



# STORIES TRAINERS TELL

## My Mental Filing System

### Contributor

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Suzann employs storytelling in her teaching. A seminar leader for twenty years, she has conducted extensive communications workshops and has taught thousands of students how to build bridges between theory and practice. Through storytelling, she teaches students to scaffold context so they may better understand theoretical constructs. Suzann holds a B.A. from Mount Mary College in English, sociology, and secondary education, and an M.S. from the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee in curriculum and instruction with an emphasis in English and linguistics. She is also completing Ph.D. work in urban studies.

### Type and Purpose(s)

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Instructional: educate and engage

### Background

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The backdrop for this situation started while Suzann was living in Indianapolis with her husband. It played out a number of years later when she moved back to Milwaukee with her husband and four sons.

### Presentation Tips

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Demonstrate the motions Suzann explains when she talks about her mind being like a Rolodex. Use the stepping in technique when relaying her inner monologue.

### Set-up

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**Option 1**—Have you ever experienced knowing something that you just can't seem to access in your brain?

**Option 2**—Knowing where to find the information we need to make a decision can sometimes be a challenge.

## My Mental Filing System

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My husband took a position in Indianapolis right out of college. We'd been there a year and weren't sure if we were going to stay. So I thought, "Do I want to apply for a teaching job? I'd feel badly leaving my students on short notice." So I looked for another kind of job and found one full-time in retail. My husband was traveling a great deal so I thought I'd also pick up a part-time job, too. This little floral shop near our apartment hired me. I was terribly surprised. I didn't know *anything* about flowers.

I studied like crazy everything I could about plants. It was a small shop. Sometimes I was the only one there. People would ask me questions and I would have to know. I studied and studied and thought, "Oh my gosh. I'm just becoming a little dictionary of plant life." I was becoming obnoxious. I'd bring it into every conversation. "Do you know this about plants and that about plants?" I used to take all the little sick plants home with me and nurse them back to health, and then take them back to the store so they could be sold. I was so proud of my learning!

Then I had four sons, all a year apart in age. Between them and all the pets, I gave up gardening and all my plants. When we finally moved back to Milwaukee, a neighbor greeted me with a house-warming gift. She said, this is my favorite plant and I thought you'd really like it." I replied, "Oh, Thanks." And then I thought, "This is her favorite plant and I'm going to kill it!"

I put the plant on the table and thought of my young children and numerous pets. "I wonder if this is a poisonous plant." I couldn't remember. Let me think. It was only fifteen years ago since I'd worked in a plant shop. I thought I knew everything. But I hadn't used those skills in years. I got furious with myself. Why can't I remember if this is a poisonous plant or not? At least I could come up with the name of the plant but I was frustrated. This was serious; the plant might be a killer.

So I looked in my memory. Now, when I try to remember something my children laugh at me because I put my right hand up with my index finger out pointing at the right side of my brain and I turn my hand like I'm searching through a Rolodex. Actually, my mind is a Rolodex and I'm turning it, trying to

figure out where poisonous plants are located. I was so mad at myself. I thought, “I’m getting old and feeble and my memory is failing. It’s like being in college and taking a test and knowing that you know something but you can’t remember it. You just have to figure out where you filed it in your head.” So I thought, “Relax and figure out where the file is. Do an association. Indianapolis. Plant. Dog. Cat. Children.” I was getting madder. And the madder I got the less I could remember. I finally said, “Just focus.” Viola. I found the file called “children,” and sure enough I found a file called “Mr. Yuck”—that green sticker that you get from the poison control center with the face that has a tongue sticking out. And then I found the whole list of poisonous plants—right there in my brain. I was so proud of myself because I was so very patient and so very persistent in finding the file in my mind.

We often have everything we need to know within us when it comes time to make an important decision. The secret is to persist until you “find the file.”

## Debrief Questions

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- 📖 What is the logic that Suzann used to find the file she needed in her brain?
- 📖 What did Suzann learn from this experience?
- 💡 What techniques do you use at home when you find yourself in situations like the one described here?
- 💡 What techniques do you use at work when you find yourself in situations where you are in need of specific information to make a decision?
- 🌐 What does this situation tell us about the importance of knowledge management in organizations?

### Key: Three Levels of Debrief Questions

- 📖 The Story: What the story means—its moral or main lesson. What the story characters have experienced.
- 💡 The Learner: How the participant feels about the story and how it personally applies to the individual.
- 🌐 The Organization or World: How the story applies to the participant’s work group, department, business unit, division, organization, industry, or to society-at-large.

## Key Point Options

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1. It is not unusual to have learned something many years ago that we have difficulty accessing in our brains in the present moment. There are techniques we can use on an individual basis to “locate” this information. One technique is to “order the brain” to find it and then let the search process work unconsciously for us.
2. Organizations have the same challenge that we do as individuals: how to organize all the information that people need to do their work in a manner that is easily accessible to all. This has spurred the growth of a variety of knowledge management systems in organizations.

## Follow-up Activities

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**Step 1**—Small-Group Discussion: In order to accomplish your work, how do you access the information you need, especially when it is information that you do not use on a regular basis? Record these items on easel paper. On another sheet, record what your department does to ensure access to needed information. On a final sheet, record what the organization does to ensure employee access to needed information.

**Step 2**—Large-Group Discussion: What can you, your department, and the organization do to make needed information more accessible?

**Step 3**—Individual Activity: Note what steps you can take as a result of this discussion to improve the organization and retrieval of information in your job and in your department.

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