

lingua business

Inside Look at Outsiders

By Paul Gibson



From time to time, you see a huge multinational business take the world economy by storm. We have the likes of Microsoft, Coca-Cola, Nestle, Accenture, as clear examples. But how did these companies really start?

Microsoft began in a garage. Dr. John Stith Pemberton, the inventor of Coca-Cola was a pharmacist. Nestle was founded by a small-scale inventor. Accenture, originally spun off from Andersen, Delaney and Co., was founded by Arthur Andersen who was orphaned at the age of 16. He began working as a mailboy by day and attended school at night, eventually being hired as the assistant to the controller of Allis-Chalmers in Chicago. At 23 he became the youngest certified public accountant (CPA) in Illinois, Chicago.

What do all of these companies have in common? They have

international prestige, they own the marketplace in their respective sectors, and all of them were created by unsuspecting and unexpected personalities. These are the so-called “outsiders” that Malcolm Gladwell writes about in the New Yorker. They have the privilege of being unknown, usually humble or even poor people that seem to have made it to the top of the corporate ladder.

Gladwell tells us about how these outsiders have an advantage over their colleagues. They know what it means to suffer, to have nothing, to not have a college degree in some cases, but still be considered a member of the business elite. He highlights the story of Sydney Weinberg at Goldman Sachs as a clear example of how an outsider or stranger to the business world, can just enter the seemingly super-complex world of Wall Street and triumph.

But maybe we should not be so surprised if you consider this: being on the outside can actually work to your advantage. Take foreigners for example. Some experts contend that foreigners seemed to be forgiven more than their colleagues because they are fighting against a language/cultural barrier to begin with. Gladwell cites the virtue of being from a different country, far away from home, where nobody knows you, so it is easier to separate business from family relationships.

So the question is this: should we really be looking for the experts among the lower ranks to come up with an “outside the box” solution that works “on the inside”. Everyone knows that a fresh pair of eyes can change the way people look, think and react towards the same issue. (For me, the important word to keep in mind here is “can” - not “necesarrily will.”) And finally, have we really gone from “compensating for disadvantage” to actually “capitalizing on socioeconomic advantage”?

This debate all goes back to the neverending question: are leaders born or are they made?

While accusing Andrew Carnegie of offering simplistic viewpoints on finding wisdom among the poor, Gladwell shocks the reader by turning around and coming to two simplistic conclusions of his own: one, that hedge funds created by Goldman Sachs are evil because they were created by rich people, not poor ones like Weinberg was; and two, that now Wall Street needs more Weinbergs instead of the inventor of the hedge fund, Waddill Catchings. While pawning off explanations for the crisis to an eclectic war of the classes, Gladwell should stick to journalism instead of selling his own socioeconomic theories.

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