

Elliott Masie's

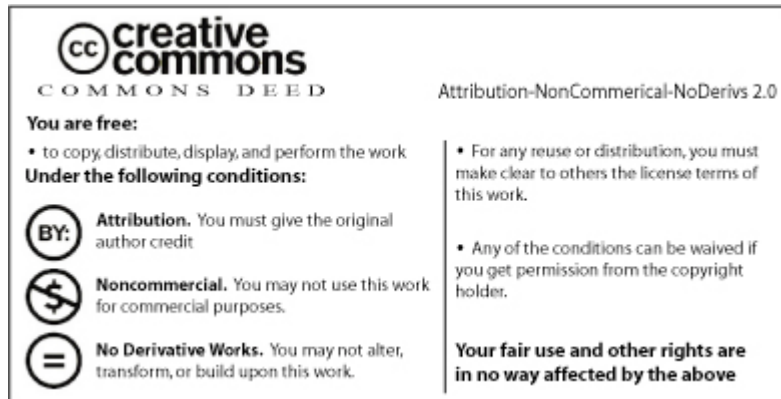
LEARNING2009

Malcolm Gladwell *Outliers*

Learning 2009 Keynote – Patterns in Culture

November 9th, 2009

Transcription of Video Segment Available at:
<http://www.learning2010.com/gladwell>



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Learning 2010 will be held from October 24-27 in Orlando, Florida.

Elliott Masie: I know you're exploring the interesting elements of culture, and you were sharing some perceptions you had about patterns, for instance, of alcoholism, which I found intriguing. Could you do a short riff on that and then I am going to hit you with a few questions from the audience?

Malcolm Gladwell: This is a story I have been working on for *The New Yorker*, and it all started because I was reading all this literature on alcoholism from the 50s. In the 50s, the center of alcohol research in the world was The Center of Alcohol Studies at Yale and they were doing all this work in New Haven. New Haven, as everybody knows, is an interesting town, particularly in the 50s. It then still had one of the largest collection of Italian-American immigrants in the country, and then also a large collection of Jewish immigrants, Irish immigrants and some German immigrants.

They had this big alcohol treatment center they set up and they began to notice, after they actually had the first 1,200 people admitted into this treatment facility and counted the ethnicities that these people belonged to, they realized [that] of the 1,200, only 40 were Italian-Americans, and they were all second and third generation. And this is in a town where 40% of the town is Italian-American.

Then they thought, "Well, is this because the Italians aren't drinking? Where are they? Why aren't they showing up?" And they go and they have all the Italians - not all of them - but a large group of them have these drinking diaries where they write down how much they drink and they [researchers] realized, oh no, to the contrary: the Italians were drinking more than anyone else. Ninety-six percent of adult Italians drank in New Haven and 92% drank every day. By every day, we are talking about, in some cases, at every meal. So they were consuming far more alcohol than anybody else and yet they were not having any identifiable social pathologies. No alcoholism. They [researchers] looked at the arrest records. They were never getting arrested for drunken driving or for public inebriation.

What they [researchers] realized was this naive assumption they had that problems with alcohol were a strict function of access to alcohol and consumption of alcohol was false. Problems of alcohol were a matter of culture. It was possible to consume large amounts if you had a culture that taught you how to consume alcohol appropriately, and that's what the Italians had. They drank all the time, and in large amounts but they only drank in groups. They only drank at mealtime and they never drank more than one or two glasses of wine in a given instance. They had a strong cultural aversion to drunkenness. You didn't get drunk, right?

Now, if you follow those four rules, I don't care how much you drink; you will not become an alcoholic, right? You can't if you follow [them]. I am interested in this only because I feel like we have moved backwards in time in our understanding of the manner of social phenomenon. It's so easy for us to say of something like alcoholism, "Oh, it is a function of genes. Some people just have that." And that's totally true: there is a strong genetic element here. But culture is stronger.

There were just as many people with genetic susceptibility to alcoholism in the Italian-American community of New Haven [as there were in other ethnic communities there], and yet it didn't matter because they had a culture which prevented them from ever reaching that stage where the genes would kick in. And that is what is such a beautiful example of how this thing called culture - which we don't know what to do with, we don't know how to talk about, and we constantly discount - of just how crucial it is in governing the way we behave, and in giving us rules and patterns and rituals that allow us to make the most out of our work, our lives, our enjoyment or our alcohol, right?

The thing about the Italians is they enjoyed their wine, and God bless them. Wine is an enjoyable thing, right? They were able to do that without suffering from the downside.

Elliott Masie: And one of the interesting challenges for us is to think about culture - obviously there is an ethnic-based culture or origin-based culture. We deal in organizational cultures, which are parallel in that sense.

Malcolm Gladwell: Every bit as powerful and meaningful, and if you don't think so, go and spend a week in the Marine Corps, right? That's not an ethnic culture; that's a professional culture and a really, really deeply powerful one. Because I do all these kinds of speaking [engagements], I go from company to company sometimes and when you see a company with a powerful culture, it hits you the moment you walk in the door and you realize it's completely possible to have [a culture that powerful].

Elliott Masie: And one of the challenges I think we all face is, as work gets distributed and we are not necessarily living next to working, next to our colleagues, as it's more virtual - and it's going to be [more virtual] - how do we still have powerful culture in that? So a manager has to think about, "How do I still touch my employees regularly? How do I create the informal moments for that?"

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