

Reading Report and Journal  
CHMN 780

Gladwell, Edwin H. (2008). *Outliers: The story of success*. New York: Hachette Book Group.

I read the book cited above completely and the following journal represents my own work:

This book argues that success emerges from relational networks, not great ideas and superb intelligence. It is a humbling argument but it also presents a perspective for building networks that foster success. I immediately think of the classic relational network called the body of Christ, and its personally relevant form in the local church.

Chapter 1—Abundance. Gladwell gives a stunning example to demonstrate that those with opportunity are gifted with more opportunity. The idea that Canadian hockey players, in parallel to examples in other sports, have improved opportunities to become elite due to birth date is sobering. Gladwell also gives ample evidence in other fields to make his case. To think that my success or failure is something I owe to my relational circumstance humbles me and inspires gratitude toward those who have helped me. My parents taught me that I could do anything I put my mind to. My dad had a job that let me think college was possible. My conference youth director got me involved in ministry. My mentoring pastors gave me a solid foundation. My conference president supported my wish for an M. Div.. My ministerial director helped me start my doctorate. I am no impressive chap but it is sobering to think that I am no different in virtue from many high school dropouts—just different in opportunity. My own experience, anecdotally, hints that Gladwell is right. Each opportunity has created the next.

Chapter 2—Effort. Gladwell acknowledges that hard work has a place in making

success but demonstrates, through examples like Bill Gates and the Beatles, that such hard work still needed opportunity to thrive. I think of my dad. He is the hardest worker I know, without exaggeration, but he had to drop out of high school and has never made more than a middle class wage. He had anything but supportive parents. But, the army gave him a chance for a trade and he maxed out in that trade, given his education level. I then think of the members of my churches who have grown up in these churches. In Souderton, those children are mostly inactive. In Lansdale, many of those children are inactive but it is hard to get them accepted as leaders. Is it possible to change the culture (which I have been trying to do for the past five years) to a culture that empowers spirituality and leadership? Gladwell's work would suggest that it could make the difference.

Chapter 3—Genius, part 1. Gladwell next argues that IQ is not a strong indicator of success. He contends that a person need only be smart enough for the task they endeavor, leaving most tasks open to most people. He comes back, again, to opportunity. He cites the effects of affirmative action on minority college students, showing that they succeed as well as their peers—opportunity again. My younger brother has an IQ at least as good as mine but he is 30 and has yet to finish high school. He suffered from a protracted illness for 14 years, crushing his opportunity. Now our parents are less able to help than they were when I was in school, so his opportunity for college is lessened. This is to say that I think Gladwell is right. How does this relate to the church? Leadership potential does not depend on current ability but on the opportunity to grow. In my five years of developing leaders in the church, I have found that giving opportunity does produce growth. The remaining challenge is a church culture that is more concerned

about status quo that growth.

Chapter 4—Genius, part 2. Practical intelligence, according to Gladwell, is often the difference between those who are given opportunity and those denied it. We get practical intelligence from our families, which disadvantages geniuses whose families do not provide a solid support. He also links this deficit to lower class parenting, where an expectation that people will let you succeed is not learned. This is probably not a result of real circumstance so much the debilitating effect of a cynicism that Americans have allowed themselves to harbor. In worse times for quality of life, American optimism spawned generations that succeeded with much less natural opportunity. Practical intelligence, born of a belief that success is possible, is probably a real factor. If the root is belief in the possibility then that is probably the place to start in efforts to build a culture of empowerment/opportunity in the church. This means verbalizing it and fighting for real opportunity for those who the establishment screens out.

Chapter 5—Opportunity. The great factors in the success story of Joe Flom are his Jewish connection, the timing of his small-generation birth, and having clothes-making skills when need was apparent. Every one of these factors was not something he planned and acquired by a brilliant scheme. Instead, these factors gave him opportunities that he intelligently took advantage of. My mind goes to the question of my opportunities. I have the ability to think and write, when I apply myself to the task. I have a voice in Adventism that comes from being hired and ordained as a pastor. My parents taught me to believe in success. I have a wife who encourages me. I think the opportunity that I need to take is the opportunity to influence clearer biblical thinking in Adventism. My forthcoming doctorate may open more doors of opportunity. I need to pray about this

more.

Chapter 6—Culture. Gladwell next turns to the role that the relational network of culture plays in success. He contends that, by understanding inherited culture, we can make people better at what they do. This suggests the need for pastoral humility when thinking to effect change in the church. The church is an inherited culture and the pastor is usually a foreigner. If the pastor (in this case, me) fails to understand the culture he is working with, the prospect of improving success is minimal. This would also apply to the things noted above, where I express interest in changing the culture that keeps people from developing into leaders. I cannot effect change until I truly understand what makes things tick. I can only make cosmetic changes unless I understand the forces at work beneath the surface.

Chapter 7—Pecking order. Gladwell discusses the ethnic explanation for plane crashes, exploring why certain cultures foster plane crashes more readily and how to remedy it. Essentially, he shows that certain cultures that have strong pecking orders (such as Korea) lead subordinates to mitigate their perspectives and keep from aiding success. One expert found a way to lead Korean pilots to work outside of their culture while aviating. He did so by using language. I wonder what can be used in my churches. One church puts a high premium on education, so maybe playing up my Andrews University leadership theory credentials would help them work outside of the box. In the other church, I think I just need to influence the influencers. In fact, influencing the influencers in that church has led to a much more empowering culture, and the church is growing because of it. Maybe Gladwell has something. The challenge is knowing how to lead adjustments in the culture while still showing respect for it and valuing its strengths.

Chapter 8—Work ethic. By contrast to the Korean piloting deficiency, Gladwell argues that Asians have cultural advantages. The hard working lifestyle of the rice paddy instills a work ethic that causes them to take advantage of opportunities that present themselves. Their language also makes it easier to do complex math, qualifying them for certain types of work. What Gladwell seems to be saying is that we inherit both advantages and disadvantages but the key is being attentive enough to this to maximize areas of strength and remedy areas of weakness. On this level, what he argues is nothing new. It is just framed differently. Whatever the case, in the church setting, this means that knowing the natural strengths of the church culture, such as Lansdale's penchant for effective family ministry, can help us maximize them. Conversely, knowing the weaknesses, such as Lansdale's tendency toward tribal warfare, can help us address what holds things back.

Chapter 9—Replacement. Gladwell next cites the case of a New York school that takes kids from all walks of life through a lottery system. Then, it creates a pervasive learning structure for their lives, minimizing time with their variable home environments. The result are kids who perform well academically, regardless of their home background. Essentially, this school replaces their social network with a new, intentional, empowering one. It works. I don't know what Frank Smith might have to say about the academic approach but Gladwell's premise the social network profoundly effects success is hard to refute. Naturally, I wonder if it is possible to make the church this kind of social network that fosters spiritual success. I think it would be more easily done starting from scratch. Otherwise, it will take lots of time but be well worth it.