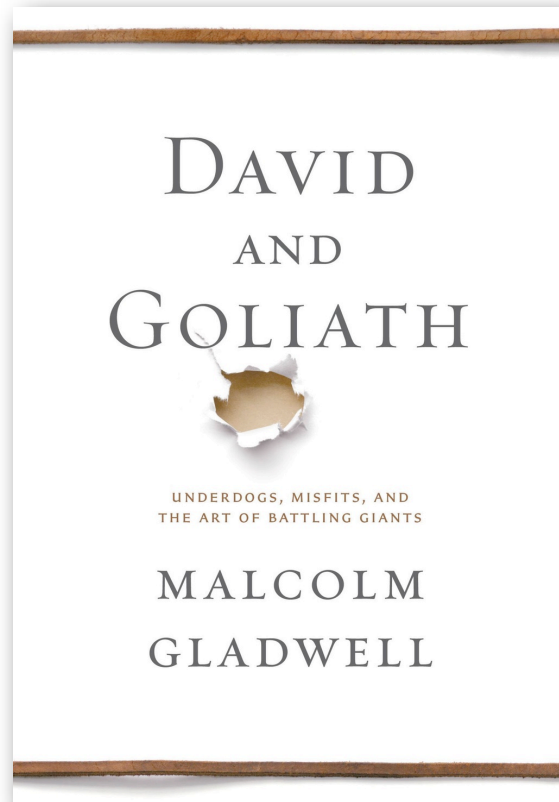




## David & Goliath - Underdogs, Misfits and the art of battling giants by Malcolm Gladwell



### **THE BOOK IN A NUTSHELL**

Sometimes what we think is an advantage becomes a disadvantage - and vice versa (where a weakness becomes a strength as we learn to compensate against it). Trying to play the Giant's game rarely is successful. To win against the Giants, the Davids need to adopt different strategies. But most of the time underdogs don't fight like Davids as they blindly accept the rules of the game as defined by the dominant players.



## THE BOOK ITSELF

**Adopt a different strategy to win** - We are attracted to stories of lopsided conflicts - where the underdog battles through and wins against the odds. But in real life, we often mis-read the odds, assuming they are heavily stacked against them. But in reality, the same qualities that appear to give the 'Giants' strength are often their sources of weakness.

You rarely win against the Giants by playing to their rules - yet many 'Davids' assume the battle need to be played on their terms without even questioning it. Furthermore, to win as an underdog you need belief that you can win - and this often comes from having a higher purpose.

Ivan Arreguin-Toft analysed all the wars over the past 200 years. When he looked at one sided battles (where one side had 10x the size of population to the other), he found the larger country won 71.5% of cases. However, when he looked at those cases where the smaller country fought with unconventional tactics (such as guerrilla warfare), he found in these situations they won more time than they lost - in these situations the underdogs won in just under two thirds of wars (63.6%).

*T.E. Lawrence fought an unconventional battle against the Turks in the First-World-War. Their advantage was speed and time (and not weaponry). Lawrence's masterstroke was the attack on the port of Aqaba. The Turks expected a raid from the sea. Instead, he came through the desert on a 600 mile loop.*

*Often how authority behaves becomes the model for how the people behave. In Brownsville, a run down suburb of New York where large chunks of the families have at least one member serving time. The police adopted a less confrontational and a more supportive approach. Key crime statistics in the area dropped dramatically since implementing the new strategy.*

*When you have nothing to lose, then you are more prepared to take risks, try a different strategy or break the rules. Martin Luther King knew they could not win against the might of the US Police force in Birmingham, Alabama - they knew they needed a different strategy. Instead they incensed the Police governor there to act against them, which could then be covered in the press. Finally, at one peaceful march a photo was taken of a dog attacking a student. The power of the picture lies in his lack of resistance to the dog attack.*





In the story of David he recognises his own relative strengths (speed and maneuverability) and the point of vulnerability of the giant (his forehead). Furthermore, David was also driven by his higher purpose (“In the name of God”).

*Vivek Ranadive coached Redwood City's 12 year old girls in the US National Junior Basketball. In studying the game he was puzzled why the teams never seemed to play the full court (instead only defending only about 24 feet of the 94 feet court). He taught his girls to play a whole court pressing strategy. Because he came from Mumbai, he was not blinded by the way other American's played.*

*The famous French Impressionists, Pissarro, Degas, Cezanne, Renoir, Sisley and Monet refused to compete for showings in the 'Salon' which was housed at the Palais de l'Industrie that was run by the Ministry of the Imperial House and Fine Arts (who favoured accuracy and shunned the impressionist style). They were so clear on their vision of art that they were not prepared to sacrifice this just to be accepted by the 'establishment'. Instead they set up their own exhibition called The Societe Anonyme Cooperative des Artistes Peintres, Sculpteurs, Graveurs in Boulevard des Capucines. In April 1874 3,500 people attended their exhibition. This established the movement of impressionism that had previously been stifled by the then cultural accepted system of artistic judgement.*

**The ‘n’ curve (or inverted ‘u’)** - Giants are at a disadvantage in some areas as ‘more’ is not always better. The ‘n’ curve suggests that benefits rise with numbers, but then plateaus before the benefits decline with increased numbers. Barry Schwartz and Adam Grant first termed it the inverted ‘u’, stating “All positive traits, states and experiences have costs that at high levels may begin to outweigh their benefits”. So a class size of 3 is just as bad as a class of say 40 (we assume the smaller the class size the better, but hundreds of studies of class size across 18 countries has concluded it has no effect on performance when within average limits).

Likewise we see the same with the effect of wealth on families. Too little and it disrupts a family; too much and it also disrupts (as wealth contains the seeds of its destruction). \$75,000 a year is suggested to be the tipping point after which family happiness declines. Thereafter there are diminishing marginal returns (i.e. a family that makes \$100,000 will not be 33% happier).

*In Northern Ireland, the Armed forces demonstrated the n curve principle that bringing in more troops doesn't reduce violence but incites it. In 1970, there were 25 killings. In 1971 184 killings; 1972, 497. Likewise, the three strikes policy in California may have been popular with the voters but it did not reduce crime rates at a faster rate than other States.*

The ‘n’ curve has three phases: The left side, where doing more has more effect. Then it flattens out (there is little difference between the suggested ‘optimal’ class size of 18 - and 25). Thereafter further increased resources actually leads in a decline in effect - for example, too few kids in a classroom stifles the quality of discussion and so we see with class sizes of 6 a decline in educational standards.

*When Caroline Sacks, a straight A student, chose to do Chemistry at Brown's she floundered and eventually gave up Chemistry. She was intimidated by the brilliance that surrounded her,*



*making her feel inadequate. If she had instead gone for her second choice (University of Maryland), she would probably have stayed with Chemistry.*

In the case above, Caroline Sacks suffered from 'relative deprivation', a term coined by Sociologist Samuel Stouffer during the Second-World-War which demonstrated that people's morale is more to do with comparing yourself versus others around you than absolute measures. The more elite an establishment, the worse people tend to feel about their own abilities (The 'n' curve again).

Research across 11 different colleges in US has confirmed this general finding. For example, when you break SATS scores into tertiles the bottom third average SATS scores for Harvard are higher than the average top tertile score for Hartwick. However, the drop out rates (and pass rates) amongst the third tertile group of two such diverse universities was the same - even though those in, for example, Harvard would have been in the top tertile at Hartwick. Thus there are times when it's better to be a big fish in a little pond than try to swim with the sharks.

A piece of research looked at published papers by Economics Phd students from a range of universities. They found a clear relationship between their 'talent' (i.e. where they were ranked in their class) and the number of papers published. For example, at Harvard the top 99 percentile PHd students published on average 4.3 versus those at 55th percentile who had an average publish rate of just 0.07. Of interest those students at the 55th percentile in their class at Harvard would be in the top section of many other universities. For example those in the top 99 percentile at Toronto are academically as gifted as those in the 55th percentile at Harvard - yet the average publish rate of Toronto's 99th percentile is higher at 3.13. It appears that the peer set diminishes or helps boost self-belief. So rather than being 'dragged' up by top establishment, such places can demoralize many (As one student said, "One of the things about Harvard is there are so many smart people there, that it's hard to feel smart there"). This has led to the suggestion that you are better to employ people who come top in a mediocre university than a mediocre candidate from a top university.

**How a potential weakness can gives us strength** - We tend to gravitate towards those areas we are naturally gifted in. But conversely the same happens in areas of major disadvantage. We have to develop skills in other areas to ameliorate our disadvantages (known as 'Compensation learning').

For many people being dyslexic can hamper their potential. It not only affects academic achievements but can also sap their self esteem and confidence. But for some a disadvantage can be the making of them (termed 'desirable difficulties' by Bjork and Bjork). An extraordinary high number of entrepreneurs (c1/3rd) are dyslexic (e.g. Richard Branson, Charles Schwab, Craig McCaw etc) - they succeeded in part because of their disadvantage.

*David Boies was born dyslexic. It meant that unconsciously he learned to listen well and memorise. When he became an attorney, he often used these skills in the court (he would 'hear' the weakness in the other sides argument as the tonality would differ slightly).*

*Gary Cohn was dyslexic and grew up being comfortable with failure. He therefore did not mind taking risks. This helped him get his first job in the city where he became a successful trader and eventually the president of Goldman Sachs.*



Courage often comes from experiencing tough times. 67% of UK Prime Ministers lost a parent before they were 16 - as were 12 out of the past 44 US Presidents (such as Washington and Obama). Likewise creatives (e.g. Keats, Wordsworth, Coleridge and Thackeray). 25% of them lost a parent by the age of 10 (rising to 45% by age of 20). The assumption is such a traumatic loss helped them build psychological strength (as having survived the worst fears of life, it gave them the strength and courage to cope with rejection).

Psychologists have found that creatives, innovators and revolutionaries share a similar trait of being disagreeable - i.e. they do not mind breaking social norms in pursuit of their vision. As the playwright, Bernard Shaw said, *“The reasonable man adapts himself to the world: The unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man”*

*Emil ‘Jay’ Freireich had a brutally difficult childhood (and was used to rejection). When he grew up he became a doctor working in the area of child leukemia (which creates horrific effects on those suffering). He dared to challenge the current thinking in place at the time and recommended giving patients a cocktail of hard drugs to try to kill the cancer that took his patients close to death (and in some cases did kill them). He risked alienation from his fellow doctors because his strategies were so extreme on the patients (including having to take monthly checks of the cells in the bone marrow using an eighteen gauge needle inserted into the shin bone just below the knee cap which he undertook without any anesthetic for the child). As far as he was concerned there was nothing to lose (as most children would die within 6 weeks anyway).*

Nietzsche once said, “That which does not kill us makes us stronger”. Research during the Second-World-War showed that when a bomb falls it divides the people into three groups: Those killed by it (!); the near misses; and the unaffected (remote misses). It appears the near misses rather than phasing them, tends to make them feel more confident and positive. There were ‘just’ 40,000 deaths in a population of 8m - hence why the blitz of London failed to have the impact of crushing morale and raising fear that their opponents thought would happen.

## CRITIQUE

I have always enjoyed Gladwell’s books but I think this time he has overcooked it. He has ‘tipped’ more into storytelling and less into robust content. This book is another example of a single concept ‘spun out’ to fill 275 pages.

His stories (whilst interesting) feel to be quite tenuously linked to his key thesis.

Some of his findings are also open to debate (e.g. N. Ireland shootings my rise in relation to the amount of armed forces on the street, but equally, the amount of insurrection might have led to the increase - let alone other sources such as greater publicity, and more organised IRA etc etc)

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