Anecdotally Speaking

Using Stories to Generate Organisational Change

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ABSTRACT

Stories told in organisations are being used increasingly as a way of gaining greater insight into organisational culture, leadership and health. These insights should be considered when organisational change is needed to improve effectiveness. This paper examines a method that combines data collection through a story elicitation process with intervention design that promotes change and learning within organisations. In this paper, we describe these processes in detail with a step-by-step account of how the authors implemented these processes in a research site. Our experience can act as a guide to other researchers undertaking similar projects. Evidence collected so far suggests that these processes can contribute to organisational change in an incremental way that engages people at various levels within an organisation.

Keywords: Anecdote circles, intervention design, change management, group facilitation, learning.

Managed organisational change remains a key issue for organisational leaders in these times of complexity and uncertainty (O’Toole, 2004). Where the need for change has been identified as an issue within an organisation, there is clearly a discernible difference between a pictured ideal state and the current state (Schein, 1995). Distinctions can be made between change that is manifested in incremental improvements, based on what was done before, and change that is dramatic, transformational and discontinuous (Weick & Quinn, 1999). This paper describes and analyses a process of bottom-up organisational change based on incremental improvements, through a process that includes facilitated sessions known as ‘anecdote circles’. This paper is intended to make a practical addition to research methodology. The paper sets out the stages of a story elicitation and intervention process using a research study as an illustration of the method.

Although there is a significant amount of literature concerning the use of stories (for example, Gabriel, 1998), little has been written about the conduct, process or utility of anecdote circles, a particular subset of narrative elicitation, in management literature. Here, we consider some of the benefits and issues associated with using anecdote circles and accompanying sensemaking and intervention design strategies as a vehicle for facilitating sustainable organisational change and learning.

We argue that anecdote circles are related to the qualitative research methods of narrative inquiry (Czarniawska, 1998) and focus groups (Macnaghten & Myers, 2004) in that stories are elicited by facilitators where participants work in a group. When allied to an adapted model of action learning, anecdote circles can usefully act as a way to capture representational stories about an organisation, and act as a vehicle for the design of intervention.
strategies for beneficial organisational change. This means that the stories be used as data to extend the theoretical understanding of organisations, and also to initiate positive change in the workplace. This paper focuses on how positive change is facilitated. The theoretical implications of the data collected are the subject of other papers under review.

The anecdote circle methodology has been developed within a Defence organisation as a tool for interfacing with the Australian Army. The Australian Army has identified an organisational need to encourage flexibility and adaptability at all levels. The changing nature of warfare means that combat and support personnel make decisions that may have far-reaching ramifications for the safety and welfare of personnel and civilians alike, as well as having far-reaching political implications beyond the success of the stated mission or tasks. This is contrary to a cultural emphasis on command, authority and obedience structures (Schmidtchen, 2006).

The objectives of this particular initiative are to:

- implement improvements that contribute to the effectiveness of the organisation
- encourage an adaptive and flexible culture
- empower people at all levels in the organisation to contribute to a positive change and learning process.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

This research method reflects a pragmatic-critical realism approach (Johnson & Duberley, 2000), which encompasses a realist ontology with a subjective epistemology. This separation of ontology and epistemology means that although things can exist, knowledge about those things is socially constructed by human beings. Thus this approach, which should not be confused with empirical realism, posits that the world’s structures are not dependent on human cognitive structures to exist.

In their interaction with structures, human actors have the power to influence or change structures. Giddens, in his theory of structuration, outlines how social structures and individuals served to influence each other; individuals may reproduce social structures or they may choose to change them (Giddens, 1984; Turner, 1986). This article outlines how individuals within a Defence organisation are encouraged to change the structures and processes, albeit in a small local way, of their workplace.

The method described in this paper also draws on the theory of sensemaking, and an adapted process of action learning. Weick’s (1995) theory of sensemaking posited that human beings construct retrospective interpretations of past events. These interpretations act to place events into a framework from which individuals can draw conclusions and make judgements. Sensemaking is an ongoing process, and is grounded in the construction of identity of the individual and the community. The sense that individuals and groups make of events may be elicited through the medium of narrative in the form of stories/anecdotes based on past lived experience. The term narrative has been variously described as ‘requir[ing] at least three elements: an original state of affairs, an action or an event, and the consequent state of affairs’ to ‘any form of communication’ (see Czarniawska, 1998 (p. 2), while stories make a point and create meaning (Czarniawska, 1998; Gabriel, 1998). An anecdote, or story, is a representation of events at a point in time, having a beginning and end, with a cast of characters (Callahan, 2005). In this paper, the terms narrative, anecdotes and stories
are used interchangeably, as the narratives elicited during these activities were used by the respondents to communicate their perspectives on various issues through a representation of events.

According to Snowden (2001) ‘… narrative … is not just about telling, constructing or even eliciting stories, it is about allowing the patterns of culture, behaviour and understanding that are revealed by stories to emerge’ (p. 1). It is through the identification and consideration of these patterns that an organisation gains a better insight into current practices enabling the organisation to take action to improve and change those practices. Leaders can understand issues within their organisation so that informed decisions can be made to manage change.

The stories are used within a context of adapted action learning. Action learning is part of a group of methods called ‘action inquiry’ that ‘include a number of processes for learning, research and change characterised by critical inquiry, systems thinking and feedback cycles of action and reflection’ (Hughes, 2002, p. 1). Action learning is a process that enables people to learn through solving real problems and reflecting on the events (Revans, 1980). The adaptation of this process, however, reflects the essentially nonpolitical stance that we adopted. Action inquiry has often been associated with critical theory, and the empowerment of the research participants (Johnson & Duberley, 2000), but has also accommodated other theoretical approaches (Drummond & Themessl-Huber, 2007, p. 431). In this research, participants are encouraged to undertake work-related change to benefit their organisation, with the added effect of causing them less frustration in the workplace. The terms and concept of action learning are thought to have been created by Lewin (in 1945), and this research is modelled on Lewin’s theory of organisational change involving unfreezing, changing and refreezing (Schein, 1995). The action learning takes the form of using the anecdotes to prompt ideas for possible interventions for change, which are then designed and implemented. The participants who implement the interventions were encouraged to monitor the change and evaluate the results in an action inquiry cycle.

The next section explores the conduct, philosophy and management of the anecdote collection and intervention design process.

WHAT IS THE PROCESS?

As outlined above, the anecdote collection and intervention design process integrates the qualitative research techniques of focus groups and action learning, incorporating the use of stories. Stories, according to Gabriel, (1998) ‘… enable us to study organisational politics, culture and change in uniquely illuminating ways, revealing how wider organisational issues are viewed, commented upon and worked on by their members’ (p. 136). The stories elicited in this method were used as information by the organisation, as data by organisational researchers, and as evidence of gaps between reality and the ideal state desired by organisational members. Thus, stories gave powerful impetus to the perceived need for organisational change.

An anecdote circle is an unstructured facilitated session where participants are encouraged to generate stories that illustrate particular aspects of people’s understanding of their workplace. Anecdote circles are designed to elicit people’s stories and lived experiences rather than gather opinions on certain matters (Callahan, 2004). Anecdote circles were originally developed by David Snowden (1999, 2001). Circles generally consist of 8–12 participants (Callahan, 2004; Smith, 2005). In the activities described in this paper, the participants of each anecdote circle were drawn from the same workgroups in order to create an environment
that supported the open disclosure of experiences (a more detailed rationale for the selection of participants is provided in the section concerning issues relating to the anecdote circle implementation process).

The discussion that occurs in the group is recorded, transcribed and analysed. The role of the anecdote circle facilitator is to ask relatively few open-ended questions that enable participants to recall events. In this respect, the facilitator spends most of his or her time listening to the discussion, asking for examples of lived events (Callahan, 2004; Smith, 2005) when necessary.

In the intervention process outlined later in this paper, anecdote circles provided the base data from which interventions were designed. This process was part of a larger study that explored organisational learning in the Australian Army. The larger study encompassed an investigation of organisational learning strategies that resulted in various theoretical academic papers, reports to relevant stakeholders as well as the design of change interventions at a local level. This investigation thus contributed to three knowledge domains: the local domains within the Australian Army, the organisational domain of the Army as a whole, and the general knowledge domain of published work accessible by practitioners and researchers.

The intervention process as a whole consisted of seven stages, namely:

1. Preparation
2. Anecdote circles
3. Extraction of the anecdotes
4. Sensemaking/reflection
5. Intervention design
6. Commitment to the intervention
7. Follow-up.

**Stage 1: Preparation for the Implementation of the Method**

In this stage, most of the facilitators were trained in the anecdote circle methodology. This training entailed familiarisation with details of the process, and practice in conducting anecdote circles. Anecdote circles require an unstructured approach, albeit with an insistence on the relating of lived experience rather than opinion. This insistence by the facilitators primarily took the form of prompts and requests, rather than directives.

As part of the preparation, ethics approvals were sought and granted, access to research sites were organised, and the usual flurry relating to equipment, transport, and liaison ensued. The recruitment of participants was based on geographic location, rank and function. The composition of the participants essentially provided a snapshot of the participating work units. These participants were asked to take part in the 90-minute anecdote circle, with some participants also invited to participate in the sensemaking and intervention design phases.
The preparation phase also entailed conducting meetings with key stakeholders (commanding officers), which acted as an opportunity to gain endorsement of the data-collecting activity from stakeholders, and enabled access to participants.

**Stage 2: Anecdote Circles**

Anecdote circles are designed to elicit stories from a group of people. These stories are generated from the people’s lived experience. Ideally, as members of the group relate their own stories, this will act as a stimulus for others to generate another story that illustrates a point or takes the discussion in another direction. In this sense, it is a form of focus group where the group dynamics are critical to the generation of anecdotes (Barbour & Schostak, 2005; Krueger, 1994; Morgan, 1996). In another sense, it is different from focus groups in that there is no rigid topic guide, although facilitators will have broad interests that can be addressed through general questions that guide the discussion. Although the anecdote circle may result in consensus among the group members, this is not necessary to achieve the goals of the circle. The goal remains, quite simply, the collection of stories about the participants’ prior experiences concerning the issue under discussion.

Participants were briefed on the topic of the research, that is, the organisation learning that took place in their organisation, their rights relating to consent, privacy and confidentiality, and that informal discussion was preferred. This is a discovery phase where issues in the organisation and the constructions of the participants are communicated via stories. There are claims in the literature that stories are a natural way of communicating (Denning, 2006), and therefore participants will respond to this ‘naturalness’ by the enthusiastic recounting of past events. According to Smith (2005), ‘storytelling is natural and easy, entertaining and energising. Stories help us understand complexity. Stories can enhance or change perceptions. Stories are easy to remember’ (p. 1).

What is frequently forgotten is that although stories are a powerful means of communication, this media relies on the skill of the storyteller to convey the message in a compelling way (O’Toole, 2004, p. 62). We found in this research study, however, that, for many people, telling stories was not a ‘natural’ way to communicate. At the commencement of the anecdote circle, after the initial briefing, participants frequently looked at the facilitators askance when their stories were invited. It should be remembered that the participants, when they walked into the room to participate, were not doing so to fulfil a particular need or desire on their part. Thus, they had no particular motivation to make a point or explain an opinion through stories until topics were discussed where they had a strong viewpoint.

According to Callahan (2004), ‘simply asking people to tell stories rarely results in stories been told. Participants are often unsure what is meant’ (p. 4). The role of the facilitator at this stage involves prompting the participants for their own experiences, and asking for concrete examples of the issues being introduced. Thus, the anecdote circle may require the participants to engage in a different method of communication, which requires some mental adjustment.

As participants contributed to the group conversation, they constructed their conversations as they articulated them. When articulating opinions, the opinions were separate from themselves. The opinions concerned their organisation, their superiors, their peers, and so on. The perspectives of the participants, in the setting of the anecdote circle, did not warrant justification. The opinion-giver’s peer either agreed or disagreed. When they were constrained to fit their opinions within an anecdote format, they often sited themselves within the context.
of the action. In the process, they exposed themselves to others in the anecdote circle. They constructed representations of themselves, their identities and their values to be recorded and communicated.

Although the participants may be confident enough to tender opinions, it is likely that they will filter and adapt their stories to construct a representation of themselves that is coherent and credible to their own conception of self. The story may be one that has been told before, or the story could be recounted for the first time. What is important is that the story served as a vehicle for participants to explicitly compare the current state of the organisation with a personally constructed desired state, which affected their telling of the story and their interpretation of events explored within the story.

**Stage 3: Extraction of the Anecdotes**

The transcripts of the anecdote circles underwent an extraction process to present a series of stories to the participants of the sensemaking/reflection workshops to inform the intervention design (stage 4). The facilitator/researcher selected stories based on how compelling the stories were and the themes of highest impact and clarity to the organisation. Compelling, in this sense, referred to those stories that captured the attention of the listener/reader due to the drama, incongruity, or interesting context. This selection involved a subjective judgement by the facilitator; however, the involvement of a number of researchers introduced inter-rater reliability, with the number of stories involving a particular issue pointing to the significance of a particular theme. The selection of stories not only indicated the range of issues raised within the anecdote circles by the participants, but also took into account the issues targeted in the initial meeting with key stakeholders (see stage 1).

In our initial sensemaking workshop, we found that the participants disliked reading direct transcripts from the anecdote circles. There were repeated complaints that the anecdotes did not make sense because of the normal ‘messiness’ of everyday conversational language. Another concern was that participants could identify the anecdote tellers due to idiosyncratic use of language. We found it more effective to ‘clean up’ the anecdotes and remove obvious linguistic quirkiness without losing the meaning of the text in order to avoid the possible identification of participants. This was considered a reasonable practice given the use to which the anecdotes were put. The researchers retained original data transcripts for use in analysing data for research publications.

The selection of anecdotes was ruthless. Because of the volume of anecdotes collected, the facilitators could not afford to be emotionally connected to particular anecdotes that may have resonated with their own views or experience. In one session, over 200 possible stories were identified and only 40 were chosen for the next stages: the sensemaking and intervention design. The facilitators developed criteria to evaluate stories on grounds other than personal interest. Stories that the researchers found intrinsically interesting were discarded if they did not meet the criteria of:

- relevance for the stakeholders
- compelling in their nature
- specific enough where actions could be formulated.
Although these two stages were held during one workshop, they represented two discrete stages in the process. A one-day workshop with the same participants was held, with the sensemaking stage in the morning followed by the intervention design in the afternoon.

**Stage 4: Sensemaking/Reflection Workshops**

The stories extracted as described in the previous stage were used as material for consideration in the sensemaking/reflection stage. This stage involved workshops comprising approximately 12–20 participants. The participants of the sensemaking/reflection were divided into groups of 4–6 people and allocated specific stories for consideration. The task that faced them was not just to glean sense from the story per se. The participants used the story as a resource to prompt them to remember other stories that may be considered relevant or important, and to generate insights that may or may not be directly related to the content of the story under consideration.

Thus, the process was iterative and ongoing, as more stories were generated for the group’s consideration. The group was asked to write down a summary of the main message of each story. The initial story in the anecdote circle acted as a catalyst to encourage the participants of the sensemaking workshop to focus their attention on a particular issue. Moreover, the initial story acted as an example that encouraged participants to communicate their own experience through additional stories, which also acted to engage them in determining the seriousness of the issue and the corrective action that could feasibly be taken. In Lewin’s model of change (Schein, 1995), this step involved the participants becoming ready to initiate change as the stories highlighted issues in the organisation, that is ‘unfreezing’, where participants became ready to initiate change. The need to encourage a safe environment was seen by Lewin as critical to the process of initiating change.

After a period of consideration of the allocated stories, the identified messages were then clustered by all the participants working together, so that the messages were concentrated into key intervention themes. If characters and/or behaviours were considered, these would undergo the same process. This clustering process was also a sensemaking activity: participants were working together to organise clusters according to their perceptions of commonality and assigned an overarching title to each cluster. Figure 1 shows a photograph of a typical result of the clustering stage.
Figure 1: Examples of Clusters Generated During a Sensemaking Workshop

The clustering process of the messages needed to result in approximately 6–8 intervention themes; a number that we found manageable within the time allocated and with the number of participants. Facilitators needed to guide the participants so that a few over-large themes did not result with vague titles such as ‘culture’ or ‘communication’. The themes needed to be specific enough to guide the direction of the intervention, for example ‘feedback from management’. In Lewin’s model of change, this direction provided impetus to what Schein deemed ‘undesirable’ change (1995, p. 5).

Stage 5: Intervention Design
Consensus is not part of the story elicitation process (as mentioned above, the goal of anecdote circles is to produce a range of stories); however, this does not mean that voting is precluded from the method entirely. In order for participants to feel committed to interventions, a selection process is required to identify more pertinent intervention themes. Voting is a practical way to achieve this.

At the intervention design stage, participants were encouraged to undertake a simple voting process to determine which of the intervention themes were the most important and feasible for action. This simple process consisted of the facilitator indicating each intervention theme and asking the participants to identify which theme was most important to their practice. The participants could make this indication by marking the list of themes according to each individual’s preference. It was observed by the facilitators that the participants found this form of voting nonthreatening, and having a process where they openly indicated their preference engendered discussion about the issues underlying the themes, as well as the importance of the theme itself. The facilitators and the participants determined where the significant numbers of votes lay. When a possible intervention gained only a few votes, this theme was discarded. Participants then nominated a theme for designing an intervention.
Groups formed and participants were reminded that the intervention should be based on actions that were within the participants’ power to affect. If senior management needed to be engaged, then the action would involve the participant writing an email or convening a meeting with the specific managers. The interventions for each group were then presented to the facilitator and the rest of the participants for feedback and any additional actions that could contribute to the intervention. Commitment to the process was encouraged through participant engagement in the design of local interventions. This set the scene for the ‘re-freezing’, where the change becomes established through the change’s congruency with already existing behaviour (Schein, 1995).

Stage 6: Commitment to the Intervention
The workshop concluded with participants committing to champion interventions that they believed they could implement (see refreezing above). This commitment was recorded by the workshop facilitators.

Stage 7: Follow-up Activities
Approximately three months after the conclusion of the intervention design, champions were asked to provide feedback on the progress of the interventions. This feedback took the form of the champion’s lived experience of implementing the intervention. It provided an opportunity for reflection on the effectiveness of the intervention and the unanticipated obstacles that may have arisen. This endeavour also provided data on the enablers and inhibitors of organisational learning, and an opportunity to adapt the interventions. It is hoped that this reflection will also feed into another iteration of the anecdote circle/sensemaking/intervention process.

Figure 2: The Process and Related Domains of Knowledge

Figure 2 shows the process in terms of the participants’ experience, and the parts of the process in the context of the three knowledge domains referred to previously, namely the
local domain of the participants’ work units, the organisational domain of the Australian Army, and the expert knowledge domain to which this paper contributes.

**ISSUES RELATING TO THE PROCESS**

The anecdote circle/sensemaking/reflection/intervention process, although a valuable tool for organisational improvement, had issues for consideration during planning and implementation stages. These issues included the following:

- the recruitment of participants
- the ongoing monitoring and review
- acceptance and support by key stakeholders
- the skill set of the facilitator.

**Recruitment of the Participants**

The composition of groups is extremely important. For the anecdote circles we aimed for group homogeneity in terms of rank and/or function in order to create an environment where people were not inhibited by others of superior rank or lack of understanding of their work context and experiences. At the same time, too much homogeneity can lead to the ‘same old stories’ emerging. A diverse set of stories will give rise to different insights and opportunities for change. This bounded homogeneity also contributed to a situation where participants built upon each other’s stories, which led to the generation of counter-stories concerning significant issues.

In the sensemaking and intervention design stages, participants were drawn from the anecdote circles so there was some degree of ownership of the experience manifested in the stories. This is important given that the intent of the stories can be more closely discerned if people of a similar rank and experience as the storyteller are present at the sensemaking stage. It was also prudent to include some key stakeholders of a similar or slightly higher rank to assess anecdotes and facilitate the implementation of designed interventions.

If possible, an identified ‘change activist’ may be included to foster enthusiasm and momentum in the group. Through careful consideration of the group composition, the intervention can be matched to the appropriate level in the organisation. In this respect, it is beneficial that the chosen action occurs at the level of the participants rather than having participants simply give orders to their subordinates on their return to the workplace.

When participants are of a higher rank, although interventions may be local, the influence of these participants may be broad. Thus, a low-ranking participant may design an intervention based locally within their workgroup: a high-ranking participant may design an intervention based locally within the army barracks.

**Thinking Small About Big Issues**

The idea of the interventions is reminiscent of Senge’s (1990) notion of leverage. Leverage denotes the capacity for small, well-focused changes to have significant results. One of the challenges for the facilitator in this process is to convince the participants that thinking small does not diminish the significance of the intervention. During the Intervention workshop,
participants were often reluctant to suggest small, incremental actions and instead tended to think in terms of what their superiors should do, or that any action taken would be futile given the enormity of the problem. As facilitators, we constantly stressed that the ultimate world-stopping solution was not required.

**Ongoing Monitoring and Review**

There is scope to incorporate iterative action-learning cycles within this process. A key component of the implementation process is to institute a system of monitoring and review when participants return to the workplace. Monitoring and review of the interventions can form part of the review of the operational plan if this method is integrated in the strategic planning and management cycle of the organisation. If, however, the anecdote circle and sensemaking intervention are a separate initiative, then the key stakeholders need to be committed to supporting an ongoing system of organisational change and review, a recursive practice, not just an ad-hoc and isolated event. The literature that does exist on this process, however, does emphasise the anecdote circle/sensemaking intervention rather than explore the notion of monitoring and review to facilitate sustainable organisational change. In our research study, monitoring and review were primarily undertaken by the researchers; however, it would be preferable if this activity was undertaken by the in-house personnel.

A key enabler of ongoing review is the identification and enlistment of an intervention ‘champion’ who supports and drives the process and encourages other participants to maintain their commitment. Ideally, this champion would have the organisational authority to allocate resources and personnel to the achievement of the intervention if required. Given that these interventions are local and small in scope, the role of champion is generally not onerous. The champion would be identified in the intervention stage, and preferably has some influence with the key stakeholders and other parties within the organisation.

**Acceptance and Support by Key Stakeholders**

Given that the goal of the intervention design is to generate actions for change at the local level by organisational members, gaining the acceptance and support of key stakeholders is an important ingredient in the effective conduct of the process and in achieving organisational change. Before planning to conduct the anecdote circle/sensemaking and intervention design process, the research team sought support for the process from senior management via a briefing session. This briefing session entailed a description of the process itself including a clarification of the roles of those facilitating the process, but also provided an opportunity for the research team to manage the expectations of senior management. For instance, management might view the team as providing expertise in managing change, organisational learning, and so on. However, such a view can be counterproductive to establishing effective support since management may assume that the experts will tell them how to make things better, and they just have to implement the recommendations. In this instance, it is advantageous for team members to position themselves as facilitators of a process that is designed to effect change in the organisation, through empowering key stakeholders to share stories, reflect, and then design small interventions that can be readily implemented. It is also important to emphasise that the process provides anecdotes that can very powerfully communicate to senior management what the views of staff are in their organisation, in a way that is potentially less distorted than the usual communication of issues upwards to management. The anecdotes can assist management in again finding the pulse of the organisation, and to therefore be better informed when making decisions that will affect staff. Gaining support
can be further enhanced by inviting management to specify those issues of concern to them that would benefit from the use of this process.

The members of the team may also have research goals, but these are of less interest to management than the benefits they can expect from supporting the process. As facilitators, we strove to avoid communicating about the process through use of academic language such as ‘research’ and ‘publications’. The general point is to use non-threatening language that is likely to be accessible to your intended audience.

The other key stakeholder group consists of those organisational members who conduct the work in the organisation. The support that this group has for the process is reflected by the extent of interest shown in participating in the process, such as attending an anecdote circle, and in the degree of energy and enthusiasm that is manifested in the sensemaking and intervention design stage. However, a clear indication of the value and importance of the process for senior management is an important influence on generating interest and participation. To avoid claims that this process represents just another ‘talk fest’ or study that won’t lead to any real changes, the final measure of acceptance and support is the design of interventions. The support of organisational members not engaged in this process can be facilitated by describing these interventions, communicating when interventions are implemented, celebrating interventions that lead to positive outcomes, and inviting them to join in.

The Facilitators

The identification of suitable facilitators is particularly important for the second stage, the anecdote circles, given the need to elicit and encourage anecdotes that are personal, rich and often emotive. Although not essential, it is desirable that facilitators of the anecdote circles have skills in qualitative research and process. It is particularly important that facilitators are skilled in establishing a safe environment, a trusting relationship with the participants and an effective working rapport. We found, as co-facilitators of anecdote circles, that we needed to continually monitor our own performance in terms of avoiding biased elicitation of stories, while encouraging participants to build on each other’s narratives with as little interference from us as possible. As proponents of reflexive practice, we also found it very useful to review transcripts of the sessions to determine talk ratios between facilitators and participants, to check for leading statements, and to otherwise learn from our experience.

CONCLUSION

The agency of the individual within organisations is constrained by the structures of the organisation. This is exacerbated in hierarchical organisations as found in the armed forces with their emphasis on rank and chain of command. Stories give us insights into the subjective constructions of the individual, and through the process of creating interventions, the structural constraints become more malleable, and thus more subject to change, which in turn empowers the individual. The combination of stories and interventions effectively marries the elicitation of voice in the less powerful ranks of the organisation with a process of action that directly empowers them, albeit momentarily.

Depending on the composition of the groups of participants, the process outlined in this paper not only gave individuals (participants) a voice, but it also gave individuals an enabling space to hear and empathise with the concerns and experience of others. This may encourage
the generation of more robust social networks and further encourage new ideas and action leading to change.

As facilitators, we found that we had to adapt our styles/approaches according to different stage of the process. For example, the anecdote circles required facilitation that drew out and promoted participation. The intervention design required firmer direction and the ability to keep the participants focused on the task at hand.

The local nature of the technique encourages self-management, where interventions based on a local context can be initiated as needed. The process has the capacity to be embedded within organisations in the following ways:

First, the process of anecdote circles, sensemaking and intervention design can be integrated into strategic-planning processes. In this respect, the anecdote circles can reveal information about inherent weaknesses and strengths of an organisation that may inform analyses of the organisation. The interventions can be incorporated into action plans and standard operating procedures, which would further their enactment. Interventions that are particularly successful can be acknowledged and communicated to other parts of the organisation for eventual absorption. The ensuing changes in behaviour generated through these interventions can lead to the circulation of new success stories to inspire further changes.

Second, the monitoring of the progress and success of the intervention can generate a ‘lessons learnt’ mode of thinking, where an organisation improves its practice by reflecting on past action. Ultimately, to say that a lesson has been learnt necessitates a change of some kind to occur. The intervention stage facilitates this application by prescribing and designating appropriate corrective, preventative and improvement actions designed to achieve specific outcomes and realise change.

Third, organisations may use the stories as information about the pervading subcultures, norms and informal structures within various units and divisions of the organisation. Whilst some stories may reflect gossip, others have strong moral overtones highlighting what sorts of behaviours, people and ideals are valued within different parts of the organisation. Whilst telling these stories, participants invariably compare themselves and their workplace to others, in the process highlighting perceived inequalities, or better ways of doing business. Taken as a whole, these stories can provide a barometer reading showing the health of the organisation.

Finally, the emphasis on local change that can be initiated by participants increases the chance of action plans being achieved, rather than appealing to a divorced authority that has other priorities.

The change process described in this paper involves people at all levels of the organisation. People are involved in making sense of their organisation through telling stories, through reflection on selected anecdotes, and through the design and implementation of interventions. This sensemaking involves empowering them to initiate change and to learn from the experience of that change.
NOTES

1 For a discussion of the differences between action learning and action research, readers are referred to the work of Zuber-Skerritt (2001). An important distinction in this work is that the results of the action-learning process would not necessarily be made public as is usual with action research.

2 We used our experience as organisational members, and, in one case, as a former strategic planning consultant to address these issues. This experience is, in most cases, indirectly influenced by organisational change and strategic choice theorists such as Child (1973), Schein (1992) and Argyris and Schön (1992); however, these authors were not used as resources during the planning phase.

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