

Outliers – The Story of Success

*Malcom Gladwell
Allen Lane, 2008.*

Why do some people achieve far more in life than others? Why do they look so extraordinary? What explains their phenomenal success? Malcom Gladwell¹ probes deeply to come up with some unique perspectives on why people succeed. He calls the successful people “outliers,” a term popular in statistics for describing observations which lie outside the normal bound, i.e., typically more than three standard deviations from the mean.

We are all intrigued by successful people. We spend a lot of time trying to analyse them. But success, Gladwell points out is not just about individuals and their inherent talent. It is also about where they come from, the twists and turns in their life, the culture they grow up in, etc. This book has been written to help people understand how to fully exploit their potential and how parents, family members, teachers, policy makers and officials can help facilitate this process.

As the author mentions: “People don’t rise from nothing. We do owe something to parentage and patronage. The people may look like they did it all by themselves. But in fact they are invariably the beneficiaries of the hidden advantages and extra ordinary opportunities and cultural legacies that allow them to learn and work hard and make sense of the world in ways others don’t.”

The book starts with a community with a very low incidence of heart attacks. Studies revealed that virtually none under 55 had showed any signs of heart disease. The death rate from all causes was 30-35% lower than expected. What explained the outstanding health of these people? Investigation revealed that this happy set of circumstances was due to the unique life style – socializing, sense of community, joint family, church and simplicity. In other words, more than genetic factors, it was the way the people lived that made them healthy.

The next example, Gladwell offers is from sport. Ice hockey is to Canada as baseball is to the US. In Canadian ice hockey, the cut off date for children enrolling is January 1. A boy who turns 10 on January 2 would be playing alongside someone who does not turn 10 till the end of the year. At that age, a 12 month gap in age represents a huge difference in physical maturity. So the older player is more likely to get noticed, receive better attention and coaching and is better placed to succeed. In short, the small group of people born closest to the cut off date, get a huge advantage. Though on paper, Canadian hockey is a strict meritocracy, the way the team is selected, puts certain children to advantage and others to disadvantage naturally.

¹ The author of the best selling books, “The Tipping Point,” and “Blink.”

The same principle can be extended to scholastic achievement in schools. Parents with a child born at the end of the academic year, close to the cut off date think that whatever disadvantage a younger child faces in kindergarten, eventually goes away. But just like hockey, it does not. The small initial advantage, a child born in the early part of the academic year has persists for years. As Gladwell mentions, "It locks children into patterns of achievement and under achievement, encouragement and discouragement that stretch on and on for years." A small advantage turns bigger and bigger, till the person concerned becomes a genuine "outlier", i.e., is a remarkably successful person.

This only goes to show the major lacunae in how modern society unearths and develops talent. Because we tend to personalise success and completely overlook where the person "has come from," we end up being unfair to people who could not succeed as much, for no fault of theirs. Simple solutions are available. For example, in a school, sections in a class could be created in such a way that children in the same age group (to the nearest three months say) could be put together. This would let students learn with and compete against other students of the same maturity level.

Gladwell covers the success of people like Bill Joy, one of the leading computer programmers of our time and founder of Sun Microsystems and Bill Gates, founder of Microsoft. They were extraordinarily intelligent. Their ideas were out of the world. Their ability to understand how the technology world was evolving, was truly amazing. They worked extremely hard. (Research reveals that it takes 10 years or 10,000 hours to be really good at something). Yet their success was not just a matter of individual merit and commitment. They were lucky to get some special opportunities, which of course they seized with both hands.

Both Joy and Gates were born at the right time. By the time they reached college, the computer revolution was about to take off. Both of them got fantastic access to computer time. Joy learnt programming at the computer centre at the University of Michigan which had one of the most advanced computer science programs in the world. Joy reached the university at exactly the time, the computer centre opened . Unlike people who struggle with punched cards, Joy was able to access time sharing, which had just emerged. He could sit at the terminals and work rather than hand over the punched cards to the computer operator.

Similarly Bill Gates got to do real time programming as an eighth grader in 1968. Till the end of high school, Gates got an extraordinary opportunity to learn computer programming. And by the time Gates dropped out of Harvard to start Microsoft, he had been programming practically non stop for seven consecutive years. He had logged in more than 10,000 hours, the threshold widely considered as the point at which people become real experts. The author quotes Gates, "I had a better exposure to software development at a young age than I think anyone did in that period of time and all because of an incredibly lucky series of events."

No doubt, Joy and Gates worked very hard but without being in the right place at the right time and access to computing resources, they would not have achieved so much. As Gladwell mentions: "Their success was not just of their own making. It was a product of the world in which they grew up."

The point of time in history to which we belong, also plays an important role in shaping our destiny. In the 1930s, the US saw a demographic trough. Responding to the economic hardship of the depression, families stopped having children. So the generation born during that decade was significantly smaller than the preceding and following generations. Belonging to a small group generated extraordinary advantages. Gladwell has explained the benefits reaped by a small generation by quoting a leading economist, "When he opens his eyes for the first time, it is in a spacious hospital, well appointed to serve the wave that preceded him. The staff is generous with their time... When he comes to school age, the magnificent buildings are already there to receive him... teachers welcome him with open arms... The university is a delightful place; lots of room in the classes and residences, no crowding in the cafeteria and the professors are solicitous. Then he hits the job market. The supply of new entrants is low, and the demand is high."

IQ plays a huge role in shaping success. But IQ only matters upto a point. Beyond that, what matters is practical intelligence. It includes things like knowing what to say to whom, when to say it and knowing how to say it for maximum impact. It is the knowledge that helps people to read situations correctly and get what we want. It is quite different from analytical ability as measured by IQ. It is practical intelligence rather than brain power, which largely determines how well we exploit the opportunities that come our way. Gladwell has profiled an extraordinarily gifted individual who seems to stumble from place to place without ever getting a strong foothold. This talented person comes nowhere near his potential in life simply because he lacks practical intelligence.

Much of success is about developing confidence and self belief. The environment in which children grow up largely determines how confident and determined they are to succeed in life. In particular, parental and family influence play a critical role. Various dimensions are involved here. To start with, parents must encourage children to be confident, speak up and assert themselves. Children must feel a sense of "entitlement." At the same time, by the way, they conduct themselves, parents can become role models to their children. For example, children who see their parents working hard and enjoying themselves and succeeding in their profession are also motivated to do well. Children whose parents encourage them and give them additional opportunities be it in academics or in sport are at an advantage. By going that extra step to ensure that children do not waste time and instead make use of their time to exploit all the development opportunities available, parents can do a great service.

Gladwell concludes by stating that to build a better more inclusive world, we must replace “the patchwork of lucky breaks and arbitrary advantages” that seem to be crucial to success. If we leave it to fortunate birth dates or happy incidents of history, many people would be automatically excluded while a few would forge ahead. We must work to remove these disadvantages. If we do so, many more people can reach the pinnacle of success. And that is important because while mankind is making rapid strides, not all people are progressing fast enough.

This is a phenomenal book by Gladwell. Not only do we get insights into the lives of successful people, we also get tips on how to bring up children, how to lead teams and what kind of environment brings out the best in people. If the ideas Gladwell has covered are implemented, the world would truly be a more friendly place for many more people. For we in India, the book is particularly important. If there is any country which has a large number of talented people who come nowhere near their full potential it is India. Our politicians are fond of stressing the importance of inclusive growth. Gladwell tells us how “inclusion” is possible.