

# **THE QUEST MASTER™ - TACTICAL STORY GENERATOR FOR INTERGRATION IN A COMPETITIVE KNOWLEDGE STRATEGY**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The Quest Master™ (TQM) is a simulation game that teaches a new style of knowledge management. Its effectiveness is achieved through its unique integration of information technology, state of the art physical facility, application of action-based narrative research, best practices from the field of organizational behavior, and the experiential capacity of interactive storytelling. TQM™ creates the conditions for generating knowledge between multi-disciplinary perspectives, subject matter experts, administrators, teams and think tanks of all kinds. This paper examines the critical need for innovative approaches to knowledge generation and demonstrates TQM's™ vital and ground breaking role in a rapidly developing field.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Knowledge management is the management of "information in context to produce an actionable understanding" (Rumizen, 2002, p. 6). Strategic knowledge management aligns the management of information with the vision of an organization. This results in actionable understandings throughout an organization so that every decision taken, every action, moves it towards its desired goals and objectives. In a competitive global market, understanding, leveraging and protecting the knowledge assets of an organization can be a key factor in determining success. Likewise, it has vast implications on the lives and well being of all of its members and stakeholders.

Knowledge is managed on three levels: operational, tactical and strategical. Each level relies on the establishment of an infrastructure and a collection of tools to facilitate organizational decision making processes. These include:

- Finding relevant information and obtaining it as fast as possible.

- Avoiding re-using information that has proven to be valuable in the past but which is not necessarily relevant for the future.
- Making good decisions in a short time frame while eliminating as much as possible bad decisions or no decision making.
- Turning decisions into actions.

Most known tools used to manage knowledge are tools to manage information. Knowledge and information is not the same thing. This can lead to greater opportunities for misinterpreting information and making poor decision. Information is useful for the decision making process only if it is relevant or reusable which it is when it comes in the form of abstractions that allow re-using it in different contexts (Lang, 1999).

| <b>Level of KM</b> | <b>Tools</b>  |
|--------------------|---|
| <b>OPERATIONAL</b> | Databases storing information including past knowledge in numerical, textual and audio-visual formats.<br><br>Information is accessed through fixed or tailored interfaces, mainly technological.   |
| <b>TACTICAL</b>    | Networks and processes that enable sharing and creating knowledge by encouraging human interaction.<br><br>Conferences, conventions, panels, whether visiting in person or through technological interfaces. Blogging, forums, professional and social sharing spaces, communities of practice. |
| <b>STRATEGICAL</b> | High caliber professional discussions targeted to extract decisions and derive actions. Managing software, presentation tools.  |

Table 1: Knowledge management tools

Strategical tools bring together all the information and acquired knowledge that can support the best decision making processes. Information collected on the operational and tactical levels is presented in visual/condensed formats. These visualizations provide a quick

summary and broad eyes view; however sometimes, these can prove to be dangerous, too condensed two dimensional and detached.

*On Saturday, February 1<sup>st</sup> 2003, sixteen minutes from home, the Columbia blasted in front of our astonished eyes on live TV broadcast. I remember that moment. The mind was trying to decode the picture in endless ways, anyway except what the eyes saw clearly. The Columbia was lost forever and among the seven crewmen one that will always be especially dear to our heart – Ilan Ramon.*

About half a year later the investigation report was published. Among its findings were issues concerning knowledge management: "[...] unfortunate illustration of how NASA's strong cultural bias and its optimistic organizational thinking undermined effective decision making" (CAIB, 2003, p. 181).

Visual presentation was found not sufficient for this level of decision making although at the time it was assumed to be more than adequate. The presentations were too structured and did not encourage dialog or questioning among its users and decision makers. The definitive selectiveness of the presentation removed the observational and listening role of its receivers. The dissemination of information did not trust the observer as able to recognize crucial technical information and make sense out of it. This realization alerted NASA to the critical need for changing its culture and the way in which knowledge was to be managed. Among other disciplines, an ancient technology was invited in to make a dramatic comeback – storytelling.

## **2. STORYTELLING IN ORGANIZATIONS**

How did storytelling become an organizational practice? Just for the same reason it exists anyway – it answers a need. As organizational life evolved so did the practice of managing its human resource. Together with profound understandings in fields of psychology, sociology and politics we now recognize humans are the most valuable asset of any organization. Not because of their 'horse power' but because of their knowledge and their ability to use it and create more of it. As any other asset, ways to manage it and make the most out of knowledge are sought. Various methodologies are implied for this purpose but as the industrial age and its managing disciplines slip into history a new style raises. People can best be managed and

their performances optimized the way people like to be managed and learn – through self-realization.

Storytelling taps into cognitive, emotional, and kinesthetic facets of our being. It creates the inner desire for action in light of understanding without forcing us to move in any predetermined direction. Stories invite us to creatively envision a picture of our roles and the roles of others. By doing so, they elicit feelings and understandings about how we can do our jobs in the best way possible. Leaders throughout history recognized the power of the spoken word in human interaction and harnessed it to pass on and preserve significant values, and to inspire action. The story of any group and the way it is told reflects its set of values, its survival strategies, its complex live fabric of intertwined relationships and inner forces. "Stories provide us with a way of understanding the underlying operating principles behind organizational communication and learning" (Gargiulo, 2005, p. 7). It echoes a deep human need to make sense of the world, both interiorly and exteriorly. It supplies reasoning and an inner sense of order. Although regarded by some as simply dramatic bluffing, stories are really a humane way to attend the most joyous and difficult truths about human existence.

Storytelling in organizations is a fast growing discipline that touches almost every facet of organizational life. Story practitioners work with teams at every level of an organization. They facilitate the creation of better communication practices and inspire leaders to tell the organization's story behind all of its facts and figures (Simmons, 2001, p.51). Stories excite a workplace community to embrace change by discovering actions to move the organization in new directions. An evaluation of an organization's stories provides a powerful and quick snapshot of its language and behavioral patterns that bypasses the lengthy process of conducting extensive research. Storytelling is not 'fools gold' – it presents the only true solid motivation people appreciate for an extended period of time – their own will.

### **3. KM AND STORYTELLING IN ORGANIZATIONS**

The ways stories are structured and told elicit questions. These question and resulting conversations provide opportunities to visit new and old organizational situation and decision with new insights. Stories enhance:

- Sharing of explicit and tacit knowledge

- Re-framing and delivery of knowledge
- Inspiring knowledge related activities
- Structuring knowledge bites
- Eliciting and collecting of knowledge

Some of the outcomes of this work stay live and fresh forever in the minds and hearts of the participants. Some of it is collected and stored eventually in operational knowledge tools.

All this work occurred after knowledge management professionals or organizational consultants of various disciplines encountered the power of stories. As is happens to most of us when we acquire something new and surprising – we first of all drag it to our den to see what could be made out of it. Some read the attached manual, most of us don't and in the case of storytelling – there is no manual attached. So we are left to interpret what we've got leaning on the best practices known to us. During this process, something crucial was left out or too easily overlooked – what's in a storyteller?

#### **4. THE CORE OF STORYTELLING – MASTERFUL STORYTELLERS**

Storytelling is the most profound long standing influence device that exists through human history and storytellers who can harness the power of the art are the central link in this process. Many names have been given to this skill –legendary marketers, thought leaders, communication architects, but it all cuts down to one expression – masterful storytellers. Storytelling is perceived in various ways and as a combination of literature, theatre, demagogy, folklore and plain lies. What storytellers actually do is *"Mediate ideas articulated in words to or with other people. Storytellers work with thought and relationship. The same process happens in literature, poetry, and theater. It is the need to successfully mediate the verbal and kinesthetic narratives to other people **orally**, in **time**, while **adapting to a specific telling**, that demands the use of a third narrative. That is the vocal, the narrative of patterned movement."* (Shiponi, 2002)

Storytellers work in a narrative world, expanding and zooming in on the information constantly in order to reveal the most relevant and reliable information that will help create the decision about their next action. This information is met with other performance indicators

and together a decision is made in an instance. This process of scanning information, experience and predictions is what creates the solid plot line then compared to known plot patterns they carry in order to form the best plot suitable for a specific event. In the storyteller's absence the managing device of the story (knowledge) event is only partial or totally missing.

The most outstanding skill of a storyteller has to do with patterned movement and the use of it in combination with all the other facets of a storytelling event to create a space for a crystallized living body of knowledge – a story. Storytellers are skillful in combining time patterns and content in a way that attracts people like diamonds – a purification of substance. Storytellers organize information and knowledge, content and relationships in a non-linear dynamic way; they use structure and process interweaving polarities; they use metaphor as a tool to comprehend complex patterns surfacing an alternative mode of understanding which lives beyond the matrix; they visualize the narrative world of stories through sphere-based geometry and configurations of higher order. For storytellers, chaos is a play ground to observe, reframe and organize, so a single plot can be reframed and sculptured in time. Storytelling suggests the integration between the knowledge society and the awareness society – it is the reflection and organizing principle of a wisdom society.

Therefore it is no surprise that the top rated feature of masterful storytelling by storytellers is 'sense of story' (Shiponi, 2007) which is an inclusion of various organizing terms among them 'the formula' and the 'oral formulaic theory' known from the works of Lord, Parry and Foley. The word 'patterns' indicates the element of re-using knowledge. We all do that but masterful storytellers have larger parts of the process mastered to the extent they can collect data, process, take a focused relevant decision, aim towards a target audience at eye-level and elicit feedback at such high speeds that the outcome sounds like plain chant and seems effortless and therefore 'must' be a natural talent or something rather simple anybody can do. Taking one step back from this picture and looking at it from a KM perspective – the skill of storytelling is management of information in context to produce an actionable understanding that is extremely fast, almost always relevant, and never superficial.

There are two important realizations here though – there is no need to go through a thorough prolonged analysis in order to prove the power of masterful storytelling. That would

be like sending oneself to get lost in the Mandelbrot set. And secondly, not everyone can be a masterful storyteller.

## **5. THE QUEST MASTER™**

*"The recommendations aim at improving decision making processes on three dimensions: Stimulating better decisions while broadening the conversation that contributes to the decision's quality, [...] Assuring the inclusiveness and combination between political and security aspects, while overcoming the wrong tendency, well known in Israel, to give preponderance to security considerations, [...] Assuring professional political-security headquarters work which is inclusive, independent and long range, [...] as a necessary condition (although not sufficient) for bettering the nature of decisions. "* (Winograd committee middle report 2007).

That is where 'the quest master' surfaced for the first time – in the gap between the casual 'war game' thinking and the understanding things have to be done in a radically different way. The second Lebanese war is a dramatic example but all of us know plenty of examples from the business and organizational worlds. Bad or no decision making happens everyday all over the globe just as good decisions appear. Knowledge management aims at improving the equilibration in favor of good decisions.

The Quest Master™ (TQM for the purpose of this paper) is the name of a proposed facility, a process and the central character of a new simulation game. It follows what happens in a masterful storyteller's head, creating a physical space enhancing the potential space between the individual and the environment which is where cultural experience is located (Winnicott, 1968), the experience we need for learning and gaining knowledge.

The objective is to teach regular and non-regular teams how to work together efficiently, generate deep learning within a group, manage knowledge, generate new knowledge, and make better decisions in a short time frame. Being knowledgeable in a specific field does not necessarily testify for the ability to take decisions especially when complicated tasks are at hand. Hierarchical organizational arrangements are great for operational purposes but not necessarily for the creation of knowledge. The game seats all participants around a table as equal contributors freeing them from any task but the sharing of their best knowledge and taking part in a discussion. The game follows a plot line guided by a professional story

facilitator who moves the story-line forward based on knowledgeable decisions made by the group.

## **5.1 The Game**

The first question in any game is "so, what does it do?" which is "what's in it for me?" (Beck & Wade, 2004, p. 78). The best reasons to play TQM vary according to the introvert and extrovert tendencies of people. To lay down a few extrovert reasons: improving decision making skills, acquiring excellent team-work habits, developing leadership skills. In comparison here are some introvert reasons: to win, exhilaration, practicing innovative behavior, sitting on one level with your boss. Introvert reasons are powerful as long as they are relatively safe and therefore the choice of a game.

The game is archetypal in nature in order to fit any culture. It is detached from a specific field of knowledge and its known drills, happening in an alternative reality. The game is about characters, their skills and their communal effort. Since "what gets measured gets done" the playing team is challenged to solve a problem. The problem is presented by TQM and a 'quest' starts. As the game goes along, the team receives relevant data upon request in order to help them build part of their case for taking decisions. The rest they will have to come up with through debate and reasoning, listening to each other and focusing only on what will help to quickly move them forward. This sense of urgency and speed is created by the game lasting only 45 min. TQM leads them along a patterned plot line which always evolves around the next action they need to take. Something can not happen if something else did not happen before that and the choice for that action needs to be relevant if the outcome has to move them forward.

The game cannot proceed without the communal effort of the group and the active contribution of each of its members. The characters are interdependent although powerful and TQM demands their active participation so the group can move forward. This facet plants the habit of communal effort but discards 'communal thinking' and polishes both listening and observing skills as it teaches the very basic understanding about non actionable blabber.

## 5.2 The characters and casting of players

Nine players sit to the game and they play nine characters. If some positions are not taken, TQM plays the missing parts and he is trained to do so as leading the quest. The nine characters represent the nine human types defined according to the Enneagram and they carry the features of both the central types and their sub-types. The players are casted to the characters by the professional team running TQM through a process of pre-evaluation, taking several Enneagram tests. The casting marries players to characters that represent one of their sub-types avoiding the feeling of one-by-one match that can resolve in a strong feeling of self exposure and in order to eliminate inner labeling.

The choice of an Enneagram is evident for a storyteller – 9 is considered a powerful number enduring both 3 and 6. The word 'powerful' might not stand for scientific proof but as written earlier in this paper – there is no need for thorough analysis of features that have been acknowledged for thousands of years in most cultures. If the reader wishes to refer to mathematics, realizing that a magnification of any section of the pattern in the Mandelbrot set shows that the pattern repeats itself into infinity can create the lead back to the single storyteller. From a more operational point of view – the Keirseyan temperament theory does not follow the pattern and the 'big five' personality types known in modern psychology are too labeling for this process. The Enneagram allows for a dynamic distribution of power since it can be divided in various ways –  $9/4$ ,  $9/3$ ,  $9/2$  the latter creating both a dynamic and settled structure.

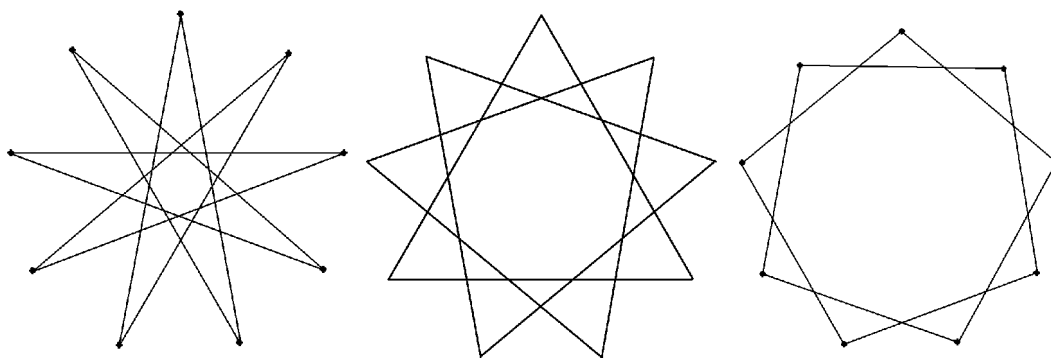


Figure 1: Enneagram divisions

### **5.3 Physical facility and supporting technology**

The pre-game prepares the players through a variety of web-based and other technology based communication tools. A set of teasers allows channeling the players 'in game' before it starts. Technology is also the interface through which players pass the pre evaluation test, the inter-game coaching and practice and where continuing support of TQM process can be further designed.

The physical facility is composed of three rooms – the 'multi purpose room' which hosts the players before and after the game and serves the processing phases; the 'game room' which is where the actual game takes place; and a 'control room' where all the technical facets of the game are controlled and supported by another team member.

The game room inhabits a large round table in the middle. Above the table on the ceiling are projectors and a video camera. Each player has a chair seated in front of his personal playing post: a computer equipped with a keypad, mouse and a headset. The computer screen is the interface through which the players receive information and the only use they can make of the computer is personal chat.

The central part of the table is covered with a game board presenting the part of 'the world' the game takes place in. The characters are presented on the board with figurines that resemble their archetypal 'looks'. The figurines and any other artifacts placed on the board can be moved around only by TQM and only after a clear decision about the next action is made by the group according to rules of discussion and along the patterned plot line. The walls of the room serve as projection screens. Before the game begins the participants watch a 10 min. movie presenting the characters, their main characteristics and attributes. Later on the screens will be used to show what the characters can see according to the way the game proceeds.

The first part of the game introduces relatively simple problems in order to help the players practice the game style, the rules of discussion and the operation of their character while receiving relevant data from the computer screen and deciding whether and how to use it. Then the main game starts and it consists of a 45 min. quest presenting a complex problem to solve. The main assets the players have are computerized data, personal knowledge and the possibility to generate more of it through paced discussion harnessing

every thought, word spoken and decision to the objective of solving the problem and moving through the plot.

The data appearing on the computer screens is aiming to deliver the most relevant collected resources to support a decision making process. The information presented alternatives between performance drivers and measured results of various factors concerning the game. As the game proceeds the data continually changes according to the decisions and actions being taken by the group. The entire session is recorded for processing. A technical facilitator supports TQM and streams relevant information to the computers as the game rolls.

After the game session is over the group moves back to the multi purpose room for processing. No processing is done while the game is in action. One of the greatest benefits of the game is learning the 'in game' style of discussion. The recorded information is used for several purposes – processing in favor of improving the specific team's next game session; applying the best coaching exercises during inter-play; feedback and learning material for TQM and the professional team; a problem collecting mechanism that helps the team create an ongoing coaching and meeting technological interface that will serve all participants of all game sessions as a place to share and receive advice.

## **6. A STORYTELLER AS A KM DEVICE**

Reading the above description one might wonder about the necessity of a storyteller in this process. I would like to refer the reader back to the description of masterful storytellers. Everything mentioned in this paper is their realm of expertise and overlooking the part of a professional who can manage such a complicated undertaking might prove as refusing to use a precious resource. The game is a tactical tool and can therefore be adapted to any field of knowledge with the necessary adjustments. However, harnessing the nature of the event and practicing its elements is adequate for creating the necessary change in the way knowledge and decision making are practices in most places today.

Here is a KM reframe of the components of the event and the definition of the skill and the game process:

| Component of storytelling event  | Presentation in the game   | KM re-frame   |
|--|--|---|
| Creating the sense of place and the possibility of sharing both physically through the way of seating the partners for the event, eye-contact and feeling of accessibility, encouraging sharing and feedback, not only of keeping your thoughts to yourself. | Special room, round table, proper positioning of each member, eliciting conversation, giving equal place in the discussion to every form of input including questioning and unstructured thoughts.           | KM requires both input and output. One of its basic components is listening in various forms. But listening, collecting data and even neatly storing it is not enough. It has to be constantly communicated so all partners are moving data around which is the platform for creating new knowledge.  |
| Sharing of ideas within a group. The storyteller knows the story but is not its sole owner. The possibility of receiving contributions and rethinking the story over is always open and remodels the story constantly.                                       | The storyteller leading the game knows the patterned plot but not the way the characters will choose to walk along it or what parts of the narrative they will put to action.                                | Professional communities fail too often when they are sure about their way of 'know how'. Sharing is the proposition to re-think even about what you are sure you already know.   |
| Sharing happens through a messenger who has the ability to combine text, voice and gesture expression.   | The storyteller leads the discussion enabling accessibility for all and to all.  | Different people are approached through different expression channels and have varied learning and expression styles. Being the top professional in a discussion does not necessarily indicate one knows how to lead a discussion. This feature, with practice and recognition, can help professionals become leaders or managers of the HR they work with. |
| This ability aims at recreating a story. Sense of story is the 'homing device' of storytellers.  | All the information and discussion during the game is constantly harnessed towards the unraveling of a dramatic plot. Things have to actually happen so the group can move forward.                          | Decision making is one thing, turning decisions into actions is another. Practicing actionable decision making can save resources and focus the KM effort of an organization.   |
| The story is created in the imagination of everyone present. This happens in storytelling since it is mostly archetypal or personal, tapping into human anecdotes most listeners are acquainted with.  | The use of visuals and streaming data helps fill the gap between what the game's participants carry in their imaginations and what they don't. If the participants can not see parts of the narrative of the | When people engage in a KM activity they all need to know enough about the narrative of the issue in order to come up with understandings. A minimal amount of previous knowledge and experience in that field is needed and that   |

| Component of storytelling event   | Presentation in the game  | KM re-frame   |
|---|---|---|
|   | story it will be perceived as non valid. There is no difference to this point between realistic and fictional narratives.   | amount rises through the levels of KM.  |
| The act resonates with the need to create order and balance. Storytelling is always for the better.   | The storyteller leading the game is 'programmed' with this feature. Cynicism, side talks 'off game' and interferences of any kind are easily crumbled with grace. This experience when practiced leads most people to follow because it is pleasant and moves the discussion forward much faster.   | Even if KM processes are well structured, they are very often wide spread enough for the participants not to see the end of 'the story' or even where it is going. This leads to a waist of resources, especially time and enthusiasm. Another element of balance that is missing many times is dealing with the positive bites of the issue.   |
| It is an act of partnership between content, messenger and 'end user', depending on the presence of all three in one place. In a way that can be explained, people tend to lye much less in the presence of a storyteller. Looking at the list of components can explain why. | All are in one place and if the game ignites to its optimal pace it becomes difficult to tell who is who which is the ultimate experience of creating something in a group. The storyteller leading the game knows how to facilitate an air of truthfulness and walk the participants through the uncomfortable feeling it creates within those not accustomed to it. | The need for face-to-face interaction is again rising after years of technological meetings. This presence, many times feared of, has a strong influence on the communication style and its truthfulness.   |
| Interdependency between all components of the act – continuously.   | The game is hardwired with interdependency. Nothing real can happen if this feature is not set into action and kept through the entire game.  | If people feel they influence what is going on, they get enough reasoning for continuing their good efforts. KM depends highly on the inner motivation to participate and that feature should be continuously nurtured even if the human contribution is appreciated as smaller than the contribution brought in by accumulated/ analyzed data. |

Table 2: Translating storytelling features and their representation in the game to KM facets.

## 7. CONCLUSIONS

The Quest Master™ is a proposition to learn how to engineer human KM decision making processes – the human way. It is needed where no definite mathematical extraction can be made, where no hierarchal operation makes sense but the ongoing scanning and learning of everything we know and might predict along a mechanism that is entirely aimed at creating actionable knowledge in a paced process – storytelling.

The only question is – will we do it?

*"Indeed, it is possible that executing the recommendations might meet resistance, among other things because of the fear of "interested parties" and organizational conservatism. This kind of resistance has disrupted like suggestions in the past. Therefore it is necessary that a vigorous demand will rise on behalf of the public for the improvement of decision making processes in the top political and security rank." (Winograd, 2007)*

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Further molding of the basic idea met me with many adults – both enthusiasts and professionals and I wish to thank them all for their contributions. The final version of this system was extracted from all the experience I've collected through this process and is now re-looked at by the team of The Story Telling Company Inc. in order to finalize the negotiable manifestation of this powerful tool. I thank all my team members for taking this cautious task upon them.

Bringing this paper to a reader friendly state in English was not possible without the kind professional eye and expertise of Terrence Gargiulo who helped me navigate the barriers of expressing complicated ideas in a second language while editing the paper at the same time to fit the professional circumstances without losing its soul.