

Tell your Story with the Headphones on

By Theresa Sigillito Hollema

Have you heard a good story lately? Most of us love to hear a good story, and we all have a great story to tell – our own. [Barker and Gower](#) show through the [Narrative Paradigm Theory](#) that story telling is a cross-culturally accepted communication tool and a quick method to build relationships, especially in a diverse environment. Stories express values and information in an accessible manner which is easy to understand and memorable. In addition, stories can help break down the assumptions which block collaboration and innovation. When I listen to your story, I must question the assumptions I had of you and your background, and replace them with something that may be new to me, stimulating the learning process. This competency to hold assumptions and be open to difference (perspective taking) has been shown to have a significant impact on [team innovation](#).

In the virtual environment, where [swift trust](#) is critical to long-term team collaboration, storytelling can be a valuable exercise for the team leader to include early in the team development. Fortunately storytelling can be done virtually as well.

Let's imagine about how this would work for a multi-cultural virtual team. The team comes together (preferably through video) and each person tells their story. Luis from Brazil begins and shares the experiences that have shaped him as a person, referencing important work experiences, and also the impact of having his grandmother living with his family during his childhood. Lucy in China is listening and asks a question which shows her interest and respect. Charlotta in Sweden, the team leader, tells what experiences have shaped her as a leader and the bosses who have influenced her leadership style. Abdul in Dubai now has a clearer understanding of Charlotta's current behaviours as a leader in the team. During each story, colleagues are listening and after each story ask questions for clarity.

This exercise may lead to improved collaboration within the team:

- Deeper understanding of each team member as a person, and not only a name behind a task. This increases empathy and respect – key elements for the long-term collaboration of a team.
- Increased appreciation for the cultural diversity in the team, as most stories will be filled with cultural references. This also begins to eliminate the blockades for building trust across cultures.
- Improved connections between team members as they recognize the similarities in their experiences as humans, even though they may be many time zones away from each other.

As the team leader, you can organize and facilitate the session for high impact. Here are some suggestions:

- Organize the personal storytelling session, apart from the normal work session.
- Ask everyone to prepare. Provide guideline questions and instructions. This may include:
 - o *Your story is an opportunity for the colleagues to learn about you. What has shaped you as a person. Describe a few key events in your life that had an impact on how you view the world, approach work, connect with others. The team is curious and interested in learning more about you. Avoid listing number of children, or elements of your resume.*

- Allow a certain time limitation to avoid run-on stories, for instance 8-10 minutes per person.
- Encourage the use of multi-media. After all, this is the benefit of being virtual. However, the multi-media must enhance the story and not distract from the storyteller.
- Give instructions to the listeners. They may ask questions to understand the story and the person, but may not voice their own perspective or experience in relation to the story, ie "I have been there too"
- Encourage people to reach out to each other *1 to 1* after the session on certain things that resonated or shared experiences they have. (This also encourages more informal communication amongst the team members).
- Close with everyone making a comment about the session. Perhaps this will lead to something for the future.

As the leader, this is your moment to lead by example. Be prepared to share your story in such a way that the team understands you and your leadership philosophy and approach. Don't simply tell your leadership style, show how it developed through your experiences. Your team will be grateful.