sail



“At last the anchor was up, the sails were set, and off we glided. It was a short, cold Christmas; and as the short northern day merged into night, we found ourselves almost broad upon the wintry ocean, whose freezing spray cased us in ice, as in polished armor. The long rows of teeth on the bulwarks glistened in the moonlight; and like the white ivory tusks of some huge elephant, vast curving icicles depended from the bows.”

Herman Melville (1851) ‘Moby Dick’

Embarking on the voyage begins before the ship sets sail. Part of the experience of ‘setting sail’ occurs in those first few moments of boarding the ship, stowing luggage and getting ready for that moment of leaving the dock. A smooth boarding experience contributes to the overall atmosphere and experience – a bon voyage.

The experience of an anecdote circle begins as soon as the participants arrive at the venue, meet the facilitator and other participants, and experience the physical space. The atmosphere further develops as the guidelines are explained. The warm-up prepares the group for that moment of departure when the anecdote circle facilitator asks the first anecdote-eliciting question. There are times, however, when Anecdote Circles have launched without ever needing to ask the first question. The ship ‘set sail’ anyway and you just need to hang on for the ride.

The physical space

With the heart of the anecdote circle being about **people feeling able to share their experiences in a warm and friendly environment**, the physical space is the first key to establishing such an environment.

The layout of a circle of chairs is a great way to bring everyone together. The circle, unlike other geometries (squares or rectangles), has no implicit hierarchy. Psychologically this can help create a statement of 'everyone's equal here'. It also helps the anecdote circle facilitator to become invisible and simply be considered a member of the group.

Arranging the chairs around a table can help people feel more secure. It also provides for easier set-up of recording equipment.

Food is a great facilitator. Food easily breaks down barriers and can be one easy step towards a warm, engaging physical space.

 **Tip:** If you know that one of the participants talks non-stop, sit them next to the facilitator rather than facing. If they face the facilitator, they feel encouraged to tell the facilitator all they know. Facing away from the facilitator seems to reduce their desire to talk too much.

Guidelines

 *"The first step towards getting somewhere is to decide that you are not going to stay where you are."¹²*

Without making guidelines explicit, people will maintain their usual conversational habits.

For the most part, this doesn't include being a listener. People love to share their experiences, their stories. Without guidelines, this often means that people, when reminded of their own experiences, will jump in and over the top of someone already sharing their story. At their core, the participant guidelines encourage people to be respectful listeners throughout the anecdote circle process. And it is far easier to record if people aren't talking over each other.

 **Anecdote (From Mark):** When opening the AC and explaining the guideline "Don't disagree, take the opportunity to tell your own experience of the event", I generally use the metaphor that we all live in a house with many windows. Each of us has our own window and we can each look out our window at the same event and perceive it differently. So it's not about determining whose view is the correct one, it's much more about understanding and exploring the differences.

PARTICIPANT GUIDELINES:

- Focus on providing examples, your experience, anecdotes and stories
- Allow your colleagues to complete their anecdote without interruption
- Rather than disagree with someone's story, tell the story the way **you** remember it.

Dave Snowden has taught us that there is also an intriguing paradox to consider in narrative work: if you force people to tell the truth, they lie; and if you allow lies, they tell the truth. The content of the stories is less important than the meanings they convey. We frequently encourage people to tell the experiences of their colleagues: **"Yes, this hasn't happened to you, but do you know of anyone to whom it has happened?"**.

The warm-up

As we have emphasised before, obtaining rich anecdotes from participants relies, in part, on asking good anecdote-eliciting questions. But before people will provide their more personally significant stories, they must feel comfortable and relaxed. **A short warm-up time is conducive to genuine sharing.**

The warm-up might occupy the first 10-15 minutes of a session. In most cases, it's useful to begin by sharing the guidelines, explaining the project, and making brief introductions. When participants are introducing themselves, it is often helpful to ask them to provide an answer to a simple question such as **"What brought you here today?"**. Once people are used to talking and listening, you can then start collecting stories.

 **Tip:** We have had situations where people have been reluctant to even answer "What brought you here today?". This can often be the case in places where the culture is not to speak out. In these cases we sometimes start with a closed question like "How long have you worked for this organisation?". Then we slowly build up, recognising the experience in the room, to create a space where more open questions may be used.

 **Anecdote (From Mark):** I ran an anecdote circle in June 2006 and, as normal during the introduction, I explained the purpose of the project and the themes we would be exploring. One of the participants was so keen to start that I didn't even get the first question out. The group was off! The only thing I had to do for the rest of the AC was to occasionally ask, "Can you give me an example...?"

The first anecdote-eliciting questions

Finally it has arrived, the time to 'set sail' and invite participants to share their experiences, anecdotes and examples around the themes your team has designed.

In some ways, asking the anecdote-eliciting questions can be like dropping a stone into a lake – a calm, clear, blue lake. Once the stone hits there's a splash, and then ripples, which make their way outwards. Finally the ripples reach the shore.

Asking the story question creates the splash. People become tuned in. Often there is silence, as people wonder who might go first. Finally the ripples reach the shore and someone pipes up and says, **"Alright, if I have to, I'll go first... There was a time..."**

 **Tip:** Offering your own story can be a great way to get started. The personal anecdote from the facilitator helps to demonstrate the nature and style of the sharing in the anecdote circle as well as helping to build rapport with the group. As in the saying "As they start, so they continue", providing a story will help to garner more stories.

 **Anecdote (From Shawn):** 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, 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.

Using audio equipment

You can collect anecdotes in a number of ways. It can be useful to record what people say during the anecdote circle and then extract the stories from the transcript.

Digital recording is cheap and effective. We use an Olympus DS2200, which we find a reliable and effective device, but any digital recorder designed to pick up a conversation among a group of four to 12 people will work.

HERE'S A LIST OF POINTS TO CONSIDER WHEN RECORDING A SESSION:

- Test your recording equipment before the session. Set up the recorder, then walk around the table talking at different volumes. Play the recording back to see whether you can hear it clearly.
- Starting the recording equipment during the warm-up period gives you and the participants a chance to get accustomed to the audio equipment. It is your last chance to ensure that everything is working prior to getting the anecdote circle going.
- Make sure you select continuous recording (not variable control voice activation).
- Have spare batteries.
- Ensure you have enough memory for the upcoming recording.
- If you are running more than one recording session in a day, download the audio file to your PC or laptop between sessions.
- Keep a spare memory card handy.
- Check the recording after each session so that you can adjust settings if need be for the next session.
- With large groups (more than 12), consider using additional microphones.

Tip: After recording the Anecdote Circles, send the audio files for transcription. The transcription company usually returns the transcript as a Word document. Most of these companies can return the transcripts within three days or less. Expect to receive 40 double-spaced pages of transcript for each 90-minute session. Instruct the transcription company to transcribe exactly what was spoken but with 'ums' and 'ahs' removed.

Tip: Another approach is to take notes and, after the session, to invite people with good anecdotes to re-tell them into the digital voice recorder. This can reduce transcription times. Anecdotes also get better the second time they are told.



The long haul



“And thereupon we all entered the cave. It was a large, airy place, with a little spring and a pool of clear water, overhung with ferns. The floor was sand. Before a big fire lay Captain Smollett; and in a far corner, only duskily flickered over by the blaze, I beheld great heaps of coin and quadrilaterals built of bars of gold. That was Flint’s treasure that we had come so far to seek and that had cost already the lives of seventeen men from the HISPANIOLA.”

Robert Louis Stevenson (1883) ‘Treasure Island’

Being an anecdote circle facilitator in many ways resembles the role of tour guide. First, there is the greeting and the warm-up, getting participants ready to start the anecdote circle. Next, there is the invitation to explore the themes, taking the participants from one theme to the next. The participants are encouraged to explore for themselves what each theme holds for them through their sharing of experiences and stories. Finally, there is the return, where the anecdote circle concludes.

The anecdote circle facilitator acts as a guide, not a leader. An anecdote circle is working if the members of the group are telling stories to each other rather than telling them to the facilitator.

Being a story listener and supporting the group

A common practice among facilitators is to lead a group through a process, interpreting each comment, feeding back to workshop participants what they heard, and describing the possible next steps. **As a result there can be an expectation on the facilitator to keep a high profile and fill the silence.**

Facilitating Anecdote Circles is different. The facilitator takes a low profile. That can mean reducing eye contact with those sharing their stories, though remaining present and listening. Subtle twiddling with recording equipment knobs can be a good 'low-status' behaviour.

The use of silence is another 'low-status' technique. When there is silence, savour it, let it hang. This can help the group to develop its own sense of pace as well as reinforcing that you are here as a guide, not as a leader.

☐☐ *"As the storyteller, I am like a tour leader through a historic building. First, I greet my guests and get them in one place, ready to start the tour. Next, I take them from room to room. In each room, I first give them an introduction that will draw them into the room; then I let them experience the room on their own. Finally, I gather them up again, elicit their reactions, then usher them out of the building."¹³*

💬 **Anecdote:** *At one of our training sessions, after a practice anecdote circle, a very experienced facilitator resumed her place with the group and stated, "If I am going to be any good at running Anecdote Circles, I need to unlearn most of what I have been taught about facilitation".*

But it's not all about being silent. An anecdote circle facilitator might ask questions like **"Could you give an example of that?"** or **"What experience are you drawing on?"** or perhaps, **"Tell us more"**. Being a story listener often entails digging deeper. For example, a storyteller might provide a surface story which has at its core something deeper, something more potent. As a story listener, you will often find that you are essentially giving that person permission, through your interest and attention, to dig deeper into their experience and share their story.

💬 **Anecdote (From Shawn):** *I originally learned to facilitate Anecdote Circles (they were called story circles back then) while working in IBM's Cynefin Centre. My teacher was Sharon Darwent who taught me to ask, "Can you give me an example?" and to relish silence.*

💬 **Anecdote (From Andrew):** *Story ditting¹⁴ is the natural phenomenon of story 'one-up-manship'. One person tells a story and then another has a better one, and so it goes. In one anecdote circle, after hearing a great bollocking story told about some energy-sapping leadership behaviour in a workshop, I looked to encourage ditting by asking, "Can anyone do better than that...?". And, of course, they could. And did!*

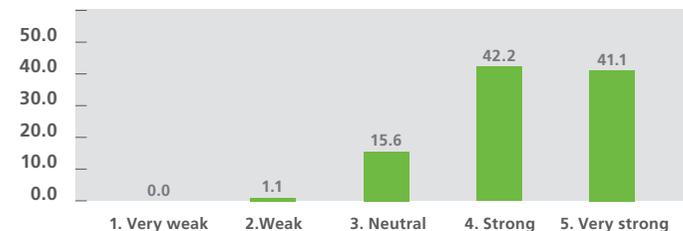
Research

Anecdote has conducted research on how people experience Anecdote Circles. Ninety people from one organisation filled in a survey immediately after participating in an anecdote circle. Here are some of the findings.

Consider the question, **“How do groups experience Anecdote Circles?”**. Within Anecdote Circles there is a considerable depth of sharing, and as shown in [Figure 1](#), an associated feeling of trust within the group.

Figure 1.

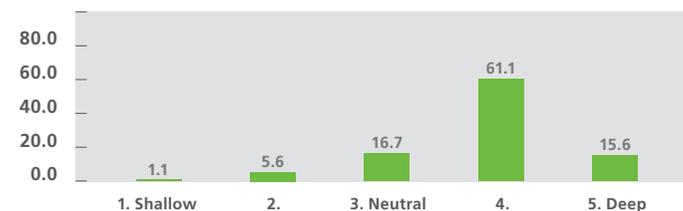
Percentage response to:
“Please rate the level of trust experienced within the group”



Interestingly, those people who had spent less time with an organisation (up to 5 years) rated the depth of sharing as more shallow than those who had been there longer (6-10, 10+years).

Figure 2.

Percentage response to:
“Please rate the level or depth of sharing you experienced amongst your colleagues”

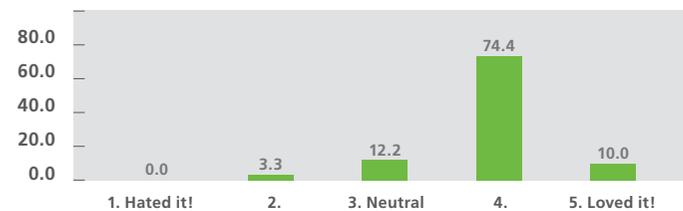


What percentage of 'turn-taking' do facilitators have for different group processes?

A facilitator takes a 'turn' whenever they make a spoken utterance in a group. 'Turn-taking' is a specific metric developed and used in the field of conversation analysis. The figure right shows some statistics based on live transcript data from various facilitated group sessions that were recorded.

Figure 3.

Percentage response to:
"Please rate your experience of the anecdote circle"



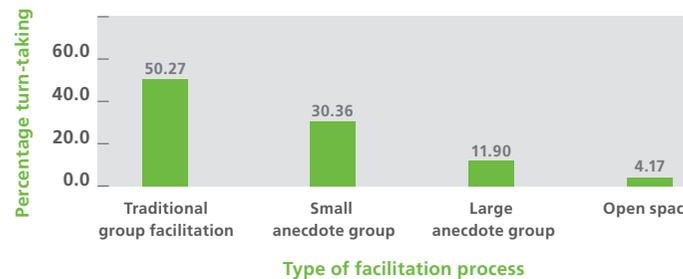
Research has shown people enjoy Anecdote Circles.

OUR FINDINGS SUGGEST:

- In more traditional group facilitation, the facilitator takes a 'turn' speaking almost every second go (e.g. facilitator – participant – facilitator – participant...)
- In a small anecdote circle (three or four people), the facilitator takes a 'turn' speaking three out of every ten times
- In a large anecdote circle (eight to ten people), the facilitator takes a 'turn' speaking approximately once in every ten times.

Figure 4.

Percentage facilitator turn-taking



Research has shown that the facilitator is often quiet in Anecdote Circles.

Surviving stormy weather



“During the afternoon the wind and sea increased greatly, and the Nimrod pitched about, shifting everything that could be moved on deck. The seas began to break over her, and we were soon wet through, not to properly dry again for the next fortnight. The decks were flooded with heavy seas, which poured, white-capped, over the side, and even the topsail yards were drenched with the spray of breaking waves. Life-lines were stretched along the deck, and it was a risky thing to go forward without holding on.”

Ernest Shackleton (1909) ‘Shackleton: The Polar Journeys’

You will sometimes encounter stormy weather during a part of the voyage.

Stormy weather in Anecdote Circles can arise for a number of reasons.. For example, someone might be trying to dominate the group, or someone might be telling well rehearsed stories, or maybe the group is simply having problems recalling any stories. Facilitators can cause problems. Examples might include not relishing silence, not being relaxed, or simply turning the anecdote circle into an interview by asking way too many questions.

Often groups will reflect and respond to the emotions, attitudes and expectations of the facilitator. Your approach towards a group, physically and emotionally, can have an impact on the way the group works together.

When the weather gets dark

In Anecdote Circles, participants freely offer their experiences and stories.

Sometimes these stories have been sitting under the surface for many years, gathering more and more emotion. **When the story finally comes out, often there is a therapeutic effect for the storyteller.** A feeling of relief. Sometimes tears.

It may be daunting for an anecdote circle facilitator encountering this for the first time. Sitting through such an experience you might think to yourself, **“Oh my god, what do I do?”** or **“Should I give them any comfort?”** or **“I wonder what the rest of the group is thinking?”**.

Like the saying **“Don’t just do something, stand there”**, it is the way you ‘stand there’ and support that makes all the difference. The support you provide should be warm, accepting and unconditional.¹⁵ In many cases, the sharing of emotion is in itself healing.



Anecdote (From Andrew):

Story after story had been pouring out. The group was engaged and sharing their experiences. And then the group fell silent. Maybe even reflective. Sitting with the silence I remained present, attentive and listening. Not feeling the need to fill the silence, I didn't. A man in his mid 30s, a middle manager, finally broke the silence and started to share his experience. Half-way through his story he stopped. He said a few more words, then stopped again. It was clear that his story was bringing forth many difficult emotions. I remained listening, present and attentive to both him and the group. The group was clearly listening and supporting him. Several people even helped him through his story by providing and contributing other details during his awkward silent moments of personal emotion, elements that I couldn't possibly have known. At the end of his story I could clearly see what this sharing and support had meant to both the group and the storyteller. All of which took place without me saying a word.



Tip: Be sure to understand an organisation's HR and counselling processes in case there is a need to seek help from outside the anecdote circle.

Letting opinions ride

🗨️ "What happens is fact, not truth. Truth is what we think about what happens."¹⁶

An anecdote circle is less concerned with the group's opinions and judgements; rather, it seeks to elicit anecdotes and experiences.

The power of Anecdote Circles lies in their ability to move from opinions to experiences. It is important for the facilitator to be mindful of what they are hearing. Is it an opinion? If so, maybe now is a good time to ask, **"Can you provide an example?"**.

Often opinion is a great conversation starter. You may find that someone provides an opinion that triggers another participant to resonate with that opinion. Asking that participant to provide an example is a great way to move the anecdote circle along.

Use your instincts when it comes to asking, **"Can you provide an example?"**. Overdoing it can make the facilitator sound repetitive and lacking new ideas.

Anecdote circle facilitators will know that an anecdote circle is working well when they hear members of the group remind a colleague: **"Yes, that's your opinion; but what would be an example?"**.

Asking too many questions

A common problem made by new facilitators is to ask question upon question compulsively – effectively turning the anecdote circle into an interview.

When posing the story questions, the facilitator should be patient and resist the urge to fill the silence with any other questions. Often the participants and the group collectively are working out both the question and themselves. Taking some time here can help the group to develop its own pace.

 **Anecdote:** I sat in on an AC with a newly trained facilitator whose first action was to stand up and walk around behind the circle of participants explaining while giving the introduction. After requests, cajoling and finally insistence, the trainee sat down. He then asked the first question and after a few seconds, he filled the silence by giving his own answer. "I have a good example..." he started and then proceeded to give a ten-minute set of opinions. It was my worst AC experience. The participants didn't enjoy it and there were almost no useful experiences shared by the group. Facilitator behaviour has a huge impact on the group.

A group is unable to recall any stories

Utilising warm-ups and ice breakers is a great way to get groups unfrozen.

Occasionally, however, a group will become stuck and be unable to recall any stories. In this situation, it is helpful to ask someone to draw a timeline and ask members of the group to single out important events. This process can help people to remember and stories then emerge.



Dealing with conflict

Conflict can arise when there is a differential in power, with one person trying to exercise superiority or 'higher status' over another or the whole group.

Interestingly, it is the only form of conflict we've experienced in an anecdote circle, where a participant attempts to dominate. Inviting participants to observe the participant guidelines of respectful listening can help. Another solution is to invite the participant to become an observer. It may be that, with Anecdote Circles focused on people sharing their experiences rather than specifically delving into debate, argument or opinion, the anecdote circle provides a platform that is conducive to a very low level of conflict.

Anecdote: Once, on the outskirts of a small village, there lived an old man. One day, a traveller coming from a far away land approached the old man and asked him, "How are the people in your village?". The old man looked up at the traveller and asked, "How do you find them in your village?". The traveller looked distraught and replied that his village was full of crime, hostility and violence and the people weren't trustworthy at all. The old man sadly nodded and answered, "I think you'll find them the same here too."

Some time later another traveller approached the old man on his way to the village and asked him, "How are the people in your village?". The old man looked at the traveller and asked, "How do you find the people in your village?". The traveller beamed and went on to tell the old man how friendly, empathetic and caring the people were in his village. The old man looked up and smiled and said to the traveller, "Well, I think you'll find them the same here too."

The return



“On the last day of August we anchored for the second time at Porto Praya in the Cape de Verd archipelago; thence we proceeded to the Azores, where we stayed six days. On the 2nd of October we made the shore, of England; and at Falmouth I left the Beagle, having lived on board the good little vessel nearly five years.”

Charles Darwin (1839) ‘The Voyage of the Beagle’

In any voyage, no matter the adventures, the sights and experiences, there comes a point of return; a time when you emerge back into your daily life; a time when you integrate yourself and prepare for the next experience. Sometimes **the return can see you taking some of the lessons from the voyage and finding ways to apply them in your life.**

The return for participants in Anecdote Circles is guided by you, the facilitator.

After having navigated your way through preparing and embarking on the voyage, journeying through the long haul and surviving any stormy weather, the facilitator emerges with the final task of helping participants return and be prepared for their next step in organisational life.

The return is a good time to inform participants of how the anecdotes will be used once extracted from the recordings and transcriptions. Another useful return step is to ask the participants to brainstorm the things that might be done to reinforce the positive things they have heard, or to tackle the negatives.

Of course, how you will use your anecdotes and stories depends on the process you are using or have had designed. For us, we often debrief participants about how the collected transcribed anecdotes will be used in a one- or two-day sensemaking and intervention workshop with their senior managers or leaders. Depending on the organisation and how this sensemaking workshop is designed, this sometimes provides us with the opportunity to issue an open invitation to the workshop.

Providing space for any questions from participants about the next steps in the process is a good way towards transparency, as well as helping participants to recognise the value of their involvement and to get ready for any next steps.

Most importantly, remember to thank people for their participation in the anecdote circle.

 **Tip:** Sometimes at the end of the session when you are just about to turn off the recorder, a new and interesting conversation may start. Keep the recorder going. You might be surprised what can come out of these 'door-handle' conversations.

 **Tip:** One useful debrief exercise for Anecdote Circles can be to ask participants which, out of all the stories and anecdotes they have heard today, they think are the three most significant stories. Such a question helps participants to debrief themselves about the voyage they have just been on, as well as working together to figure out what 'most significant' means for them. This also has the added benefit of helping you to establish a way to whittle down the number of anecdotes that you potentially have to deal with after transcription.

 "We recall a five-day workshop which we ran some years ago with Phill Boas. We kept postponing the official start so that people wouldn't just switch into 'workshop participant' mode (and so that we wouldn't just become workshop facilitators). On the last day, as we bid them farewell, we declared the workshop open: "Let the workshop begin". One of our intentions was to make the point that the real workshop was outside in their normal life, and they had just taken part in a preparation for that."¹⁷

Learning to facilitate Anecdote Circles

Bon voyage!

There is only so much one can achieve through reading. To really learn, you need experience.

HOW CAN YOU OVERCOME THE ANECDOTE CIRCLE LEARNING CURVE:

Anecdote Circles can be a little tricky at first but with practice they will become second nature. We've been asked by many people about ways they can learn how to run successful Anecdote Circles while getting practical experience at the same time.

You might be interested in a half-day session we have designed to help up to 10 people learn how to run Anecdote Circles.

HERE ARE SOME OF THE THINGS YOU WILL LEARN:

- How to create the conditions that will enable anecdotes to be shared
- Silence is a powerful facilitation technique and an essential skill in facilitating Anecdote Circles
- When to delve for more detail and when to let the anecdote circle flow
- How to increase story richness
- Techniques for ensuring anecdotes are told.

WHAT ATTENDEES HAVE SAID:

"Indeed the very practical nature of this workshop is its greatest strength."

"Shawn has a most honest, open and engaging approach which is what is shown to work best with this technique and creates an enjoyable workshop."

"The workshop covered a lot of territory in a way that combined analytical rigour with a clear and informal delivery. I recommend it without reservation."

Good luck with your Anecdote Circles.

Keep in touch – we'd love to hear your stories!

See www.anecdote.com.au/AnecdoteCircles for more details.

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