



# STORIES TRAINERS TELL

## The Porcupine and the Snake

### 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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Minerva; explore

### Background

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This story is an old fable told for many years by one of Suzann's retired colleagues.

### Presentation Tips

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Have some fun with the animal characters in the story. Create a unique voice, facial expressions, and mannerisms for each.

### Set-up

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**Option 1**—Surface issues or symptoms can mask the real problem.

**Option 2**—How do we go beyond what we hear or see in a situation to address what is really going on?

## The Porcupine and the Snake

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There was a big flood in the valley where a porcupine lived and his home was flooded out. He moved about the countryside looking for a new dwelling but couldn't find one—everything was underwater. So he decided to seek higher ground.

The porcupine started up a hill and came upon a snake. He said to the snake, “Do you know of any place where I could live? I'm homeless.” And the snake said, “My family would be happy if you came to live with us. We have more than enough room. Come and stay with us.” “That would be great! Thank you so much,” said the porcupine. And off he went with the snake.

The snake's home was near the top of the hill since snakes live in high ground. Once they arrived, the snake introduced the porcupine to the snake's family—they were all very welcoming. The home itself consisted of a series of tunnels right beneath the ground. At first the porcupine thought, “I'm never going to fit. These tunnels are so small and I'm not that small.” But, when beckoned, he instead said, “Fine,” and went down into the series of tunnels to settle in with the snakes.

It didn't take long before the snakes were not happy with the situation and the porcupine was not happy with the situation. Generally, everybody was pretty miserable. The porcupine and the snakes came to the agreement that the porcupine would have to move out. The situation was just not working. The porcupine couldn't figure out the cause. The truth is, the porcupine hadn't dealt with his core problem. [While it took him awhile to figure out what was making him truly unhappy, what the porcupine eventually came to realize is that] “the core is the cause.”

[How often have you been in situations where you and others weren't feeling good about things? As you reflect back on these experiences, what core problem did you need to acknowledge and address? Surface issues and problem symptoms can often mask the real problem. Always remember . . . the core is the cause. It needs to be dealt with in order for the problem to go away.]

## Debrief Questions

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- 📖 What was the problem the story referred to? Why couldn't the porcupine and the snakes get along? Note: Give participants some time to answer this question. Responses might include: they are different species, the porcupine has quills and the snakes have skins and the porcupine quills would irritate the snakes, the porcupine didn't feel comfortable around a different species, they didn't map out their territory, lack of communication, and so on.
- 📖 Look at identifying the core problem. What is the core problem? Answer: The core problem is that the porcupine could not deal with the fact that he was homeless. The core is the cause of ensuing problems.
- 💡 What does this story teach us about searching for the root cause of a problem?
- 💡 When have you found that what you thought was the reason for a problem was not actually the underlying or real reason for the problem?
- 🌐 Why is it important for organizations to develop methods for finding the root cause of a problem?

### 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. This is a symbolic story. When there is a problem or a conflict, usually there are layers to the conflict. Often people don't look at what the real problem is. They just look at the symptoms of the problem. By trying to address the symptoms, they don't actually address the real issue.
2. The core is the cause. The porcupine was homeless and was taking advantage of a possible solution. However, he was not really solving his long-term problem. The porcupine was not doing anything to try to find a more compatible and permanent home.
3. Often in organizations, people believe that the real problem has to do with getting along or not getting along. Just as in this story about the porcupine and the snake, there is usually a deeper reason for the surface symptoms of conflict and a lack of unity.

## Follow-up Activities

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**Step 1**—Small-Group Discussion: Identify a problem that one of the group members is currently trying to resolve. What are the possible causes of this problem? What is the root cause of the problem? Why do you believe this is the root cause? What assumptions are you making about the problem and the possible solution(s)? What constraints are contrived or real? What ideas does your group have for resolving this situation?

**Step 2**—Large-Group Discussion: Ask several of the small groups to present their problem analysis to the large group. What root causes did the small groups identify? How can we become more skilled at identifying root causes when working with future problems?

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