

# David and Goliath Summary

By Malcolm Gladwell

In the HBO series *Goliath*, Billy Bob Thornton's character Billy McBride says, 'You may be an f-ing tough guy, but I'm a crazy guy. The difference is crazy guys don't give up.'

*David and Goliath* is an intriguing look at how we have framed and misrepresented underdogs and misfits. In a compelling way, Malcolm Gladwell asks us to reassess our assumptions about strengths, weaknesses, advantages, and disadvantages.

Malcolm Gladwell isn't your typical self-help author. He combines rigorous social science research with vivid storytelling, and the result is that his books read like novels at times. His stories are rich in wisdom and insight, and aim to scaffold his major theories and research findings. The first part of the book unpacks advantages and disadvantages, and looks at how we can reframe these. The second part is about what Gladwell terms "desirable difficulties." Desirable difficulties are those things that we've been conditioned to believe hinder us, when actually they're tools that we can use to our advantage.

We'll briefly look at the accuracy of our assumptions about strengths and weaknesses, and delve into the David and Goliath narrative and metaphor. Was David really the underdog? Was Goliath the force he was presented as? Most importantly, is it just that underdogs have that scrappy "never give up" attitude that gives them the edge, or is there more to the story?

# David vs. Goliath

Whether you're familiar with the story as a biblical narrative, or as a secular metaphor, the consensus on David versus Goliath has been uncontested. David was the underdog, and his triumph over the mighty Goliath was nothing short of a miracle. Or was it?

Malcolm Gladwell is from the school of thought where we need to interrogate things a lot more rigorously. In *David and Goliath*, he invites us to examine the accuracy of our assumptions when it comes to common sense views, our opinions about the world, and our rational and irrational thought processes. In the conflict of David versus Goliath, there's a lot more to the story, and our views on advantages and disadvantages.

Gladwell's reframing of the David and Goliath story challenges what we've come to assume about underdogs. The common assumption is that underdogs are unevenly matched, and have to overcome considerable obstacles in order to triumph. What's more, the audience is left with a significant feeling of surprise when the unexpected individual or team beats the odds.

The book's argument is that David had the advantage, and was therefore destined to win. At the time of the story, armies were divided into cavalry, infantry, and projectile warriors. The cavalry involved men on horses and chariots. The infantry were the warriors and foot soldiers, and the projectile warriors were the archers and slingshot masters. Slings were the snipers of their day, and were renowned for being lethal and highly skilled. It's posited that a good slinger could kill someone from 200 yards away, and if they were highly practiced, they seldom missed. Gladwell argues that we should always look at the data, and the data shows that any betting shop would have David to win against Goliath.

Sure Goliath was big, huge in fact, but his size was actually a disadvantage. He was a large target, he was ungainly, and he also had poor eyesight.

In short, bigger isn't always better, which leads us to delve into the accuracy of our everyday assumptions about pros and cons, and advantages and disadvantages. When we look at asymmetrical conflicts, we should be a lot more pragmatic in our analysis, and flip our assumptions around to test them out. For example, what are the advantages and disadvantages of size? Is being fast always a good thing? Is getting into the best school going to benefit us? Once we know our weaknesses and our strengths, we can use them a lot more effectively, and challenge how we interpret weakness and vulnerability.

## **The Pros of Cons and the Cons of Pros**

Advantages and disadvantages are seen as mutually exclusive. Binaries. They're juxtaposed, and we're led to believe that if we're disadvantaged, we're less likely to succeed than someone who has more advantages than us.

Gladwell argues that advantages have disadvantages, and disadvantages have advantages – and it's up to us to find and create opportunities.

Let's look at the story of Silicon Valley entrepreneur and former CEO of TIBCO, Vivek Ranadivé. Ranadivé found himself in the unlikely position of coaching his daughter's basketball team. As a coach, the odds were heavily stacked against him because he was in very unfamiliar terrain with very little knowledge of the game. To add insult to injury, his daughter's team was, for all intents and purposes, downright lousy. The

team had none of the basic skills, and had no chance of learning any of them in time.

So how did Ranadivé's team end up at the national championship?

Ranadivé realized that they could defeat their opponents by exploiting their weaknesses. The team learned about agitating the other team, and didn't allow them to advance or to use the ball. So, while Ranadivé's team were only ever winning with low scores, and were spoiling the game by not actually playing basketball, their strategy was foolproof.

The lesson is, when you don't have anything to go on, you have to come up with an alternate strategy. In this case, Ranadivé used the weakness of not having a lot of skill, and committed to working hard, hustling, and agitating. His belief centered around the notion that either you give up, or you work with dogged determination and hustle.

## **The Inverted U**

If you visualize an upside-down U on a graph, you'll see an upward trajectory, a bit of a curve, and then a steep decline. This represents advantages and disadvantages.

For example, let's apply this to classroom sizes. What are your assumptions about the optimum classroom size? Most people believe that smaller class sizes are better. However, if we use the inverted U graph, to illustrate the optimum classroom size, too small is a disadvantage, and so is too big. To use the "three little pigs" analogy, there is a "just right."

The same theory can be applied to courage. Aristotle famously said, 'Courage is a mean with regard to fear and confidence.' In a nutshell, this means that there's a sweet spot when it comes to balancing fear and confidence. If fear is the beginning of the inverted U curve, and confidence is the other end of the inverted U, we can see that both negatively affect courage. Courage comes down to balancing fear and confidence. With too much fear, we're cowardly, and with too much confidence, we lose our rationality, act impulsively, and become over-confident. We need a measure of fear to balance out our reckless tendencies.

Gladwell suggests that as individuals, we should all be looking for the optimum points in our inverted U curves. He also says that we need to critique what motivates us, and what leads us to perform at our optimum level.

For many of us, incentives are everything, but again incentives have their sweet spots. How do you feel about receiving a prize or reward when everyone around you gets a prize? One of the largest psychological studies done in the USA is a famous World War II study. In this study, one of the most significant and poignant findings was regarding satisfaction around promotions. Air corps and the military police were questioned about promotion prospects, the openness of rewarding excellence and achievement, and general career fulfillment. The findings revealed that the military police were significantly more satisfied. The reasons were that promotion in the military police was a lot more difficult. Hence if you received a promotion, this was great cause to celebrate, and if promotions weren't obtained, it could be explained away as, "no one is getting promoted." On the other hand, in the air corps, relatively high levels of dissatisfaction were because promotion was so easy. Hence if you didn't get promoted, this was a sign that you must be terrible at your

job, and if you did get promoted, it was a case of "well everyone is."

## **Courage Is Earned Through Experience**

We're often told that underdogs come through because they have high levels of courage relative to their talent or skills. And, we've peddled the belief that we have a predisposition to bravery, or we don't. Basically, we're either brave, or we're not.

Again, this is an assumption worth challenging. To illustrate this, Gladwell talks about the mood of Londoners during the second world war. Hospitals were opened in London to anticipate the morale drop and increase in stress and anxiety due to bombings. Over the course of the war, Germany dropped 30 thousand bombs and over 500 tons of explosives on the city. Thousands of people were killed or injured, and millions lost their homes. The Blitz was both terrifying and devastating, but Londoners endured. Much research shows that we often experience extreme fear and terror of anticipation, but then we go through the event and learn to survive. As the old adage goes, "there's nothing to fear but fear itself." So often, the anticipation of what's going to happen is worse than the actual event, and this experience helps to build and develop our courage.

Of course this doesn't happen all the time, and there are circumstances that are traumatic, and from which we may not recover. However, we can often use disadvantages as advantages and embrace and nurture resilience. We have the ability to find strength in adversity, allowing us to reframe it.

# Desirable Difficulties

Adversity can be viewed as a desirable difficulty, because it builds strength and resilience.

Gladwell tells the story of an aptitude test that's already pretty challenging. However, researchers made it even more challenging by changing the font to an annoying and hard-to-read font. What happened? Well, the overall performance and test scores went up.

It may sound counterintuitive to make something difficult even harder than it needs to be, however as we've learned from the 4% rule, humans thrive on being stretched. There are numerous stories of people with dyslexia who have fine-tuned and honed their listening and social skills to compensate for their reading and learning challenges, with tremendous success.

Gladwell also talks about the fact that most people who try to get a science and maths degree fail. He asks why the dropout rate across these degrees is so high and the optimal strategy for achieving your goal of getting this degree? A lot of it has to do with class rankings and the overvaluing of prestige. The argument is that the best strategy for tertiary success isn't to get into your first, second, or even third choice school. This might sound outrageous because we value exclusive universities so highly. However, the best predictor of success isn't your intelligence level, but your relative level of intelligence. The stats show that if you're in the bottom third of your class, your chances of dropping out are a lot higher. Therefore Gladwell advises following any strategy that prevents falling in the bottom third of your class. And it's not about

being mediocre, but rather that we underestimate the psychological costs of falling in the bottom half of any class.

The lesson here is not to overvalue prestige and undervalue the cost of not succeeding at that institution. And, if the top handful of students are constantly achieving and outperforming you, then motivation goes into a downward spiral. Once again, this demonstrates how we allocate value in an irrational way. It doesn't matter what school you go to; it's all about where you rank, so that you can build motivation and thrive.

Isn't it interesting that we've never thought to question the disadvantages of prestige and getting into a highly prized school?

## **In Conclusion**

Seeing the world in a new way is immensely powerful and liberating. And while Malcolm Gladwell isn't telling us that we need to recreate the world around us according to our own opinions, he is showing us the immense benefit that we can all get from reassessing our challenges and using them in a more meaningful way.

Once we're honest about our disadvantages, we can take note of them, and then stop moaning about all the things standing in our way, and hustle. Furthermore, we need to trust ourselves because this is how we build confidence and courage. Success comes from trusting in our intelligence and talent, embracing opportunities and advantages, and reframing obstacles and challenges.

One of the most profound contributions of Malcolm Gladwell is that he provides theories to organize our experiences. He argues that 'People are



experience rich and theory poor. That most people necessarily lack access to organizing principles in their lives. If you're not immersed in the world of academia, and you don't have the leisure to follow and acquire grand theories, you don't have theories to explain things.'

And, while we may not necessarily buy into all his arguments, he continues to open up the space to have better discussions. He says that it's not about converting people to his way of thinking, but having conversations around new ways of thought, supported by research. We underestimate irrationality, and we resist change, and so often, we accept the way things are.