



# WE ARE MORE THAN SQUIRRELS

Matthew 25:14-30

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## ABSTRACT

Our performance is a direct result of how and what we have individually and collectively learned in the past coupled with our ability to act on our experiences. Matthew 25:14-30 showcases the actions of three servants each were entrusted to embrace their Master's talents and to create value with them while the Master went away on a journey. Two performed well and were rewarded for their actions. One failed and suffered the consequences. Individual and organizational learning requires commitment, understanding, expectations, and risk. Today, learning defines the workplace and will play a significant role in determining whether an organization is successful over the long term or not.

**Keywords:** organizational learning, individual learning, workplace, culture

## INTRODUCTION

Squirrels spend most of the spring and summer months gathering nuts and berries. It consumes most of their time while awake. They eat some, but most they store for later retrieval to sustain themselves over the long, harsh, and barren winter months. The amazing thing about squirrels is that they often forget where they store their nuts and berries. They often bury them in the ground, but most will never be consumed because they have forgotten where to look. In a way, God uses the squirrel's lack of a solid memory to do His work. He counts on their forgetfulness to help plant His trees and plants. God expects a lot more of us than squirrels. He can still use our weaknesses for His Glory, but He has created us to use our talents paired with our faith to do His work. From the beginning, we were created and placed in the Garden of Eden to work it as He directs (Genesis 2:15). God challenges us to learn how to use our talents for Him. It is our innate ability to learn and to greatly increase our capabilities as individuals when combined in organizations that separates us from the squirrel. The following is a narrative analysis of Matthew 15:14-30, the "Parable of the Talents", that details how we are to learn to use our talents; how this lesson was taught in relation to commitment, understanding, expectations, and risk; and, how we are to apply it to the modern workplace today.

## NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

Matthew 25:14-30 tells the story of a Master and his three servants who he entrusted to use their given talents to generate wealth. It is a narrative told by Jesus to teach His followers. "It may appear that the narrational voice is simply presenting a straightforward account of the way things happened" (Robbins 1996, 18). However, the text itself "speaks" and teaches about work, faith, commitment, risk, overcoming fear, expectations, reward, and consequences (Robbins, 15). The beauty of this pericope of this scripture is that its lessons were understandable then and now. Simple lessons can be extracted and applied for the individual along with complex answers for organizations desiring to grow and prosper today.

The story starts off with the Master giving each servant a certain number of talents “according to his ability” (Matthew 25:15). He gave them the talents because he was planning to go “on a journey” that would require him to trust his servants to make use of his property to create value and ultimately wealth (Matthew 25:14). The protagonist is not the Master, but the servant he gave only one talent to. Once the Master goes away each servant is charged with creating wealth. The two servants that were given the most talents each doubled their talents from five to ten and from two to four respectively (Matthew 25: 16-17). “But he who had received the one talent went and dug in the ground and hid his Master’s money” (Matthew 25:18).

When the Master returned from his journey, he summoned each servant to learn what each had gained him while he was gone (Matthew 25:19). To the first two servants, when the Master learned that they had both doubled their accounts, the Master stated: “Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your Master” (Matthew 25: 21 & 23). However, the third servant he delivered his wrath.

The first two servants rightfully recognized the situation they were in and their charge from their Master. They understood that this was not their talents to be used, but the Masters. “Master, you have delivered me five talents; here, I have made five more” (Matthews 25:20). It was expected for them to make a return. The narrational tool of repetition by both servants doubling their allotment of talents shows the importance of generating a return and growth for use of entrusted talents.

The third servant could not overcome any or all of the possible reasons for not creating wealth. Whether it was fear of failure, laziness, selfishness, a lack of faith, or no confidence, the servant chose not to do the Master’s will. “Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed, so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here, you have what is yours” (Matthew 25:24-25). The servant failed and the Master showed him no mercy. The Master understood that this servant from the beginning did not have the capacity or capability to produce as the other servants did. However, he still charged him to generate wealth with a little. He gave him a task where success was well within his reach and capabilities.

The Master rightfully called him out for his failure by calling him a “wicked and slothful servant” and showed him what he could have done at a minimum which was to give his talent to someone else to generate a simple return from interest (Matthew 25:26-27). The Master then stripped the servant from his only talent and gave it to the first servant who proved his worth the most (Matthew 25:28). “For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the who has not, even what he has will be taken away” (Matthew 25:29). On the surface this may not seem fair, but the lesson here is that the talent’s sole purpose is to be used to generate more value. The Master used talents to create his wealth. Two servants got it through previously learned experiences and knew that they needed to put their talents to use. The third servant only saw what it could or could not do for them. It was an object to be protected and returned without gain. The third servant was of no value to the Master and was “cast” out from his presence to be forever separated from the Master (Matthew 25:30). The Master required all of the servants to “detach themselves from worldly treasure” for themselves and to see their entrusted talents as a means to generate wealth for their Master (DeSilva 2004, 277). That was to be their sole motivation. Two succeeded and one failed. Two would continue to be given opportunities and one would lose all that they had left which was themselves. Two had learned from past experiences and were ready for their Master’s charge and performed with excellence.

## LEARNING TO LEARN: COMMITMENT, UNDERSTANDING, EXPECTATIONS, AND RISK

Learning is a commitment by both individuals and organizations to creating a better future. Learning requires obedience and imagination of what the future might hold. Individuals and organizations “fail to create the future not because they fail to predict it, but because they fail to imagine it” (Hamel 2002, 125). Imagination leads to an understanding of what one knows and what one needs to learn. Learning requires both passive and direct active participation by individuals to create change (Billet 2004, 316). Performance is how an organization is ultimately

measured just as the Master held each servant accountable for their performance. Successful individuals and organizations understand the importance of learning. Organizational learning has a direct “impact on performance” (Škerlavaj et al. 2007, 360).

“Organizational learning is a complex process” that seeks to “change behavior” through new ideas and information (Škerlavaj et al. 2007, 348). The expectation for individuals and organizations going through a learning process is that they will change and learn how to be successful. “Organizational learning often involves tensions” between old and new ideas, different “understandings”, and “organizational actors” as they act and “engage” with others (Garud et al. 2001, 598). The two servants that created wealth did so by changing their habits learned from previous interactions with the Master who knew more about their potential than they may have about themselves.

Learning helps to fill in the gaps by eliminating unknowns which helps to manage risk. Often practical experience is learned through “informal learning” either through “trial and error” or knowledge sharing between fellow team members (Inanc et al. 2015, 451). Organizations “don’t need more risk takers; they need people who understand how to de-risk big aspirations” (Hamel, 276). Two servants learned how to succeed by managing risk and one did not. The higher risk was actually exhibited by the third servant who thought that they were being less risky by sticking his talent in the ground and not willing to do what it took to learn how to use it in a smart and well-managed manner.

## APPLICATIONS TO TODAY’S WORKPLACE

Successful individuals and organizations know how to learn and apply what they learn to their organization. “A key competitive advantage of organizations lies in their ability to learn and to be responsive to challenges from both internal and external business environments” (Škerlavaj et al. 2007, 360). Failing to learn and applying new knowledge has negative consequences that could result in an individual losing their job or an organization going out of business.

Each servant was given an opportunity to learn how to maximize their entrusted talents. Two of the servants succeeded because they put their talents and learned experiences to work utilizing their core capabilities. A core capability is a “competitive advantage” that an individual or an organization has that cannot easily be created or copied by others in the marketplace (Leonard 1998, 4). They embraced their talents to conduct business and generate a return. The Master recognized their core capabilities and entrusted them to utilize their talents and pair them with their core capability. They did not waiver from what they knew they could do with excellence and matched their resources to them.

“The flip side of a core capability, coexisting with it, is a core rigidity” (Leonard 1998, 55). Core capabilities, an individual or an organization’s “strengths”, are also “simultaneously”, it’s “weaknesses” which are called core rigidities (Leonard, 30). A core rigidity will often cause failure when an individual or organization “fall prey to insularity or overshoot an optimal level of best practices” (Leonard, 55). In a way, a core rigidity causes blind spots that allow weaknesses to start defining performance for an individual or organization rather than its strengths. The core rigidity hampers our ability to learn. The marketplace demands our best and when our weaknesses start to define us as opposed to our strengths then we will eventually fail.

When trying to learn something new and create a new core capability, it is important to resist the core rigidity that may kill the development of it too soon before it has a chance “to emerge” (Leonard 1998, 56). A healthy tolerance for risk while learning is needed for both individuals and organizations to develop new capabilities. In addition, the limitations often created by the core rigidity such as well defined and “structured positions in an organization” impacts the way learning takes place (Fuller et al. 2007, 756).

Learning with too many limitations or at the other extreme with not enough limitations is not conducive to an organization striving to be successful. Proper workplace learning environments have both expansive and restrictive qualities (Fuller et al. 2007, 756). The Master gave each servant a defined amount of talents (the restriction and the enabling resource) with the charge to create wealth (the expansive characteristic and charge). The Master rewarded performance

gleaned from either learning how to be successful with what was given to them or punished the one who failed to learn how to succeed.

## CONCLUSION

Learning from past experience and shared knowledge positions both individuals and organizations for success. God (the Master) expects us to learn and then apply what we have learned to develop core capabilities and pair them with our talents (resources) to create value and growth. A healthy understanding of what we are to do, the expectations of how we will be measured, and a means to properly manage risk is something that can be learned and then applied to seek success. Matthew 25: 14-30 shows servants being held accountable for all of their actions whether they are successes or failures. Learning is key to achieving success and for giving an account of all of our work.

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