

# ***“The Outliers – The Story of Success”***

Malcolm Gladwell

(Little, Brown and Company, Hachette Book Group, Inc.)

**Summary by Bob Littell, Chief NetWeaver**

**Foreward** – Why I believe this work is so significant – **Bob Littell**

I grew up in the Washington, DC area in a middle class family neighborhood – Sleepy Hollow. Although I had a number of friends in my own neighborhood, I spent a good deal of my high school years with friends who lived across the main thoroughfare in a community called Lake Barcroft. A number of them were children of Senators, Congressmen, high-ranking Military Officers, and business owners and executives.

After reading *“The Outliers”*, it gave me a much greater appreciation for how by visiting and staying in their homes, it implanted in me a sense of ‘**great expectations**’ and probably subconsciously, an inner drive to achieve greater success.

In addition, because I needed to help pay my way through college, I decided that I could make the most money by getting a summer-time job as a clerk typist with the U.S. Government. That inspired me to take a typing class in high school (probably this was 1963) and I was one of the only three males in a class made up otherwise of only women. I once set a typing speed record of 110 words/minute with 3 mistakes.

Had I not taken that course and become a whiz on a typewriter (probably the equivalent of the 10,000 hours Malcolm Gladwell describes in his book) which of course later became the computer keyboard, I would probably never have developed the writing skills I have today and you probably wouldn’t be reading this summary today.

Although Gladwell’s book primarily deals with **extremely successful people**, I believe that every one of us who have achieved even some moderate level of success can learn by thinking back in our lives about factors – outside the standard measures of ‘**intelligence**’ and ‘**ambition**’ which influenced us in some significant way.

I believe that by becoming more aware of some of these outside factors which have influenced the MOST successful among us, that we can better understand some ways we can better raise our children. . .offer better help and support as mentors, and eliminate some prejudices we might have for those who don’t exactly fit into the ‘standard’ mode which our society often dictates as being most appropriate.

I think this book also reminds us of the role that **'luck'** plays in most of our lives – being at the right place at the right time - and in NetWeaving terms, helps strengthen my belief that NetWeaving can play an important role in increasing your chances of having **'good luck'** cross your path.

My favorite quote along these lines comes from AHZ Carr which I've quoted before in his classic book – *"How to Attract Good Luck"*:

*The first important step in attracting good luck. . .the beneficial effect of chance upon our lives. . .comes to us through other people. Between ourselves and those who cross our path, chance spins an invisible thread of awareness – a **"luck-line"** . . .To expose ourselves to luck, then, means in essence to come into healthy human relationships with more people. The more luck-lines a person throws out, the more luck he is likely to find.*

This particular **"Don't Need to Read the Book"** book club event, and this summary, will be different from others in that rather than reviewing the entire book as I usually do – where I just include page references and a few teasers to make you want to buy and read the entire book.

Rather than discussing almost the entire book as we normally do, we are only going to review the first four (4) chapters which include a few of the key themes, and the stories that go along with them. Our discussions will be all about sharing some of our own personal experiences, and how outside factors which we might have previously missed, have led us to where we are today.

Gladwell really summarizes what the book is all about and how we often overlook the factors that truly explain the success of extraordinarily successful people in this paragraph:

*"In Outliers, I want to convince you that these kinds of personal explanations of success don't work. People don't rise from nothing. We do owe something to parentage and patronage. The people who stand before kings may look like they did it all by themselves. But in fact they are invariably the beneficiaries of hidden advantages and extraordinary opportunities and cultural legacies that allow them to learn and work hard and make sense of the world in ways others cannot. It makes a difference where and when we grew up. The culture we belong to and the legacies passed by our forebears shape the patterns of our achievement in ways we cannot begin to imagine. It's not enough to ask what successful people are like, in other words. It is only by asking where they are **from** that we can unravel the logic behind who succeeds and who doesn't."*

By learning from others at our book club meeting, as well as from the stories in the book, I once again believe we can all better understand how to become more aware of how factors – outside the standard ones we believe contribute to success – can have a major influence. And by becoming more aware, perhaps we can discover, or in some

situations, create ways to maximize the power of these ‘**outside**’ influencers to help others we know and love to achieve greater success.

**Chapter 1 – The Matthew Effect** – *“For unto everyone that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance. But from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath.”* MATTHEW 25:29

Have you ever considered that the date someone is born could play a MAJOR role in determining their success in life?

Gladwell begins with the story of two of the finest teams in the Canadian Hockey League (the finest junior hockey in the world) – The Medicine Hat Tigers and the Vancouver Giants *“These were the future stars of the sport – seventeen, eighteen, and nineteen-year-olds who had been skating and shooting pucks since they were barely more than toddlers.” . . .* *“Success in hockey is based on individual merit – and both of those words are important. Players are judged on their own performance, not on anyone else’s, and on the basis of their ability, not on some other arbitrary fact. . . Or are they?”*

A review of the charts Gladwell provides on pages 20 and 21, reveals that on the Medicine Hat roster: *17 out of 25 players were born in January, February, March or April.*

Gladwell tells the story of how Roger Barnsley, a Canadian psychologist, first drew attention to the concept of ‘**relative age**’. What he discovered is that it not only mattered what **year** the most successful boys were born, but even more importantly, **the month**. *“In any elite group of hockey players – the very best of the best- 40 percent of the players will have been born between January and March, 30 percent between April and June, 20 percent between July and September, and 10 percent between October and December.”*

*So what’s the explanation?*

*“The explanation for this is quite simple. It has nothing to do with astrology, nor is there anything magical about the first three months of the year. It’s simply that in Canada, the eligibility cutoff for age-class hockey is January 1. A boy who turns ten on January 2, then, could be playing alongside someone who doesn’t turn ten until the end of the year – and at that age, in preadolescence, a twelve-month gap in age represents an enormous difference in physical maturity.” . . .* *“This being Canada, the most hockey-crazed country on earth, coaches start to select players for the traveling ‘rep squad’ – the all-star teams – at the age of nine or ten, and of course they are more likely to view as talented the bigger and more coordinated players, who have had the benefit critical extra months of maturity.”* *“And what happens when a player gets chosen for a rep squad? He gets better coaching, and his teammates are better, and he plays fifty or seventy-five games a season instead of twenty games a season like those left behind in the ‘house’ league, and he practices twice as much as, or even*

*three times more than, he would have otherwise. In the beginning , his advantage isn't so much that he is inherently better but only that he is a little older. But by the age of thirteen or fourteen, with the benefit of better coaching and all that extra practice under his belt, he really is better, so he's the one more likely to make it to the Major Junior A league and from there into the Big Leagues”*

All of this can transfer into sports and even education of all kinds where ‘relative age’ can have an unintentional outcome.

Gladwell suggests that in education, even though it would complicate things administratively, we should consider dividing children into smaller birth date groups: *“Elementary and middle schools could put the January through April – born students in one class, the May through August in another class, and those born in September through December in the third class. They could let students learn with and compete against other students of the same maturity level.”*

## **Chapter 2 – The 10,000 Hour Rule – “*In Hamburg, we had to play for eight hours*” – The Beatles**

You know the saying, “***Practice makes perfect***”, but have you ever thought that the difference between ‘**mediocre**’ and ‘**extraordinary**’ success could be explained by something as simple as, “***Who was willing to practice for 10,000 hours??***” in order to get REALLY GOOD.

In the early 1990’s psychologist K. Anders Ericsson and two colleagues at Berlin’s elite Academy of Music, divided the school’s violinists into three groups. In the first group were the stars, the students with the potential to become world-class soloists. In the second were those judged to be merely ‘good.’ In the third group were students who were unlikely to ever play professionally and who intended to be music teachers in the public school system. Each was asked, since the time they had first started playing to the present, how many total hours had they practiced.

*“They had all started playing at roughly the same age – around 5 years old and in the early years, most practiced about the same – two or three hours a week. “But when the students were around the age of eight, real differences started to emerge. The students who would end up the best in their class began to practice more than everyone else: six hours a week, by age nine, eight hours a week by age twelve, sixteen hours a week by age fourteen, and up and up, until by the age of twenty they were practicing - that is, purposefully single mindedly playing their instruments with the intent to get better – well over thirty hours a week. In fact, by the age of twenty, the elite performers had each totaled ten thousand hours of practice. By contrast, the merely good students had totaled eight thousand hours, and the future music teachers had totaled just over four thousand hours.”*

We all probably know the story of Tiger Woods and how he went on the Mike Douglas show at age 2 and was already hitting the spot out of golf ball, but did you see the interview segment on *60 Minutes* with Ed Bradley where he is holding an iron in one hand and effortlessly bouncing a golf ball off the club head while talking with Ed. Then with one extra high bounce, he hits the ball in mid-air about 50 or 60 yards? Tiger was obviously a child protégé but what Malcolm Gladwell points out, it is those who show **some** individual talent, who then practice MUCH harder than anyone else, who really become the super-stars. Not only has Tiger impacted the entire golf world by his practice regimen, but by his overall fanaticism about working out the total body.

And surprisingly one of the most interesting conclusions from the research that Gladwell and others have done shows that: ***“Achievement is talent plus preparation. The problem with this view is that the closer psychologists look at the careers of the gifted, the smaller the role innate talent seems to play and bigger the role preparation seems to play.”***

And what role did ‘luck’ play in the story of Bill Joy, who in computer circles, garners much the same awe as Bill Gates, and by some is known as ***“The Edison of the Internet”***. In college, Gladwell says he so confounded his professors at U. of Cal. Berkeley by making up a complicated algorithm on an oral exam that one of his stunned professors – compared the experience to ***‘Jesus confounding his elders’***. Once again was this the naturally gifted born genius or were there other factors that really made the difference?

Sure he WAS a boy genius, often baffling his parents with questions they couldn’t answer. Then he achieved a perfect score on the math portion of the Scholastic Aptitude Test. He said, ***“It wasn’t particularly hard” . . . “There was plenty of time to check it twice”***. But would he have achieved the preeminence he did – rewriting UNIX and creating Java – had it not been for some strokes of luck, combined with the 10,000 hour rule. Gladwell illuminates the extra factors involved.

In the early 70’s, computers filled up entire rooms and getting access to them was not only very difficult, but the cost was prohibitive for most individuals. Finally, ‘time-sharing’ allowed multiple programmers to work online all at once.

It turned out that by going to the University of Michigan – one of the first universities in the world to switch over to time-sharing – Joy had access to computer time. But there was a limit imposed to give students equal time. Joy and others figured a way to jury-rig the system by putting in a “time equals” and then a letter, like  $t = k$  and not be charged. ***“It was a bug in the software. You could put in  $t = k$  and sit there forever.”***

The Bill Gates story is similar and on page 54, Gladwell summarizes the various strokes of luck and fortune which all came together: 1) Gates got sent to a private elite high school back in **1968** which had access to a time-sharing terminal; 2) there was a group – ***Mothers of Lakeside*** who were wealthy enough to pay for computer fees which

would have been unaffordable to most; 3) When that money ran out, one of the parents happened to work at a company who needed someone to work on its payroll software and that gave Gates unlimited week night access; 4) When that company folded, Gates discovered ISI (Information Sciences, Inc.) which agreed to let he and his friends have unlimited access in exchange for working on a payroll automation system for the company. Their time on the mainframe averaged out to 8 hours a day, seven days a week; 5) Gates happened to live walking distance from the University of Washington; 6) the University allowed FREE access to the computers from 3 to 6:00 am; 7) a power computer TRW needed computer programming experts and they called, Bud Pembroke, one of the founders of ISI; 8) Bud recommended Gates and his friends; 9) Lakeside, an elite private school allowed Gates and friends spend their Spring term miles away, writing code.

Another example he gives of **the 10,000 hour rule** involves **the Beatles**. They had been playing together long before they ever came to the U.S. and appeared on the Ed Sullivan show. I remember that like it was yesterday.

*“Lennon and McCartney first started playing together in 1957, seven years prior to landing in America.”* As a struggling high school rock band, they got invited to play in Hamburg, Germany but in strip clubs because Hamburg didn’t have rock and roll clubs. With people constantly coming in and out of the clubs, the bands would play non-stop, hour after hour. And it was only a coincidence that a club owner named Bruno used to bring in bands almost exclusively from Liverpool.

Gladwell quotes John Lennon, *“In Liverpool, we’d only ever done one-hour sessions, and we just used to do our best numbers, the same ones, at every one. In Hamburg, we had to play for eight hours, so we really had to find a new way of playing.”*

### **Chapter 3 – The Trouble with Genius – “*Knowledge of a boy’s IQ is of little help if you are faced with a forum full of clever boys.*”**

Someone with an IQ of 140 or above is considered to be a genius. In one study Gladwell cites, Lewis Terman, a professor of psychology at Stanford, sorted through records of some 250,000 elementary and high school students and identified 1,470 children who IQ’s averaged over 140 and ranged as high as 200. They became known as the **‘Termites’**. Gladwell said, *“Terman believed that these children were destined to be the future elite of the United States.”*

But that didn’t happen. According to Gladwell, someone with an IQ below 70 is considered mentally disabled. A score of 100 is average and just a little above that would probably allow you to succeed in college, and to get into a graduate level program 115.

*“In general, the higher your score, the more education you’ll get, the more money you’re likely to make, and believe it or not – the longer you’ll live. . .*

*But there's a catch. The relationship between success and IQ works only up to a point. Once someone has reached an IQ of somewhere around 120, having additional IQ points doesn't seem to translate into any measurable real-world advantage."*

So Gladwell and others believe that there is a **'threshold'** at which other factors take over as being **most important for real-world success**.

One test which shows how this might work is a **'divergence test'**. A person with a high IQ might come up with a logical set of answers to a series of questions designed to sort through a list of possibilities and **'converge'** on the right answer. ***"But the 'divergence test' is really designed to 'measure something profoundly different – something much close to creativity."***

So what about Terman's "Termites"? Most were successful, but few ended up doing extraordinary things of national or international importance. Terman concluded, *"intellect and achievement are far from perfectly correlated."*

#### ***Chapter 4 – The Trouble with Genius, Part 2 – “After protracted negotiations, it was agreed that Robert [Oppenheimer – father of the Atomic Bomb] would be put on probation.”***

How could one genius with a higher IQ than Einstein – Chris Langan - miss getting into college because his mother missed a deadline in getting a required form in on time; dropped out of college mostly due to an opinionated professor who couldn't recognize his gifts and wouldn't allow him to move a class, end up as a manual laborer, then spent most of his adult life as a bouncer in a bar. Whereas another gifted - but probably not more so than the above Chris Langan - got away with attempting to poison his tutor, receiving only probation.

The second one was Robert Oppenheimer, scientific director of the Manhattan Project.

What Gladwell explains is the difference is something called, **"Practical Intelligence"**. *"He [Oppenheimer] possessed the kind of savvy that allowed him to get what he wanted from the world."*

Psychologist, Robert Sternberg, is the one who described this concept which includes things like ***"Knowing what to say to whom, knowing when to say it, and knowing how to say it for maximum effect."***

*" It's practical in nature: that is, it's not knowledge for its own sake. It's knowledge that helps you read situations correctly and get what you want. And critically, it is a kind of intelligence separate from the sort of analytical ability measured by IQ."*

Where does it come from? According to Gladwell, “IQ is a measure, to some degree, of innate ability.” . . . “*But social savvy is knowledge. It’s a set of skills that have to be learned.*”

Gladwell gives a number of examples of how Middle and Upper Class Children are often brought up differently than those from lower income families and how these become lifetime advantages in the development of ‘**practical intelligence**’

Things like, how strict or lax the parents were; whether they were hyper-involved in their children’s lives which made a big positive difference; how were the parents ‘expectations’ about their children’s performance and success.

One psychologist Gladwell quotes – Annette Lareau - studied a group of 3<sup>rd</sup> graders from across a wide spectrum of race and family income. She concluded that the wealthier parents – regardless of race – raised their kids in a way different from the poorer parents.

The wealthier parents were heavily involved in their children’s free time; they reasoned with them, rather than just issuing commands. If they were doing poorly in school, they intervened with the teachers whereas the poorer parents were intimidated by authority and stayed in the background.

I think that this study sheds important light on the importance of the way we should be treating young children from poorer families. If we recognize this and give them some of the same attention and encouragement by mentoring which might be missing at home, what a difference this might just make.

In the school in South Atlanta which I have now adopted and where I teach 3<sup>rd</sup> graders NetWeaving and Pay It Forward concepts every year, there’s a supportive spirit of this kind in the school. Believe it or not, when the Principal, Pat Lavant, starts our “**Principal for a Day**” tour every year, I am blown away that she knows the names of virtually every child in every class. This spirit of encouragement permeates throughout the school. These kids probably don’t truly appreciate today what an advantage they have in attending this school.

Rather than reviewing the entire book this time, I have decided to try a different approach and consequently, we will be handling this week’s “Don’t Need to Read the Book” book club meeting differently as well.

I’m sending my entire Summary of the **first four (4) chapters** of the book to my entire invitation mailing list and I hope that these notes will stimulate you to not only want to buy and read the entire book to have in your library, but it will make you want to attend our meeting this week to share YOUR OWN story of how these factors have influenced your life in ways that, up until now, you had not totally appreciated.

In **Chapter 5** - “**The Three Lessons of Joe Flom** – *Mary got a quarter*”, you would learn why many or even most of the senior leading lawyers in New York City have several things in common: 1) they are Jewish and grew up at a time when Jews were heavily discriminated against; 2) their parents were poor; 3) most of their parents were immigrants who grew up during the depression – many who had owned small shops and stores but almost all had some occupational skills and many found their calling and fortunes in the garment industry. Also you’d learn the advantage of being born in 1930 – the “**Trough Generation**”.

In **Chapter 6** – “**Harlan, Kentucky** – *“Die like man, like your brother did!”*”, you would learn why the Appalachian Region was a breeding ground for ferocious and often fatal family feuds such as the Hatfield’s and the McCoy’s.

In **Chapter 7** – “**The Ethnic Theory of Plane Crashes** – *“Captain, the weather radar has helped us a lot”*”, you’ll learn why during the decade between 1988 to 1998, the LAST airline you would have wanted to be on was Korean Air, with a loss rate 17 times higher than United Airlines. Today it has one of the safest records. Why and how could ‘**cultural heritage**’ have been the underlying cause? And why could it be that in many airline crashes, a cause can be blamed on the fact that the **MOST** senior member of the crew was the captain, whereas had the less experienced officer been the captain, chances are the crash wouldn’t have occurred. Can anyone spell ‘**mitigation**’?

In **Chapter 8** – “**Rice Paddies and Math Tests** – *“No one who can rise before dawn three hundred sixty days a year fails to make his family rich”*”, you’ll learn why the Chinese can say this sequence of numbers: 4, 8, 5, 3, 9, 7, 6 in two seconds versus the time it will take you. You will learn that as human beings, we store digits in a memory loop that runs for about two seconds. Ever wonder why we are given telephone numbers broken down into two sets (actually 3 with the area code included). P.S. Try an experiment and see if it helps you like it did me when I thought of this and tried it. When you hear a telephone number, put more emphasis on making sure to concentrate on the LAST 4 numbers, rather than the first three. Now that I have read this chapter, I understand why that works. You will also learn in this chapter why Chinese rice farmers not only learn why and how to work harder, but also smarter and why in some ways, rice farming is like owning and running a small business.

In **Chapter 9** – “**Marita’s Bargain** – *All my friends now are from Kipp*”, you’ll learn how one of the explanations for why our students nationally score so low on math is attributable to our elongated ‘**summer vacation**’ breaks. You’ll learn how a school in New York City – **KIPP** – a middle school – composed of about half African Americans and the rest Hispanics - with 90% qualifying for ‘**free or reduced lunch**’ costs - has totally reversed low math scores by copying a more Asian school year length – 220 days in South Korea – 243 in Japan vs. 180 days in more traditional U.S. schools. You’ll learn about a typical day the Bronx KIPP Academy that would probably make any 5<sup>th</sup> graders of yours claim ‘school brutality’, but why 80% of KIPP graduates will go on to college, in many cases being the first in their family to do so.

In **Chapter 10** – “**A Jamaican Story – *If a progeny of young colored children is brought forth, these are emancipated***”, you will learn about Malcolm Gladwell – his Jamaican heritage and how almost everything else covered in the chapter explains how his family came to survive and prosper. And how about the fact that his great-great-great-grandmother, a West African - was bought at Alligator Pond – a fishing village on the south coast by William Ford, a coffee plantation owner. They had a son, John, who in those day’s terms was a ‘**mulatto**’ who fell into the Jamaican ‘**colored class**’ – higher in social status than traditional ‘blacks’. From all the lessons learned in previous chapters, you will learn how this genius of an author and astute observer of life’s frailties, successes, and failures could have developed into one of the most productive citizens in our country and why we are fortunate to have been a land which has attracted so many who have contributed so much to our country’s strength and heritage.