

## Malcolm Gladwell on Success

by Entelechy, Inc.

Over the years, we have been extremely fortunate to partner with some of the world's greatest thought leaders whose fascinating insights into life and leadership have provided meaningful and inspiring life lessons. The list is as impressive as it is diverse — from John Maxwell, Stephen M.R. Covey, and Marshall Goldsmith to David Cooperrider and Richard Boyatzis. Through our work with Linkage Inc., we help support their broadcasts of these famous people by designing and developing participant and facilitator guides that many clients use to turn a 90-minute presentation into a true learning and growth opportunity.

We recently had the opportunity to support Malcolm Gladwell's Linkage broadcast, *Why People Are Successful*. Gladwell is a staff writer for The New Yorker magazine and author of three New York Times #1 bestsellers: [Outliers: The Story of Success](#), [The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference](#), and [Blink: The Power of Thinking](#).



Malcolm Gladwell has an incomparable gift for interpreting new ideas in the social sciences and making them understandable, relevant, and valuable to businesses and individuals. In his Linkage presentation, Gladwell takes an exciting new approach to helping people succeed — an approach that suggests we need to understand — and use — the factors that really foster success.

Using the immensely popular 70s rock band, Fleetwood Mac, as the premise for his presentation, Gladwell shares the lessons that make successful individuals and organizations successful. After all, when you consider Fleetwood Mac, surely there is not a more incredibly successful creative organization in the music industry. They were able to not only thrive, but find extraordinary success in a demanding and competitive consumer marketplace. Isn't that exactly what today's organizations want to do?

We too often think that huge success happens overnight and is somehow magical or miraculous. We somehow find it more comforting to think that people who experience success must have caught a lucky break. That would be the easy way to explain the rise of a creative group, but nothing could be farther from the truth as Gladwell is quick to point out. There are real principles at work behind great success. By recognizing and applying these principles we can improve our chances of success.

The first lesson Gladwell shares is the importance of effort. Most would agree that Fleetwood Mac's most important — and successful — album was *Rumors*. Given the seemingly short amount of time they were “on the map” before *Rumors*, most people think of Fleetwood Mac as an overnight success. The reality is *Rumors* was their 15<sup>th</sup> album! The truth is, we overlook the incredible amount of hard work that goes into a

burst of creativity. Studies have revealed that in order to reach a level where you can engage in highly productive, creative, and innovative work, you have to put in the equivalent of 10,000 hours on the subject. It doesn't matter where you look. When you look at successful organizations and successful individuals, you always see this period of intensive preparation before any kind of success. In his newest bestseller, Outliers, Gladwell explores — from the Beatles to Bill Gates — how the 10,000-hour rule is the prelude and gateway to finding success.

Gladwell explains that we often leave the willingness to do hard work out of the success equation. We talk about creativity, innovation, and talent as the ingredients in success, but don't focus on the kind of attitude that is necessary to make the most of talent. As Gladwell shares, "That attitude part, to my mind, is as important, if not more important, than the talent part." The first lesson is all about having a willingness to sit down and expend effort in the pursuit of a goal. That is what successful people and organizations have: the willingness and attitude to make a commitment towards a goal with a focus on putting in the preparation necessary to find success.

Gladwell's second lesson builds on the first — it is not only the amount of time put forth but how difficult the journey is. In the case of Fleetwood Mac, their journey to success was not only long, but extremely grueling. They experienced the comings and goings of numerous band members — including their founder and main songwriter, the lack of commercial success of many of their early albums, and the relationship struggles that are common to any group of creative individuals. When you examine Fleetwood Mac's journey to success, you will find that though they capitalized on their creativity, it was their continual struggle (and perseverance) that became the forge that shaped, tested, and reshaped their mettle as a band.

Psychologists make a distinction between two very different kinds of learning strategies:

- **Capitalization Strategy:** Building on your strengths. At each level of development you are using a set of advantages that allow you to take the next step and achieve at the next level. This is the most common learning and career strategy.
- **Compensation Strategy:** Compensating for your weaknesses. You are in a difficult situation and you are extracting lessons from the situation that allow you to go to the next level. This strategy is not only rare, but a lot more difficult to master — but the payoff is huge.

This is a crucial point and one that runs contrary to current thinking: Compensation strategies are a lot more powerful than capitalization strategies. Gladwell points to an astonishing study around some of the biggest entrepreneurs of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century — an

*Do you see the consequences of the way we have chosen to think about success? Because we so profoundly personalize success, we miss opportunities to lift others onto the top rung.... We are too much in awe of those who succeed and far too dismissive of those who fail. And most of all, we become much too passive.*

Malcolm Gladwell  
Outliers  
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amazing one-third of those studied have a learning disability (i.e., dyslexia.). How do you explain something that would seem to negatively impact success? In actuality, it is a perfect example of using compensation strategies. Imagine at a young age you are faced with a school environment that requires that you read and write, but you are unable to do that. To succeed, you now have to do one or more of the following:

1. Find someone else to do your work, a.k.a. develop delegation skills.
2. Build a strong team around you, a.k.a. develop leadership skills.
3. Find creative ways to accomplish your work, a.k.a. develop problem-solving skills.
4. Strengthen your best communication method, a.k.a. develop great oral communication skills.

By employing a compensation strategy for learning, the core principles of entrepreneurship are in place for a venture into the real world. Compensation is a more powerful learning skill than capitalization. For today's successful organizations, it's not just the ability to make the most of their strengths, but rather that rare and powerful ability to learn from — and make the most of — their weaknesses.

Gladwell's third lesson is the importance of diversity in the pursuit of success. It is not enough to learn how to be good. You need to learn what to be good at. Fleetwood Mac dabbled in many music genres — starting with rhythm and blues and experimenting with all kinds of sounds until they landed on the mellow California sound that became their ultimate signature sound. Throughout their journey to success, they were engaged in a ceaseless process of experimentation and risk-taking.

As Gladwell shares, the importance of experimentation has been researched and documented by economist David Galenson. According to Galenson, there are two kinds of creative styles:

1. **Conceptual Innovation:** A conceptual innovator has a big, bold, revolutionary idea that transforms the world around them. Picasso is an example of a conceptual innovator — in an early burst of success, he transformed the face of modern art.
2. **Experimental Innovation:** An experimental innovator employs a ceaseless, disciplined, and focused process of iteration, trial and error, and experimentation. Cezanne is an example of an experimental innovator — he never had a big, bold idea; he didn't burst onto the art scene. He very carefully and painstakingly tried one thing after another; putting together a set of skills and abilities that by the age of 50 turned him into one of the most important artists of his generation.

Gladwell and Galenson agree; experimentation is an incredibly powerful and important mode of innovation. It is not surprising that you find this type of experimental innovation in many of today's highly successful and creative organizations. The kind of problems

*Success is not a random act. It arises out of a predictable and powerful set of circumstances and opportunities.*

Malcolm Gladwell

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that many creative organizations face today are so complex that they cannot be solved with one big, bold idea that transforms them overnight. These kinds of complex problems take a long time to master and require a commitment to experimentation.

Gladwell's last lesson is simplistic in nature, but in some ways most important: To be successful you need support and resources. The three principles Gladwell shares — 1) patience and effort to achieve greatness; 2) the ability to extract lessons from weakness; and 3) taking risks and experimenting — are not possible without the presence of an organization that stands behind the creative group. High performing creative organizations all commit the resources, provide the support, and create the collaborative environment that make learning and experimentation possible. Leaving us with one last insight to consider: As Malcolm Gladwell explains, "Talent cannot succeed all by itself."

If you want to challenge yourself to look at success in a way that will have you questioning everything you believe about the path to extraordinary achievement, read Malcolm Gladwell's book, [Outliers: The Story of Success](#). Or, to find out more about [Outliers](#) and Gladwell's other books known for illuminating patterns behind everyday experiences, visit his website at <http://www.gladwell.com>.

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