



Anecdotal Circles

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What does the technique entail?

The anecdotal technique is a narrative technique used to guide participants in sharing stories in a relaxed and spontaneous manner resulting in the collection of meaningful anecdotes around a single incident or situation. These stories are truthful and without opinion for bias. The anecdotal circle must flow freely and where participants are not conscious of the detailed structure of objectives of the session in a lightly facilitated group based method.

The anecdotal technique entails:

Step 1: Defining the focus area – in here the facilitator will understand the objective.

Step 2: Inviting participation – in here the facilitator will choose participants from a focus area.

Step 3: Framing the questions – in here the questions will be defined for the focus area.

Step 4: Preparing the logistics – in here the right environment is selected for facilitation of the session.

Step 5: Conducting the circle – in here the actual circle is conducted.

The technique entails the facilitation of anecdotes that a mixture of positive and negative stories.

When and why should it be used (i.e. Benefits / Advantages)?

Anecdote Circles works best when

- Dealing with people aspect of an organisation (culture, organisational structure), strategy, decision making, and knowledge mapping (retention and diffusion).
- You want to understand the depth of an organisation by delving into real experiences of the participants.
- The qualitative findings supplement the quantitative analysis that may also be in progress.

- The deep dive using the stories allows the user to understand what is important to the focus group. These may include key issues that concern them. Metaphors and archetypes can be extracted from a collection of stories to tell the facilitator about the group's culture and what they value.

- An outcome from the use of this technique may also support team-building and strengthen common understanding in the participants.
- Used as a mechanism for capture of experiences but can also work as an intervention.
- For sense-making as the stories disclose sensitive information in a blameless environment.

When and why should it not be used (i.e. Detriments / Disadvantages)

Anecdotal Circles Technique should not be used when the company

- Only wants an opinion or point of view and it is more for informational purposes.
- Wants to have a directed flow of discussion.
- Does not understand the value of qualitative data.
- When participants do not dit.

How should the technique be used?

Step 1: Define the focus area

Unless already known, a brainstorming session with the project team can be used to identify the issues and clustered together to develop a set of themes. Ensure that the correct approach is being chosen. Anecdotal Circles work best where traditional methods of enquiry e.g. surveys, questionnaires will not provide the correct result. Only a few themes can be facilitated. Ideally less than 4 in a 1.5 hour anecdotal circle session.

Step 2: Invite Participation

Participants should be relevant to the focus area. This can be in a specific area

“...sharing stories in a relaxed and spontaneous manner resulting in the collection of meaningful anecdotes around a single incident or situation.”



of the organisation or from a cross-section of the organisation. Participant should represent diversity and be a mixture of age groups, gender, period of employment, race, seniority, detractors and enthusiast. Target populations should ideally be 10% of participants. Anecdote circles usually consist of 8-12 people sitting in a circle and sharing their experiences by telling anecdotes, about the area of focus for that group.

Step 3: Frame the question

Asking well-articulated questions allows for good anecdotes to be collected. Questions should be framed so that stories are not biased to provide the facilitators desired outcomes. Organisational language should be used by the facilitator as well as the use of emotional words such as disappointed, surprised, felt, and annoyed. Questions can be expanded to set the scene e.g. Consider

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this..., use when and where questions. It is important that we avoid the word story and use the word illustrate. Questions should drive experience and not opinion.

Step 4: Prepare the logistics

The room should be bright and airy. There should be sufficient chairs for all attendees (participants, facilitator scribe) set in a circle so that there is no implicit hierarchy. One could use desks to create security. Ensure that there is sufficient writing material and a tested audio setup if you are recording. Use audio equipment to record stories. Ensure that recording equipment is tested before the session. Once the session is completed, send the audio to be transcribed. Sit participants who are overly chatty next to the facilitator so there is no eye contact.

Step 5: Conduct the circle

Begin

Start by having a 10-15 minutes session initiation to make participants feel comfortable and relaxed.

The warm up can consist of setting the guidelines, sharing the reason for the discussion, and participants introducing themselves.

Rules of the session are also discussed such as one person speaks at a time, the group will respect the privacy and sensitivity of the story and no identities will be revealed. Provide guidelines e.g. provide your experience through a story that you have experienced, use a story to paint a similar or different picture. Don't disagree with someone else's events of the story, rather tell the story as you saw it.

During the circle, the facilitator must get both positive and negative stories.

Facilitate themes:

To begin the first theme, the facilitator must ask the first question and then be quiet. Someone will eventually respond. Alternatively, discuss a similar story of your own. Use warm up and icebreakers to get your team going and when the team is stuck then to use time lines to get participants remembering. As we progress into the anecdotes, the facilitator will guide the participants to tell stories to each other and

not to the facilitator.

During the session, the facilitator must maintain a low profile and appear busy to maintain the status of a guide when participants are talking. Subtle interjections are used by the facilitator to continue the exploration of a story e.g. "Can you tell us more?". The approach to the group can have an impact on the success of the stories being told. E.g. facilitator must not ask too many questions, participants who dominate the conversation must be managed.

The stories can get ominous and emotional in nature so the facilitator needs to be attentive and caring. It is advisable to know the companies' HR policies and counselling process. During the circle, we must elicit stories and not opinions. Don't ask too many questions and do not fill the silent spaces unless required. Participants are using this time to reflect. Manage ditting with regards to time. Ditting which is a tendency for us to want to tell a richer, more dramatic story than the one that we have just heard will happen. Dits also tell us about rich, resonant themes inside an organisation. If the stories are negative then ask for positive stories around this topic

Detractors

Conflict occurs when people are trying to show their authority. This is normally the person who wants to dominate the conversation. The facilitator should invite the participant to become an observer or remind the participants of the guidelines. Alternatively the dominating person can be given a task such as deriving archetypes which may be used to spark conversation. Be careful not to include the line manager of the participants in the same circle as this may inhibit sharing.

The end

At the end of the circle, the facilitator will steer the group back by providing guidance on how anecdotes will be used, brainstorm adding positive feedback or removing negative feedback gained during the session. Finally thank everyone for their participation.

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