

Building Narrative Capacity at ADB

By Norman Lu and Olivier Serrat

- **ADB makes growing use of knowledge management tools, methods, and approaches but must better capture and store its wealth of tacit knowledge.**
- **In 2009, the Knowledge Management Center in ADB's Regional and Sustainable Development Department launched an oral history project to help ADB hear itself.**
- **ADB staff expressed deep appreciation for *ADB: Reflections and Beyond* and its companion audio composition, *Beyond: Stories and Sounds from ADB's Region*—ADB has developed an appetite for storytelling in various contexts and applications.**

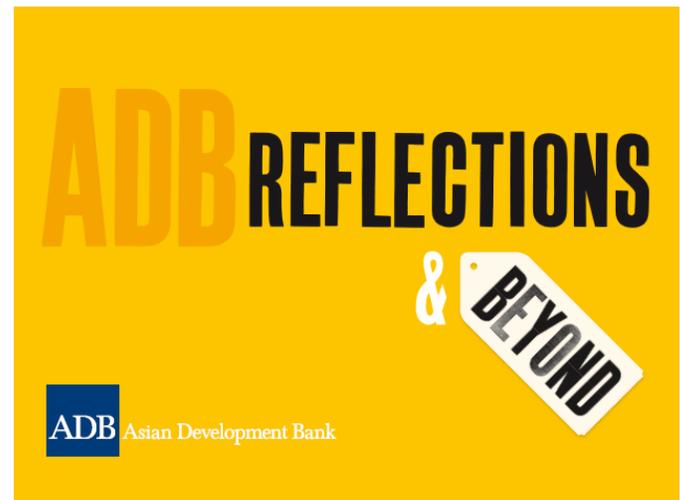
Origins

ADB has insufficient means of capturing and storing its vast wealth of tacit experience. Coaching and mentoring are somewhat ad hoc; exit interviews are still cursory; the Critical Incident technique finds few applications; structured peer assists have not yet been introduced; knowledge harvesting is not practiced; after-action reviews and retrospects are more or less unheard of; and only a small number of weblogs exists.¹ In short, knowledge sharing is limited to small (but rapidly expanding) communities and networks of practice, meetings over coffee, or occasional exchanges in hallways. A particular concern is that senior staff do not often transfer their experience with audiences outside their management circles.

“ADB is both a repository of stories waiting to be told and an audience ready to listen.”

At the 2007 annual meeting of the Knowledge Management for Development community, Olivier Serrat, head of the Knowledge Management Center in ADB's Regional and Sustainable Development Department, learned of a storytelling project of the Islamic Development Bank, conducted in 2006 because many of that organization's staff were about to retire. Upon joining the Knowledge Management Center in 2008, he formulated an oral history project to create a means by which ADB might hear itself and learn from past and present experience. Storytelling would surely help ADB become a learning

¹ The Knowledge Management Center publishes its *Knowledge Solutions* series in blog form. The series offers handy guides on tools, methods, and approaches to propel development forward and enhance its effects. The areas of competence it covers are knowledge capture and storage, knowledge sharing and learning, collaboration mechanisms, as well as management techniques and strategy development. The techniques the series highlights include knowledge harvesting. See, for example, ADB. 2008. *Storytelling*. Manila. Available: www.adb.org/documents/information/knowledge-solutions/storytelling.pdf



organization as envisaged in Strategy 2020, ADB's long-term strategic framework.

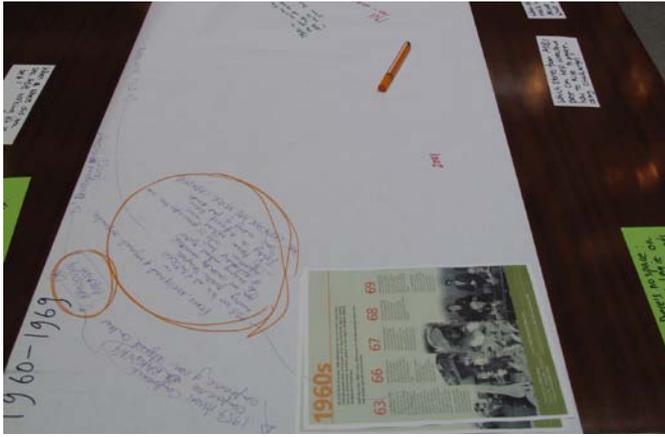
In October 2008, the Center decided to test ADB's appetite for storytelling. A scoping exercise soon confirmed that staff were ready and willing to share their experiences with narrative techniques. According to an early participant, “It's easier to talk about the future if you ground it in the events of the past.”

Listening to ADB Through Stories

In March 2009, long tables covered with blank sheets were laid out in ADB's Library, inviting staff to jot down significant memories and mark out ADB's crossroads over the years. With some difficulty at the start, a timeline of ADB's history, born of staff reminiscences, emerged. It articulated a healthy blend of recollections—some fundamental, others more subtle. It became the basis for the structure of *ADB: Reflections and Beyond*. Accordingly, that would intersperse reminiscences of arrivals and early years, descriptions of ADB projects and day-to-day operations, reports of complex situations and tricky judgment calls, etc. with personal memories of colleagues.

“I heard a story about something you did 15 years ago. Can you tell me more about it?”

Interviews with alumni, Management, and staff provided the most trying yet fulfilling moments. Storytelling was still new to ADB, even though some had used it in projects. The Center initially identified over 40 interviewees—a judicious mix of senior and junior international and local staff, alumni, and former members of the Board of Directors and Management. Some interviewees declined invitations to take part. Others said they could only spare 30 minutes but reminisced for more than 2.5 hours. A couple were eager to be interviewed but hesitated—they felt they were not senior enough. A few quickly that interviewscan preserve institutional memory and requested follow-up sessions.



The timeline in the ADB Library where staff jotted their recollections.

The book *ADB: Reflections and Beyond* is one of many fruits from the interviews. A companion audio composition, *Beyond: Stories and Sounds from ADB's Region*, selects pearls of wisdom, artistically allied to sounds captured in headquarters and the field, in the form of podcasts.

Poring over the material yielded by 33 interviews and making selections for the publication was not easy. But the greater challenge lay in transcribing spoken words into written language without losing spontaneity, essence, or appeal. Dealing with these difficulties occupied the Center in the second half of 2009.

“How can I write a back-to-office report that even begins to tell the story of this mission?”

ADB: Reflections and Beyond was printed in January 2010. But, there was still a sense of uncertainty stemming from concerns over how the book should be launched, how staff would react to it, and what unintended effects it might have. Eventually, the “Yellow Book” was released on 2 February 2010, coinciding with ADB President Haruhiko Kuroda’s town hall presentation of ADB’s *Our People Strategy*, a document that sets out the principles for how the bank will recruit, motivate, and manage its workforce to achieve the goals of Strategy 2020. The limited number of copies of the book placed on display at the launch were snapped up by staff as they arrived. Every staff member received a copy of the book the following day. *ADB: Reflections and Beyond* is now given to each prospective staff.

Appreciation and Follow-up

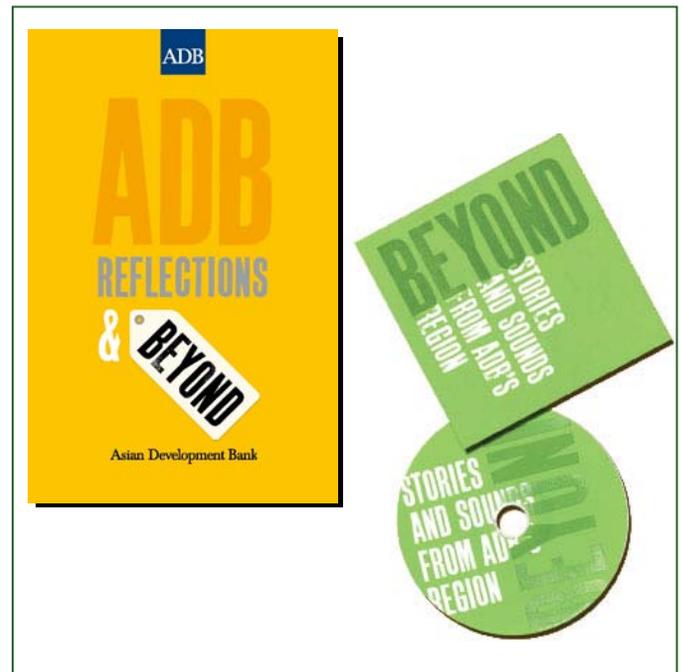
Reactions to the book were overwhelmingly positive. At the town hall meeting, staff who held advance copies began to flick

through the book. Reactions ranged from surprise to amusement to delight. A department head later asked: “Are you the guys behind the Yellow Book? When is the next volume coming out?”

ADB: Reflections and Beyond and *Beyond: Stories and Sounds from ADB's Region* succeeded in connecting staff with ADB’s very rich history. They contrast sharply with the dominant tone and style of traditional ADB products. The book is refreshingly different, “...a bit on the light side, which is fine, but future stories can go deeper.”

There is something to be said for positive deviance. As is the case for many radical innovation projects, starting small and flying below the radar helped get things done. Once staff see, recognize, and understand the benefits of approaches such as storytelling (especially when products begin to take shape), demand for related initiatives typically increases. Other departments are beginning to use the technique for training purposes. For example, storytelling is being used to develop a source book for country directors.

As a postscript, the Center later asked the interviewees how narrative techniques might be applied elsewhere. One suggested that ADB should consider capturing stories from its audiences, clients, and partners. Their feedback might feature people who helped shape the evolution of ADB’s development work across Asia and the Pacific.



ADB: Reflections and Beyond, sometimes referred to as “The Yellow Book” and the companion audio composition, *Beyond: Stories and Sounds from ADB's Region*.

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ADB: Reflections and Beyond. Available: www.adb.org/documents/books/adb-reflections-and-beyond/default.asp

Beyond: Stories and Sounds from ADB's Region. Available: www.adb.org/documents/multimedia/beyond-stories-sounds-from-adb/default.asp

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