

The Advantages of Disadvantages – Succeeding in Difficult Situations*

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Malcolm Gladwell:

David & Goliath – Underdogs, Misfits and the Art of Battling Giants

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“David and Goliath” is about how to take on “giants”. “Giants” can be mighty adversaries, armies, disabilities, misery or oppression. Each chapter is a separate story in which someone faces a daunting task. Should they act as usual, or trust their knowledge and instincts? Should they resist or give up?

The stories explore two ideas. The first is that one can succeed even in almost hopeless situations, since managing to withstand an overwhelming force is uplifting. The other is that we constantly misinterpret and mismanage these asymmetrical situations. Not everyone and everything is a real “giant” that we perceive as such. Their power is often also their weakness. And an asymmetrical situation can open doors, create opportunities, teach and enlighten us, and it can even facilitate the seemingly impossible. We need guidance to successfully confront our “giants”, and what could serve as a better example for that than the lessons of the battle between David and Goliath?

The book describes and analyses a number of difficulties and conflicts to show that the weak can emerge from these situations victorious and the powerful can lose. The author uses interdisciplinary analysis, including historiography, economics, sociology and political science. In his heuristic model, Gladwell sheds new light on famous and less well-known stories that mainly come from the USA and Western Europe of the 20th and 21st centuries. The author has an enjoyable, entertaining style. He is able to draw practical lessons from historical and sociological data, and to improve the strategic knowledge of appreciative readers. That is why I wholeheartedly recommend this book to anyone. I believe it is a good tool for improving personal and collective problem-solving abilities. The book could also

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be used as course material. Not in its entirety, but its case studies, analyses and the corresponding lessons learned that are directly related to the particular educational targets.

“David and Goliath” consists of an introduction analysing the David and Goliath story, and three main parts divided into nine stories that present the advantages of disadvantages (and vice versa), the theory of desirable difficulties, and the limits of power.

In the introduction, the clash between David and Goliath comes to life, and the author gives us an unconventional interpretation of the story. In Gladwell’s reading it does not depict the practically implausible victory of the apparent underdog, but describes the “drawbacks” of power and the strategy based on this, which ultimately led to David’s victory.

The first three stories highlight that one part of advantages comes from the existence of resources and the other from the lack of resources. The weak can come out on top in certain situations because the lack of something might be more advantageous than having it. However, it seems to be hard for us to learn this. Strengths are interpreted too narrowly. We consider many things helpful, when in fact they are not, while deeming others detrimental, even though they make us stronger and brighter. Why do we unconsciously believe that Goliath will win? And what does it mean when someone handles challenges in an unconventional way, just like David?

The basketball team in the first story was able to succeed because they attacked their powerful opponent where it was just as vulnerable as the weaker ones. The big class in the second story did not have worse results than smaller ones, yet it is a common endeavour to reduce class sizes. And there are some who, after getting into the best university, give up their career dreams, because compared to the others they do not consider themselves “good enough”. In a nutshell, the first part is about apparent advantages that might not always be beneficial.

The three stories in the second part are about disadvantages, that is, disabilities or difficulties that make one’s circumstances unusually inauspicious. Common sense dictates that we should flee these, but this is not always possible. Then how can we take advantage of these situations? The theory of “desired difficulties” suggests that not all obstacles are negative.

Many people are affected by dyslexia, which makes some deviant while hardening others and leading them to success. One third of successful entrepreneurs have dyslexia! In the fifth story, the author takes a look at creatives, innovators, artists, entrepreneurs and politicians, and finds that many of them lost one of their parents in early childhood. And there are even historical examples proving that strength can

be drawn from traumas. During the London Blitz, for example, those not directly affected mustered courage from the hardships, which increased their resilience. The members of the African-American civil rights movement and their leader, the Nobel Peace Prize-laureate Martin Luther King were unarmed and oppressed, and they came from a community that had been disadvantaged for centuries. During these adversities, however, they learned how to fight “giants” – and succeed. And in many parts of the world, there are stories about a “trickster hero” that illustrate this phenomenon. We are all familiar with the tales about Brer Rabbit and the fox. These teach us the art of survival and triumphing in an inhospitable environment.

The third part of the book points out the limits of power. The basic category of analysis in political science when examining power struggles and conflicts is legitimacy that justifies the acceptance of authority and power. The seventh story approaches the legitimacy problem by looking at how the first great conflict of the Irish freedom struggle was handled. Legitimacy is based on three things: first, those that are expected to respect authority need to feel that they can speak their minds and that they will be heard. Second, rules need to be predictable and known in advance. Third, authority has to be fair, and cannot favour one group over the other.

The eighth story shows that the same rules apply to maintaining law and order. In California, the sanctions for committing crimes were deemed too mild, and the “Three-strikes law” was introduced. As a result, the number of convicts doubled and crime rates dropped significantly. But has this stricter policy had the desired effect? Increased punishment does in fact deter crime up to a point, but after that it does not. After 20 years, in 2012, California eventually put an end to the biggest judicial experiment of the United States. Following a referendum, the sanctions were reduced again.

The book’s last, ninth story sums up the lessons learned from saving Jews in France under German occupation. Gladwell argues that the excessive, oppressive use of authority causes problems of legitimacy and justification. And authority without legitimacy fosters resistance instead of obedience. When the powerful eliminate an insurgent, there will always be someone else to replace that person!

The book uses the stories to present the questions of power in a unique way. It demonstrates that the sources of authority are not uniform or homogenous. In any given authority situation or conflict, the different sources of authority clash. One can defeat the other, thus overcoming the apparently glaring initial disparity. This disparity can be turned to the underdog’s advantage with another type of authority source, or with carefully conceived or spontaneous strategic decisions. This is the most important lesson from the book for us as individuals, communities and as members and actors in networks of society. If possible, we have to learn this from this book.