

Reading Guide for *Outliers**

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As I read *Outliers* for the first time in May 2009, I tried to do so with the following specific question in mind:

How might I apply both the ideas overtly expressed by the author in his exploratory case studies and the ideas generated by the creative process in my own mind as I read this to the mission of training and leading the latest generation of military aviators?

Yes, it is a very targeted question but I think germane to our mission of training and leading young aviators. I certainly hope that as you read it you also reflect on more general questions of how to apply ideas in the book to your lives and work. In any case...On the most fundamental level, I think the general answer to the specific question is simply that we must recognize and challenge our assumptions, both personal and institutional, by asking ourselves: why do I/we think the way I/we think? What informs our thought about topic X? What are our own cultural values and basic assumptions? What are the implicit motivations that sway our judgment about our surroundings and our relationship with them? Challenging ourselves in such fundamental ways can be enlightening and uncomfortable at the same time. The recognition that our foundational beliefs are perhaps not the granite we had believed is akin to the first time one experienced an earthquake. It can generate uneasiness on the verge of panic that forces us to look away before being consumed by the fear inherent in shattering the façade of terra firma we have constructed in our minds.

The following questions are written in the order they popped into my head as I read the book. I have included the page number of specific passages that served as catalysts for the questions. I hope you will generate questions of your own as stimulated by your background, your experience and the myriad facets that make our perspectives so individually prismatic. Finally, as you read this do not infer from it that I am soft on our student aviators achieving the standards. I am adamant that the standards we set for our military aviators cannot be waived. Those who can't or won't meet the prescribed standards will not make it through either our primary or advanced flight training programs while I serve as wing commander. It is, however, incumbent on each of us in positions of leadership in Naval Aviation to constantly and introspectively critique and assess how we are performing individually and organizationally; then to adapt if and as necessary to improve. It is also absolutely critical that we identify and capitalize on individual students' strengths while working to shore up their individual weaknesses in getting them to those standards. I look forward to the discussion!

PART ONE: OPPORTUNITY

Chapter One – The Mathew Effect

“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.”

* *Outliers* by Malcolm Gladwell, Little Brown and Company, New York, 2008, is the latest book in the Commodore’s Professional Reading Series for Training Air Wing FOUR Leadership.

1. (p.19) Does mentoring belong in the same sentence as parentage and patronage? As leaders (and educators of leaders) are we instilling the ideas of both guidance and giving implied by parentage and patronage? As we do so, are we also consciously reassessing the cultural legacies passed down to us so that we might filter out artifacts, values and basic assumptions* that might be obsolete (or downright harmful)? Or are we unable to look above and beyond our own cultural makeup and hence blindly passing on the way it has always been?

2. (p. 24) Can you think of instances in your career (or specifically in flight training) where we might identify someone as “ace of the base” too early, giving that individual more of our time and energy with the result that others are left behind? How many midshipmen do you think have opted out of becoming aviators because they were exposed to aviation on CORTRAMID/PROTRAMID by some ignorant aviator who thought it was amusing to see how airsick he could get the midshipman by unscrewing the airplane in a series of aerobatics or spins? I personally know a retired flag officer who told me he had chosen a different career path for just that reason, being convinced he was not aeronautically adaptable by just one encounter with an aviator whose job it was to recruit the best for Naval Aviation but instead used the flight to satisfy his own myopic need for a feeling of superiority. How many ensigns and second lieutenants opt themselves out of selecting for jets because of the same type of experience in the initial phases of Primary flight training? Might we actually have cost ourselves getting the very best aviators who might just have needed some acclimation to the environment of flight in some cases? What is the potential impact of reinforcing such self-fulfilling prophecies on the efficacy of Naval Aviation as a whole? Could we be even better than we are?

3. (p.25) Do we see Barnsley’s ideas of selection, streaming and differentiated experience in flight school? How? Why? Are there cultural assumptions inherent to Naval Aviation that drive these? Though not mentioned specifically in this passage, is it possible that talent (and the presumed lack thereof) is reinforced by the effect these things have on student aviators’ belief in themselves? What might a study of gradesheet comments from the Contact phase of Primary flight training show us about downstream performance in the program? Might the students who were encouraged and motivated by their on-wing instructors during those first four flights do statistically better later on than those who had instructors question whether or not they were suited for aviation? Is it too “touchy-feely” for us to ask ourselves this question? Or is military aviation a human endeavor subject to the manifestations of human nature in our performance? How positive a part might mentoring and encouraging actually play in building even better aviators? Can we teach our instructor cadre to reinforce the strengths they find in individual students while also mentoring the students to overcome their weaknesses? How many might achieve the standards (or higher) that would otherwise have been discouraged and dismissed like the 4 year-old t-ball player in comparison with his 5 year-old counterparts?

3. (p.26) I wonder if there is a correlation between Navy Standard Score (NSS) and birth month? Or, even more fundamental to Gladwell’s thesis, is there a distribution of earlier birth months amongst aviators (and officers in general)? Are those elements which might reinforce feelings of inadequacy amongst our country’s youth at the kindergarten level reflected in who

* Artifacts, espoused values and basic assumptions are the building blocks of culture as described by Edward Schein in his book, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*.

might have the inherent confidence necessary to seek membership in a highly competitive profession such as military aviation? If that's the case, should we be targeting our efforts to build self-confidence (and the success corollary to it) at younger children in order to increase the recruiting pool for military service? Or should we just malign the dwindling number of eligible recruits coming out of high school as a sign of the societal decay of our times and then settle for what we can compete for against other high-standard professions? Doesn't this seem to beg the question; what is true strategic thought?

4. (p.28) Do you think it reasonable to include as a challenge of leadership and mentorship the overcoming of disadvantages like age distribution that might have locked someone into a pattern of underachievement? What other elements might we overcome through mentorship? Could similar thinking be applied to organizations that have their own patterns of success or failure? Can you think of examples in your own organization? Can an organization be "mentored?" If you think not, how about mentoring a team?

5. (p.32) Do we prematurely write off people as failures in the flight program? Are there cases where we might have set someone up for failure in the program? Are there some students who failed out that could have achieved the standards within the prescribed time and resource expenditures? Are there some students who quit simply out of the belief that they didn't have what it took?

Chapter Two: The 10,000 Hour Rule

"Practice isn't the thing you do once you're good. It's the thing you do that makes you good."

1. (p.39) Is "[t]he idea that excellence at performing a complex task requires a critical minimum level of practice" applicable to Naval Air Training? How many hours of practice do we accumulate for our student aviators? What should count in assessing those cumulative hours? Hours in the airplane and simulator obviously, but what else? What elements in the value stream of building aviators might actually take away from building the required expertise?

2. (p.46) The passage about Bill Joy's success reminds me of the "5 whys" approach to determining causality. Why are you successful? Because I got a good education. Why did you get a good education? Because I went to the Naval Academy. Why did you go to the Naval Academy? Because I worked hard. Why did you work hard. Because my parents demanded it and set a good example... And so it goes. There are both internal and external influences that lead to success. Certainly one must take advantage of opportunity but is our ability to take advantage of opportunity based itself on opportunity of a sort?

3. (p.47) Do we allow our junior officers to practice for 10,000 hours in their first ten years? This would obviously include more than just pure flight hours but should be specific to our craft. What would you include as "practice?" Perhaps more importantly, what would you not include? What are the barriers we have to achieving greatness as naval aviators?

4. (p.54) I found it notable how many times the word "happened" appeared on this page. Of course, it was the author's intent to make this notable. The happenstance which resulted in Bill Gates getting extra time to practice fell into place like tumblers in a lock, lining up opportunities

which resulted in future success. Is it possible for us to avoid depending on happenstance for the opportunities that might result in outlier-type success of individuals in our organization? How? Are there things we can or should be doing that take chance out of the equation? Could intended consequences replace chance in such a way that you could see the entire standard distribution curve of success shift to the right in your organization?

5. (p. 55) "But what truly distinguishes their histories is not their extraordinary talent but their extraordinary opportunities." What opportunities throughout life enabled you to be who and what you are? How successful might you have been if depending only on your talent and hard work? What opportunities have you given others?

6. (p. 67) What patterns of success can you see in your organization? With regards to our student military aviators, are we culturally resistant to acknowledging such patterns based on valuation of individual merit?

Chapter 4: The Trouble with Geniuses, Part 2

"But social savvy is knowledge. It's a set of skills that have to be learned."

1. (p. 100) How much of a role does the savvy (or lack of it) as described in Chris Langan's case, play in our profession as aviators? Can you be the best student aviator ever and still fail in flight school? How? Why?

2. (p. 101) Can we teach "practical intelligence" to our students? Do we? If so, how? If not, how might we?

3. (p. 105) Can we use the example on this page to our advantage? Are we correct in assuming that our students have no inherent differences amongst them similar to those between middle class and poor children? Can we identify and help correct such differences in 20-somethings? How might we teach our students to further "customize" their environment in such a way as to achieve even greater success?

4. (p. 108) How might we actively makeup for cultural backgrounds which might inherently disadvantage a young person in the military? Is it too late for us to apply some of those parenting strategies that might have given Alex an advantage over Katie in modern society? Does the term "parenting" make you uncomfortable as a military leader? Ask yourself why? Does our military culture force us away from the softer notion of parenting to a steelier notion of leadership? Is that good? Why or why not?

Chapter 5: The Three Lessons of Joe Flom

"Successful people don't do it alone."

1. (p. 119) I remember reading an article once that included advice from successful people, including President Clinton. A common theme in all of the advice was that it is important to ask for help. Asking for help is very empowering and rewarding to the person from whom you ask it.

Think about that for a second. Why is it so rewarding and empowering? At the same time, however, don't our military culture and its elements of individual merit and independent initiative tend to stifle asking for help? But we are *also* a culture of teamwork and cooperation in the achievement of common objectives. How do we reconcile these internal conflicts? Might these elements of our culture create some confusion and consternation in our newest members (officers and enlisted)? How do we help them navigate these conflicts? How do we get them to ask for help while also assuming individual responsibility for themselves?

2. (p. 125) The hostile takeovers represent an "every man for himself" ethic that, without controls, would metastasize through society (it has also historically been a manifestation of human nature). If the military is a reflection of our society, at least to the degree that we draw our membership from society at large, how do inculcate ideals that balance the baser human nature? How do we move our membership up to the higher levels of Maslow's Hierarchy? Are we completely dependent on our recruit training and commissioning sources to do this for us? If not, do we have a plan to continue acculturation to our organizational values? Who is responsible for this plan? How do (or should) we implement it?

3. (p. 131) How might we "equalize" our new members in order to overcome the assumptions which accompany their parents' class? Why does this even matter?

4. (p. 144) "The Jews '...worked like madmen *at what they knew.*'" How can we take advantage of pre-existing knowledge and skills by connecting them to flight skills and knowledge on an individually tailored basis? Is this, at least in part, the "art" of an educator? Or do we just assume each student is cut from a cookie mold and must be trained in the exact same manner as every other in order to be "fair." Is it reasonable to acknowledge that individual students will require varied levels of organizational effort and resources to achieve our standards based on their individual characteristics at the beginning of the flight program? Should we use how much time, effort or resources we expend on an individual as the principle basis for judging *their* success? If so, doesn't that fly in the face of logic as represented by our acknowledgement that different students begin the program with different levels of talent, experience and aptitude? What do *you* think?

5. (p. 149) How would you actively weave "autonomy, complexity and a connection between effort and reward" into the leadership and management of your organization? We talk a lot of making the military a world-class workplace. What are you doing *now* to make it so?

6. (p. 150) Repeat after me: I want *everyone* in my organization to feel their work is meaningful. Now answer the question: What have I done recently to make it so?

7. (p. 151) "[I]f you work hard enough and assert yourself, and use your mind and imagination, you can shape the world to your desires." How can we in the military spread this theme to the next generation? Community outreach? If able to do so, we will have strategic impact in the truest sense on the future economic health and national security of the United States.

PART TWO: LEGACY

Chapter Seven: The Ethnic Theory of Plane Crashes

“The kinds of errors that cause plane crashes are invariably errors of teamwork and communication.”

1. (p. 184) Are all of our pilots familiar with these common elements of aircraft accidents? How do we include this kind of information as a matter of course in their training?
2. (p. 185) I think Earl Weener’s comment that two pilots flying cooperatively instead of one flying and one acting as backup is the very foundation of CRM. Simple but elegant.
3. (p. 188) The description of Captain Caviedes being maxed out is less telling about his experience and his capability as a pilot than it is about human nature in general, particularly as it applies to the aviator culture. We are not very good at the constant and honest self-assessment necessary to recognize and act on eroding skills in the cockpit. How do we teach the introspection necessary to make critical judgments about the *current* situation and our ability to handle it? How do we give aviators the tools to overcome our cultural machismo and admit when they need help?
4. (p. 190) Captain Ratwatte *asked for help*. Do you think this lessened the respect his crew had for him? Or was it a teaching moment and chance for him to set the example of a mature aviator using all of the resources at his command? How do we teach our new aviators that asking for help is not a sign of weakness?
5. (p. 191) How do we train our pilots the critical thinking required to bring more than just technical skill to a situation? A common element of every gradesheet throughout the Naval Aviation training continuum is Headwork/Situational Awareness (HW/SA). But what is HW/SA? The Course Training Standard for HW/SA is defined loosely in the Primary Master Curriculum Guide as: “Understands instructions, demonstrations, and explanations; Foresees and avoids possible difficulties.; Remains alert and spatially oriented.” More broadly in our profession it might be defined as how quickly and accurately the aviator can reduce the delta between reality and perceived reality by processing information in a myriad of forms in order to make appropriate decisions in the application of aviator knowledge and skills; and how quickly and accurately the aviator can prioritize tasks, filter information and shed loads when appropriate in order to maintain SA when encountering new, more and/or more complex stimulus (aviate, navigate, communicate being our simplest model for load-shedding by aviators). So how do we actually measure HW/SA beyond the oversimplified definition given in our curriculum guides? And more importantly, how do we teach it?
6. (p. 195) How Captain Klotz communicated with ATC certainly affected how the controllers prioritized him into their workload. How do we train aviators to balance the sense of “cool” we want them to have during an emergency or challenging situation with the need to clearly communicate required assistance? How do we teach controllers to recognize this potential for miscommunication by pilots who tend to mask their sense of urgency?

- Gladwell writes that we mitigate speech due to politeness, shame, embarrassment or deference to authority. Aviators mitigate speech in order to maintain a professional and analytic environment in the cockpit during an emergency as well as keep up the appearances associated with being the cool aviator. But how do we teach aviators to recognize the potential downfalls associated with mitigating speech?

7. (p. 206) What do you think of the Power Distance Index as it applies to our military culture? Does our hierarchical nature in the military run counter to our “American-ness?”

8. (p. 209) Where might the U.S. military fall on the scale of PDIs? Higher or lower than the United States as a country?

9. (p. 216) The challenge for us is to make sure both senior and junior in the cockpit assume responsibility for making sure communication has occurred. Good CRM should not be receiver or transmitter oriented. It is based on the active development of an environment conducive to communication and by active efforts by all parties to ensure the communication makes sense. The onus is on the senior to set up the proper environment. The onus is on the junior to know when to call BS and how loud to call it!

10. (p.219) How honest are we as an organization in confronting those aspects of our culture and heritage which are not compatible with safe aviating? What are some of those elements of our culture? Is it possible for us to be selective in how and when we conform to our cultural norms? Think about how often I fly as the wing commander with newly minted ensigns and second lieutenants. How do I create an environment that is good for learning the art and science of aviation as well as an environment that encourages cooperation in flying the aircraft to safely accomplish the mission? How do you do it?

Chapter Eight: Rice Paddies and Math Tests

“[I]t’s not so much ability as attitude.”

1. (p. 248) How might we test for persistence for flight school entry? Should we? Could a willingness to concentrate and sit through some sort of questionnaire be equally telling about a student’s potential for success in flight school as it is for success at mathematics? Is the “give up factor” one we could predetermine? How?

2. (p. 249) “No one who can rise before dawn three hundred sixty days a year fails to make his family rich.” How badly do we hurt America’s ability to compete on the global stage by lowering each generation’s persistence? “Don’t worry about it, Honey,” is our common refrain and our strategic blunder.

Chapter Nine: Marita’s Bargain

“Outliers are those who have been given opportunities – and who have had the strength and presence of mind to seize them.”

1. (p. 251) Do we (should we) teach and reinforce a SSLANT protocol of our own? Are we too afraid such teaching might be akin to parenting? If we don't reinforce the basics in flight school, who will? Should we also be an officer finishing course for our young aviators? Smile; stand up; firm handshake; eye contact; ask questions; blend confidence and deference appropriately. Look for every teachable moment!

2. (p. 260) How do we "warm up" our flight students? Do our instructors have a basic understanding of how the human brain learns? How do we educate our instructors on the science (and art) of learning? If we don't, are we then relegated to training in cookie cutter fashion? Why don't we seem to treat flight instruction as a profession in and of itself? Does having a PhD make one a good college professor? Does having a set of wings make one a good flight, simulator or ground school instructor?

3. (p. 262) Do we have a "sink or swim" approach to flight school, or elements thereof? Should we? Why or why not?

- Is flight school meaningful? Is the relationship between effort and reward clear? This perhaps seems like an easy question from our perspective as rated aviators and instructor pilots. Certainly the reward of gold or silver wings and the responsibilities, adventure and privileges that go with them are easily related to the effort students make on a daily basis. But think about this from the student perspective. The grind of flight school can actually make them forget about why they chose our profession. How do we *actively and consciously* make flight school meaningful on a daily and weekly basis? Where does this effort fall in the category of mentoring? Does it? Should it?

"The outlier, in the end, is not an outlier at all."