

A Review of Books

Malcolm Gladwell's *David and Goliath* Summary

Gladwell, Malcolm (2013). *David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits, and the Art of Battling Giants*. New York: Little, Brown and Company.

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In his book *David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits, and the Art of Battling Giants*, Malcolm Gladwell shares stories in which underdogs who are pitted against seemingly unbeatable opponents end up being victorious. Two overarching ideas are explored throughout the book: the first is that “much of what we consider valuable in our world arises out of ... lopsided conflicts, because the act of facing overwhelming odds produces greatness and beauty” (Gladwell 2013, p. 6), meaning that achievement is often born from immense struggle. The second idea is that “we consistently get these kinds of conflicts wrong” (*Ibid.*, p. 6) by misreading or misinterpreting the conflicts we encounter. Essentially, Gladwell challenges our conventional ways of thinking and contends that we are stuck in rigid frameworks regarding ideas about obstacles, disadvantages, and power that limit our perceptions of our full capabilities. This paper will provide a detailed review of Gladwell's book before applying the underdog story to a case of economic catch-up from an underdog economy.

In the introduction, Gladwell unfolds the central premise of his book through the classic story of David and Goliath. He reveals that the

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story that we all think we know is actually incorrect. While we may think David miraculously won the single combat duel when he should not have, Gladwell explains that our misperception of David as an underdog stems from our entrenched mindset of what defines a great warrior and that a single combat duel should be fought hand to hand. In this entrenched mindset, Goliath appears to be the likely victor because he was an experienced warrior who possessed the height, strength, and equipment that would make him a 'giant' in hand-to-hand duel; meanwhile David lacked combat experience and armor, which would seemingly make him the underdog. However, these preconceived expectations are shown to be key limitations that brought Goliath's demise. David may not have won in hand to hand combat against Goliath, but David did not fight abiding by the traditional rules of duel; he capitalized on his skill with the sling, which allowed him to fight from a distance and changed the rules of the duel to his advantage. Gladwell asserts that the sling is an incredibly potent weapon, with potential to rival a .45 automatic pistol, so Goliath — weighed down by heavy immobilizing armor and with an unexposed area on his face — did not stand a chance to an effectively used sling. While power in combat is usually equated with physical might, David proved that power can come in other forms as well. In addition, the Israelites assumed too much about Goliath, jumping to conclusions by his physical markers of typical power, without realizing he actually had acromegaly that made Goliath blind and slow. The story of David and Goliath teaches us that 'giants' — opponents of all kinds "from armies and mighty warriors to disability, misfortune, and oppression" (*Ibid.*, p. 5) — are not always what they seem.

There are three parts to the book. The first part discusses the advantages of disadvantages and vice versa, using examples of basketball, class size, and school rankings. The first story is about Vivek Ranadivé, who had never played basketball before but successfully coached his daughter's basketball team of inexperienced young girls all the way to the national championship by defying normal practices of basketball. His and the girls' disadvantages of basketball inexperience ended up being an advantage because it freed them up to playing unconventionally. They capitalized on the weak points of basketball games — the inbound pass time limitation and the standard convention of allowing opponents to dribble up the court undefended after an inbound pass. By playing a strategy called a 'full-court press' in which defensive pressure is constantly applied, the girls took advantage of these weak points in basketball and were able to supplant talent with effort. The girls worked on

high fitness so that they could implement the full-court press, and with intense perseverance, they beat many 'giant' teams. Gladwell states that there are actually countless basketball game stories where "David used the full-court press to beat Goliath" (*Ibid.*, p. 31), and he provides several collegiate examples of underdog victors. If the full-court press is so successful, it is puzzling why the strategy is not utilized all the time. The answer, however, is revealed that underdogs often do not use the press because the practice defies how typical basketball games supposedly should be played; moreover, the full-court press is very difficult and requires more effort than a talented player may have to exert. Gladwell states that to "play by David's rules, you have to be desperate. You have to be so *bad* that you have no choice" (*Ibid.*, p. 34), but with enough effort, underdogs can achieve extraordinary things with a fraction of the talent of their competitors.

This strategy of emphasizing effort and breaking convention has been applied multiple times in warfare as well. Gladwell cites that throughout history, weaker and smaller armies have won against much larger armies at least 29 percent of the time. Underdogs win more frequently than we perceive, so Gladwell cautions against automatically assuming that someone who is smaller, poorer or less skilled is *necessarily* at a disadvantage. One of the victorious underdogs was Lawrence of Arabia, who led the Arab revolt against the Turkish army near the end of World War One. Lawrence's army of untrained, ill-equipped Bedouin nomads was the underdog to the modern Turkish army. However, because the nomads carried minimal equipment and were accustomed to traveling long distances quickly, their advantages lay in speed, endurance, individual intelligence, and knowledge of terrain. The Turkish, on the other hand, were immobile with all of their weapons. Thus, Lawrence was able to attack the Turks where they were weak: from the unprotected east, a huge expanse of desert that the Turkish never suspected to be attacked from because of its inconceivability. It took a lot more effort crossing the harsh desert terrain to attack from the east, but effort supplanted combat talent, and Lawrence's troop triumphed, just like the full court-press in basketball allowed Rinadivé's team to win.

Gladwell also distinguishes between advantages associated with material resources and advantages resulting from an absence of such resources, arguing that "the latter is sometimes every bit the equal of the former" (*Ibid.*, pp. 24-25) and has allowed underdogs to win more often than perceived. In our rigid definitions of what advantages are, we can often get confused about whether something is helpful or harmful to

us. Gladwell thus argues that we must be desperate and willing enough to defy convention and work hard in order to reap bountiful success.

To illustrate the idea of mixing up advantages and disadvantages, Gladwell turns to classroom size and wealth. He states that the advantages that come with more wealth or a smaller class size follow an inverted-U curve in which the relative position on the curve determines how much more benefit extra wealth or fewer students provide before diminishing marginal returns sets in; more wealth and smaller class sizes help only *up to a point*, after which the factors actually end up being detrimental. Gladwell states that 77 percent of Americans think that smaller classes unarguably lead to better school performance. However, the story of middle school principal Teresa DeBrito defies this common misperception. Class size reduction is shown to improve class performance only if the reduction is from a very large class of over 30 students to a range between the twenties and high teens. Variation in student number between the twenties and teens, however, does not make any difference, and reduction to below ten students actually hurts class performance. People misperceive the benefits and detriments between both large and small classes, as they do with perceptions of wealth. Gladwell relates the story of a famous Hollywood figure to demonstrate that money can make parenting easier by allowing the purchases of higher quality health, education, and consumption goods, but parenting is improved only to a certain extent. The story shows that raising kids in an environment with too much money makes these kids lose appreciation for the effort required to earn such wealth, actually leading to lack of ambition and of a sense of self-worth not tied to money. Gladwell concludes that children who take wealth for granted can ultimately face problems later in their lives when they try to earn their own livings.

The next concepts Gladwell presents are that of 'Little Fish in a Big Pond' versus 'Big Fish in a Little Pond', where sometimes it is better to be the latter. Gladwell contends that the Impressionist painters in late 1890s France were able to succeed by deciding not to exhibit in the famous Salon that traditionally provided the rite of passage for all great artwork. Instead, the Impressionists created their own exhibition stage, allowing their work to be 'Big Fish' — or the main players — in a 'Little Pond' of exclusively Impressionist paintings rather than being 'Little Fish' in a 'Big Pond' of hundreds of paintings vying for attention and approval at the Salon. By creating an environment in which they could be in the spotlight and attract the focus of the appropriate audience, the Impressionists were able to create their own relative situations and

gain success.

The story of college graduate Caroline Sacks also illustrates the disadvantages of being a 'Little Fish in a Big Pond.' Sacks had the choice of going to Brown University and the lower ranking University of Maryland; following the typical decision-making process of selecting based on prestige and name-power, she decided to go to Brown University. She was a bright student who excelled throughout her life and dreamed of pursuing science, however once she got to Brown, she found herself amongst the elite of students from across the nation. When she did not perform as well in science classes as her peers did, "the experience of comparing herself to all the other brilliant fish shattered her confidence [and] made her feel stupid, even though she isn't stupid at all" (*Ibid.*, p. 77). Gladwell asserts that Sacks' experience embodies the concept of 'relative deprivation' in which our sense of how deprived we are is related to those immediately around us whom we identify as being in the same boat as ourselves. Even though being at the bottom of a Brown University course still made Sacks smarter than the majority of the national population by fact of having made it to Brown, she failed to see this point and felt inadequate because she was not as brilliant as the very small top percent of the elite. Relative deprivation shattered Caroline's confidence and made her drop science altogether. Gladwell points out, however, that there are many people not in the academic elite who are successful in this world. He argues that if Sacks had gone to the University of Maryland, she would have maintained her self-confidence by being at the top of the class and her life would be different.

Part two of the book focuses on the theory of 'desirable difficulty' and that being an underdog and having a weakness can change people in ways often unacknowledged. Dyslexia is conventionally considered a disadvantage that nobody would wish to have. It is considered a setback that leaves you worse off than you would be without it. However, Gladwell contends that the extra effort people must exert to overcome difficulties like dyslexia actually creates certain traits that make these people highly talented in certain areas in ways they would not be without the difficulty. The example of David Boies depicts a successful dyslexic who went from a construction worker with a high school education to a highly successful trial lawyer. Law school requires a lot of reading, the main weakness for dyslexics. However, to counter his difficulty in reading, Boies had developed an astute memory and listening ability that allowed him to be highly focused in classes so that he could still learn the law school material. As a lawyer, the listening skill and

the ability to simplify complicated material also proved to be some of the strongest assets that propelled Boies to the top of his profession, and these strengths were developed due to his dyslexia. Gladwell contends that while most of us practice 'capitalization learning' in which "we get good at something by building on the strengths that we are naturally given" (*Ibid.*, p. 112), people with disadvantages like dyslexia practice 'compensation learning' where they are forced out of necessity to learn something by whatever means possible. Gladwell states that "what is learned out of necessity is inevitably more powerful than the learning that comes easily" (*Ibid.*, p. 113) because of the extra amount of effort that desperation injects. Gladwell points out that many of today's most successful entrepreneurs are actually dyslexic, contending that their success comes from certain personality traits of openness, conscientiousness and disagreeableness that they developed to compensate for learning difficulties.

Next, Gladwell asserts that sometimes difficulty may be desirable, as demonstrated by the story of Emil "Jay" Freireich. Freireich overcame a tough childhood during the Great Depression and eventually became a pioneering physician for leukemia. His tragically harsh upbringing left him with a violent temper, but it also nourished unyielding willpower and courage that were vital in Freireich's ambitions to champion developments in leukemia cures during that age in medicine, where many of his practices and ideas were considered dangerous or absurd. Gladwell therefore argues that while Freireich's childhood was unfortunate, the character it developed was the silver lining that helped Freireich successfully make advancements leukemia treatment.

Similarly, courage was created out of adversity during the London Blitz bombing of World War Two. Gladwell argues that Londoners who survived the bombings conquered some of the most horrific fears, which produces exhilaration and a sense of triumph that remains, affecting the rest of the lives of those who overcome adversity. Many successful people including President Obama and Bill Clinton have been found to have had childhood adversity that created a willpower and endurance to help them become presidents of the United States.

One famous historical figure whose story Gladwell addresses includes that of Martin Luther King Jr. when his civil rights movement efforts were beginning to lose momentum. While African Americans suffered from harsh treatment from racists, King's assistant Wyatt Walker viewed this suffering as a desirable difficulty that could prove useful. Walker felt the civil rights movement could regain vigor if the brutality experi-

enced by the segregated blacks was exposed to the wider public. Therefore, Walker essentially created a crisis in Birmingham to purposely provoke the authorities into violence towards the peaceful protestors so that media could document this violence and expose it nationwide. This eventually allowed the movement to get the leverage it needed, despite some unfortunate but necessary difficulties that included many injuries suffered by the protestors. While we all try to minimize and avoid adversity, Gladwell argues that sometimes there are benefits that we gain that are greater than the suffering.

The third and final part of the book explores the limits of power through the exploration of such themes as justice and whether it should be based partially on vengeance or completely on the virtues of forgiveness. Gladwell also states that "there are real limits to what evil and misfortune can accomplish" (*Ibid.*, p. 275) by illustrating how the Nazi oppression of Jewish and other marginalized groups could not completely destroy these communities. Even though vengeance or evil can create great destruction, a community of survivors from the destruction is also created, nurturing in them an unshakable valiant human spirit that supersedes the evil. Gladwell claims that courage is not an innate quality that we are born with, but rather courage is earned once someone goes through tough times and realizes these events are not so tough after all.

Drawing from Gladwell's complete reconsiderations of conventional thinking about what makes someone a giant or an underdog, and what are advantages and disadvantages, we can see countless examples in economic history where companies or nations have succeeded beyond expectations by pursuing unconventional development strategies. One example is China. Despite being a huge nation, China had an economy that, for the majority of the past century, was a metaphorical David in that it was backwards and lacked experience with modern economic development. Standard economic catch-up theories have always aligned with the Goliath of the 'Washington Consensus,' a market-based approach that promotes deregulation, privatization, FDI liberalization, and other neoliberal policies. However, China has defied this standard route of economic development by following its own path of experimental economic growth. Considering China's controlling communist government and state-owned enterprises along with demographic and resource challenges, pursuing the Washington Consensus would have been incompatible with China's unique conditions. Instead, China slowly transitioned towards becoming more open by developing pockets of experimental development

through township and village enterprises and other unique methods. China's lack of protocol, known as the 'Beijing Consensus,' has allowed the Chinese economy to successfully and rapidly grow, with China now boasting one of the largest and fastest growing economies in the world. Had China dogmatically pursued the Washington Consensus, perhaps its economy would not be the global contender that it is today.

Whether individually or on a national scale, we must unchain ourselves from rigid mental frameworks in order to turn disadvantages into advantages. The themes that Gladwell asserts may help us overcome impossible struggles to reach unimaginable achievements.

Reference

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