

Story telling from Nigeria:

Practice and Lessons

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“The key to learning is not analytical method, but organizational process; and the central methodological concern is with effectively engaging with the necessary participation of system members in contributing to the collective knowledge of the system”.¹

¹ D. Korten (1981). Management of Social Transformation at National and Sub- national Levels. Unpublished Paper, Manila. Ford Foundation.

Introduction

The object of this article is to show the importance of story-telling events as an integral feature of a monitoring process. Based on our adaptation of Anecdote Circles, such events provided opportunities for Advisors working on a Policy Development Programme in Nigeria, spread out across different federal level ministries, to come together, listen to and so learn from each others' experiences.

Recently, and for some, lesson learning has become an important feature of monitoring, hence the ubiquitous acronym MEL. Learning lessons is about making assessments and reflections more structured through asking questions such as: "What is working well and how?" and "What is not working and why?".² We argue such questions should not be held in abeyance to independent evaluations, rather be answered by project teams if, that is, monitoring is to fulfil its fundamental purpose to improve, not just comment and report on, performance.

There are two main ways such questions can be answered: feedback through giving voice to the clients or beneficiaries; and from those who are responsible for delivering the support. This article focuses on the latter.

"Storytelling has progressed and is about a diversity of voices, not just one teller of one past; it is how a group or organization of people negotiates the telling of history and the telling of what future is arriving in the present". David Boje (2014)³

Managers need formal reports to capture stories of performance among individuals who provide the services and these depend on their recall and analysis of particular stories. While this is an important consideration, it tends to focus on individual accountability and ignores behavioural interactions among them that constitute the storytelling event as a group. Having these conversations in a group helps make better sense of their experiences, understand the complexities and uncertainties often associated with the environments in which EAs work, share lessons and spot ways to adapt their approach.⁴

Inspired by the work of David Boje, Pfizer⁵ and Cognitive Edge⁶, we introduced Anecdote Circles as a bi-annual story telling exercise as a complement or a bridge to the more formal reporting procedure. Such circles are an informal social event that explore and make sense of the interactions the EAs have with those they support in Ministries. They make good what surveys and reporting cannot begin to capture.

The circles treat participating EAs as the subject of the stories that matter to them rather than objects of a group interview determined by questions that matter to Management. The nature of these conversations are largely informed by the uncertainties of how and to what extent their client

² <https://www.odi.org/blogs/10749-three-ways-incorporate-evaluative-thinking-monitoring>

³ https://davidboje.com/vita/paper_pdfs/Sampe%20STORYTELLING%20Practics%20boje.pdf

⁴ Wilkins, Alan 1979 "Organizational stories as an expression of management philosophy: Implications for social control in organizations." Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Stanford University.

⁵ <https://narrate.co.uk/2011/02/using-stories-to-increase-sales-at-pfizer/>

⁶ <https://cynefin.io/wiki/>

institutions – the Ministries – understand and respond to their presence and advice. In essence, they give opportunities to tell stories that help: a) avoid repeating mistakes from the past; and b) allow the repetition and spread of successes.

Background

The Policy Development Facility Phase II (PDF II) was a flexible, rapid-response facility funded by the UKAID to support “Champions of Change”, primarily Ministers, in implementing economic and social policies that help reduce poverty in Nigeria. It was managed by Development Alternatives Incorporated (DAI) and run by a small Programme Management Unit (PMU). PDF II operated at the federal level for five years, from April 2015 through to March 2020. The support to the “Champions of Change” was provided by technical assistance through Embedded Advisers (EAs) to pursuing vital economic and social reforms through improving capacity and generating evidence to inform decision-making. Some of the terminologies used above have been unpacked below.

“Champions of Change” were reform minded senior government officials who are primarily Ministers but also other senior government officials. These “Champions of Change” usually request support for technical assistance from the UK Government’s Department for International Development, Nigeria (DFIDN). The request triggers sourcing and contracting of Embedded Advisers whose primary place of assignment is the government ministries, departments or agencies (MDAs). The MDAs, that included the Vice Presidents Office with focus on economic development, are fully staffed with Permanent Secretaries who are the administrative heads and Directors and other Officers assigned to various departments. The “Champions of Change” are political appointees and usually have limited time in office. The request for Embedded Advisers therefore, is to help them pursue a reform agenda within a very short timeframe.

Embedded Advisers are Nigerian experts, most of whom have gained experience from the private sector outside of Nigeria. Many are totally new to the Nigerian Government space so have limited knowledge of the institutional complexity involved in pursuing reforms. Although they have the requisite expertise, they need a good understanding on the political economy and how to navigate the bureaucracy of the Nigerian civil service. To achieve success, a delicate balance has to be struck between high quality technical delivery and building and managing relationships amongst the civil servants. Failing to do this results in limited buy-in which threatens the sustainability of the reforms once the Minister leaves office.

Included in the design of PDF II was a robust Knowledge Management (KM) approach to improve performance by continuous support to innovative approaches within PDF II. Taking into account lessons learned including from other DFID programmes, the KM approach was underpinned by monitoring processes that created and captured information. Some of these innovative approaches include: After Action Reviews for performance improvement; Tracer Studies to capture the consequences of events at which analytical work is presented; Beneficiary feedback on the performance of the EAs to ensure the quality and relevance of their support; and Anecdote Circles which is the subject of this article.

Learning from implementation of PDF II’s predecessor PDF I, showed that there is significant knowledge, not necessarily captured by formal reporting arrangements nor communicated to all EAs. Furthermore, under PDF I, EAs were not able to share learning and experiences with their colleagues even where they worked for the same government institution albeit on different assignments. This learning necessitated the set-up of Anecdote Circles to allow interactions amongst EAs.

The Objective and Approach

The main purpose of Anecdote Circles is to help EAs make sense of their work in introducing change among their client ministries. They are a story-based approach to monitoring primarily for the benefit of the EAs – to listen to and learn about stories from each other. EAs do not wait for the PMU to cure

their problems/replicate their successes. They conclude with agreed actions so ensuring others outside the circles do not re-interpret the stories after the data has been collected.

Key features of the approach

- **They focus on the work of the EAs** - The success of the EAs and that of their principal clients are mutually dependent: For EAs to stimulate changes in the behaviours and/or decisions in their MDAs rests entirely on the quality and relevance of their facilitation.
- **They give voice to the EAs** - They give primacy to the views and experiences of the EAs who will generate different perspectives. They offer opportunities for the PMU to also learn from this clear understanding of experiences from the “field”.
- **They focus on sharing experiences** – They offer an event in which the EAs can talk about and diagnose the experiences they have in supporting “Champions of Change”. Such experiences are about exploring their relationships with their clients/beneficiaries and in understanding and reacting to their responses at point of contact and beyond with other staff in the Ministries.
- **They are dynamic** - We ran two rounds of the circles every year from 2016-2019 each with a different set of themes (or identifiers). The different themes reflected the stage of the EAs’ relationships with their client ministries. Their nature moved with how their support evolved. For example, the first year focussed on how they were settling in and developing relationships, while later on in 2017/18 the focus shifted to results they had achieved, how these were realised and lessons they had learnt in their success or otherwise.

We set out six steps in designing and facilitating Anecdote Circles:⁷

1. **Define the common themes or identifiers through reviewing their individual reports** (e.g. handling rejection of the facilitation, facilitator’s knowledge of the “system”, the brokering skills of the facilitator).
2. **Identify the participants** (usually choices involve no more than 5-12 in each circle and you can mix them up by client group and/or sector).
3. **Develop the starter questions** for each theme remember to use emotional words (but avoid asking too many – it is not an interview). For example, and in relation to the handling rejection: a) “*when have you felt appreciated or rejected by the “Champion of Change” you work with?*”; and b) “*where in the Ministry have you been surprised by how “Staff “ responded to you”?*”
4. **Let experiences and examples be heard** – not opinions
5. **Note down 2 lessons EAs learnt from each other at the end of each circle**
6. **Present and analyse the ‘results’ among the circles** in reference to the themes to reveal patterns of lessons and share ways EAs overcame challenges and actions EAs draw and define for themselves after the event.

To prepare for each AC event, we developed some tips for participating in anecdote circles adapted from Pfizer and Anecdote’s guidance.

For EAs

- Focus on providing examples, your experience, anecdotes and stories
- Allow your colleagues to complete their anecdote without interruption
- Rather than disagree with someone’s story, tell the story the way you remember it.

For Facilitators

Being an anecdote circle facilitator in many ways resembles the role of a tour guide. First, there is the greeting and the warm-up, getting EAs to start the anecdote circle. Next, there is the invitation to explore the “themes”, taking the participants from one to the next. The EAs are encouraged to explore for themselves what each “theme” holds for them through their sharing of experiences and stories. Finally, there is the return, where the anecdote circle concludes.

⁷ Adapted from https://www.anecdote.com/pdfs/papers/Ultimate_Guide_to_ACs_v1.0.pdf

- You act as a guide, not a leader.
- An anecdote circle is working if the EAs are telling stories to each other rather than telling them to you. It is not a focus group interview.
- Start the circle by asking them “Do you know each other?”
- Keep a low profile after having introduced the theme
- Try not to intervene more than 3 times for every 10 contributions
- Resist temptation to break the silence – silence is powerful
- Ask few questions and if you do, try these: a) “Can you provide an example ?” if EAs are just giving opinions and judgements; and b) “Can anyone provide another example ?” if an EA has just provided an example of something?
- At the end of each Theme, ask the EAs to write down something on a post-it note they would like to do/ask for after the Circle has finished

In PDF II we adapted the approach to not only fit the role and purpose of the EAs, but also in ensuring the themes defining the scope of conversations in the circles were relevant to the issues they raised in their reports.

Our first set of circles were run in April 2016 and, for each of the four circles, we developed the following themes/signifiers and questions to prompt conversations. Each circle lasted for 1.5-2 hours.

Theme 1 Your Clients’ Resources

- A common problem among the MDAs is delays in budget releases and/or inadequate amounts. When did you experience this and how did you handle this frustration?
- Think back to instances when you had to support development of a policy, a strategy or a framework. When did you feel appreciated in supporting your MDA to formulate changes to and/or develop new policies, strategies, frameworks or regulations?

Theme 2 Your Clients’ Environments

- Think of a time when you needed assistance in finding something out about and/or or solving a problem to do with dis-connects among government institutions? How did you go about it, who did you contact, what happened?
- There is potentially lots of value for government in sharing knowledge with the general public. Where have you heard about good examples of government communicating with the general public?
- The behaviours of those with whom you work are impossible to predict. Has anything in your MDA surprised or disappointed you in the last six months?

Lessons Learnt

What went well and how?

The following are examples of stories told during the circles:

Box 1 – Lesson behind achievements: Identify other champions in Ministries

Although PDF II’s Champions of Change – typically FGN Ministers and Senior Government Officials – request EA support, other champions are needed to ensure the EAs’ success. EAs have supervisors, yet this relationship rarely determines the changes the EAs are there to help bring about, and how best to do this. Furthermore, it is sometimes the case there is an air of resentment when EAs arrive. A major determinant of EA effectiveness, therefore, is in developing relationships, specifically working with a different type of champion, for example: Senior civil servants within Departments such as Directors whose participation in working with EAs determines their ability to deliver the intended support as well as improve the use of them among decision makers. Such champions need to be carefully identified and be chosen for a specific purpose.

Box 2 – Lesson behind achievements: Coordination among stakeholders

Involving different stakeholders at different points in the policy development process matters. Opportunities to involve the **private sector** from the outset - in analysing the problems and formulating the policy intervention helps ensure the policy intervention helps resolve issues relevant to them and their businesses. It also helps ensure they benefit or that policy execution/implementation is effective. To help communicate the policy and its benefits to poor people requires collaborating with advocacy and lobbying groups from **civil society**. It is important for the private sector to take front stage during implementation. As case in point are financial service providers. Often local private sector companies become complacent and passive and do not respond to policy interventions. In so being, they provide opportunities for international development banks to step in and so potentially distort domestic capital markets with debt financing products. These often threaten sustainability. Related to this is the need for coordination across MDAs. The development and implementation of policy are rarely the exclusive domain of any one MDA. Both policy functions need to be harmonised.

Box 3 – Lesson behind sub-optimal results: Checking assumptions about the legitimacy of the request for EAs.

Related to the lesson in box 1, it proved challenging to establish a solid start in MDAs. The champion of change, who requested the support, did not always effectively communicate the need for and work of EAs among departments in the 'host' MDA. People who had a large part to play in determining the EAs' 'success'. In this respect, a significant amount of time is needed at the beginning to establish relationships with the MDA's departments, how they work and to explain the EAs' brief. It is not to be assumed that certain MDA staff are necessarily sufficiently aware of and willing to work with the EA just because the request has been made to DFID.

What didn't go quite so well and why?

As mentioned above, the EAs work across different MDAs with different principals and schedules. Identifying a suitable time to bring all EAs together was always a challenge. Close contact was maintained with the EAs to understand the nuances of their schedule as reflected by the governments' schedule. For example, scheduling had to take into cognisance when the Federal Executive Council was meeting or if there was a big government event that involved multiple MDAs. Also, for the EAs, having very tight deadlines often at short notice meant that priority would be given to that rather than attend an anecdote circle.

Another example of things that did not go so well are instances where the PMU or DFID used the anecdote circle to achieve a different objective. Given the difficulty in bringing a number of the EAs together and the desire not to make this too often, the anecdote circle event was used a few times in this way. For maximum results, the circles need to be kept focussed to ensure that interest of the EAs does not wane and get distracted from other interests and that they get maximum benefit.

Conclusions

Positive feedback was given by EAs on usefulness of the circles at different times during the course of the programme some of which was during their exit interviews and during anecdote circles. The following is a summary of the feedback received.

- **The importance of bringing EAs together.** The bi-annual Anecdote Circles provided opportunities for EAs to share experiences and insights with each other and to communicate

these to the PMU. This proved a significant complement to the more formal, bureaucratic reporting system where individual EAs communicated directly to the PMU. Such fora enabled EAs to share issues and challenges they thought were peculiar to them. Having these opportunities was re-assuring. They learnt how much they had in common and, through learning from each other, identified ways to resolve issues and pursue opportunities.

- **The importance of making connections and staying connected.** Beyond the bi-annual events, the EAs benefited from reaching out to each other to solve emerging challenges or to get access to other MDAs relevant to their work. The PMU also helped in identifying opportunities to connect EAs who were experiencing similar issues. Of particular value to the EAs was the KM team helping EAs respond to new and/or different demands from the “Champions of Change” and helping to better navigate the client MDA’s institutional environment. Such insights were often based on sharing comparable experiences among other EAs. One EA had this to say during his exit interview “EAs should be mandated to attend at least 2 anecdote circles because the gathering is very useful for networking”
- **Understanding how things work.** The circles helped the EAs in getting to know the internal processes - the red tape – and who is responsible for them, helped in understanding how the MDA works. Identifying who is responsible for specific stages in the decision-making process helps ‘spot’ who to work with to ensure the policy is understood and so avoid blockages or hold ups due to mis-understanding.

Feedback received from the EAs on the usefulness of the anecdote circles held in April 2018 is captured below:

Criteria ⁽¹⁾	Score ⁽²⁾			
	1	2	3	4
1) Learn from other EAs	12	3	1	
2) Help bring focus to our work	9	6	1	
3) Update PDF II Team on progress, issues and lessons	9	7		
Total	30	16	2	

Notes:

⁽¹⁾ Defined by EAs as the reasons they participate in the Anecdote Circles

⁽²⁾ 1 = excellent; 4 = poor

From the table above one can conclude that their feedback was very positive. Making recommendations on improvements, some of the feedback received were to, “invite clients to the circles to stimulate discussions on sustainable change”, “change time to weekends so more people can participate...”, “allow more time for discussion in the circles”, “...present select EA case studies on their achievement, challenges and next steps”.