

Identifying Communities of Practice through Storytelling

By Seth Kahan and Madelyn Blair, PhD

In the year 2000 the World Bank had been practicing Knowledge Management (KM) for three years. The Bank had been divided into institution-wide networks, large cross sections of staff members engaged in related fields of interest. All of them had vibrant and active thematic groups (known in KM circles as “communities of practice”) – with a single exception. In its first year the ISN achieved recognition, taking its place in the institution’s KM hierarchy and receiving a small budget. When the ISN was created seven *Thematic Groups* (also known as “communities of practice”) had been established as a rudimentary step. None of these were active at the conclusion of its first year when Seth Kahan was appointed ISN Coordinator. There were no regular meetings and knowledge was not being developed for documentation. The ISN Coordinator’s mandate was to bring the Thematic Groups to life, get them up and running as part of the institution’s KM program.

The Information Solutions Network (ISN) was a new group, made up of those people who were involved in information systems and delivery. These were the staff members who put the wires in the wall and the satellites in the sky, built enterprise technology systems, ran the libraries and developed the Intranet. This community was one of the largest in the Bank, comprised of over 1,000 workers, who were viewed by many as “back line support staff.” Yet, their work was becoming increasingly important as almost every project at the Bank had an information systems or technology component.

Kahan had been at the Bank for eleven years during which he served in information systems. The ISN was his home and its members were his colleagues. His first step toward breathing life into the network was to identify the existing informal Thematic Groups and focus efforts on nurturing them. It was clear that the ISN was a vital community: the Bank was a leader in global communications technology, the Intranet was in its fifth iteration, e-Government was a constant topic on bulletin boards and in public meetings, a new paper on the Information Technology sector was in the works, and two exciting initiatives were well underway: the Global Development Gateway and the Global Distance Learning program – high profile projects that were using cutting edge technology to advance the World Bank’s development goals. A way to identify the informal groups that clustered around these activities was needed – a way that drew on the interests, the passion and experience of the ISN’s membership.

Kahan brought in Madelyn Blair, an organizational consultant with a solid background in information technology and knowledge management. She could speak the ISN’s language. Together they developed an approach. Together they hand picked 20-30 of the “movers and shakers” in the ISN, all inspired veterans.

In a 90 minute meeting, the veterans were each asked to share a story about a work assignment that was especially exciting. Blair and Kahan worked as a pair, teasing the stories out, and simultaneously working at a flip chart to record themes that appeared.

“We were looking for stories where these folks shared what they were passionate about. We knew that their passion would be the lifeblood of our Thematic Groups, and nothing else would suffice,” says Blair.

“When the stories began, the energy in the room changed noticeably. People were leaning in, on the edge of their chairs, listening closely to each other. It quickly became clear what turned these people on. They enjoyed going to the third world countries and solving puzzles that had both technical and geo-political components,” tells Kahan.

Over the next few days Blair and Kahan poured over their notes, called the veterans to verify their perceptions and worked to identify common themes around which they could comfortably begin building Thematic Groups. Nine groups were identified:

- **Information Management**
- **Information Exchange**
- **Data Management**
- **Business Systems**
- **Internet Working Group**
- **Technology Infrastructure**
- **Technical and Application Support**
- **Country Office Support**
- **Informatics**

Over the next year, six of the nine Thematic Groups flourished, (Information Management, Information Exchange, Business Systems, Technology Infrastructure, Internet Working Group, Technical and Application Support), two moved along garnering a minor following (Data Management, Country Office Support), and one held only three meetings (Informatics). The remarkable thing was the participation of the people in the ISN. Through workshops, retreats and classes sponsored by the Thematic Groups, more than 800 of the 1100 staff members participated over the course of the year.

Storytelling provided an “organic” form for locating the interests and passion of a traditionally analytic community. By listening to the stories told,

Blair and Kahan were able to indirectly approach the membership and successfully identify the natural, existing communities of practice within.

Story told by Sridhar Iyer, Regional Information Technology Office for Middle East North Africa Region

The World Bank decided to open a resident mission office in West Bank following the Oslo Peace Convention. Those were the early days of connecting Country Offices to the Bank's network. We did not have our network fully commissioned in the Middle East North Africa (MENA) region at that time so we had to go through private providers to connect us to the Bank network. Companies like AT&T and MCI were working in Egypt, Israel and other places, but West Bank was a totally different ballgame.

A team comprising myself and a specialist from the Bank's central Information Solutions Group were commissioned to visit the Country Office, check out the location, look at the options and make a proposal for connectivity. It was extremely difficult to do business with West Bank and Gaza without the link. The cost of telephone calls was exorbitant and there was a constant discontinuation of services due to local reception.

We went to check the scenario out. The third day after we landed we were staying in a hotel, the American Colony hotel, just outside the Palestinian Israeli border on the West Bank. I was just standing out on the balcony looking at the city when I heard a loud thud. I didn't know what was going on; it was a huge blast. I didn't know what it was. I switched on the TV and there it was, a bomb in one of the Jerusalem areas, early in the morning around seven o'clock. Everything was stopped; things were closed. That was the backdrop in which we were working.

We visited the Country Office and it was clear that they did not have contacts on the Israeli side. We felt our way around the Palestinian side. We met some of the Palestinian authorities, telling them what we were trying to do. They were extremely happy. They said, "As soon as you do that, please give us some connections so that we can also communicate." I said, "We are coming to you to seek your help to help us do this." The answer was, we only control the communication in the West Bank area." They pointed us to another budding telecom company, PalTel, to try and see whether they could help us. We got the same answer from them.

We found a private Israeli telecom company that was interested, so we went to Tel Aviv to meet them. They turned out to be well qualified and enterprising. They had a lot of technical knowledge. They said, "Yes, we can do everything." As a matter of fact they were subcontracting a lot of their services from the Israeli telecom, so they could be our intermediary making it possible for us to sidestep some of the bureaucracy. They told us they would get everything done, but we needed to get permission from the Israeli telecom to operate from the West Bank area.

The West Bank in those days was zoned into three types of areas: those that were fully under the control of the Palestinians, partially under Palestinian control or totally under Israeli control. Our Country Office was in an area that was under the Palestinian control. When the private Israeli company found this out they said, "Oh, we can't go there. That's totally under Palestinian control; it's not even jointly controlled." We asked them to come and just do a site inspection and tell us what the options were. They said they would do it only if we drove them in our UN vehicle. So, we took our car, picked up these guys brought them to the resident mission.

They took a survey and said, "Yes, it's doable. We can put the satellite up here. But to get the last mile from the Israeli checkpoint to here we need to talk to Israeli Telecom. They are the only ones who can pull a fiber or a cable or anything back here."

Unfortunately the day we were supposed to meet Israeli Telecom we heard yet another bomb. They moved our meeting to Tel Aviv. We put together a position paper that spelled out the situation, where we needed their help and so on and faxed it over. We then went to meet the telecom vice-minister. When he arrived he brought our papers and he had made notes on them, which was very heartening. He said he very much appreciated the work we had done. He asked us, "Okay, what do you want from us? You need to get the Palestinians to help you." But, we all knew that the Palestinians couldn't do anything. We told him. He looked at a few maps and told us, "Well, you're in a zone that will make it very difficult. But, we'll look it over and see what we can do." The meeting was over. We took it as a good sign. We knew that at least in principle they knew what we were doing.

The negotiations started and it seemed absolutely impossible to put the last mile in. Then the Israeli telecom company and the folks on my team came up with an idea that was innovative. We decided to put in a spectrum line-of-sight modem on top of our building, one of the tallest buildings. We then rented a rooftop space on one of the industrial buildings on the other side of the border, a place that was also very tall so that there was no hindrance between the two modems. Once this was done the wire can be pulled from the modems.

This is what was done. It worked perfectly. It was a win-win situation. The Bank was happy; it was done quickly. The Israeli Telecom was happy because they didn't have to go into the zone. The private Israeli telecom company was happy because they could serve us. And, of course, the resident mission was happy because they got connectivity. This link survived almost four years until we got the technology to use our own network.

“How To” - Using Storytelling to Identify Communities of Practice

1. Bring together “inspired veterans;” *i.e.*, those who have a history in the community and are interested and passionate about their work.
2. Ask them to reflect and choose a story that typifies what they love about their work.
3. As they begin to share their stories, one at a time, ask provocative questions designed to get to the “heart” of the story; *i.e.*, what is it that really turned the teller on about the situation. Open ended questions work best in this regard: “Can you tell me more about that? Say a little about what that was like? Who was involved? What was so important about that particular event? Why is that a critical piece of the story?”
4. During the storytelling note what is important about both the process the teller describes and the content. For example, a process note from Sridhar’s story would include: troubleshooting political obstacles and a content note would include: connecting Country Offices to the World Bank’s network
5. Following the storytelling event compare and contrast, identifying common themes that fit these two requirements:
 - a. A common issue or problem that a significant number of storytellers are dealing with as part of their work
 - b. Areas that rouse interest, passion and curiosity from a significant number of the tellers
6. Contact participants to discuss your findings and validate your ideas for potential Communities of Practice.
7. Rather than announcing the results of your work and mandating the new communities, have a participatory session in which you share what you have learned and work together with the participants to choose the new communities.