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*John Mariotti*



# The Forest & The Trees

*A Business Parable*

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**T**here are many lessons to be learned from nature that apply in the world of business. This is only one of them. Pay close attention to the lessons in this parable and find others of your own.

## The Forest and the Large Tree

I live on a hill that overlooks a vast expanse of forest. In this forest there are trees of all different species, sizes and ages. While I looked at this work of

nature one day, it struck me that a message was being delivered by nature that applied to organizations, especially business organizations in this world of ours. I began to focus on one great tree.

This enormous tree was great in both height and girth. It was, I assumed, very old. In fact, there were no small trees under the shadow of its huge branches. The large tree dominated its part of the forest. Its size and spread were so impressive that it completely excluded new growth (even its own seeds, grasses and other plants) from growing in its shadow. All around it, the trees were mostly of a similar species and of varying ages and sizes.

The immediate area around the great tree had obviously been “seeded” by the tree’s own seeds, some of which had grown and flourished outside its shadow. Other plant life also flourished there, and the diversity of it was beautiful to behold (no doubt seeds carried into the area by the birds or the wind). As majestic as the large tree was, its setting in the forest was only enhanced by the surrounding diversity. Alone, it simply wouldn’t have been as impressive, because there would have been nothing for comparison!

In other areas of the forest, similar places existed. I would like to focus on just this one, while remembering that the nature of the forest is that this place is repeated many times over.

## **The Great Storm**

After many years, one day in the very early spring, a great windstorm swept through the forest. This was a new, stronger, and different kind of windstorm. Never before had such winds been felt in this forest. Other times there had been strong winds, but these just blew down the smaller, dead or dying branches of the large tree. This natural pruning was healthy for the large tree, keeping it clear of growth that was no longer alive and thriving. This new, stronger wind pushed and pulled at the limbs and branches of the tree. As nature would have it, the sap traveled slowly up to the treetop because the tree was very large.

By virtue of its size and age, the tree was rigid and strong. Its limbs were very large and stiff too. The smaller trees flexed in the wind. Their branches whipped in different directions as the wind swirled and changed its direction. The branches that had grown into large limbs of the large tree had lost their flexibility because of their size. Their very survival depended on their size and strength. As the wind whipped around the mighty tree, one of

the larger limbs broke, with a resounding crack. Once its greatest strength, now its huge size and weight worked to its disadvantage after the new winds had broken it.

The large limb crashed to the ground.

If trees could scream, this titan would have screamed a cry of pain and anguish louder than ever heard throughout the forest.

## **The New Growth of Competition**

Even so, hardly diminished by the loss of this one large limb, the large tree had many large branches. But something different and new happened in the space on the ground beneath where the large limb had been.

The absence of its shade let the sunlight and rain through and new growth began. Some of the seeds from the large tree that had fallen there also began to grow as many other plant seeds also sprang to life. This new growth sprouted quickly and grew rapidly.

Different species began to grow and the competition for sunlight and nutrients was on. This was especially true because the roots of the large tree were also large and deep, and the new growth could find plenty of niches in the topsoil in which to anchor themselves.

The new growth was much different from the rest of the area around the big tree. It was very diverse and flexible. It was aggressive, growing very fast, often doubling its height in a single year. The large tree continued to dominate its part of the forest until yet another strong storm came. It seemed the storms with different, stronger winds were coming more often. Not far from the wound of the previous broken limb, there was an area no longer protected from the wind, where the first large limb had broken.

Never before had the tree felt the pressures of the wind so deeply into its core. Another limb broke this time. It was not so large as the first, but it was in a part of the tree near the first break. The first branch had lain on the ground for some time, and the burrowing, sucking and chewing insects had found it. After they infested it, they moved to the large trunk of the tree nearby. A few of them found their way to it, and in a dead area from an old wound, they began their work on the live tree.

## Decay, Vermin and the Rotten Interior

Since this dead area went all the way to the center of the tree, the parasites gained access to other old wounds. When the large tree was younger and healthier, its center was also healthy and solid. As seasons went by some of these central areas began to rot, because the sap (of life) was mostly required out at the bark, on the outside of the tree to support its own new growth. The inside continued to decay, and the parasites continued their slow, steady march into weakened areas.

The new growth around the great tree continued to flourish, continuing to gather greater amounts of sunlight and life-giving moisture. As time went by, the old tree slowly gave way to the ravages of the storms and wind by losing first one limb, then another. Rotting and attack by parasites further weakened its core. With each broken limb and fallen branch, more new aggressive growth sprouted around it. The trees that grew in the area exposed by the original broken limb were now quite large and still growing rapidly. They were now competing for the light and moisture with each other and the great tree.

## The Great Tree Falls

Finally, one day after much of the great tree's strength had been destroyed by winds and storms, its roots and core damaged by rot and parasites, the old tree toppled over. Its once proud bulk lay on the ground in somber, sad repose. A few of its roots remained in the soil, and some growth appeared on its limbs each spring, but most of it was a broken and decaying hulk. The new trees that had sprouted in its space now shaded its meager growth from the sunlight and took the nourishment from the soil so it could get none. They were now reaching skyward.

As they grew taller and larger, it became apparent there was no longer room for all of them to become as dominant as the great tree had. Just as their predecessor had grown strong and rigid, some of them did too. They could no longer flex with the swirling stormy winds. Their growth upward had slowed too. The sap simply took too long to get to the top for them to grow much taller. They spread their limbs outward in an attempt to take a larger area of sunlight. Their deep roots reached outward to nourish the large frame they had grown and cling to the territory they now claimed.

## History Will Repeat

The one thing they couldn't know (or did they?) was that they too would fall to the ravages of time, the strong winds of change, and the growth of the young and flexible. Some of them were fortunate in that a forester found them. He thinned out the forest around them and pruned away their dead growth. He treated their wounds to keep out the insects, and prevent or cut out the rotting inside. Despite his finest efforts, their size and height was limited. No matter how hard they reached for the sky, the sheer structure they needed to add the height worked against them when the stronger, stormy winds blew.

The *shape* of the forest is constantly *shifting*. Old growth matures and dies off, and new growth takes its place. Nature has a way of telling us things. The messages are subtle but powerful. Often we ignore them. More often we are simply unaware of the messages because we do not think to look for them. The forest is so large that we only see the small part of it where we are.

*How can we realize the message that we are only living in a small piece of time and space and see the larger forest around us?*

*How can we also see the richness of life that is within the forest and in every tree?*

Perhaps we cannot — or perhaps we need a wise forester, who knows of the story of the large tree and has been both inside and outside the forest to realize its size and majesty.

## Learning from Nature

One thing is certain. We can learn from the laws of nature and the story of the forest. There are many morals to be derived from this simple story. The skillful forester is the one who knows when the humane thing to do is to prune (or even fell!) the large tree and relieve its misery. The fact that trees cannot grow to the sky is no longer a mystery. Companies, like trees, also cannot “grow to the sky.” Their own size, rigidity, and bulk ultimately become the disadvantage that allows the smaller, faster and more flexible new competitors to prevail.

Markets have limits — just as the forest does. The wise forester picks only a limited area of the forest to “shape” and prune lest he spread himself too thin and does a poor job for all. Line extensions and overly ambitious expansion into unfamiliar areas can damage or destroy companies too.

Understanding these principles, as intelligent human inhabitants of the forest, perhaps we can adapt. Better yet, perhaps we can help nature create a healthier forest, by pruning the trees, and clearing the dead wood, but most of all by understanding that the time it takes the sap to reach the top, and the rigidity of great size, can cause the tree’s downfall. One thing is certain: unless we learn about the care, flexibility, and pruning needed to deal with the winds of change and the storms of time as the tree (company) grows larger, history will repeat itself throughout the forest again and again!

Markets, like forests, are constantly evolving. Like trees, the competitors who can flexibly adjust will survive and prosper the longest. The wise forester, like modern day executives *shapes* the trees and the forest to lengthen the lives of the large trees. He knows that they must be felled in order to be replaced with new growth when their size and rigidity have limited their vitality, lest nature knock them down due to the forces of competition.

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**John L. Mariotti** is an internationally known author, columnist, and speaker. He is the author of *The Shape Shifters* and *The Silence*. You can learn more about John, or contact him, at [www.shape-shifters.com](http://www.shape-shifters.com).

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