

# The Anecdote Circle

**Type** : **Process Description**

**Family** : **Knowledge**

In anecdote circles, facilitators use a "toolbox" of several methods including ditting, feature shift, archetypal storytelling, and alternative histories to help people tell stories.

## What is it?

An anecdote circle is a gathering (physical or virtual) whose purpose is to generate and collect anecdotes about some issue or topic. Usually the anecdotes gathered will be used later in some sort of sense-making, and they may be placed in a narrative database for sense-making and as a knowledge repository.

An anecdote is a naturally occurring story, as found in the "wild" of conversational discourse. Anecdotes are usually short and about a single incident or situation. Contrast this with a purposeful story, which is long and complex as well as deliberately constructed and told (usually many times). Some people tell purposeful stories often; others don't. What you are after in the anecdote circle is not purposeful stories, which are indicative of what people believe is expected of them, but anecdotes, which are more unguarded and truthful. For sense-making and knowledge sharing anecdotes are priceless. They can answer many questions that direct questioning cannot. Telling stories allows people to disclose sensitive information without attribution or blame, because the inherent distance between reality and narration provides safety for truth-telling.

The general operating principle of the anecdote circle is this. Because "you only know what you know when you need to know it", it is difficult to get at aspects of knowledge, values and beliefs that are held in common but rarely talked about. When people tell each other stories about their experiences, the social negotiations that take place create conditions which recreate to some extent the feeling of being "in the field under fire", or, in the state of "needing to know". Thus hidden knowledge surfaces and becomes available in ways it could not otherwise do so. The end result is a diverse body of anecdotes that together represent the true situation better than a few stories one might gather in simple interviews without such complex social exchanges. All of the narrative techniques we use in anecdote circles increase the complexity of the narrative patterns generated in natural conversation.

## Essentials

These are some elements of a well-functioning anecdote circle. If you see these things happening, leave things alone; if you don't, intervene. Each of these things also represents an obstacle to a well-functioning anecdote circle, because these are all things people need some help to talk about.

- ☉ **Extremes.** People should be talking about best and worst moments, not about everyday things. What you are looking for is the boundaries of experience, not the midpoint. You are not interested in what a "typical day at the office" is like; you are interested in the best and worst days in a career spanning forty years. And importantly, these extremes must include the negative as well as the positive. It is much easier to get "success stories" out of people than it is to get stories of failure and disappointment; but it is the latter that is usually more fruitful.
- ☉ **Events.** People should be *recounting things that happened*, not lecturing or giving opinions or complaining. You are looking for stories, which are a qualitatively different type of data than any other kind of statement. All stories describe events; if nothing happens, it is not a story. This is a major obstacle and one that can produce bountiful amounts of opinions, statements, facts, and instructions - but no stories. Whether you get stories or not depends on how you frame the things you ask people to do. It can be as simple as making sure to ask "was there a time you felt proud" rather than "what were your accomplishments". Always frame your introductions to natural storytelling in terms of events - times, moments, experiences, instances, things that happened, and so on. Avoid mentioning things that don't have a time element, like conditions, beliefs, rules, expectations, memory, and so on.
- ☉ **Emotions.** In every situation there will be some issues that people are going to be at least a little passionate about. If that isn't happening you haven't found the issues yet. Sometimes it takes a while for people to open up and start talking about what really matters to them. You need to find a balance between using techniques that help move this along and just having patience and letting things take time. You can help people *too* much. Sometimes you will get all of your useful anecdotes in the last quarter of the anecdote circle's time. That's fine, as long as it happens.
- ☉ **Experiences.** You want to hear about people's real experiences, not what they believe they should be saying, or the company line, or what they heard on the news. You need to cut through all that to get to what has actually happened to them, because that is where the real potential of narrative disclosure is realized. The several techniques for fictional exploration described below can help with this obstacle. But outside of any technique, you also need to convince people that you really do want to know what *their* experiences have been and that their perspectives are valuable to you. You can do that in how you talk about what the anecdote circle is about and why you need the perspectives the people in it have to offer. Your reasons for this will of course differ based on why you are holding the anecdote circle; but in nearly every case you will be truthfully able to say that you are after something deeper and more meaningful and significant than what can be found out by reading official stories or news stories or instruction manuals, something that only the people in the room know about. Knowing that what they will be talking about will be valuable will help people to volunteer what they know.



**Exchanges.** Naturally occurring storytelling lives in a habitat of conversation. It is not a "thing" you ask for but an emergent property of discourse. Whether you get emergence or "things" will depend entirely on how you present the anecdote circle. Watch your language. Never "ask" for a story. Never tell people "we want your stories" or in any way refer to a story as a thing. If you do that, you will tap into a lot of misperceptions about what a "story" or an "anecdote" is, including a novel, a movie, a comedy routine, a lie. You don't want people to get the idea that you want them to perform or make things up *for the sake of the things themselves*, because the focus will shift from process to product (and thereby destroy the product). What you want people to understand is that you want them to talk together about the past, about times and events in the past, about things that happened to them, about their experiences. If that happens, there will be much better anecdotes produced than if people believe they are "producing" anything.

## People and Timing

An anecdote circle should be populated by people who have some kind of shared experience and who can reflect together on some issue or topic or history. There should also be some diversity within the group, perhaps in age or background; normally this comes naturally and doesn't need to be planned. The number of people in an anecdote circle should be small - say ten to fifteen people.

The process could take anywhere from two hours to a whole day, depending on how much material is desired and for what reason, and how many people you have access to and for how long. In general you want to gather as much rich and diverse anecdotal material as possible in as short a time as possible. It is helpful to time the anecdote circle so that it comes when people are naturally more relaxed - say at the end of the day or the end of the week.

### Capturing anecdotes

There are many ways to collect anecdotes in an anecdote circle. At one extreme, you need not capture any anecdotes if the purpose of the circle is to lead in to another sense-making exercise and not to populate a narrative database. At the other extreme, say if the people in the anecdote circle are hard to get together or will be impossible to get access to again, you may want to record every anecdote that is told. The most common technique is to record each small-group conversation in audio (not video, as people tend to be more self-conscious) and have the tapes transcribed for use in a narrative database. You can also have scribes sit with each group and write down anecdotes as they are told; this method is quick because it doesn't require transcription, but it doesn't result in verbatim stories. There are circumstances in which scribes can be very useful, say if you will use the anecdotes the next day in sense-making exercises but won't need them in detail for a narrative database. However, it can sometimes be hard to find enough fast note-takers to complete the task.

The best method is to ritualize capture. Here a digital tape recorder is used, and when the circle decide that an anecdote should be used, the teller leaves the circle to speak and index their anecdote. This way permission is granted, material recorded is kept to the minimum, and the last vocal person is removed for a time to allow others to get a word in edgeways!

In any case, it is useful to ask people to write down anecdote titles on hexagons as they go, because you can then look for those in the audio recordings as well as use them right away in any sense-making exercises that come afterwards. If you will be including some element of sense-making in the workshop, whether it's deriving archetypes or creating a Cynefin framework populated with anecdote turning points, the anecdote titles will be heavily used, so you will need people to write them down anyway.

## General Plan

Following this section are several techniques you can use to get people to tell anecdotes. You should be familiar with each of these, but you should not plan to use them in any kind of fixed agenda. The anecdote circle is perhaps the Cynefin method in which you need to think on your feet and adapt your plans to new circumstances more than any other. You will get all kinds of groups of people in an anecdote circle. People are famously diverse in (a) how much they tell stories, (b) how much they *think* they tell stories, and (c) whether they think it is worthwhile to tell stories. Some people live in a narrative world; some don't. It is easy to get people who are natural storytellers to tell stories - too easy, in fact, because if those are the only people telling stories you will get an insufficiently diverse set of anecdotes. The techniques described below have all worked to help people who don't often tell stories to tell stories, and to improve the breadth and diversity of the stories told.

Watch for especially active people dominating groups. You want everyone in the anecdote circle to tell at least some stories to get maximum diversity. Don't say anything to people who are dominating the storytelling, just pull them aside and find something you need them to do. Deriving archetypes is a very good thing to ask dominating people to do, since they will likely throw a lot of energy into that task. Even if you don't use the archetypes for anything, it makes the experience more interesting for the people, and talking about the archetypes always sparks some lively conversation.

Probably the most important thing about the anecdote circle is that people shouldn't be aware of a lot of structure or "objectives" in what they are doing. They should mostly think they are having an interesting time reminiscing together. Mix up the techniques so that people can find things they like doing. It's fine to have different groups doing different exercises at the same time. If a technique isn't working for one group (say they can't think of any way to shift the setting, or they won't dit), try another one. What you are trying to do above all is facilitate the emergence of natural storytelling in engaged energetic conversation, which will lead to the collection of a diverse body of meaningful anecdotes.

## Techniques: Best and Worst Moments

A good way to get people to talk about experiences rather than opinions is to ask them to talk about best and worst moments. The word "moments" here is a stand-in for "events", which is what you are after - things happening, things unfolding *in time*. Ask people to think over the past and

have them come up with a few of the best moments they can remember. This can be done from individual perspectives ("what were your best moments") or looking at the experience of the organization as a whole ("what have been the organization's best moments"). Encourage people to follow stories they hear with their own stories. One way to do that is to mention how stories usually *remind* people of other stories, and how the natural thread of storytelling in conversation is also a useful way for people to compare experiences and think together about something. By the logic of the self-fulfilling prophecy, if you tell people something usually happens, they will probably end up doing it.

After people seem to have exhausted the topic of best moments, ask them to do the same thing for worst moments. It's better to do the best moments before the worst, because otherwise people may descend into complaining and arguing instead of telling stories. When people are talking about their best moments they will be more likely to tell stories because they will be proud of their achievements.

Asking people to describe best and worst moments is also a good way to build a foundation for the other techniques (see following sections).

One thing that facilitators have sometimes done in this technique is ask people to draw pictures of their best and worst moments. For some groups this will be useful to help people free up their memories and creative energy; for other groups it will not free up anything and will just be irritating. Look at the behavior of the group you have and decide whether drawing pictures would be useful. If you do ask people to draw pictures, be careful not to give them any examples or descriptions of exactly what to draw. You want them to interpret your ambiguous "draw the moment" instructions in diverse ways.

## Techniques: Ditting

Using ditting as a technique takes advantage of the propensity of people to always want to "better" what someone else has done. This comes out often in spontaneous storytelling events. The famous Monty Python sketch where people talk about their childhoods is all about ditting:

*We used to live in this tiiny old house, with greaaaaat big holes in the roof.*

*House? You were lucky to have a HOUSE! We used to live in one room, all hundred and twenty-six of us, no furniture. Half the floor was missing; we were all huddled together in one corner for fear of FALLING!*

*You were lucky to have a ROOM! \*We\* used to have to live in a corridor!*

*(And on and on)*

Ditting gets people to talk about things they might not have talked about otherwise because it brings things out to the extremes of experience, to areas that are less "safe", which is where some of the more important issues will surface. It's also a motivating factor to get people to tell more stories than they would otherwise have told, and to get more people to talk when they might have held back.

It's not necessary or even advisable to *ask* people to top each others' stories. It's better to just mention that there is this interesting social phenomenon called ditting. There is a clip from the movie *Jaws* in which some men are talking and they do a very good demonstration of ditting. You can show the clip, or give another example from another source or from your own experience, talk about how ditting occurs naturally, and then lead into a storytelling session without further comment.

There are (at least) three ways you can combine ditting with other exercises.

- 🎤 You can combine ditting with the best/worst moment exercise, describing ditting before asking people to talk about their best (and then worst) moments.
- 🎤 You can do a short "best moments" exercise, *then* mention ditting, then ask people to talk about best moments again. In this way you can "build" ditting in to the experience as people get more comfortable with the premise.
- 🎤 You can do ditting independently of any other exercise by asking people to talk about specific things that an earlier exercise suggested might be especially fruitful. For example, if during a previous exercise you notice that people keep making oblique references to close calls, you might ask them to dit on the subject "narrowly avoided disasters, near-tragic mistakes, and heroic saves".

Some groups will pick up ditting and run with it; some groups will simply refuse to go along. As with all the other techniques here, watch how people respond, and if the technique isn't working, try another one.

## Techniques: Archetypal storytelling

"Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth." - Oscar Wilde

Archetypal storytelling uses fictional characters to represent the identities of real people. This technique is most useful for sensitive topics in which you need to help people reveal things that they don't want to own up to or admit. Children famously use archetypal storytelling when they are willing to admit a wrongdoing only as long as "Teddy did it". People who feel they have been wronged but are not willing to point the finger in public can sometimes explain what happened when the perpetrator is fictionalized. Even people who have no such trauma to report but just don't want to talk in public about their own failures and disappointments can be more forthcoming when things remain on the metaphorical level (and remember the negative is usually more useful than the positive for sense-making and knowledge sharing). Archetypal storytelling is also useful for sense-making because it can explore different perspectives as well as reveal hidden assumptions.

The first step in facilitating archetypal storytelling is to derive some character archetypes through two-stage emergence. A good way to do this is to pull one person from each group *after some storytelling has taken place* and ask them to talk together about some of the characters in the stories they each heard in their own groups. When the archetypes have been derived (perhaps with the

help of a cartoonist), groups can be asked to tell anecdotes from the point of view of different archetypes. As with ditting, you can do this after another exercise provides some starter anecdotes - for example, a group might already have a good "best moment" anecdote, and so you could ask them to retell that anecdote from the point of view of two opposing archetypes (Hero and Villian or the like). Or you can do this without prior anecdotes to work from.

One way to start archetypal storytelling going (most useful with a particularly imaginative group or if you have a lot of time) is to ask people to role play the archetypes - you be the Hero and you be the Villian - and ask the archetypes some questions and see how they respond. For example, you might ask the Hero and the Villian to tell about a moment in which they were proud of their work, or in which they were frustrated. You could also ask people to act out how the archetypes might interact - perhaps the archetypes could dit together. Or give them situations: what might these two archetypes say if they were stuck in an elevator together, or if they had to solve an urgent problem together, or if they found themselves sitting side by side at a dinner party. All of these fictional explorations will lead to more anecdotes being told about issues that strike closer to the heart of what people really have to say.

## Techniques: Feature shift

The feature shift technique involves retelling anecdotes with aspects changed. This is most useful for going deeper into the issues behind anecdotes that are told. It is particularly recommended when you have a group that is telling anecdotes, but the anecdotes tend to be superficial and not much disclosure is going on. Like archetypal storytelling, feature shift storytelling creates a larger margin of safe disclosure by moving the narrative into fiction and away from the facts.

To do a feature shift exercise, ask people to choose an anecdote that has already been told (either in a previous exercise, or give them some time to tell some and choose one). Ask them to retell the anecdote with one feature of the story changed. Some examples are:

- Shift the *setting* to one that is superficially different but metaphorically similar in some way: from a factory floor to a military submarine; from a military briefing to an opera; from a programming team to a spaceship crew. How does the story play out in a different setting? Which elements are the same and which are different? How might the story end differently? What deeper truths about the real story come out in a different setting?
- Shift the *characters* around in some way - switch the protagonist and antagonist, for example. This can be done either with real people mentioned in the anecdote (or in other anecdotes) or with archetypes, if you have derived them. For example, say you have an anecdote in which someone gets fired in a way that makes the supervisor seem evil; and you replace the supervisor character with a "Hero" archetype. What would the Hero have done in that circumstance? Would it be so very much different from what the actual supervisor did? Could there be aspects of the supervisor's behavior that a Hero might do? What does that mean about popular perceptions of supervisors? Might supervisors be trying to make the best of a bad situation? Now what if the person who was fired was replaced with another archetype, say the "Villian"? How might the story play out? And so on.

- Shift the *perspective* from which the story is told, without changing any of the characters or setting. For example, how would the "evil supervisor fires employee" anecdote play out if the supervisor was the one telling it? How would it play out if an observer from another country was telling it? If the CEO was telling it? If the employee's five year old daughter was telling it? Moving the narrator's point of view around can surface unspoken assumptions about roles and expectations, making it more clear why things are the way they are.

In the midst of doing this feature shifting, encourage people to tell more anecdotes as the shifted stories remind them. Let the conversation diverge into new threads if it wants to. The point of these exercises is not to nail down all alternative ways of telling a story, but to give people a fictional space to explore topics that will be meaningful in later sense-making or knowledge exchange. Whatever facilitates the gathering of such conversations works. In some sense the real purpose of all of these exercises is something different from their obvious objective. The real purpose is to get people to disclose knowledge and beliefs that they themselves might not have been aware of. The people doing the disclosing don't need to know the real purpose of the exercises; *you* just need to understand the purpose and be able to recognize whether what you are doing is working or not.

## Techniques: Alternative histories

Using alternative histories to bring out anecdotes involves making a change to an anecdote, as in the "feature shift" technique, but in this case you are changing the *plot* of the anecdote. This technique is especially useful if people are not willing to explore the negative space of failure and disappointment. It is also useful if people are obviously holding a lot of assumptions in common (saying things like "and we all know why he didn't make the deadline") but not bringing them out in the open. It also creates more diverse sets of anecdotes because a broader space is being considered.

To do alternative histories, start by asking people for a success story (or take one from a previous "best moments" exercise), and ask what could have caused the story to be about a failure instead of a success. At what turning points could things have happened differently to change the outcome? At what points were they lucky, and what would have happened if they hadn't been lucky? At what points were there major decisions made, and what would have happened if any of those decisions had been made differently? If people would like to, have them draw out turning points in the story on a chalkboard or large paper, and draw lines to other outcomes they can then talk about.

You can also do this in reverse - how would a failure story have had to change to make it a success story - but as with the best/worst moments exercise, it works better to start with a success story rather than a failure story.

As you explore fictional possibilities by changing anecdotes, other anecdotes will come up, possibly ones that could not be told until a fictional example opened up the space.