

excerpt from
Beating the System
by Russell Ackoff and Sheldon Rovin

Introduction

System beaters come in all sizes, shapes, and walks of life. However, they have something in common: all are fed up with the systems that abuse them and they do something about it. In our book we tell stories that show how these individuals, the system beaters, defeated the system that was frustrating them. *All of the stories are true.* Most come from the experience of the authors. The rest came directly from the people who experienced them. The composition of the stories consists of the story, the take-home message or meaning drawn from the story as the last paragraph, in italics, and last, a moral that the story suggests.

OUR SYSTEM-BEATING HERO

When we were putting the book together, we decided to find a universal name for our system beater. We wanted a name that would be recognized by most of our readers, one that people could identify with. At the same time, using a universal name would eliminate a great deal of self-reference and possible embarrassment to the other people whose stories are in the book. “David” of David and Goliath fame was our choice, and we use David throughout except in a few stories.

One of the best known characters in the Old Testament is David, a “mere” shepherd boy who defeated the mighty Philistine warrior Goliath. When the Israelites were at war with the Philistines, the two armies faced each other from opposite hills. Every morning for forty days, the huge, powerful Goliath (he reportedly stood over nine feet tall) challenged the Israelites for someone to come out and fight him, but none would. One day, David, then too young for the army, arrived with some deliveries for his older brothers, soldiers in the Israelite army. He heard Goliath’s bellowing and immediately volunteered to fight him. The king of the Israelites, King Saul, at first was reluctant because of David’s size, youth, and inexperience. David certainly was not a warrior. But because the king had no other choice, he relented.

After turning down an offer of the king’s own armor, David went to a nearby creek and got five suitable pebbles (five, not just one—perhaps he had some doubts: people usually have doubts when facing such formidable odds!) for his sling. The rest of the story, as they say, is history. Goliath was clad from head to toe with heavy protective armor. But David hit the giant with a single, perfectly aimed shot in his forehead just below Goliath’s protective helmet, *the most vulnerable place on Goliath.* Goliath fell and David, using Goliath’s own sword, cut off his head. The Israelites drew inspiration from David’s defeat of Goliath and attacked the Philistines, who bid a hasty retreat, and the Israelites gained the victory. The entire story can be

found in 1 Samuel 17:1–58.

The story’s legendary status, we believe, has to do with the appeal of the little guy taking on and overcoming the much larger, stronger, and seemingly unbeatable monolith, the system in the form of Goliath. An undistinguished person, at least until that point, unarmed, carrying only a sling, used his desire and creativity, not might, to beat the “goliath.” This story is an apt metaphor for describing how all of us can defeat an abusive system, a goliath, by use of our will and wits, not strength. So David becomes our system-beating symbol.

HOW THE BOOK IS ORGANIZED

The book is organized in a manner that makes it easy to access a story or stories that apply to a system-caused problem you want to overcome. The contents page will help you do this, as will the arrangement of stories by category following chapter 11.

Although the need to beat the many systems that compromise our quality of life, we believe, is implicitly understood, in chapter 1 we make it explicit. We explain the need and show how and what systems do to mistreat us.

As you will see from the stories, beating the system involves ignoring the obstacles erected by the system or circumventing them as well as courage, persistence, and creativity. But it also involves a reasonable understanding of systems, how they function and, particularly, malfunction, where their weaknesses and vulnerabilities are, and the incentives that drive them. Additionally, system beating requires that we look at systems as a whole rather than part by part as is typically done. In chapter 2, using lots of examples, we explain all of this.

System beating requires some creativity. Being creative assures you of having a leg up on the system you are trying to beat because if anything is certain, it is that the system that is beating you isn’t being creative. Monolithic, rule-following behavior by definition isn’t creative. Chapter 3 deals with creativity. Creativity, stripped to its essence, is the process of challenging or denying the different assumptions we make, most of them implicit, that ordinarily inhibit and constrain us from doing and achieving what we want and departing from what is. We also will offer a few creative strategies here as well as in part II.

After the preface and introduction, the book is organized into three parts. Part I includes chapters 1, 2, and 3, which describe why systems need to be beaten, understanding systems, and understanding creativity, respectively. Part II consists of stories from and about real people who have beaten systems. It includes six chapters. Chapter 4 is a collection of stories and anecdotes that show how the different assumptions described in chapter 3 are recognized and then challenged or denied as a prerequisite to creative system beating.

Chapters 5–9 are an array of creative strategies that can be used to beat a system.

The title of each chapter indicates the particular strategy. Each of these chapters includes several stories showing how that particular strategy was used to defeat a system.

In part III, chapter 10 offers some “Rules of Thumb for System Beaters” that underlie the processes and actions used by the system vanquishers in the stories of part II. These can be used as guidelines to keep in mind as you set about trying to overcome a system. To pique your interest we list them now:

Do the unexpected. Experts are not needed. Ask for forgiveness, not permission. Don't accept the first no. Don't say no to yourself for anyone else. Find allies. Clog the system.

As we say in our parting suggestion below, you don't have to read our book from its beginning to the end; so if the spirit moves you, go to chapter 10 without further ado.

Chapter 11 is devoted to what organizations (systems) might think about and do to avoid or minimize having people they serve and employ find it necessary to defeat them. Following chapter 11 is an arrangement of stories into categories to help you access examples of system beating in an area of particular interest. The categories are not exclusive: some stories could easily be placed in more than one category, and we actually identify some of the stories in more than one category. There is no exclusivity in the ways systems can be overcome.

Finally, you do not necessarily have to start at the beginning and read the book, as is typically done, from front to back. *Actually, not reading the book from front to back is a form of beating the system for reading books with its unstated rule of going from front to back. So carry on in your own inimitable fashion, go where you want, and have fun.*

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