

Power of story

Sense making comes from son's Persian Gulf experience

By John and JoAnn Girard

For several years, we have had the great pleasure of speaking to groups of organizational leaders about knowledge management.

Specifically, we speak about how leaders may reap the benefits of creating and sharing organizational knowledge.

This journey has taken us to destinations across the United States and Canada as well as Europe, Asia, South America, Africa and Australia.

In fact, Antarctica is the only continent where we have not spoken about knowledge management – we await an invitation!

Over the years, our talks have changed.

Initially, we spoke about rather complex cognitive theories with the hope folks in the audience would take our words of wisdom and single-handedly transform their organizations.

After many sessions of watching yet another audience grin politely as we delivered our sermon, we realized that we were contributing to one of the common themes of our talks – information overload.

As it turns out, much of what we were talking about was simply lost in the translation.

At first, we wondered if it were the audiences because it certainly could not be us!

After each presentation, we would spend hours answering emails from individuals with questions such as “I really enjoyed your talk; however, I am not really sure how to implement the ideas you were discussing. Do you have any examples of these ideas in action?”

After many nights of responding to similar questions, we realized (finally) that we were making the whole thing seem very complicated.

We began to respond to questions with short stories that illustrated the point we

Gone are the days where ships pass in the night without notice. Gone are the days when ships rely on semaphore or even radios to stay in contact.

were trying to make. One day we had an epiphany: why wait until after the presentation to share these stories? We decided to transform our talks into a series of stories that explained the (unnecessarily) complicated theories we were describing.

The story that follows is one of our favorites.

Not that long ago, our son, John, was serving aboard a Canadian warship in the Persian Gulf, as part of Operation Enduring Freedom.

His ship was part of a larger formation known as

the USS George Washington Battlegroup, aptly named because the lead ship in the group was the aircraft carrier USS George Washington.

All total, there were six ships in this futurist flotilla, each of which was in constant contact with the mother ship. Gone are the days where ships pass in the night without notice. Gone are the days when ships rely on semaphore or even radios to stay in contact.

In fact, today's modern warships are one the best examples of virtual collaboration in action. Each ship is inextricably connected to the remainder of the flotilla.

At the personal level, technology played an important role in ensuring our son was able to stay connected with his

friends and family back home.

In modern navies, this homeward-bound connection may be as important as the interconnectedness of the operational ships. Though it may be true that Napoleon armies could “march on food,” today soldiers, sailors, and airmen and women are probably more concerned about staying connected than they are about the quality or quantity of their food.

If you are in doubt, simply ask a soldier if he or she would rather have a MRE (meal ready to eat, which is actually an

oxymoron) or a five-minute phone call home.

One day, during his six-month “cruise” in the Persian Gulf, our son decided to explore other opportunities in the military.

Although we are not entirely certain what triggered this sudden quest for knowledge, we were very impressed that modern satellite technology allowed him to search the vast stores of data on the Defense Wide Area Network.

He was able to access, almost instantly, all the information he wanted to decide what military occupation would be of most interest to him.

He was able to read factsheets and download and watch videos that described each job. Essentially, he had access to everything that would have been available to him if he were back home – very impressive.

He also had access to vast volumes of regulations that explain the process for changing careers.

As you can imagine, it is a very bureaucratic process to change careers in the military. There are many forms to fill out and many deadlines to meet. As he continued to navigate through this maze of knowledge, he began to trip upon contradictions.

He found different dates, different processes and different approval authorities. The more he searched, the more contradictions he found.

Soon it became clear he would not be able to rely on the data he was finding – it was simply impossible to determine which documents

were up-to-date and which ones were dangerous old relics taking up valuable space.

At the end of the day, our son contacted us for help. He knew we would know someone who would have the real knowledge he needed.

Indeed, he was correct and after just a couple telephone calls, we were able to connect with the person who knew the real procedures.

This is a great example of how knowledge flows in many organizations.

Frequently it makes more sense to find a person who knows what you need to know rather than search volumes of uncontrolled content on corporate intranets.

So what is the moral of the story? Well, the first lesson we learned was the

power of story to help people understand and remember complex issues.

The story clearly reinforces that organizations should have procedures for content management and digital asset management; in short, someone should own all data and be responsible to maintain it.

However, technology alone will not suffice. We learned that often people prefer to connect with other people rather than with data. To satisfy this

want, organizations should consider investing in systems to facilitate this human-to-human connection.

So what are you doing to ensure you remain connected with people? Do you rely on technology to facilitate connections?

We encourage you to connect, collaborate and communicate with other Smart People – start today by following *Smart People* on Twitter <http://twitter.com/Smart_People>. **SP**



Adapted from John and JoAnn's book, The Leader's Guide to Knowledge Management: Drawing on the Past to Enhance Future. John Girard, PhD (john@johngirard.net) is cofounder and chief knowledge architect of Sagology, a firm that focuses on connecting people with people to collaborate and share knowledge. JoAnn Girard (joann@joanngirard.net) is the cofounder and managing partner of Sagology.