

Fixing Healthcare Podcast Transcript

Interview with Malcolm Gladwell

- Jeremy Corr: Hello and welcome to the new Fixing Healthcare podcast series, Breaking the Rules of Healthcare. I am one of your hosts, Jeremy Corr. I'm also the host of the popular New Books in Medicine podcast and CEO of Executive Podcast Solutions.
- Jeremy Corr: With me is Dr. Robert Pearl. For 18 years Robert was the CEO of the Permanente Group, the nation's largest physician group. He is currently a Forbes contributor, professor at both the Stanford University School of Medicine and Business and author of the bestselling books, *Mistreated: Why We Think We're Getting Good Health Care -- And Why We're Usually Wrong* and *Uncaring: How the Culture of Medicine Kills Doctors and Patients*. All profits go to Doctors Without Borders. If you want more information on a broad range of healthcare topics you can go to his website, robertpearlmd.com.
- Jeremy Corr: Our guest today is Malcolm Gladwell. He's the bestselling author of *The Tipping Point*, *Outliers*, *David and Goliath* and most recently, *The Bomber Mafia*, as well as the podcast host for *Revisionist History*.
- Robert Pearl: Malcolm, welcome to this new program for our Fixing Healthcare podcast.
- Malcolm Gladwell: Thank you. I'm glad to be on the show.
- Robert Pearl: The theme of this new podcast is that the American healthcare system is so broken that small tweaks won't be enough. Progress will require breaking the rules. By rules I don't mean the written ones, the ones you can find in textbooks or published by regulators. No, these are the unwritten rules, the norms, expected behaviors and ways of thinking. And I can't imagine a better first guest than yourself. For more than any other writer I've ever read or podcaster I've ever listened to, you adore the rule breakers in all walks of life including the arts, the military, sports and technology. So let me start by asking you, if we built a rule breaker hall of fame who would be a few of your first nominees and why?
- Malcolm Gladwell: Such a great question. I wrote about one in one of my books, I've forgotten which one, oh, in *David and Goliath*, I wrote about a man named Emil Freireich who was maybe the most important pioneer in combination chemotherapy and he's a classic example of a rule breaker because at the time he was trying to treat childhood leukemia. Not only was the idea of combining different therapeutic agents in one regimen... I mean, to say it was outlandish is not even giving... People thought that was so heretical and nuts but he was trying it on children and he was doing it.

Malcolm Gladwell: He realized the only way to cure leukemia was to take children to the brink of death repeatedly once a month for whatever it was, a year, a year and a half, using some of the most toxic drugs we know, putting them through an incredible amount of pain, taking them to the brink of death, bringing on side effects that were unspeakable, that was the way to cure them of a deadly disease. What he went through when he was trying to prove the value of combination chemotherapy for this... what he went through on a social level was unbelievable. I mean, he was denounced, ostracized. In retrospect, it's miraculous he was even able to do the experiments at NCI that he was able to do. Maybe it's because it was the 1960s and there was a different attitude about risk taking and rule breaking but he was... And my conclusion was he was able to do what he did in large part because of his personality.

Malcolm Gladwell: He was simply someone who just didn't care if everyone else thought he was a monster and you need to be that way if you're a rule breaker, right? I mean, you can't be someone who's too concerned about what your peers think and it's really, really hard to find people who both have the imagination to break a rule and figure out a better way of doing things and also the strength of character to not care about the naysayers. It's easy to find one of those traits and not the other. Very difficult to find both those traits in combination.

Robert Pearl: Given that, how can we differentiate a positive rule breaker from a sociopath or fool?

Malcolm Gladwell: I'm not sure we always can, at least at the beginning, because all of those three states you've described can look very similar out of the gate. So a lot of people looked at Emil Freireich and said, "He's a sociopath. He's torturing these children. He's violating every norm of medicine. What he's doing has no place at the NCI." They thought he was a Nazi doctor, right? That's what they thought he was. Turns out actually, no. He did more to... probably saved as many lives as... He's on the short list of people who saved thousands or tens of thousands of lives because of the things that he... But in the moment when he was starting out it looked he was a sociopath and maybe even a fool.

Malcolm Gladwell: In the early 1960s and late 1950s the smartest people in medicine thought you could not combine chemotherapy drugs, that they would cancel out. If you combined them they would cancel each other out and more than that they would bring on... The side effect profile was so overwhelming that you would be doing more harm than good. So he looks like a fool when he says, "Actually no, I think we can do that." He looks rash. He looks intemperate. He looks a Nazi doctor. That's the thing we have to keep in mind I think, is when we make those kinds of judgements of rule breakers we may be right. There's going to be some sociopaths mixed in there. I mean, there's going to be the Elizabeth Holmes. She's actually an interesting and equally complicated... Because that's the kind of territory that she's operating in, right?

Malcolm Gladwell: She's selling her idea to a group of people who are aware of the fact that sometimes great ideas look crazy in the beginning. So that's why they give her a

pass, right? She goes to all these wise Silicon Valley people who have seen a version of this play out many times in the past and are aware of the fact that some percentage of truly brilliant, transformative, incredibly lucrative ideas look completely impossible and nuts out of the gate. And her idea looks impossible and nuts and they think, "Well, I don't know, it's worth gambling on. There's a 10% chance or a 5% chance or a 1% chance it works but if it does work my one million dollar investment's going to be worth a billion dollars." Right? So from their standpoint I don't think that those who invested with Elizabeth Holmes are irrational. I think it's rational for someone with a lot of money in Silicon Valley to make bets on crazy ideas because there's a lot of other crazy ideas that did pay off, right?

Malcolm Gladwell: Had she been right that company would be worth, I mean, untold billions of dollars, right? Would I have given Elizabeth Holmes \$10,000 in 2005, whenever, I've forgotten when she starts her company, had she approached me? I don't know. Probably. If I had 10,000 lying around... It's a lottery bet, right? Now as it turns out, she falls into either the sociopath or the fool category not the... but we don't know in the beginning, that's the thing. And if you get too upset, too intent on trying to separate out the visionaries from the fools and the sociopaths at the beginning then usually what you do is you just discourage anyone from breaking the rules.

Robert Pearl: Malcolm, you've written about people who do care what others think. I mean, you've written about Captain Sully landing in the Hudson, you've written about David and his battle with Goliath, you've written about many the impressionists' paintings and athletes, what else besides a certain thick skin gives them the courage to be rule breakers?

Malcolm Gladwell: Well there's obviously... These are people... tend to be people who... They do have a vision, right? They are powered by something that's really consequential and that motivates them. Freireich, to return to him, is a... he's dogged and there's a problem that he has sunk his teeth into which is, "We have this untreatable disease that's 100% fatal. I refuse to accept that. As a doctor I cannot... As a hematologist I cannot in good conscience continue my career without taking a crack at trying to solve this problem." That's how he would phrase it, I think. That, "I went to medical school to learn about diseases of the blood. This is a disease of the blood. How can I continue unless I give it my best shot?" And I think there's a version of that that every one of these rule breakers have which is this... they're powered by a vision of whether they can make their world better.

Malcolm Gladwell: I've just been from my own podcast doing all these interviews about people who are trying to solve the relative age effect which is the observation that in sports and in education there are undue advantages given to people who are in the oldest part of their class, right? If your cut off for soccer teams is January 1st then kids born in January and February are overrepresented at elite levels, right? And that's stupid. Why would you leave someone who's born in December? Why would you leave that talent on the table just because they

don't conform to your arbitrary cutoff for organizing your sport? It's been incredibly difficult to change the rules in that arena for all of the normal reasons. It complicates matters. You have to explain a complicated notion to people. You have to rearrange the way you've been doing things for a hundred years.

Malcolm Gladwell: There's all this logistical inertia that is in place in institutions but the people who want to change it, the two countries that have been most adamant about it, trying to change this in the world of soccer are the Netherlands and England. Why? They're two small countries that are crazy about soccer that have been repeatedly denied at the highest levels. They want to win the World Cup and they know they can't win... you can't win the World Cup if your population is 5 million unless you are insanely efficient in how you exploit talent, right? So the Dutch have a reason. United States does not have a reason to do this in basketball. The Germans don't have a reason to do this in soccer. The Dutch do. And so I think rule breakers tend to be people who are in a position where they have a compelling reason to want to deviate from the norm.

Robert Pearl: You've written a lot about the history of racism and the people who have broken those rules, was it simply out of desperation you think, that they did so?

Malcolm Gladwell: That's part of it. The project I'm working on now is about the former mayor of Los Angeles, Tom Bradley, the first Black mayor of LA, one of the first Black mayors of any major American city and this is a man who did the impossible. He was a sharecropper's son from South LA who became the most powerful big city mayor in America for 20 years and he repeatedly is the first to do something. The first Black man to do 'X'. Fill in the blanks, he did it. And so he is a classic. So the question is what fires him? Part of it is anger that he can see no reason why... Tom Bradley is... In every setting he was ever in until his dying day he was always the smartest, the best looking, the biggest, you name the superlative. He's one of these people who had it all, right? And he could never wrap his mind around the fact that he could be the smartest, the fastest, the biggest, the best looking, the most ambitious, the most charismatic in the room and not be allowed to succeed.

Malcolm Gladwell: It didn't make any sense to him when he was 14 and it didn't make any sense to him when he was 75. His inability to understand why the kind of insane unfairness of the position he was being put in over and over and over again motivated him to say, "I'm not going to play by the rules. This just doesn't make any sense to me." And I think many people are in that position, people who are struck by the transcendent inequality or unfairness of their position and that gives you... That can be a very, very powerful motivator.

Robert Pearl: Do you consider yourself to be a rule breaker?

Malcolm Gladwell: No. No, I have skated on the smooth pond of privilege my entire life. I'm a middle-class Canadian from at a time when to be a middle class Canadian was to be the most advantaged person on the face of the earth, so I have never had

any... I like pursuing mildly controversial or counterintuitive ideas, that doesn't make you a rule breaker. I mean, I have been cosseted by some of the biggest institutions in journalism my whole career. I went from The Washington Post to The New Yorker. That's not the profile of a rule breaker.

Robert Pearl: Let me disagree Malcolm, because I think you have broken the rules about how you write nonfiction, not when you're with The New Yorker but when you wrote your subsequent books because you were willing to take hypotheses for which 70, 80%, maybe 90% definitive facts and create narratives to help other people understand problems, understand their lives. You're the only author that I'm aware of in the nonfiction world that's had parody books written about your books. I think you've totally broken the rules about how nonfiction is written and other people have followed in your footsteps even if I'm only talking about the unwritten rules, not the legal and regulatory ones.

Malcolm Gladwell: Well you're very nice to say that. I'll give you this, that I have... I might appear to be a rule breaker because I'm very interested in rule breakers. That is to say I'm drawn to different topics than other people because I have a great affinity for the iconoclast. I am the son of a great iconoclast and so I have a great affection for people who like to do things their own way and are indifferent to what the world thinks of them. That was Graham. That was Graham Gladwell. One of the great hilarious, indomitable iconoclasts that I've ever known ,so maybe I'm one by proxy, how's that?

Robert Pearl: That's great. Do you think the 10,000-hour rule that you've popularized and rule breaking align or clash with each other?

Malcolm Gladwell: That's interesting. The 10,000-hour rule is just about the... it's an observation about the underappreciated power of effort, right? It's a useful metric for getting people to think about how much can be gained through sheer repetition, practice, willpower, grit, that cluster of things. You can accomplish a great deal more than you realize and so it helps you put talent in perspective. It says that your ability to succeed in a given world may have less to do with some kind of natural-born gift and more to do with your willingness to apply yourself in a given domain. How far are you willing to run with your gifts? Rule breaking is very much about that notion of your willingness to apply yourself and run with your gifts in new direction.

Malcolm Gladwell: I don't think you can find a rule breaker who understands any... follows any path to success other than outworking the status quo or everyone else, right? I don't think there's any other... What the rule breaker is, is someone who's willing to commit themselves to an unpopular idea at a level that exceeds that of their peers. That's my definition of a rule breaker. It's not holding an unpopular position, that's just a beginning. It's, are you then willing to bet a huge chunk of your own time, energy, career, what have you, on that idea and it is the magnitude of the bet that makes you a rule breaker.

Robert Pearl: What I meant was, do you have to be so expert, which takes 10,000 hours, in order to understand the systems well enough to break the rules or after doing it for 10,000 hours are you so committed to it that you're now afraid to break it and have to start all over again?

Malcolm Gladwell: I think both are true. I think that the downside of that kind of investment in a domain is it does make you... for some people it does capture them. If you've done 10 years of specialty training in medicine in a particular domain you're powerfully invested in and you've made it top and you're now Chief of 'X' at Mass General, it's going to be hard for you to be a rule breaker because you're now at the top of the... The system is working beautifully for you, right? At the same time I would say that simultaneously it's easy for you to be a rule breaker because you now have the expertise and the experience and the knowledge to understand what rules need to be broken. I mean, no one knows better than you what's wrong, right? You've lived it. This is one of those cases where I think both are true and maybe the most successful innovators are those who understand that, who work that contradiction.

Robert Pearl: Is that why you think that doctors in general, not with the exception of the chemotherapist you described earlier, find it hard to break the rules?

Malcolm Gladwell: Well, it's funny. I have a cousin who's a big deal doctor. I won't name his institution, you know it well, very big deal. And when I talk to him I don't find... His willingness to break the rules, it strikes me as enormous. He desperately wants to do all kinds of things differently but I think he, like many physicians, feels thwarted that the problem is not that the... I think that given the freedom many people in the medical profession, physicians would quite happily innovate in all kinds of areas but I think they're constrained by the institutions they're a part of, by the other parties involved in the... just the way... I mean, and I can't believe I'm telling you this but the way we have chosen to pay doctors for the work they do. Well, in many instances that makes it really hard for those doctors to break rules, right?

Malcolm Gladwell: If you're not going to get paid in the same way if you break a rule then why would you break the rule, right? If we held your pay out of it, if we said we're going to pay you just as much or more then you would say, "Alright let's do it." But you got a mortgage, you got kids in college, who's going to... it's this crazy system. In other professions when people break rules and bring greater economic efficiency or value we reward them. In medicine it's really unclear that we have a consistent pattern of rewarding the person who wants to do things better. With my cousin I had this... we were having a discussion about organic chemistry and my question was, remind me again why you have to take organic chemistry to go to medical school?

Malcolm Gladwell: It's really hard, weeds out a lot of people but is it relevant to being a good doctor? Why do you guys persist in having that? And he was like, "Oh, I mean, yeah, it's nuts. I don't know why we do it." But he's not in a position to change it. I mean, does he want to spend all of his capital, the limited number of things

that he can in his position make better about medicine? Does he want to spend his professional capital on trying to fix the weird obsession that medicine has with organic chemistry? I don't know. I mean, it's just hard in a world where there's a whole separate fiefdom over there of medical school administrators and institutions who are determined to do things the way they've always done them.

Robert Pearl:

This series actually came out of interview you did of me when you asked me the question about how would I change education and as you know the first one in the series was about how we train or how we accept medical students and then we train them and I point out that in the 20th century you had to carry a 50 pound backpack to have all the information in medicine and organic chemistry is simply a way we assess your ability to memorize because if you can't memorize a tremendous amount of facts you don't do well on that class. So it was the key skill that we were trying to assess for most of history and now in the 21st century where we carry cell phones and you can look up so many of the things that we used to test or acquire around memory and we've not made this change and advanced it and broken the rules for how we select and train the next generation who will be practicing 20, 30, 40 years from now. But let me ask you, what's one unwritten rule you'd like the United States to break?

Malcolm Gladwell:

Oh wow. I mean, there's 50. It strikes me that in many professions and in many areas we pay way too much attention to someone's age. So let me give you a small example of this, in your world as you know there is a current, and it's only going to get worse, nursing crisis, right? Massive. I talked to a friend of mine who's an administrator at a big hospital system who said that 100% of their profit last year was eaten up by increased nursing costs. Every penny that they make as a hospital system last year went to paying the same group of nurses more. That's how crazy it is. You must know this much more than me. So there's a thing where there's not enough nurses. We're clearly not using nurses in the most efficient way. They're all burning out. They're all quitting. I mean, this is an emerging... So the question is we have to rethink, well, are we treating nurses properly? Are we recruiting the right people into nursing? And are we managing a trajectory of nursing careers properly?

Malcolm Gladwell:

A profession where everyone quits at 50 has a problem, right? Precisely at the point in someone's career where we want them around, if they're leaving because they can't take it anymore, that's a major crisis. There's a case where this model of selecting people out in their early twenties into a profession, throwing them into the mix and then riding them as long as we can until they just say, "Enough." And quit at 50 or 55, that doesn't work, right? So now I'm wondering what if we just took age out of it? What if we made it really easy for people to enter nursing at 40 and we redesigned nursing so that someone at 40 could be comfortable with it? What would it take to have 65 year old nurses?

Malcolm Gladwell:

Well you couldn't work them nearly as hard physically but maybe having a 65 year old nurse who might have social skills and life experiences that are incredibly useful for good patient care, maybe the act of redesigning the

profession so a 65 year old could efficiently and meaningfully participate would be really, really useful for medicine. Now, is that possible? I don't know. I'd love to try it. I'd love for us to experiment with that, but we can only do that if we abandon this idea we have that what a profession is, is something you join at a young age and then carry over over the course of your life.

Robert Pearl: Is there one rule you regret not breaking?

Malcolm Gladwell: Yeah. I should have gone to college in a country other than the country I grew up in and I should have... not just country, in a culture other than the culture I grew up in. In other words the unwritten rule there is that the point of going to college is to maximize the academic successes you've had up until that point, right? You were a good student in high school so you go someplace where you could continue to have the same privileged position that you've had in high school. In fact, I think it would have more useful to do take the opposite approach. I thrived in high school. I should have gone to college in a place where I would've had to struggle. That would've made way more sense in retrospect.

Robert Pearl: I'd to give you a few categories and ask you to tell me who pops into your mind as a great rule breaker.

Malcolm Gladwell: Okay.

Robert Pearl: President of the United States.

Malcolm Gladwell: Oh, interesting. Have we had a rule-breaking president? Well, I mean, in a negative way Trump is a rule breaker. He systematically violated every norm that has constrained the Office of President for the last 100 years. Well, the great positive rule breaker would be FDR who threatens to pack the court, who is four terms, who is in the face of first economic catastrophe and then a war realizes that as president he has to fundamentally rewrite the contract between the American people and their government. I mean, the new deal is a spectacular act of rule breaking. That's not what Americans thought their deal with the government was and he said, "Oh, actually it is. Why? Because we've had a depression and there's too much suffering." So I think FDR is probably the best example.

Robert Pearl: Athlete.

Malcolm Gladwell: This is a dumb example, but do you remember the back-stroker David Berkoff?

Robert Pearl: Yes.

Malcolm Gladwell: The Berkoff Blast-off. Wasn't he at Stanford? He might have been. Can't remember. He figured out, so genius, that you could move faster under the water than above the water so in the backstroke when he took off, he wiggled like an eel underwater and surfaced, I don't know, 20 feet, 15 feet later than

everyone he was competing against and he'd be way ahead because he could move faster underwater. Now they've changed the rules, I think. You can't do it any more but I don't think he wanted... He had the world record for a while, I think, in the 100 meter backstroke because he succeeded at backstroking by limiting the amount of backstroking he did, which I just think is... I've always thought he was fantastic.

Robert Pearl: How about writer?

Malcolm Gladwell: Good rule-breaker writer. Well I mean, there's the classic James Joyce. He's kind of the modernist rule breaker but I'm trying to think of... And then there are the experimental novelists but I'm trying to think of... Here's one, I was writing, a little thing... my Facebook bulletin thing and I was writing about if you go on a road trip to the South what book should you read? And one of the first books I recommend is a book that won the Pulitzer Prize by Diane McWhorter called Carry Me Home and it is a rule-breaking book because she writes a book about the civil rights movement in Birmingham in the 1960s and she is a privileged white Birmingham native and it's really interesting. First of all it's rule breaking in that it's history that's also memoir in this really very unusual way, it doesn't fall into either category.

Malcolm Gladwell: But secondly the idea that she is someone who is outside of the world of African Americans in that period, very much on the opposite side of the line is choosing to write a deeply engrossing history about a culture that is not hers which is more and more difficult for people to do but the result is fascinating because you're seeing Birmingham through the eyes in '63, whenever, through the eyes of someone... a wealthy white person and who is coming to terms with their own privilege as they tell you the story. Anyway, it's a marvelous... I have always thought she was... That book is a fantastic example of constructive rule breaking in writing.

Robert Pearl: How about artist, painter, sculptor?

Malcolm Gladwell: Yeah, there was a great example of rule breaking in the classical music world in the '70s when they went from doing open auditions to blind auditions and discovered these were... Orchestras in that era were almost exclusively male and they honestly believed that women just weren't as good at doing classical music as men were, and when they went to blind auditions they discovered that they were suddenly hiring all kinds of women and what they... By breaking a rule about auditions, by making someone audition behind a screen they uncovered their own prejudice. They realized, "Oh, in a way we had been blind to, in a way we'd been unaware of, we had been discriminating against women. We had let the evidence of our eyes get in the way of our ears and only when we removed our eyes from the equation could we actually listen to people and realized women were as good as men." So the pioneers of that particular practice were brilliant rule breakers.

Robert Pearl: Any last thoughts you want listeners to know about rule breaking?

Malcolm Gladwell: Well my big question is, is it getting harder, not easier? Sometimes I worry it's getting harder and if it is getting harder then we need to pay a lot more attention to what we can do to restore the natural balance between this kind of transgressive risk taking and the importance of adhering to norms when that's the right course of action.

Robert Pearl: And what's your prescription?

Malcolm Gladwell: I think rule breaking is getting harder and that bums me out.

Robert Pearl: Maybe you should write a book and tell the world how to make the change happen and get people to read it...

Malcolm Gladwell: I will leave that for you.

Robert Pearl: Well thank you so much Malcolm. It's always a pleasure to talk with you and I always learn much and I'm sure the listeners all enjoyed it so thank you so much for being the first guest on Breaking The Rules podcast.

Malcolm Gladwell: My pleasure. I'm honored to be the first, Robbie.

Jeremy Corr: Robbie, what do you think about what Malcolm said?

Robert Pearl: Jeremy, Malcolm possesses a brilliant mind and the ability to take massive topics and boil them down to a few key ideas. He pointed out that rule breakers need to possess a vision for how to make the world better and a compelling reason to want to do so. Then they need a combination of thick skin, the willingness to embrace an unpopular position and the ability to invest themselves over time. I can't think of a better explanation of who rule breakers are and what they do.

Jeremy Corr: We hope you enjoyed this podcast and will tell your friends and colleagues about it. Please subscribe to Fixing Healthcare on Apple podcasts, Spotify or your favorite podcast platform. If you listened to the show please rate it five stars and leave a review. Visit our website at fixinghealthcarepodcast.com and follow us on LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter @FixingHCPodcast. Thank you for listening to Fixing Healthcare, Breaking The Rules with Dr. Robert Pearl and Jeremy corr. Have a great day.