



Tom Brown talks about his ever-popular set of tales...

A quick note...

Tom Brown's *Fiscal Fairy Tales* are traditional folk tales re-written with a humorous spin to stimulate discussion about today's work world. They were first published on the Internet, then in booklet form, then (in Japan, Korea, China, and elsewhere) in book form.

The 12 innovative *Tales* in the series including *Snowed White*, *The Ugly Cash Cow*, *Cindrella*, *Little Tim Soldier*, and *Rumpshsheepskin* are all designed as can't-fail individual thought-generators or discussion-starters for meetings (both large and small!) inside companies and other organizations.

Because of the keen interest in these modern-day fairy tales — and the person who invented them — here is a candid interview with Tom Brown, the teller of the tales.

You may already know Tom. He's the author of more than 400 columns and features in journals like *The Harvard Management Update Newsletter*, *Across The Board*, *IndustryWeek*, and *The Wall Street Journal*. More about Tom can be found at www.tombrown.us.

Tom's *Fiscal Fairy Tales* are available at www.amazon.com/BrownHerron. Here's what Tom has to say about the origin and value of his *Tales*.

Fairy Tales — for the modern workplace?

Really?

TOM BROWN: If you trace the tradition of fairy tales — before the advent of the printing press — you find such stories were a primary form of entertainment for *adults* rather than children.

It was only when such tales were printed that they were taken to be edifying “literature” written by adults for the instruction of children.

Professor Max Luthi points out that although a small fraction of the population, over the age of five or so, refuses to deal with fairy tales, almost everyone else is immediately attracted to the simplicity and the magic of a fairy tale.

I've sure found that to be true.

Starting with *In Search Of Excellence*, back in the 1980s, the business world has been filled with stories of people in companies doing wild things. You could say that my *Fiscal Fairy Tales* series are stories about the workplace — today!

However, your tales are not like old-time fables. You've got modern characters who use express mail, cell phones, and jet airplanes. And you don't have any "moral" at the end of the tale which tells people what to do...

TOM: I was very careful to write these *Tales* without including simple-minded solutions. One of the things I note with alarm is that many companies and organizations so often state that they want the good ideas and positive thinking of all the people who work there. Yet, more often than not, they don't have a context or catalyst to get such discussion going. That's the main reason I wrote the *Fiscal Fairy Tales*. These are designed to get people talking in a positive way about today's work world.

Yes, but there are many full-length books out there to do that!

TOM: Good point. And, if there were all the time in the world, groups of people inside companies could take a week or two to read a major business book and then take a day or more to discuss it. But, as we all know, time is ultra-tight these days. Each of these tales can be read in a matter of minutes. Literally! Just like classic fairy tales.

And people can just as quickly grasp what real-world issues are lying beneath the surface of the humor and mystery of the tale itself. That means that, in no more than 15-20 minutes, a large group of workers and managers are ready to start discussing "what's happening here" and "how can we make things better" because of the quick-start nature of these *Fiscal Fairy Tales*.

Then it is possible to approach difficult or complex issues indirectly, through fairy tales?

TOM: I've read not only a lot of fairy tales but also a lot of scholarly books about them. What I took from all my readings is the impression that fairy tales are simple and deal with the essentials of living, that they use magical events to bring forward basic truths, and that almost everyone can immediately relate to them.

Now, in today's fast-paced, interconnected business world, where events halfway around the world could affect your job (or, whether you *have* a job!) in the flash of a news headline — it is apparent that many workers and managers are far too often drowning in complexities.

Even internal company processes can be mind-boggling: ever look at a value-added flow chart for your own work unit or all the steps in a design-to-production-transition plan?

There are still dozens of books being published each year in the general field of management and leadership; that statistic echoes for me what a friend said a decade ago and remains true today: "More is written and spoken about management than is *known* about management." Then I read what Jack Zipes had to say about folklore: "Myths and fairy tales seem to know something that we do not know.... We keep returning to them for answers."

Fiscal Fairy Tales are simply a way to get some big issues — like how to cope with a merger and acquisition, how to create a learning organization, or how to come to

grips with very profitable companies relentlessly laying off more workers — framed in the simplicity of a classic story. Sure, Goldilocks has become Gridilocks and the context and characters have changed; but the memory of the original tale and the humorous counterpoint of the new one combine to make for a pleasant way to discuss some very troublesome issues.

Without a doubt, if someone called a group of workers together saying she immediately wanted to unfreeze all the critical decisions being held up by organizational gridlock, the room would get *very* quiet for a long time while everyone stares at the floor. The “Gridilocks” tale enables people to laugh first, realize that *everyone* is affected by and suffers from gridlock — and then start talking about how to make things better.

You call these “fiscal” tales. Are they just about money?

TOM: The *Fiscal Fairy Tales* deal with lots of worklife issues. However, one company president once shared with me his view that “we live in an economic world.” I agree. No matter where you work, no matter what your role is, the reality is that everyone’s actions affect the bottom line. More than that, you can no longer escape the repercussions from what others do to influence the bottom line. Economics has become a second universal language.

Like all fairy tales, mine reflect what’s happening in the world of men, women, and children. Today’s “Giant” may be a cumbersome, uncaring corporation rather than a monstrous lummo; either one, however, can change your life.

Is there an overriding theme or message in these tales?

TOM: *Fiscal Fairy Tales* talk about what is required for people to be productive and work together harmoniously, both within organizations and in society. Today’s work world is filled with lots of people and things in motion — but are we, together, taking active steps to make things better for companies, for the people inside them, and for society as a whole? These tales challenge managers to realize that the problems they are most concerned about — good ideas being ignored, recruiting and retaining good workers, being able to recover from a marketplace setback — are also issues that everyone today wants to resolve. *Everyone!*

Probably the single greatest message in my *Tales* is that these uncommon stories can reveal a lot of common ground among the members of an organization — if people will only start putting their heads together and begin talking openly and honestly about what is blocking progress. The future is *us!*

Sounds like you have a bold desire for these tales to make something significant happen!

TOM: I would be happy if anyone said, after reading my *Tales*, that he or she found it easier to discuss a major organizational problem and that, based on sharing a new point of view, positive changes were starting to happen. My *Fiscal Fairy Tales* are about real people laboring inside real workplaces. They are designed for organizations that need to change and for the people who work there. In the end, they are the only ones who can make real change happen. ◇