



## SENSE MAKING METHODS

*Sense making  
the processes through which  
people interpret and give meaning  
to their experiences*

# ANECDOTE CIRCLES

Going beyond an interview or survey, Anecdote Circles create space for conversation and stories. With less structure than our usual interventions, they account for the complex and messy nature of our businesses, and our humanity.

Anecdote Circles also remove the element of interviewer or facilitator predetermination (no matter how well-intentioned!). They allow the participants themselves to determine their own meaning, and create a space for exploration.

Anecdote Circles aren't just a data-gathering activity, they can be a change intervention in themselves, creating unexpected momentum.

# WHAT DO ANECDOTE CIRCLES LOOK LIKE?

## group size

Anywhere from 4-12 people is ideal.

## group mix

You want people who have a common identity or experience (have worked in the same role, organisation project etc) and then you want diversity in that group (age, seniority, enthusiasm, influence, background etc).

## timing

You'll want 90 mins minimum.

## getting them there

You can do an open callout with some targeted criteria and then select, or do a specific invite list - it's up to you. But you need the right mix of people in the room.

## what to ask

You'll need to work around themes, rather than a focus, and have some story eliciting questions at hand. Check out the later pages of this guide for help.

## environment

While we love to do this face to face in a casual circle format, with some food and an informal atmosphere, you can easily facilitate this online via your preferred platform.

# THREE STEPS TO PREPARING AND RUNNING AN ANECDOTE CIRCLE

## 01 Know your theme not your focus

Unlike other activities, an Anecdote Circle won't have a specific outcome planned. You want your people to share their real life experiences and stories around a general theme or direction, not trying to problem solve about a specific topic (this isn't brainstorming). Try to avoid creating expectations for yourself or others about what people might say and insights you might gain.

So instead of an outcome you will have a theme. Themes can include things like safety, rewards, motivation, attrition, morale. In 90 mins you want no more than perhaps 2-3 themes or you may only cover one theme if you have 12 participants who are all sharing well.

In our experience we don't share the theme with the participants.

## 02 Prepare the players

Create the invitation (either targeted or create a broad invite with criteria and then select your players). Let them know the activity will be an opportunity to talk about the past and their experiences to inform the project. **Try not to ask them for stories in the invitation** as it creates a preconception of what a story might be (ie a comedy routine or a movie etc) and impacts their participation. More natural stories come when preconceptions are removed.

Assure your audience of confidentiality and them know their sharings will be recorded and de-identified to shape the learnings for your projects.

## 03 Shape the language

Once you have your players in the room, in a circle, you need questions to ask that will bring out their stories. The words you use here are very important. Storytelling is natural habit of people everywhere, so you just need to get them started on something they already know how to do.

An example of creating questions around themes:

Theme - morale

Context - Consider a time you were provided feedback by your leader - either formally or informally

Questions - When might you have been proud about what you were told?

When have you felt frustrated or annoyed at what you were told?



# IDEAS FOR SHAPING YOUR QUESTIONS

**01** Use an opening that asks them to recall  
Phrases like "Picture", "Consider", "Imagine", "Think about", "Describe".

**02** Connect the opening to the theme  
"Consider a time you were given safety directions by your leader."

**03** Now we want to move it out of the ordinary so they don't just describe a regular day  
"When were you (Insert an emotion here) by that advice?"  
You might use a positive or negative emotion.

**04** Allow different people to share their stories  
If no one is sharing a positive story then ask the question gain with a negative emotion (or vice versa) e.g. "When were you frustrated or disappointed by that direction?"

**05** Avoid 'how' and 'why' in your questioning  
This leads to participants and facilitators providing opinions and judgments and can stifle open sharing of stories.

# TIPS ON STORIES

1

Stories describe events, if nothing happened, it's not a story, it may be opinion, fact, a statement or instruction

2

Get people talking about the best and worst moments, not an ordinary day

3

People should be recounting things that happened; not lecturing or complaining

4

Focus on events - it can be as simple as making sure to ask "was there a time you felt proud" rather than "what were your accomplishments".

5

Always frame your introductions to natural storytelling in terms of events - times, moments, experiences, instances, things that happened, and so on.

6

In every situation there will be some issues that people are going to be at least a little passionate about. If that isn't happening you haven't found the issues yet.



Probably the most important thing about the Anecdote Circle is that people should not be aware of a lot of structure or "objectives" in what they are doing. They should mostly think they are having an interesting time reminiscing together.

# RECORDING THE RESULTS

There are a number of options for capturing the narratives from your Anecdote Circle.



You can audio record the conversation at each table and have it transcribed and de-identified for use.



Get participants to self-record anecdote titles/notes on post-its.



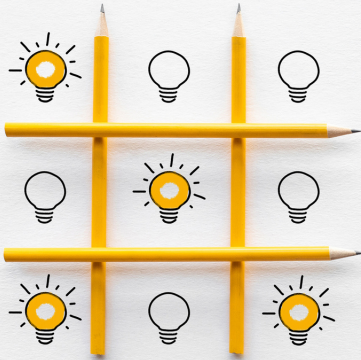
You may invite a scribe to write down anecdotes as they are told, which can capture stories but doesn't provide them verbatim.



Or you could use a Graphic Facilitator\* who provides a similar service but captures a visual representation of the stories. They may of course add some interpretation to what is said.

\*We recommend Simon Banks of Visual Funk

# WHAT DO YOU DO WITH THESE RESULTS?



## Shape your change strategy

Now you know more, right from the people. So let that information shape how you build your strategy.

Opportunities might be:

- better targeting of change agents
- new communication channels
- clearer understanding of leadership capability gaps
- understanding of process/reality gaps
- weaknesses in existing communication channels / key players

## Use the knowledge from this Circle to shape the next

You've got insights now to shape the theme and questions going forward

Your next Anecdote Circle might be on just one of the themes you've covered in this initial circle (with new participants), allowing you to delve into the theme with more questioning. Or you might explore a tangent theme that emerged during this Circle.



## Bring your learnings to your Project Board or Project Team

How are things really working on the ground, and what does that mean for the project going forward?

The insights from Anecdote Circles can have great authority as they have no analysis or filtering and are the raw experience of the players. As users of the system or members of a team or organisation, this can be powerful input into a project plan (if heeded!).



# THANK YOU

## Interested in more on these types of methods?

The Cynefin Company® is our inspiration for all things Complexity and Cynefin and they kindly share their ideas and inspiration on [www.cynefin.io](http://www.cynefin.io).

Our work takes inspiration from here to support Change Practitioners working in all types of projects. We regularly share our ideas so keep up with us at [www.timbsandco.com](http://www.timbsandco.com).

