More than Numbers: Revitalising Employee Engagement through Pattern-based Narrative Research

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Introduction

Imagine this familiar scene. Everyone is looking at the findings of the recent annual organisational climate conducted by Human Resources. True to its nature, the pages of the report for this quantitative survey are filled with statistics. “Employee Satisfaction rose by 3.2 per cent,” Human Resources says enthusiastically. When asked by the Chairman what the number means, the response is, “It’s based on the figures we got from the different metrics, mainly an increase in Work-life Balance and Recognition, although satisfaction would have been higher if not for the fall in Satisfaction with Middle Management.” The Chairman looks up, interested in the reasons behind the decrease in Satisfaction with Middle Management. Human Resources seem lost, because they only have what the statistics tell them... and numbers are but part of the story.

To begin with, what is an organisation? Westley defines it as "a series of interlocking routines, habituated action patterns that bring the same people together around the same activities in the same time and places". But doing the same things the same way all the time does not mean that results will be equally good. Some issues do have standard solutions that will place them into the “complicated” and “simple” domains of the Cynefin framework.

However, other issues may instead be “complex” - essentially unsolvable, they are at best, brought to the organisation’s awareness and managed. Understanding the issues within this complex space requires more context than simply numbers. Homo Narrans is the idea that humans are fundamentally shaped by and shape the narrative structures of their existence - that humans make decisions based on pattern recognition. As human brains are more sensitised to narrative forms of knowledge about a situation than they are to analytical processes, it is not surprising that narrative remains the principle mechanism of learning and knowledge transfer within an organisation. The Homo Narrans concept implies that effective employee engagement necessitates the management of these narrative patterns. These entrained patterns need to be broken to allow for the emergence of undiscovered issues.

Over the last 18 months, Cognitive Edge worked with four different government agencies in Singapore and collected over a thousand individual narrative fragments in those workplaces. Through the richness of the experiences shared by respondents, we demonstrate how narrative capture is essential to better understanding organisational climate. Narrative and its conformity or otherwise with desired corporate values can be one

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1 Westley, Frances R. [SOURCE]. 1990.
2 Cynefin Contextualisation, a tool for sensemaking: http://www.cognitive-edge.com/method.php?mid=9
5 Snowden, D.J. Naturalising Knowledge Management. 2007.
measure of the overall health of an organisation\textsuperscript{6}. Combined with the visualisations produced by the patent-pending Cognitive Edge SenseMaker\textsuperscript{®} software, the study of narrative patterns is a powerful complement to existing studies of organisational climate.

This paper will discuss the challenges faced by the organisations, the approach that was used, the narratives that were collected and the lessons learned from these projects.

Challenges faced by the organisations

The organisations varied in size from small (around two hundred employees) to large (tens of thousands of employees). They were from different parts of the public sector with different tasks and encompassed areas such as bureaucracy, education and enforcement.

Three of the organisations had completed their internal traditional, quantitative climate survey, within the last 12 months. For two organisations, there were issues brought out by the quantitative surveys that they were aware needed further attention. The comment that recurred was that they knew there were issues to be addressed as highlighted by the quantitative data, but they didn’t know what the numbers meant. More information and context were needed before they could create interventions. Without a fuller understanding of the situation at hand, it was difficult to react or respond effectively.

In addition, the organisations were also interested in several themes, such as understanding employee perception of the value proposition of working in their organisation, improving work processes through feedback gained from internal and external stakeholders and possibly detecting signals of potential issues before these became serious problems.

Generally, the themes that existed across the organisations tended to be about workload, leadership, people management, career advancement/recognition, reward, teamwork and workplace culture.

(i) Approach - Signifier Design

Narrative capture and sensemaking were used to complement the organisations’ internal climate surveys and traditional quantitative stakeholder surveys. In order to derive as much value as possible from narrative fragments, the respondent were requested to index the stories according to certain filters (we term as signifiers) in a process known as \textit{signification}. This self-signification removes any possible expert and interpretation bias - the respondent through his choices indicates exactly what he meant to share and communicate through his narrative. This signification is done using our patent-pending SenseMaker\textsuperscript{®} software.

Designing the signifiers was a joint effort between Cognitive Edge and the respective project teams. Both formal inputs and informal inputs were used in our design. Formal inputs included items such as project objectives, the organisations’ mission statements and values. Informal inputs tended to be other items not necessarily present on first thought to the project team. Through various Cognitive Edge open-source methods such as Two-Stage Emergence and Anecdote Circles (available on our website\textsuperscript{7}), our informal inputs were created and included in the signifier design process.


\textsuperscript{7} Visit http://www.cognitive-edge.com/method.php
Employees (such as those from Human Resources) have a tendency to be entrained to think in a certain manner and to prioritise issues over others, which is understandable due to the requirements of their job. For example, we worked with a certain organisation where the mission statement was reproduced almost perfectly by a minority of its employees. However, the majority of experiences shared by other employees reflected experiences inconsistent with the organisation’s espoused values.

Therefore, we have found that informal inputs are an important part of the signifier design process, since they provide insight into the actual, not ideal as stated mission statement, existing values of people in the organisation.

(ii) Approach - Data Collection

Our aim was to gather as many narratives as possible, all self-signified (by respondent) at point of capture. There is no fixed "magic" number of stories that need to be collected - similar to traditional quantitative surveys, the ideal number is the number that gives us confidence to accept the findings based on the data collected. We used the same approach as traditional quantitative surveys by surveying a diverse sample of the organisational staff.

Once designed, the signifiers were loaded online for web capture through Cognitive Edge’s proprietary Sensemaker® Collector software. We are an advocate of web capture for several reasons. This medium is scalable - there are no additional significant costs no matter the size of your target audience, be they two hundred people, two thousand or twenty thousand people. The medium provides more privacy to respondents than phone surveys or focus groups. This is important for respondents who might not have shared their experiences without the anonymity, especially if the experiences were not positive.

Besides being more environmentally friendly and less labor-intensive than paper capture, Web capture also provides greater accessibility across various geographies within the same period of time. Web capture is also very convenient: the original signifiers can be retained at no cost and can be re-used to follow up on the study.

As the same signifiers are used, comparisons are possible even though time frames are different. This enables the organisation to effectively monitor the efficacy of its interventions.

Data collection is not conducted exclusively through web capture. Where deemed suitable by either clients or Cognitive Edge, Anecdote Circles are also used as a method to collect data fragments.

Signification of data during collection

We received a total of 1,195 fragments from the four pilot projects over 18 months. The actual collection period was each project lasted for approximately one to two months.

The majority of the fragments were contributed via online capture. Respondents were sent an email containing a link to the web capture site. This site is customised with the organisation’s introductory message and unique signifiers. After answering a prompting question, each respondent then tagged his experience using the signifiers. A signifier may or may not be applicable to an experience, hence the option of ticking "Not Applicable" for any filter. An experience may therefore have as many as all signifiers tagged with it, or no signifiers. The latter is highly unlikely in the event of a serious response, since the design
process for the signifiers and prompting questions help ensure the relevance of signifiers to respondents, in line with the questions that they answer.

When collection is done via Anecdote Circles, the respondent contributes an experience and then chooses the relevant signifiers for his experience. In a typical Anecdote Circle lasting ninety minutes, the average person contributes three to four anecdotes. For small groups, the Anecdote Circle is an effective method which utilises social dynamics to collect experiences.

By having respondents signify their own experiences, the results are less likely to be tainted by expert bias during analysis. Using the related experience as context, the signification structures are a form of sensemaking for the analyst. When the experiences are aggregated and analysed on a larger scale, a new level of meaning becomes available that provides an organisation-wide perspective of the current situation on the ground.

Sensemaking

Sensemaking is the act of making sense of the world around us, using the fragments we have collected to provide context for further understanding.

The collected fragments were analysed using the SenseMaker® suite of tools, which offer visualisations of the data in the form of histograms, triads and landscapes, all backed by traditional mathematical statistics as well as the qualitative material of the narratives. Included below are images used in a standard report - for all the images below, it is possible to dive into the numbers by selecting any section of the image to see the fragments behind each statistic.

Histograms

As in traditional histograms (above), we can analyse the data using simple charts. This chart traces the frequency of experience as deemed by the respondent. As the respondent groups were broken into sub-groups, the analyst is able to compare the subgroups to track the differences and similarities. Histograms are an excellent way for granular analysis of the multi choice questions that might ask about the emotional tone of the fragments or a breakdown of the respondent's background (of course, dependent on the details the respondent is willing to share). There are other standard statistical tools available in the SenseMaker® Explorer tool for more quantitative-minded analysts.

In the chart below, the breakdown is by multiple respondent groups across different emotions, resulting in a simple but rich image.

**Triads**

The apices of each triad - such as X1, X2 and X3 - vary according to triad design and objective. For example, a triad might want to understand which of an organisation’s official values are most important to a respondent. In this case, X1 could be Integrity, X2 could be Service and X3 could be Creativity. Based on how respondents signify the triad, interesting (and sometimes unexpected) triad patterns may be shown. Triads provide a quick, accessible heat map of the available data.
Landscapes

The three-dimensional landscapes above were created with the survey data and are based on the concept of “fitness landscapes” as seen in evolutionary biology. When designed with a stability axis, it becomes possible to track changes in people’s perceptions over time (as well as the persistence of their beliefs). Understanding the nature of peaks and troughs may enable decision makers to become more efficient and effective in creating interventions.

Because we are able to “deep dive” into the data when necessary to pull up the supporting fragments, as analysts we are better able to understand the meaning of the data as we are supported by the context provided in the fragments.

Traditional analysts are generally very used to dealing with metrics and traditional statistical methodology. Conducting studies with the narrative capture method requires the same application of proper sampling techniques, a diversity of respondent perspectives, and most importantly sufficient volumes of material.

Findings

Organisation A1

A1 was most interested in understanding its employees’ perception of the value proposition of working for the organisation.

Finding: Employees in A1 placed a very strong emphasis on teamwork and unlike the other organisations we studied, A1 employees seemed to rely more on leadership to provide direction. While work opportunities tended to be ample, stress levels were also seen as high and growing.

Organisation A2

A2 had recently completed its internal climate survey and was also undergoing a period of change due to movements in senior management. The A2 project team was aware of issues on the ground which had to be addressed.

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Finding: Our study uncovered that although there were many positive aspects about the A2 workplace, there were also some challenges that needed to be addressed: inadequate workplace support for employees to properly carry out their duties, unfair division of workload, strong department divisions and an arrogant, out-of-touch leadership that was not doing the best job to motivate subordinates. One of the most important findings was that the mission statement and personal employee values were not quite aligned.

Organisation A3

A3 had recently completed its internal climate survey and was interested in obtaining more specific feedback from its employees.

Finding: The narrative capture revealed experiences in circulation among ground-level employees that senior management had been unaware of - in several instances, when the findings were presented, senior management shared that such experiences would have been detrimental if they had been discovered at a later point in time.

Each division was discovered to really have its own set of challenges that it was facing; there was hardly more than a single issue which was common to all divisions. The large surprise for this organisation was the importance of relations with peers - more than recognition and workload (common issues in climate surveys), such importance was placed on relations with peers that we recommended senior management to take note of that when creating interventions.

Organisation A4

Organisation A4 was curious about its internal and external stakeholders’ perceptions of its organisation and workplace culture. It had commissioned a traditional quantitative survey with another consultant, and brought Cognitive Edge in to supplement the traditional approach.

Finding: Our narrative capture brought to senior management’s attention the unfortunate stark disconnect between internal and external stakeholder perceptions, which was not to the organisation’s advantage in any manner. The capture highlighted the internal stakeholders’ complacency regarding their work achievements, and the external stakeholders’ frustration with A4’s work processes and ability to carry out its duties.

What worked well

Survey design

In general, less is more especially when it comes to the number of prompting questions and signifiers that respondents have to deal with. For A2, their two-step survey process was ambitious but did not work out very well in the context of a pilot project, given that the survey design was new (although intuitive) to employees.

Prompting questions can be revised and more multi-choice questions added to enhance sensemaking of the data at the post-collection phase. It was noticed that experiences contributed through web capture tended to be more negative in nature than those collected through Anecdote Circles. We can only imagine the barriers (and results) that focus groups face. For example, where we have an organisation suffering low workplace morale (perhaps resulting from autocratic supervisors), it is unlikely that respondents from that workplace would share their negative experiences in focus group sessions.
Obtaining explicit endorsement from senior management

We have found it very useful to obtain explicit endorsement from senior management, usually in the form of an introductory letter for dissemination to survey respondents. The message legitimises the survey while the involvement of senior-level staff implies that the findings of the project will be studied and followed up on. This encourages respondents to be honest and forthcoming in sharing their experiences.

Allowing for emergence

A broad-based capture and ambiguous signifiers are useful in uncovering previously unforeseen issues. The Cognitive Edge pre-hypothesis approach allows the space for new issues to emerge. Narratives that do not fit within the patterns formed from the data may be noise - or they could well be weak signals that deserve a closer study. The capability for the analyst to “pull up” a fragment for further study allows better understanding and decision making.

Lessons learned

Concerns about privacy

In general, there was concern among respondents about how their experiences would be used by their organisations. Respondents shared verbally with us that they were worried about being identified and blacklisted by their employer (presumably if they were to share negative stories), even though the survey instructions were explicit about not using real names in the experiences. The instructions applied to both web capture and Anecdote Circles.

This came as a surprise to both Cognitive Edge and the respective project teams, since online capture offers a large degree of anonymity to the respondent. In A2, more than 80% of respondents withheld permission to share their stories outside the team. This percentage was much higher than expected or seen in other projects, where the general consensus was that sharing experiences were important to help the organisation improve. The very presence of that concern was highly indicative of the organisational culture.

A4, which did not ask respondents regarding permission for access, faced the same issue. It had assured respondents that their contributions would be kept confidential. Still, participants tended to be guarded about sharing their emotions about their experiences, indexing as “neutral” rather than a positive or negative experience (common in all other projects that Cognitive Edge has done). Their experiences also tended to sound like corporate script.

We took several steps in anticipation of people’s concerns. It was made clear on the introduction of the online capture site the project’s commitment to ensuring the confidentiality of people’s experiences. During sensemaking and evaluation of stories (if any) to share with the organisation, it could become tempting for the project team to wish to share some unauthorised stories within a larger circle. This idea was strongly discouraged, as it was important to respect the context in which the experiences were shared. This would also build trust within the organisation for subsequent captures.

Survey fatigue

Survey fatigue is an issue for both traditional and non-traditional surveys. Capture incentives could be created, such as an organisation donation of x dollar per survey
response to a designated charity, or a reward such as the opportunity to attend a coveted internal training course.

For organisations with staff outreach sessions such as "Lunch and Learn", these events are a good way to stimulate survey response since staff would typically have more time then to share their experiences.

Final thoughts

People share their experiences all the time, whether at the pantry with a colleague, over lunch with their friends or while having drinks with their mates. In order to more accurately gauge ground sentiment and understand the issues on the ground, it is not an exaggeration to say that senior management needs to be able to tap into the experiences that are being shared (and often not with them).

The common feature of across the collected experiences is how powerful these narratives are. There are inspiring anecdotes about supervisors with excellent management skills, whose genuine interest and concern in their subordinates are related with gratitude and appreciation. People confide that adequate recognition from superiors has contributed to employee retention, and that a strong culture of teamwork in the workplace has helped them very much through the difficult times.

Then there are the negative stories, where inadequate supervisory skills and lack of direction of management are exposed. Stories of official and actual office hours, official and actual tasks expected to ensure career advancement, stories of events that occurred which should not have occurred and were not known till capture. The presence of a strong disconnect between senior management and the ground is not uncommon.

The project team often encountered the collected stories with a mixture of agreement, surprise and sometimes shock. There was little dissent with the themes that occurred - as employees themselves, they acknowledged that the stories tended to be representative of organisational culture.

Now, imagine this scenario. The Chairman looks up, interested in the reasons behind the drop in Satisfaction with Middle Management. The Director for Human Resources brings up a sheet of paper. “According to the narratives here provided by the employees, the recent revision in reward structure and the frequent shuffling of supervisors in these two departments have greatly affected employee experiences....” Access to the actual experiences of employees on the ground (and not just numbers filtered through various levels of organisational bureaucracy) is an excellent form of sensemaking, empowering decision makers to make more meaningful, effective decisions.

Angelina Seah is a Consultant with Cognitive Edge. An Accredited Practitioner based in Singapore, she has extensive experience working with both public and private sectors locally and internationally, most recently in North America, Australia and the UK.
Bibliography


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