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Reframing our perceptions and the power of the underdog

The holidays are one of my favorite times of year. The season affords me the chance to see family and friends and to do things I am often too busy to accomplish during the course of the year. The several-day respite is also a great opportunity to read books that have been gathering dust on my nightstand for the past few months.

I am an avid Malcolm Gladwell fan. I kicked off Thanksgiving weekend by reading his latest book, "David and Goliath," in which he provides an intriguing commentary on this biblical story and other similar tales and discusses the value to society of lopsided conflicts and our frequent misperceptions about them.

He also explores the surprising success rate of underdogs and how the majority views on concepts such as power, strength, competition, advantage, opportunity and disability are often not based in reality. As with Gladwell's other works, he brings a provocative clarity and insight to his discussions and he leaves readers considering how these perspectives impact interpretations of their own life experiences.

Gladwell's observations continue to reverberate in my mind as 2014 quickly approaches. Indeed, "David and Goliath" is very timely for all of us as we wind up our personal and professional responsibilities, examine our successes and shortcomings over the past 12 months and create our lists of New Year's resolutions.

Gladwell provides an interesting framework within which to evaluate ourselves, both as individuals and as professionals. He reminds us that our perceptions are frequently inaccurate and we must proceed with caution when sizing up ourselves, those around us and our circumstances. This awareness enables us to more fully

understand what we observe in the world around us and to make the necessary adjustments.

Our lives are patchwork quilts of experiences — our successes, failures, things of which we are proud and those which we wish we had done differently. It is human nature to create subjective narratives about ourselves and others.

"David and Goliath" invites us to think differently as we craft these autobiographies and define the concepts of adversity, disability and disadvantage in the context of our lives. We are encouraged to reframe what these concepts mean to us and how we address them.

2013 has provided yet another stark reminder that our businesses continue to evolve at breakneck speed. Being a successful lawyer in this day and age can be challenging, even an uphill battle. We have been forced to adapt in real time to survive and we must stay ahead of the curve in order to thrive.

We are constantly barraged with reminders that our industry will never be the same. For those who have practiced for many years, there can be a profound sense of melancholy in lamenting how things used to be.

This experience can trigger a response that is not all that different from some of the most profound losses that we have experienced in our lives. It is easy to become overwhelmed by all that has and will continue to change. We can become anxious and apprehensive about what our future holds.

The challenges of the legal profession are not all that different from the stories of conflict and competition which Gladwell imparts. He contends that our analysis of such situations often misses the mark. How we define underdogs is a fluid concept and they are often not nearly as weak

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as they appear to be at first glance.

This is because society tends to have limited, rigid definitions of what power, strength and advantage are in any given situation. Gladwell believes that we frequently characterize certain qualities or circumstances as helpful or fortuitous when they are not and, conversely, that we negatively label certain qualities as handicaps, disadvantages or weaknesses when in

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fact they are what make us stronger and wiser in the face of our adversaries.

We must also understand that there can be too much of a good thing and qualities which are tremendous strengths can quickly become great weaknesses depending on the circumstances.

As we reflect on our careers and the upcoming New Year, we should be mindful that our profession is what we make of it. The challenging developments of the past five years can work to our advantage rather than be our handicap.

We can find ways to turn market conditions into opportunities rather than allowing them to hinder us. We should have faith and confidence that we will continue to make the necessary transitions for ourselves and for our businesses and that we will remain bona fide contenders in the game of law.

We must also realistically reassess our situations on a continual basis. We must not allow our egos to underestimate the strength of our competition. We must remain keenly aware of what they do well and where our performance remains on par or falls short in comparison.

We must think about how to take these shortcomings and either find ways to use them to our advantage, to create new capabilities or to take existing offerings and recast them into something more valuable than before.

We should remain mindful that even our greatest skills and strengths can easily become our weaknesses if we do not harness and modulate them properly. It is through our awareness and focus on all of these things that we will both survive and thrive.

Even if we are the underdog, we can still come out swinging and achieve great success in 2014 and beyond. Our fate lies in our own hands.