



Great Projects Are Stories

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Recently, I saw the IMAX showing of Apollo 11. It was a bigger than life, audacious, mesmerizing adventure of challenge, inspiration and accomplishment. As I left the theater, I thought, “This was as good as any superhero extravaganza.” It was a documentary of fifty-year-old footage, but it was better; it was real.

Projects are all about challenges and problems. They are about people from different backgrounds, with different ideas and interests. They are about leadership. And they are always about a story.

Great leaders use stories as prized tools. Stories are subjective, of course. We develop our own meaning from a story. Different people interpret the same story in very different ways. This is both the frustration and beauty of our collective endeavors. We are smart and wonder why everyone doesn't see things from our perspective - and this is what makes stories so essential for leadership and learning. It is also a perfect analogy for life in a project. Team members seeing the same things, and interpreting in different ways.

Stories are a medium of knowledge transfer. According to the Project Management Institute's *Pulse of the Profession*[®] findings, organizations most effective at knowledge transfer improve project outcomes by nearly 35 percent. Knowledge is power. Transferring that knowledge is powerful.

What is the power of story?

NASA became a great place for sharing and discussing stories. As Chief Knowledge Officer and Director of NASA Academy, I learned about the power of story for creating a learning culture. In the early 1990's, I was brought to NASA Headquarters to design an Academy focused on building a culture of learning and expertise around projects and programs. I discovered that you cannot tell or policy experienced leaders to learn, but you can use storytelling forums to change a culture. And a culture that values knowledge transfer from the top to the bottom drives better outcomes and business objectives all round. Effective organizations are three times as likely to have a formal knowledge transfer process. And these effective organizations have much more of their projects meet their original goals and business intent.

Jerry Madden was one of the first project leaders at NASA to show me the power of story. At one of the first NASA project management training classes, Jerry never used a slide, he just told stories. One of my favorites was, ‘What a Little Barbecue Sauce Can Do.’

We (NASA) were working a joint project with international partners from Germany. We had a major review scheduled, and decided that each of us would take over a bottle of barbecue sauce

in our luggage. A typical American barbecue was arranged. The event was a great success; the Germans loved the barbecued meat liberally sprinkled with the sauce.

Two weeks later, we discovered a problem with a harness, which had to be repaired promptly. We brought the harness to the floor and pleaded for quick turnaround, but were told to get in line. Our project did not have the muscle to slip in front of the work being done for other projects. The technician then asked who the harness was for. When told, they said, "Aren't they the barbecue people? Give me the harness; I'll fix it for you on my lunch hour." And that was only the beginning of the very special treatment we received for the remainder of the three-year period. That barbecue sauce made all those at our barbecue feel they were part of our team.

I was in awe of Jerry. Up until Jerry, every other session was a 100-slide presentation where the main skill being developed was endurance in a painful setting. I soon discovered that storytelling had a unique power that prompted sharing knowledge, encouraging reflection, building community, and allowing for learning.

What is the secret?

Let me offer a few advantages of reflective leadership, and learning through the use of stories.

1. Knowledge – Project expertise is embedded in wisdom that comes from experience. Very hard to quantify or place in a database, but a natural formula for telling stories. Knowledge is also all about meaning through collective exchange. It's not a list, it's about conversation, adaptation, and sharing.
2. Context – Leadership is dependent on the context of the situation. Stories are all about the context. Training is fine, but too often the generic, off-the-shelf tone becomes a barrier for relevance and meaning.
3. Learning through Reflection – Walk by yourself on a beach. What happens? If you're like me, you start thinking in stories, images, ideas, concepts. This reflection is a natural consequence of sharing a story. Story encourages reflection and exchange. The most successful leaders, teams, organizations engage in reflection and sharing of ideas. It builds expertise and is the foundation for innovation.

So, let's stop reading, and I will stop writing. Tell me your story.

Really.

Stop reading and tell me about your greatest project challenge. What is it that you are working on that is so very important and demands success? What are the problems? What excites you about the mission? What are the actions that you are taking? Who is helping, and who is hurting? What are the shared lessons that you will never forget? What are the outcomes? Write it out in notes, or draw images that serve as a reminder.

Then, get together with colleagues and share. This is the basis for a wonderful leadership knowledge forum. It's all about real stories, leadership, and learning. And I would love to hear your story about how it goes.

We have some more resources online about storytelling, knowledge transfer, and creating a culture of sharing - and do feel free to use them for your work:

<https://www.pmi.org/learning/thought-leadership/pulse/capture-value-knowledge-transfer>



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