

KEY POINTS

- Human experience is a powerful way to communicate ADB's work and its impact.
- Storytelling can play a unique part in ADB's role as a knowledge solutions provider and can harness the power of knowledge to address the critical challenges of developing Asia and the Pacific.
- ADB is full of passionate development professionals capable of learning storytelling techniques to engage their audience in a creative way.
- ADB speakers who are trained on TED-style storytelling techniques are able to communicate complex ideas using simple, conversational language. This promotes sharing of knowledge, information, and insights that are easily understood and resonate with different audiences.
- In ADB, the most common use of storytelling is for knowledge sharing and learning, such as transferring tacit knowledge or explaining complex subjects. Storytelling can help articulate new directions and foster cultural change in the organization.
- Numerous innovations in storytelling can be explored by ADB, such as focusing on story listening, collaborative storytelling, and providing evidence of the impact of ADB's work.

Why ADB Uses Storytelling in Knowledge Management

Miko Jazmine Mojica
Knowledge Management Analyst
Budget, People, and Management
Systems Department
Asian Development Bank (ADB)

Jane Parry
Health and Communications Specialist
(Consultant), Knowledge Team
Department of Communications and
Knowledge Management
ADB

INTRODUCTION

Stories help to ground data in people's lived experience, and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) has long used storytelling as a critical part of communicating its work. Even before the advent of social media, ADB was creating books and audiovisual knowledge products based on first-hand experiences to create interactive stories about sustainable development. Now, in the social media era, vlogs, podcasts, and live streaming are expanding the way users consume information, but at the same time narrowing their attention spans. This has radically changed the landscape of content creation and effective communication.

ADB wants to be recognized not only as a development financial institution to its developing member countries (DMCs) in Asia and the Pacific, but also as a source of technical skills and expertise. ADB's Strategy 2030 and its Knowledge Management Action Plan, 2021–2025 are a call to action for ADB to solidify its role as a knowledge solutions provider and harness the power of knowledge to address the critical challenges of developing Asia and the Pacific.

Storytelling can play a unique role in helping to achieve such objectives. Besides communicating the impact of ADB's work, stories also communicate the context in which knowledge is created and applied. Storytelling is an effective tool for knowledge transfer and communication.

Notes: This brief was peer reviewed by Patrick Lambe, principal consultant at Straits Knowledge; Ajit Sharma, TEDx Ambassador to India; Giovanni Verlini, principal communications specialist, Department of Communications and Knowledge Management (DOCK), Asian Development Bank (ADB); and John Larkin, principal communications specialist, DOCK, ADB. The ADB Knowledge and Innovation Talks program was led by Susann Roth, advisor, DOCK, ADB. Miko Mojica was the program manager and Ajit Sharma was the TEDx coach.

Storytelling in ADB has been revitalized. ADB has adopted a popular approach used in TED-style talks to enhance communication with its intended audiences and to deliver its messages more effectively. In introducing TED-style talks, ADB is looking to address new challenges, create opportunities for better communication, and harness the potential of storytelling as a knowledge management and communication tool.

HARNESSING THE POWER OF KNOWLEDGE THROUGH STORYTELLING

Two papers published by the Harvard Graduate School of Education in 2002¹ and 2004² looked at why and how organizations work with stories. Storytelling can powerfully convey norms and values within the organization. Highly contextual knowledge, which is often tacit, can be more efficiently exchanged using stories.

Three categories were identified in which organizational practitioners select a strategy of using stories when faced with challenges (Wilson 2004). The first strategy, knowledge sharing and learning, was the most widely reported purpose. The other two are for challenges that require providing leadership and for fostering cultural change.

Nonetheless, storytelling has had its share of detractors. Some dismiss stories as “soft” because they are perceived as less rigorous than “hard” data, and thus less valuable. However, stories can also illuminate, with concrete examples, the work that is represented in numbers and statistics, so that the human impact can be communicated alongside the financial and economic impact.

Stories that are over-rehearsed and too polished may be received with skepticism and cynicism. Good storytellers recognize that the audience, as human beings, perceive that reality is full of imperfections.

Moments that present storytelling or “story listening” opportunities can be overlooked, and people may not recognize or know how to use those opportunities. There is also the challenge of knowing when it is appropriate to use a story, and when it is not. Crafting, telling, and listening to stories can also take time. In complex situations, the single point of view communicated in a story can be inherently biased or overlook details relevant to the audience.

Lastly, demonstrating the effectiveness of using stories can be tricky, such as when showing results to a variety of audiences. Yet, when done well, storytelling can powerfully convey norms and values

within the organization, communicate trustworthiness, and reinforce commitment, especially in a period of organizational change.

Through stories, highly contextual and tacit knowledge can be more efficiently exchanged and can help people rethink practices and long-held perceptions that hinder change. Most of all, stories have an inherent ability to engage human emotion and imagination, and thus convey messages as well as knowledge more effectively over the long term.

THE CHALLENGE AND PROMISE OF STORYTELLING

Storytelling can help address the three main challenges of communicating ADB’s work and its impact.

- (i) ADB’s work is often technical in nature and can be difficult for outsiders to understand.
- (ii) The impact of ADB’s work may not be as obvious or easy to articulate and may be evident only after several years after a project has been implemented.
- (iii) Staff have limited focus and capacity for knowledge management, and communications activities are often siloed, fragmented, or seen as additional work. This is largely because ADB’s corporate results framework and incentive structure are optimized for a financial institution and encourage a focus on numbers.

Despite these challenges, ADB, as an organization, is full of passionate development professionals who have rich experiences, knowledge, and lessons learned, gathered from working on the most pressing challenges in the development sector. They do problem-solving daily as they work on a wide range of development issues, reach an understanding of what DMCs need, and explore solutions that are replicable and sustainable.

Many of the staff are plagued with a common dilemma: they have so much knowledge and insights accumulated from work, and yet feel they lack the time or capability to impart this knowledge so that organizations or even individual end users can learn from it or better understand ADB’s operations.

ADB needs to communicate effectively, and at multiple levels, with its partners and stakeholders to realize its mission to achieve a prosperous, inclusive, resilient, and sustainable Asia and the Pacific. The more effectively it communicates, the better it can build trust and credibility with partners and stakeholders, including other development institutions. DMCs, meanwhile, can learn and benefit

¹ D. Soule and D. G. Wilson. 2002. *Storytelling in Organizations: The power and traps of using stories to share knowledge in organizations*. Harvard Graduate School of Education. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/242189756_Storytelling_in_Organizations_The_power_and_traps_of_using_stories_to_share_knowledge_in_organizations.

² D. G. Wilson. 2004. *Story Work in Organizations: The purposes, practices and challenges of working with stories in organizations*. Project Zero, Harvard Graduate School of Education. <https://pz.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/StoryworkInOrgs.pdf>.

from each other's experiences and best practices through sharing knowledge and expertise from ADB projects.

THE ADVENT OF TED-STYLE STORYTELLING

In 2019, ADB's Knowledge Advisory Services Center (KASC) introduced the TED-style method of storytelling. A TEDx ambassador was invited to train ADB staff on delivering compelling stories about innovative projects that they have worked on. The speakers were challenged to break away from their usual presentation style and to tell their stories in a more engaging and creative way.

The speakers delivered their TED-style "Very Innovative Person" talks at the inaugural Innovation Fair held at ADB headquarters in Manila in January 2020. This event showcased the wide range of innovations happening across ADB departments and teams. The talks were made available on ADB's Knowledge and Innovation YouTube [channel](#) and were also repurposed into feature articles in the event's publication, ADB's Faces of Innovation.

When the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic hit just a few months after the Innovation Fair, KASC decided to continue offering the program as virtual training. Staff invited to participate were those who had contributed to significant knowledge solutions and outstanding examples of good practices in various ADB projects and initiatives. TED-style preparatory workshops were reimaged into group webinars and individual virtual coaching sessions. The speakers were trained to record their own videos in the comfort of their own homes or offices, but the recordings were sent to professional video editors and packaged into a final product aligned with ADB's visual branding.

These talks were first launched as part of the ADB's Vice-President for Knowledge Management Retreat in March 2021. The videos generated significant interest. A video on gender-responsive budgeting, a very technical subject but presented in a highly engaging manner, was often reused in internal and external events having proven to be effective. This generated interest from staff, including those in ADB's resident missions, on training on how to record videos. The training was supported through the ADB Sector and Thematic Learning program and is designed to equip ADB staff with the skills to communicate project stories using less technical language. The stories become a powerful way to synthesize and communicate the knowledge they have gained. To promote visibility and gather a larger audience, the videos produced were posted publicly on YouTube.

CREATING THE ADB KNOWLEDGE AND INNOVATION TALKS

The videos produced from the TED-style approach to storytelling which ADB adopted were branded as ADB Knowledge and Innovation (K&I) Talks. Unlike the typical TED Talk, which can

run from 15 to 18 minutes, each K&I Talk is limited to 5–8 minutes. The process of producing a TED Talk can take several months and involves different teams putting it all together. In a K&I Talk, the process is shortened to 2–4 weeks and mainly involves the speaker working closely with a coach to produce the talk from the ground up.

The process involves learning the elements of what makes a good ADB K&I Talk (Figure 1). Speakers are taught storytelling and public speaking techniques to master the principles of building an idea for the talk. They learn how to structure the talk by

- following a strong central narrative;
- using scripting;
- learning how to explain complex ideas and using powerful arguments;
- building a good voice, body language, and presence; and
- recording the talk using their own equipment such as a mobile phone.

The process also helps speakers to reflect on their learnings from projects and to synthesize relevant knowledge for a wider audience.

In a world full of content creators, the differentiator is no longer the equipment used to produce the video, but the ability to capture knowledge and emotions with powerful storytelling. This involves using anecdotes, personal experiences, and other forms of narrative to create audience empathy and understanding.

While the videos are well produced, they are not perfect. Yet, in a sense, that is part of their appeal; they have a unique, personal, or self-produced feel that sets them apart from more corporate-looking videos. This is intentional, to highlight the authenticity of ADB's staff and the projects they work on. The speakers are given the creative freedom to film the talks in a variety of settings, including their offices, homes, or outdoor spaces. The talks are not directed but delivered in an authentic way, based on the script that the speaker themselves developed with the help of the TEDx coach. Each talk is delivered as a story rather than a straightforward reporting of facts and figures. It has a personal touch that conveys the speaker's passion and expertise.

STORYTELLING FOR KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

Overall, the TED-style storytelling process has been transformative for ADB speakers who are passionate about their work. The speakers are able to develop their confidence, hone their communication skills, and become more effective advocates for ADB. They can share their passion and enthusiasm to a wider audience and inspire others to take positive action. These skills go beyond producing videos and can enhance the quality of their work as they engage with project partners and stakeholders.

As a knowledge management and communication tool, the speakers who are trained on TED-style storytelling techniques are

Figure 1: What Makes a Good ADB Knowledge and Innovation Talk

It's a talk about a project that showcases a strong **knowledge solution** or an **innovative approach**

The project that has an **insightful and inspiring story**

Original and powerful pictures and videos from the project

Audience connection
(keeping in mind today's online content consumption behavior)

Unique format
(short, conversational, less jargons, and insightful)

Commitment
from the Speaker

Authenticity (projecting a real and human aspect of the work)



ADB = Asian Development Bank.

Source: Virtual briefing of TEDx coach on the TED-style training program given to the ADB Knowledge Management focal points in March 2022.

able to communicate complex ideas using simple, conversational language. This promotes sharing of knowledge, information, and insights that are easily understood and resonate with different audiences. Disseminating them to relevant audiences can also encourage creativity, foster innovation, and open opportunities for more collaboration. One of the K&I speakers discovered that sharing her experience led to productive conversations with senior management, often people with whom she had not spoken with previously. Conversations like this can help create feedback loops and new connections that support organizational learning and knowledge flow within the organization.

In 2021 and 2022, ADB produced 40 K&I Talks on a wide range of topics, from solid waste management to climate resilience, safer roads and transport, to gender equality. As the COVID-19 pandemic wore on, this helped ADB bridge the gap due to the lack of face-to-face interaction with colleagues, country counterparts, and partners.

MONITORING THE IMPACT OF ADB KNOWLEDGE AND INNOVATION TALKS

Given the experimental nature of how storytelling through TED-style videos was introduced in ADB only recently, there is as yet no systematic way to measure the impact of the K&I Talks. However, two aspects can be considered when looking at how effective the videos have been. On the tangible side, the organic social media growth of ADB Knowledge and Innovation, particularly on YouTube and LinkedIn, is supported by statistics on these social media channels since the videos were uploaded in 2021. From fewer than 50 subscribers, the ADB Knowledge and Innovation YouTube channel has grown to over 560 subscribers as of June

2023. All 58 uploaded K&I videos are getting an average of 345 views per video. To disseminate the videos, the [LinkedIn page](#) for ADB Knowledge and Innovation was created in April 2021. Since then, it has grown organically to over 2,500 followers as of June 2023.

On the intangible side, some of the speakers who appeared on these videos have shared how it made a positive difference when presenting their work to their audiences, and also how it helped improve their overall communication skills. These anecdotes were captured in panel sessions discussing the importance of storytelling at the [Knowledge Forum 2021](#) and [Innovation Fair 2022](#). The recordings are publicly available on the ADB Knowledge & Innovation's [YouTube](#) channel.

FUTURE INNOVATIONS ON STORYTELLING

However, ADB could also consider using storytelling when persuading and articulating new directions, such as its current transition to establish a [new operating model](#), and fostering cultural change through its Culture Transformation Initiative, which is an ongoing corporate effort to champion the values of being transformational, trustworthy, and customer-centric (Figure 2).

The TED-style K&I Talk is just one form of storytelling at ADB. Stories from project results and case studies, partnerships, and latest research are also packaged and published in different formats and across the bank's communication channels, including the ADB websites, corporate social media, and various other platforms managed by the different teams and departments.

Figure 2: Storytelling Applications

Providing Leadership	Knowledge Sharing and Learning	Fostering Cultural Change
Launching a vision Strategic planning Persuading others Communicating identity Motivating others Controlling rumors	Exchanging strategies/solutions Sharing tacit knowledge Communicating complex ideas Training through simulations Facilitating unlearning Career development	Revealing beliefs Building trust and commitment Conveying values and norms Fostering collaboration Reconciling conflict

Source: D. G. Wilson. 2004. *Story Work in Organizations: The purposes, practices and challenges of working with stories in organizations*. Project Zero, Harvard Graduate School of Education. Page 2. <https://pz.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/StoryworkInOrgs.pdf>.

Possible future directions include the following:

- **Focusing on story listening.** The practice of listening to others’ stories will enable ADB to focus on what its stakeholders really need. Story listening is a skill that helps listeners ask more appropriate questions, make well-informed decisions, and, in turn, become better storytellers.
- **Collaborative storytelling.** As the content creation process has been democratized through accessible technology to create and share videos easily, grassroots storytelling can be used to present diverse perspectives and voices. There is also

a potential to collaborate with innovative enterprises, such as content platforms like Netflix, to come up with socially relevant and entertaining content on mainstream media.

- **Providing evidence of success and impact.** ADB is yet to adopt a systematic process to evaluate the impact of its storytelling or use storytelling in formal monitoring and evaluation of projects. The “Most Significant Change” process is one example of a story-based evaluation technique.³ If there is a process or framework for measurement in place, this can provide more support in terms of investments and develop a strong business case for storytelling.

³ R. Davies and J. Dart. 2005. The ‘Most Significant Change’ (MSC) Technique: A Guide to Its Use. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/275409002_The_‘Most_Significant_Change’_MSC_Technique_A_Guide_to_Its_Use.

About the Asian Development Bank

ADB is committed to achieving a prosperous, inclusive, resilient, and sustainable Asia and the Pacific, while sustaining its efforts to eradicate extreme poverty. Established in 1966, it is owned by 68 members—49 from the region. Its main instruments for helping its developing member countries are policy dialogue, loans, equity investments, guarantees, grants, and technical assistance.

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Asian Development Bank
 6 ADB Avenue, Mandaluyong City
 1550 Metro Manila, Philippines
www.adb.org