

David and Goliath

By Malcolm Gladwell

What happens when ordinary people confront powerful opponents of all kinds?

1. Much of what we consider valuable in our world arises out of these kinds of lopsided conflicts.
2. We constantly get these kinds of conflicts wrong. What appears to be great strength can have a built in weakness. Being an underdog can change people in ways that we often fail to appreciate.

The Story of David & Goliath

Ancient armies had three kinds of warriors: cavalry, infantry, projectile warriors (included slingers). Cavalry were deadly against projectile warriors because they moved quickly, infantry were effective against cavalry because of their armor and long pikes, and projectile warriors were deadly against infantry because infantry were weighted down with armor and slow.

Why have we misinterpreted the battle between David and Goliath?

1. We think of power in terms of physical might.
2. We don't realize that Goliath had vision problems that hampered his ability to fight at a distance.

Part One: The Advantages of Disadvantages (and the Disadvantages of Advantages)

If you don't understand the history of a game you are free to make up an approach that maximizes your chances. Often history only limits your ability to think 'outside the box'.

History doesn't always follow common sense ideas. In wars between very large countries and very small ones, over the last 200 years, the large country has won 71% of the time. This means the weaker country has won almost one-third of the time. When the weaker country uses unconventional tactics, their winning percentages climb to over 60%.

We have a limited and rigid definition of what an advantage is and this causes us to think of some things as helpful when they aren't and to think of some things as unhelpful when they are strengths.

Why isn't this unconventional approach used more often? Underdog strategies are hard and require incredible discipline and dedication. Therefore, underdogs have to be very desperate to attempt them. Often the unconventional approach requires the user to be viewed in an unflattering manner, i.e. shooting basketball freethrows underhanded is 'girlish' and 'not manly'.

Doing more of a good thing often improves the result only so far. Actions taken often reflect an inverted-U curve, where performance peaks out and then declines. This is true of teaching reduced class sizes, as well as policing a city.

Sometimes being a big fish in a little pond is better than being a little fish in a bigger, more prestigious pond. You are allowed to develop your interests instead of competing with the best in your interest area, not succeeding, and then changing to a less challenging area. More than half of all American students who start out in science/technology/math programs drop out after their first or second year because they insist on going to the most competitive institutions for their education. Yet, the top students at the smaller schools do just as well as the students from the 'better' schools; perhaps because they remained in areas of study that interested them.

Part Two: The Theory of Desirable Difficulty

Having a disadvantage means having to develop other skills in order to be successful. This can give the handicapped person a big advantage in the marketplace. David Boies is dyslexic and cannot read well. Because of this he learned to rely on his memory and to listen really well to others. He managed to get through law school by attending a smaller university, listening intently to the professors, and using the summary guides regarding major cases. He then went into litigation, rather than corporate law, and his ability to 'think on his feet' and read what others were actually saying was a great strength. Today he is arguably the best trial lawyer in the U.S. and argues cases in the Supreme Court.

People who can 'think on their feet' will often attempt things others would not dream of doing. People who have handicaps have to develop their ability to 'think outside the box' because they are not able to do things others take for granted.

A really disadvantaged childhood can crush children, but it can also embolden them to find their own way and maintain a laser-like focus on their goals. While this may not help them in social skills, it can allow them to try approaches and invent things that others simply cannot grasp.

When people live in an unequal society, i.e. the American Negro, they have to learn nuance and innuendo in order to simply survive. The powerful have no need for that kind of knowledge and often look down upon it. This gives the underdog the ability to 'trick' the powerful with their own rules and regulations and to do things others would view as horrific.

Part Three: The Limits of Power

Often times powerful states do not realize the limits of their own power. People are not rational beings and their reaction to society is in direct relationship to how legitimate they view the authorities of that society. If every family knows someone who is in jail, then jail is not viewed as a place of disgrace, but can become a badge of honor. In this environment the police become the enemies and further force to suppress loses its effectiveness. You can't treat different sections of society differently and expect to retain your legitimacy.

Inverted-U curves are all about limits. They illustrate the fact that "more" is not always better; there comes a point, in fact, when the extra resources that the powerful think of as their greatest advantage only serve to make things worse, i.e. the Three Strikes law in California.

Absolute power to do something has limits. At some point power becomes suppression and the suppressed no longer have any connection to the rest of society. When this happens, the fabric of the entire society becomes frayed.

Groups of suppressed peoples can become a society in their own right. This gives them an extreme advantage when dealing with the larger society, because they no longer fear the type of treatment the larger society imposes upon them. This happened to the Huguenots in France during the German occupation in World War II. They transported and hid many Jews from the Nazis and Vichy governments. The threats of the authorities were simply not effective against a people who had been suppressed for centuries.