

A Fiscal Fairy Tale

By Tom Brown

***Rumpl-
sheepskin***

First, you must know that the miller *had* to talk about it. He had spent his life grinding grain — and that’s not what he wanted to do at all. “Why couldn’t I have been a locksmith?” he asked over and over. “That’s where the exciting work is — not to mention the bucks.” So, in his cumulative daily despair, he made sure that his one and only daughter would not meet the same fate. She

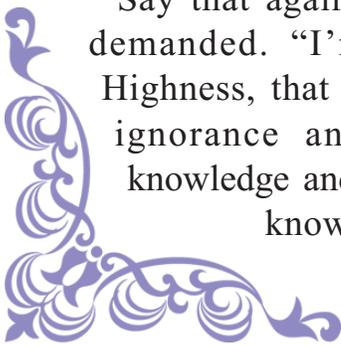


attended only gold-medal schools, was forced to take all subjects exotic, and came home not just a college graduate but also a damsel licensed to create, investigate, and repair “learning organizations.”

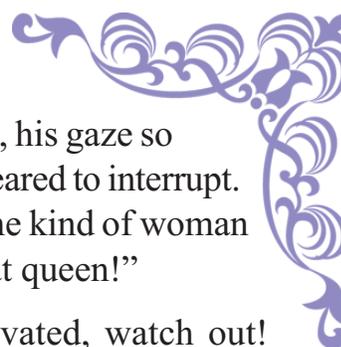
Thus the miller, in his unabashed pride and in his vicarious sense of escape from grain grinding, bragged to *everyone* about his daughter’s unique talents. “There’s not a company in this kingdom that wouldn’t learn more — and thereby make more — if my daughter helped them,” he’d often shout to passersby, most of whom were strangers. So it wasn’t as if he chose only the King for some extreme braggadocio about his newly minted collegian.

“Say, miller,” the King inquired from atop his royal steed one day. “I am in search of someone who can really beef up my castle in terms of productivity. It seems like everyone has to do everything twice; and yet whenever a problem arises, no one knows what to do. Nobody’s learning how to be better!”

The miller barely let the King finish before he began his diagnosis of the situation: there was a problem with castle discipline, people needed to learn how to learn, the entire kingdom could soon be one huge learning organization — and his daughter, uniquely, could spin knowledge into gold.



“Say that again, old man,” the King demanded. “I’m telling you, Your Highness, that my daughter can take ignorance and transform it into knowledge and, from there, spin that knowledge into gold.” The



King stared at the miller for a minute or so, his gaze so intense even the miller feared to interrupt. “You know, that’s just the kind of woman who would make a great queen!”

When kings are motivated, watch out! Before the miller’s daughter knew what had happened, she was brought aboard the

Welcome to my castle! I’m sure you will be very happy here.

King’s private helicopter, placed on the castle payroll, and given an office replete with mahogany desk and other fine furniture. Her gold-ink business cards bore her name and, below that, the embossed title “Lady of Learning.” The daughter — remembering all that wheat dust over everything back home — surveyed her spiffy office and captured her life achievement in one word: “*Kewl!*”

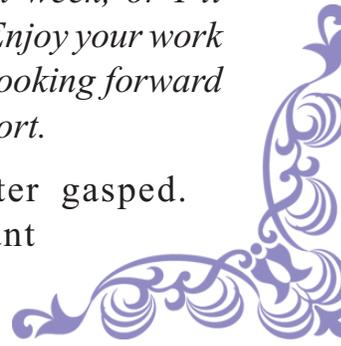
Then came the terse memo from the King.

Date: Today

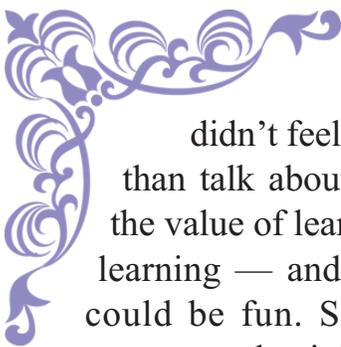
To: Lady of Learning

From: The King

Welcome to my castle! I’m sure you will be very happy here. I need to see a 50 percent increase in worker productivity by next week, or I’ll behead your father. Enjoy your work with us, and I’ll be looking forward to your progress report.



The dutiful daughter gasped. Despite her abundant



college studies, she didn't feel she could do a lot more than talk about the need for learning, the value of learning, the importance of learning — and, oh yes, how learning could be fun. She never, *ever*, would connect productivity to learning.

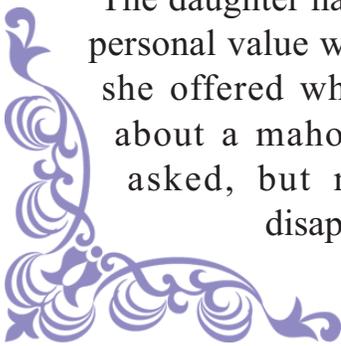
So she sat in her high-back leather office chair and fumed. “Dadeeeeeeee-aaaaaaarrrrrrgggggghhhhh!”

Her exasperation was interrupted by the strangest little man. “Good evening, pretty one. Why the funk?” When the miller's daughter explained that she had to boost

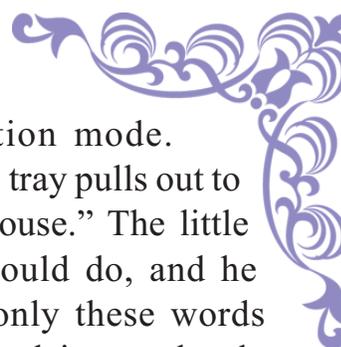
The little man nodded that it would do, and he offered the daughter only these words before leaving: “I'll be back in a week; take very long lunches.”

worker productivity in a week or lose her precious father, the little man said he'd take the case.

“You can make such a thing happen?” she asked, her voice quavering with doubt. “You got that right,” he responded. “What will you give me for doing so?”



The daughter had brought very little of personal value with her to the castle, so she offered what was nearby. “How about a mahogany credenza?” she asked, but noting his frown of disappointment, she instantly



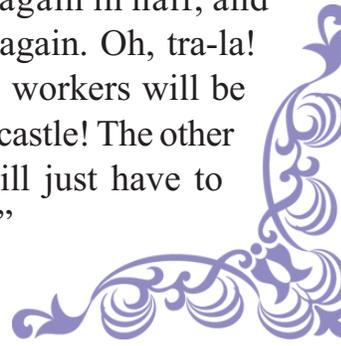
shifted to a more appealing demonstration mode. “See here! See how this tray pulls out to hold your computer mouse.” The little man nodded that it would do, and he offered the daughter only these words before leaving: “I'll be back in a week; take *very* long lunches.”

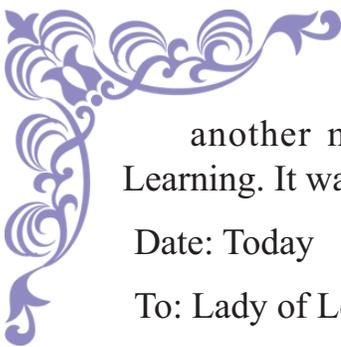
This daughter could dine with the best of them, and so she found scampi and eclairs to be tasty lunches indeed, especially when shared with top officers of the King's court.

Exactly seven days later, the little man appeared at her office door with a neatly-prepared memo to the King from the Lady Of Learning that showed — in words, graphs, charts, and testimonials — how workers now were forming teams, which had boosted their output by at least 50 percent. A videocassette of the new Gardening Department's CHOP Team in action made the daughter delirious with pride.

“Learning pays!” she announced. “You got that right,” said the little man.

The King, of course, was deliriously happy as well. “At this rate, the cost savings here will soon drive oodles of money right to our bottom line. Workers increasing their productivity weekly, and at a 50 percent rate, is like cutting costs in half, and then again in half, and then again — and yet again. Oh, tra-la! Pretty soon, one or two workers will be all we'll need to run this castle! The other 3,592 on the payroll will just have to find other employment.”





So the King dictated another memo to the Lady Of Learning. It was an echo, really.

Date: Today

To: Lady of Learning

From: The King

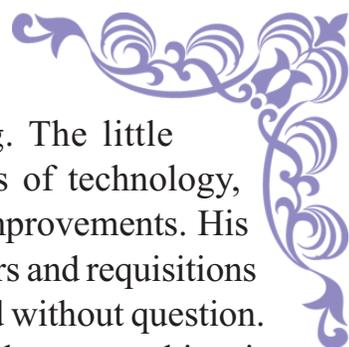
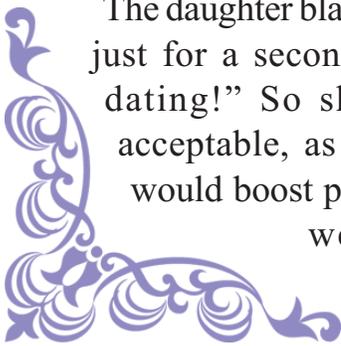
Your work and your report were impressive. Keep up the good work. I need to see a 50 percent increase in worker productivity by next week, or I'll boil your father in oil. You have a bright future here!

The daughter was aghast, almost asthmatic. Before she could start exercising her stress-relief breathing techniques, however, her little man appeared again. "Don't tell me," he said, "The King wants another 50 percent."

"How... how... could you know? Have you seen such happenings before?" The daughter's tone betrayed half doom, half optimism. "Can you help? Do I have *that* right?" Nods exchanged, the little man and the daughter once again were discussing terms. Revealing that his office furniture was already quite adequate and that the used credenza had already been sold through the classifieds, the little man raised the stakes considerably. "I'll boost productivity yet again," he said, eyes flashing, "in exchange for your first-born child!"

The daughter blanched at the thought, but just for a second. "Hey, I'm not even dating!" So she said the deal was acceptable, as long as the little man would boost productivity for 52-more weeks, not just one.

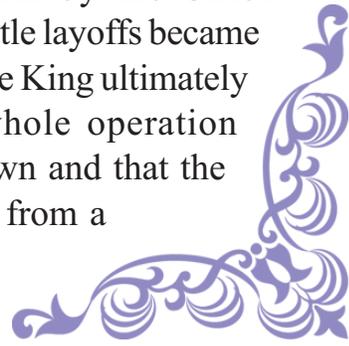
"Deal!"

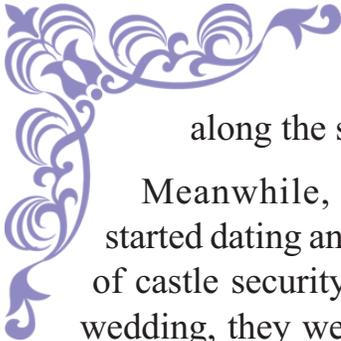


The castle therewith really started pumping. The little man imported all kinds of technology, training, and process improvements. His endless expense vouchers and requisitions were submitted and paid without question. Not only were the gardeners working in teams, but they had state-of-the-art mowers, weed whips, and blowers; and after extensive training, they could disassemble and reassemble every piece of equipment to stopwatch standards. Moreover, they were now capable of speaking about "the importance of perceptions" in dealing with their castle counterparts. Fewer gardeners brought forth nine times the blossoms. Every other department mirrored the same success.

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The Lady of Learning readily acknowledged that the little man kept his part of the bargain and that she would, sooner or later, keep hers. Although the King ogled her with increasing personal interest, he was preoccupied with the ever-improving ledgers brought to him by his Chief Information Officer. Castle layoffs became a regular occurrence. The King ultimately announced that the whole operation would soon be shut down and that the kingdom would be run from a scenic six-room condo





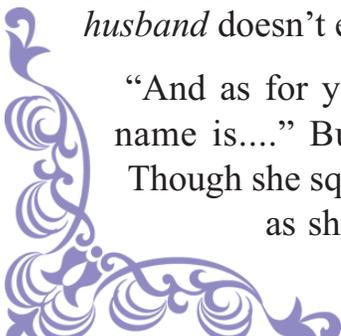
in some remote city
along the southern panhandle.

Meanwhile, the miller's daughter started dating and soon married the chief of castle security. Within a year of their wedding, they were blessed with a child. One day, there came a knock at the door. It was the little man, back the minute she returned from maternity leave. "Remember me?" (How could she *not* recall his achievements — and their handshake?) "You're not going to hold me to this, are you? Do you really want the burdens of being a single parent?"

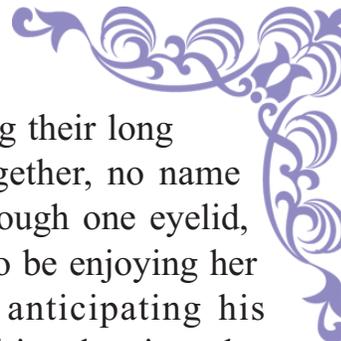
The little man folded his arms and fixed his eyes on the daughter's. "I'll let you off under one condition. Don't you think it odd that in all this time, we have not exchanged names? Guess mine, and I'll forget our deal and forgive your debt."

Squinting through one eyelid, the little man seemed to be enjoying her plight, perhaps even anticipating his victory.

At which point, the daughter apologized for her lapse in social protocol. "My name's Rumpsheepskin," she said, laughing in embarrassment at the odd name her father had given her. "But I seldom use it. My *husband* doesn't even know it.



"And as for you, I'd guess that your name is..." But here she was stuck. Though she squeezed her eyes as tight as she could, trying to focus



on any slip or hint he might have made during their long months of working together, no name emerged. Squinting through one eyelid, the little man seemed to be enjoying her plight, perhaps even anticipating his victory. And it was his gloating that triggered the image of the luggage tag on his briefcase, which he once plopped on her desk when looking for his solar-powered scientific and financial calculator. Yes, yes, it was coming to her now. Almost, almost... just about... almost...

"You are," she announced with the glee of a student who recalls an exam question from luck rather than study, "You *are* McKinsey Bain Mercer Andersen, aren't you?"

The little man stomped so hard in his fit of anger that a section of the wooden floor collapsed. He neither acknowledged the accuracy of her appellation nor denied it. He just fell through the floor, shaking his fist, never to be seen again — at least, not in this kingdom.



The End

Illustration and layout by Mac Thornton

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