

COACHING *for* LEADERS

Edge: Turning Adversity into Advantage

by Laura Huang

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Dave's Reading Highlights

What do I mean by “edge”? Having an edge is about gaining an advantage, but it goes beyond just advantage. It's about recognizing that others will have their own perceptions about us, right or wrong. When you recognize the power in those perceptions and learn to use them in your favor, you create an edge.

People generally underestimate two things: How hard it is to get your foot in the door as an outsider (whatever “outsider” means to you). How wide doors are open once you're on the inside.

Those who can create that for themselves are the ones who Enrich, Delight, and Guide—to make their Effort go further. These four concepts make up the core structure of this book.

Those who have an edge, however, are also able to demonstrate and effectively communicate the value they bring, rather than leaving it up to others to guess.

“Life is not a matter of holding good cards, but of playing a poor hand well,” Robert Louis Stevenson once said. That's what you get with an edge.

Guide the perceptions that others have of you. Make your own privilege. That is ultimately how you get more out of your hard work. Just like people giving investment advice say, “Let your money make money for you,” we should let our hard work work for us.

Nagasu decided that she would guide all future perceptions about her herself. Her story wasn’t about what had happened to her at the 2014 nationals, but about an athlete pushing the boundaries of her sport.

Though some might argue that it was just about personal branding, the edge that she created for herself extended far beyond mere marketing. What did Nagasu do specifically? She knew the value she brought. She knew the value of a triple axel and how it would enrich the team. But she also knew that before people would let her in, before they would ever believe in her value, they needed to first be delighted by her story and her personality. So she let that show. She acknowledged the controversies in her career, saying, “Everybody makes mistakes and obviously I’ve had ups and downs.” But Nagasu also declared that she had nothing to be ashamed of, owning her winding path and saying, “I’m not afraid to show everyone who I am.”

PRINCIPLE 1 Hard work should speak for itself. (But it doesn’t.)

Ask yourself this: When people are interacting with you or your organization, what is the most basic thing they expect you to deliver in order for them to allow you to continue up the ladder of influence?

To identify our basic goods, we must own not only our strengths but also our weaknesses. When you acknowledge and accept your weaknesses, you start to see the contours of the playing field. Knowing your weaknesses and your basic goods helps you figure out where you can create an edge.

Creating an edge starts with pinpointing your basic goods and defining your circle of competence, and operating inside that perimeter. Of course, over time, you can work to expand your circle

like Buc-ee's did. But never lose sight of the basics that are the foundation of your edge.

PRINCIPLE 2 It's not about giving it your all. Your basic goods help you get it all.

Scudamore continued to own it, even doubled down on it. That bias, he said, would always be a part of how people saw him, but everyone has their own skills and talents. Now he calls his dropout status his "badge of honor." "Grow where you're planted," he said. "And now I steer people in the direction of me as a dropout—not away from it. People underestimate me because of it, and I use that to my full advantage. I plant some beautiful things out of what others think is trash." Your history and your story are part of your basic goods. Don't underestimate where you've been planted—grow there. Or grow where the soil is less jammed with other plants and you're less likely to get crowded out.

PRINCIPLE 3 To use your basic goods in distinct ways, go where others don't.

When we own constraints, magical things can happen. Indeed, when we leverage difficulties and use them as tools to propel us toward success, we start to carve out our edge. We enrich in ways that put the focus on us, rather than on others—as long as we don't let others dictate our constraints, that is.

But the teams that made the most in profit? Those who didn't use the five dollars at all. It's a lesson they are all amazed to learn: that those who come back with the highest profits—one year, a team came in at over four thousand dollars—are typically the ones who never even use the five dollars. The teams that seem to generate the greatest profit are those who look at the resources at their disposal through a completely different lens. We have a tendency to focus on constraints, even when we are thinking in terms of opportunities. We scan the environment for ways that we can provide value and we zero in on the obvious opportunities—all the ways we can use five dollars. This ends up excluding a large set of opportunities—those

that we could do based on four dollars, three dollars, or even nothing. And more important, it excludes ones that we need thousands of dollars to do. You see, the five dollars actually becomes a constraint. It limits the ideas that are possible. When the focal point is the five dollars, there are only so many opportunities available to us—so we end up doing things like car washes, lemonade stands, and bake sales. That is how the majority think.

We tend to focus on solving problems and generally are decent at it. We look for people who can create valuable solutions to strategic problems. We bring together people from heterogeneous backgrounds and disciplines, trying to form top teams with cross-functional and interdisciplinary strengths. But much of this is in vain because before we can effectively create valuable solutions to strategic problems, we need to know what problem we should be addressing in the first place.

You never realize how much of your background is sewn into the lining of your clothes. —Tom Wolfe Highlight

Self-awareness is a sense of who we are, what we value, and what our inherent strengths are. When we say “self-awareness,” we mean knowledge of who we are internally. But gaining an edge requires knowledge of your inner self and how it interacts with the outer world. It’s both within you and contextual. That’s what I didn’t yet understand. We need to own who we are and the context—what is within us and what is around us need to complement each other in order for us to be successful. I didn’t understand that self-knowledge and self-awareness only go so far if you ignore the truth of others’ perceptions and don’t take control to guide them.

The path forward—the path to creating an edge for oneself—is therefore about acknowledging and receiving the perceptions of others, while simultaneously empowering yourself not to embrace and adopt those views. You can accept the perceptions of others so that you can consciously address them and confront them—but without embracing and internalizing them. For as we’ll discuss later, the views of others are overwhelmingly not about you at all—they’re

about their own insecurities, their own goals, and their attempts to reconcile their own sense of self-awareness.

The way you chronicle your personal trajectory helps you explain who you are in a compelling way, a way that others will understand and be impacted by. People are trying to guess about your future potential based on your past trajectory. Ultimately, there is no wrong or right trajectory. The only mistake you can make is having no trajectory in mind at all. If you don't provide your own chronicle of who you are, one will be given to you. You'll assume whatever description the other party gives you, dictated by their biases, perceptions, and attributions. Don't passively let others write your narrative—write your own narrative and guide others' view of you. Make sure you have a baseline account of your trajectory, craft your own narrative, and don't shy away from embracing all your past experiences—even the disadvantages, challenges, and obstacles that you've faced—in mapping your story. Your past is not something that you should lament; it should be another asset in how you gain your unique advantage. Let your past make you better, not bitter.