

Learning management from Aesop's Fables and panchatantra or Jatak tales

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Abstract

Once upon a time Vishnu Sharma, who putatively created the entire corpus of Panchatantra stories in the *third century BC*, used these fables underpinning moral tales to teach statecraft, diplomacy and commerce. As then the King Sudarshan's three lunkheaded children in the royal court of Mahilaropya were not too well disposed to learning they were brought under the tutelage of Vishnu Sharma, and within no times they were transformed.

Bishnu Sharma's Greek equivalent was Aesop, a slave and raconteur believed to have subsisted a impoverished life in Greece between sixth and seventh century BC, collected the fables to be named as Aesop's Fables. There are several reference to Aesop from Greek historian Herodotus to Aristophanes, in his comedy *The Wasps*, characterising the protagonist Philocleon as having apprehended the "absurdities" of Aesop from conversation at communal feasts. Plato recorded in *Phaedo* that Socrates absorbed himself in Aesop's fables, which he knew into verses, during his time in prison.

In Classical times these fables become part of public discourse as these pithy narratives were uniquely short and unaffected, though fictitious yet close to life and nature. These narratives were populated with talking animals and plants, and sometimes interspersed with human beings. The fables like *Esopé à la ville*, scripted in alexandrine couplets, narrates a physically unattractive and repulsive Aesop acting as counsel to Learchus, governor of Cyzicus under King Croesus, and employing his fables to find solution to romantic problems and political tumult. It draws a parallel to problem solving situations in modern management as Aesop betrothed to the governor's daughter, despite the latter ignored him for a young admirer to whom she was infatuated with. Aesop waded through this little crisis in his personal life reciting free verse fables such as the *Fox and the Weasel*, the *Town Mouse and the Country Mouse*, the *Crab and her Daughter*, or *The Man with two Mistresses*.

The analogies of Aesop's Fables continue to serve as guiding points in change management situations. When change is to be ushered in through gentle persuasion rather than force the Aesop's fable of 'the North Wind and the Sun' serves as a template example. Similarly concurring to reasonable change in the present time than risking far worse enforced change in the future can be learnt from the fable of 'Ass and the Mule'. The fable of the *Crow and the Pitcher* outlines the change being induced by pressure or necessity. In the face of a vociferous and hostile industrial union resisting positive change of any kind the tale of *Lion and the Ass* proves the might is right by enforcing change. Like many charismatic corporate head honchos such as late Steve Jobs who always led by example and evidence the fable of the *Crab and his Mother* will serve as an axiomatic truth to change people by exemplarities. Since the application of change management always needs to be personalised -- any change management program does not affect two individuals the same way as expectation differs -- the fable of the *Miller, his Son and the Ass* seem to be emblematic. It is said time heals and softens any change, thus allowing individuals to get used to things during the course of time. This knowledge is derived from the fable *Rich Man and the Tanner*. Equally emphatic for change management is the need for tolerance, both for change agent or the recipient of the same. The fable of the *Oak and the Reeds* underscores this truth.

These fables, now pervade anything from change management and problem solving to understanding and controlling organisation behaviour or adopting strategies for business expansion. However, it is interesting to find out in what forms these narratives/sub-texts exist and how they continue to influence the contemporary discourse of management.