

# The ASK story

## An insider's perspective on storytelling at Nasa

In order for the agency's project managers to be able to keep up with demands for faster, better and cheaper results, Nasa sought a way to bring it's PMs up to speed as quickly as possible. To this end, **Todd Post** describes the work being undertaken by the team at *ASK Magazine*, and reveals the role storytelling is playing as a tool for converting tacit to explicit knowledge.

At NASA, everyone seems to be delighted with the knowledge sharing initiative, and specifically the storytelling component, *ASK Magazine*. I am the editor of *ASK Magazine*, so I confess I'm biased, but I believe Nasa does the personal side of KM better than any institution I've seen.

ASK stands for 'academy sharing knowledge', an online magazine about project management, mostly as it's practiced at Nasa. The academy is Nasa's Academy of Programme and Project Leadership (APPL), a comprehensive resource including training and events like local and national knowledge sharing meetings.

ASK is part of the broader APPL vision to build and nurture a learning community among Nasa's programme and project managers. Anyone can read ASK on the web. From the beginning we decided not to restrict it to Nasa eyes. I hope you'll have a look if you haven't already. Visit us at [www.appl.nasa.gov/knowledge/ask\\_home.htm](http://www.appl.nasa.gov/knowledge/ask_home.htm).

But enough of this. Now for a story.

Not long ago, albeit aeons in technological time, Nasa was an institution of few and big projects: Apollo, Space Station, the shuttle; you've seen them on television, you've read about them in the newspaper.

In this bygone era, Nasa's project management community used to be smaller than it is today. The old paradigm for schooling project managers (PM) used to be by apprenticeship. Spend years working as a system engineer, learning all about the hardware, software, systems and subsystems and how to integrate them, become a deputy under the tutelage of a veteran PM, and then, in time, (15 years, let's say) you get your own project to manage.

Today things are different. The old paradigm doesn't cut it in the 'faster, better, cheaper' era. FBC was ushered in by Nasa administrator, Dan Goldin, a little less than a decade ago. Today, there are a great many projects at Nasa, many smaller than those mentioned above, cranking out results faster than ever before and costing a great deal less (in real money). The cheaper a PM can pull

these projects off, the better for both the agency and his career.

To keep pace with these changes, the pool of PMs has grown larger. Many of Nasa's current PMs are younger than ever. There is therefore no time to bring them up through ranks in the same way their senior colleagues were.

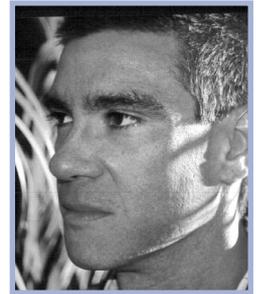
To complicate matters, many of the older PMs are nearing retirement age. In the next five years it's estimated that close to 50 per cent of the Nasa workforce will retire or be eligible for retirement. It is a dark prospect for any institution when its largest repository of knowledge – the practitioners themselves – is about to disappear, as these practitioners take their knowledge with them.

These are some of the more important exigencies that led to the birth of Nasa's knowledge sharing initiative. The others, more immediate to the growth of *ASK Magazine*, have to do with people. You can't have a story without characters, after all.

Perhaps the leading protagonist of this story is Dr Alexander Laufer, a project management consultant, or as he prefers to describe himself a 'champion of learning and unlearning'. While storytelling is all the rage these days, Laufer has been promulgating stories as a tool for converting tacit knowledge to explicit knowledge and as method for quickly assimilating new knowledge for more than a decade.

At Proctor and Gamble in the late 80s and early 90s, Laufer launched a storytelling project much like what we are doing with ASK. At P&G he and several associates at the company produced a book of stories by project managers, the purpose being to pass on their knowledge to a younger generation of practitioners. Unlike ASK, the book was not intended to be an ongoing project, and when it was done Laufer left P&G.

During the last several years, Laufer collected stories from Nasa PMs and assembled them in a book that would be the precursor to ASK, *Project Management Success Stories: Lessons of Project Leaders*. Laufer's co-author on the project was APPL



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director, Dr Edward Hoffman. Although he is not involved in the day-to-day work of the magazine, Hoffman deserves an equal slice of the credit. It was his vision from the start to direct much of APPL's focus towards storytelling, and it was he who brought Laufer on board. What Laufer and Hoffman wanted was for ASK to engage an even larger pool of PMs at Nasa than they had managed to get involved with *Project Management Success Stories*.

As the ASK editor, I came to the project with no background whatsoever in project management. My experience as a freelance writer over many years gave me a certain flexibility and adaptability to write about a broad range of subjects, but project management was not yet part of my repertoire. With Laufer and Hoffman, we already had two experts in project management on the team. What we needed was someone to make the stories compelling to read – to put some zip in the prose. A PM might have an excellent story to tell, but he doesn't always know the best way to tell it.

The other characters in this story, the real heroes of the project, are the Nasa PMs who contribute to and support the magazine. Without their co-operation, it's hard to imagine that ASK would ever have amounted to anything. These are incredibly busy people and their generosity and excitement about the project underscore how important they feel it is to them and to the agency.

Nasa project managers are a bright bunch of people and they generally want to continue learning and become more reflective practitioners. Ask them what it means to be a successful PM (and I have on many occasions) and nine out of ten will tell you it's about bringing lots of people together to function as a winning team. Many have embraced the storytelling format precisely because of its personalised format. They see it as a tool, but as a very personal one.

There are many tools for codifying knowledge. Far fewer exist that personalise it. Storytelling is one of the most personal ways of sharing knowledge and, not surprisingly, one of the most popular. At least this is what we're finding at Nasa.

The stories that appear in ASK are all told in first person. Ostensibly, the authors are the Nasa PMs. There are several who are fine writers and whose stories have needed very little editing. Mostly I work with them to craft the stories so that there is suspense and the stories rise out of action, not just information.

We get the stories from them in a variety of ways, but most commonly I approach them with a particular topic in mind, usually one Laufer has set as a theme for an upcoming issue. For instance, an earlier issue focused on reviews. Reviews occupy a huge amount

of a Nasa PM's attention. On some projects, it is common for there to be a dozen major reviews.

Laufer knows a lot about the way reviews work at Nasa. He knows the people to contact to find out who is challenging the status quo when it comes to preparing for and conducting reviews. I make an appointment to interview a PM. Once I get him talking, I can sometimes let him go for 15-20 minutes without having to ask a question. Contrary to the stereotype of an inarticulate engineer, Nasa PMs are non-stop talkers once you press the right button and get them started.

An interview may last an hour, maybe two hours, depending on the nature of the subject and the amount of time the PM has for it. One thing we've found is that as ASK has gained in popularity, it has become much easier than it was in the beginning to schedule time with PMs. Everyone always has a story to tell, and now there is a reason to share it. Reading stories by their peers in ASK has triggered other project managers in Nasa to come forward and share stories of their own.

There are manifold reasons for the success of ASK. Certainly one of the more important reasons is that we listen to and respond to what our audience tells us about what they want from the magazine. For example, we learnt that a large part of our audience preferred to read a hard copy version of the magazine, and so we designed a PDF version for them to download from the website. Some in our audience suggested providing an audio companion to the stories. They felt that with their busy schedules, it would be convenient if they could listen to an audio version of the story while they were doing other things. We have provided them with this capability, too.

It helps to know your audience and to listen to what they care about. We've got that covered at ASK. For any KM initiative, but especially one as personal as storytelling, this is essential.

We publish ASK every other month, but I suspect that if we wanted to publish on a monthly or even a weekly basis, we would never run out of material. There are plenty of stories Nasa PMs have to tell, and we believe there is a world of them still to explore. ■

## ASK Magazine



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