

## New Kid on the Block: David and His Friend, Goliath

### Series: Part 4

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We all know the story: David, a stripling shepherd, takes on Goliath, an imposing giant. For those of you old enough to remember, we had our own version some years ago when a young boxer named Cassius Clay (Muhammad Ali) took on the baddest man in boxing, Sonny Liston. In both cases the lessons were not to underestimate or overestimate your opponent, not to let your expectations of the rules of engagement cloud the reality of battle, the advantages of speed and mobility over size and fixed positions. Malcolm Gladwell, in his book, *David and Goliath*, provides many more lessons regarding seeming disadvantages that turn out to be advantages in lopsided encounters.

But all these lessons have to do with situations in which Goliath is the adversary. What about those even more usual situations in which Goliath is your friend or ally, your employer or client? What you bring to those encounters are the same speed and flexibility that David used to bring down Goliath. But now those resources can be put to mutual advantage. Large organizations operate according to policies and procedures; in ordinary times these are enough to keep the wheels of progress rolling slowly and steadily along. But these days ordinary times only last fifteen minutes. Unless the behemoth is accompanied by fast, maneuverable fighter escorts, its own size is its vulnerability.

Even within policies and procedures there is room for speed and innovation. W. Edwards Deming famously said that all knowledge comes from outside the company. What all due respect, Deming was wrong. His statement would be more accurate if it recognized that a great deal of knowledge within the organization withers on the vine because it is unrecognized, not respected, unsought or unrewarded. Large organizations, in order to avoid informational clutter and distraction establish gatekeepers, people or policies that restrict the flow of information up the hierarchy. The first task of the innovator then is to find someone, or some situation, within range of their limited influence that is likely to look favorably on their proposal. A local solution, informed by relevant experience, and providing an exact fit to circumstances is the first rung on the ladder.

David was very good with his slingshot; he had plenty of time and opportunity to practice out there protecting his flocks from predators. When the moment came David knew just where to aim for maximum effect. Without that knowledge and his physical skill, the effort would have been wasted. So before you get ahead of yourself with your own next big thing, make sure you know what you are talking about, your credentials are in order, and how your recommendation affects local (meaning departmental) conditions, as well as whatever broader target you have in mind.

Goliath might not have been more useful to David alive than dead but your own personal Goliath is more valuable as an ally than a trophy.