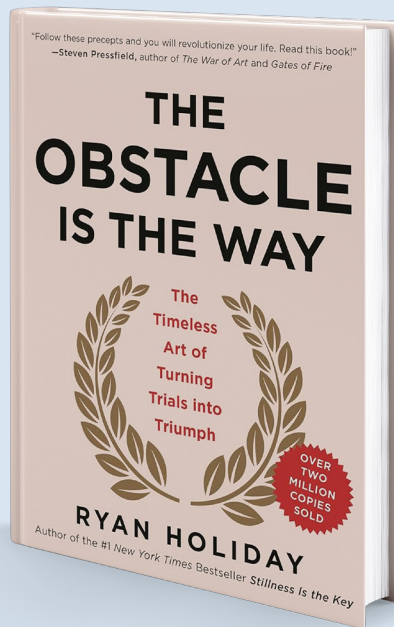


Book Snaps™

In-depth reviews of best-selling business books.



The Obstacle is the Way

The Timeless Art of Turning Trials into Triumph

By Ryan Holiday

Ryan Holiday is one of the world's bestselling living philosophers. His books, including *The Obstacle Is the Way*, *Ego Is the Enemy*, *The Daily Stoic*, and the #1 New York Times best-seller *Stillness Is the Key*, appear in more than forty languages and have sold over 10 million copies. He lives outside Austin with his wife and two boys ... and a small herd of cows and donkeys and goats. His bookstore, The Painted Porch, sits on historic Main Street in Bastrop, Texas.

A Book Review by Soundview

Turn Your Problems into Your Biggest Advantages

In his book, *The Obstacle Is the Way*, author Ryan Holiday encourages his readers to see obstacles and impediments in a new way. Instead of seeing them as roadblocks or insurmountable problems, he wants his reader to draw on the experience that history provides and realize that it is not despite obstacles that people succeed but rather because of obstacles that they succeed. He looks at historical figures as diverse as General Dwight D Eisenhower and Laura Ingalls Wilder as well as those from as far back as ancient Athens and as modern as President Barack Obama to show how people from all areas of life and through the ages have been able to face obstacles and use them to propel them forward. For Holiday, “the obstacle is the way.”

While each person has their own unique combination of obstacles, Holiday believes that “the responses they elicit are the same: Fear. Frustration. Confusion. Helplessness. Depression. Anger.” To a large degree, we cannot control the obstacles that confront us. That does not leave us helpless, however. We can control both our attitude about the problem and our approach to the problem, and therein lies the opportunity. Holiday quotes Andry Grove of Intel as saying, “Bad companies are destroyed by crisis. Good companies survive them. Great companies are improved by them.” Holiday’s book is not just about business, however. His principles apply to all people in all walks of life. They are principles for a successful life, not just a profitable company.

“Turn it around. Find some benefit. Use it as fuel.” This is the principle Holiday wants his readers to live by when they are faced with obstacles. There are three principles at play in changing obstacles into opportunities: “Perception, Action, and the Will,” and he organizes his book according to these three principles.

Perception

Holiday understands that it takes skill to properly align our perceptions, but it is a key to successfully meeting the demands placed upon us. Perception refers to “how we see and

understand what occurs around us – and what we decide those events will mean.” These perceptions can either serve to strengthen us or to weaken us.

When discussing the discipline that beneficial perception requires, he refers to John D. Rockefeller’s rise in the oil industry until he eventually controlled 90% of that industry. This all occurred within 20 years of the Panic of 1857. While those around him panicked as the financial crisis developed, Rockefeller stayed calm. He took the Panic of 1857 and used it as an opportunity to watch and learn. He saw it as a “baptism in the market,” learning how many people were left unprepared for market challenges. He learned that because the market is volatile, it requires discipline to make a profit. As Holiday says, “For the rest of his life, the greater the chaos, the calmer Rockefeller would become, particularly when those around him were either panicked or mad with greed.” Rockefeller was able to succeed because he taught himself “to see opportunity inside the obstacle,” something many people cannot do. Holiday insists that when faced with obstacles, we have a choice: we can follow our emotions and the direction of the crowd, or we can filter them. This filtering requires discipline, but it is this discipline which can help a person determine the most prudent course of action.

Crucial to success in the face of obstacles is a determination to control what it is that we can control, namely how we allow something to affect us. Holiday writes about Rubin Hurricane Carter who went from being a boxing superstar to being incarcerated for a triple homicide he did not commit. Rather than allowing himself to fall into despair and rail against what he could not control, Carter chose to focus on what he could control. He spent all of his free time in prison working on his legal case instead of fighting against what he could not control: the rules and confines of prison life. Holiday explains that the large amount of time prisoners have on their hands is part of why some people are able to drastically turn their lives around while incarcerated. When inmates learn to accept where they are and control what they can, some are able to make great strides that prepare them well for life in the outside world. All of this requires controlling perceptions. Holiday writes, “There is no good or bad without us, there is only perception. There is the event itself and the story we tell ourselves about what it means.”

“When we aim high,” Holiday writes, “pressure and stress obligingly come along for the ride. Stuff is going to happen.” When obstacles do arise, grace and poise are the most important characteristics a person can possess; these are even more important than talent is. He sees these attributes as acts of defiance because they require an individual to refuse to be intimidated. He believes that the road is tough, but there are always countermoves that people can make when faced with obstacles if they refuse to allow themselves to become overcome with fear and with a sense of failure.

NASA, Holiday explains, understands this need for a clear head in the face of obstacles. This is why before its first launch, NASA trained astronauts in hundreds of simulations. NASA knew things would go wrong, and they also knew that high above the Earth, panic will lead to death. Holiday says, “Un-

certainty and fear are relieved by authority. Training is authority.” We must understand that we do not have the luxury of panicking when faced with obstacles. Rarely does allowing our emotions to upset us give us options. Rather, oftentimes they get in the way of introspection, alertness, and wisdom. He does not encourage his reader to ignore feelings. Rather, he wants his readers to acknowledge them and deal with them. He does not, however, want them to believe that feeling something is the same thing as doing something.

When moving on to discuss objectivity, Holiday says that the thought, “This happened and it is bad” are actually two different ideas. The first part explains an objective reality, but the second refers to our interpretation of it. “The observing eye sees simply what is there,” he paraphrases Miyamoto Musashi as saying; “the perceiving eye sees more than what is there.” In other words, the observing eye does not see insurmountable obstacles; it just sees what is there. It is the perceiving eye that makes judgments about it. Holiday believes that these perceptions are not helpful as they inundate us with information we do not need. It takes strength to override our perceptions and the instinctual behavior they lead to. He encourages his reader to take themselves out of the equation and consider what advice they would give to another in the same situation. This will make it easier for a person to determine the correct course of action to take.

Holiday writes, “Problems are rarely as bad as we think – or rather, they are precisely as bad as we think.” Because of this, people have to train themselves to avoid thinking about the meaning of everything. This requires training our brains from pursuing distracting thoughts and instead focusing on what is in front of us and what needs to be done. “It’s our preconceptions that are the problem.” Holiday maintains that there is always an opportunity in every situation. For example, instead of focusing on how problematic a difficult colleague is, a person can instead look at the opportunity that person gives them to appreciate good friends and keep alert while at work. Being able to become better because of obstacles is referred to as post-traumatic growth, and it propels individuals to new growth.

Action

Holiday maintains that “Action is commonplace, right action is not.” Our actions must be prudent and be in service of our larger goal. He tells the story of Demosthenes, Athens’s greatest orator. Demosthenes had a lot stacked against him that could have and possibly should have held him back. He did not succumb to these obstacles, however. He took deliberate action to overcome them. Stripped of his rightful inheritance and suffering from a severe speech impediment, he decided to become a great orator, inspired by oration he had seen in the past. He took numerous steps to overcome his speech difficulties and he took every opportunity he had to improve his skills. When faced with setbacks in winning back his inheritance, he became flexible and creative, always taking steps to achieve the goal set before him. He eventually succeeded in winning back the small part of his inheritance that was still left. Holiday maintains that how we react to bad circumstances tells us a lot about ourselves. He believes that many people, even if they can conceive of a solution,



...a lack of persistence is what stands in the way of most people achieving their goals. “

find themselves remaining stuck because it is easier to ignore a problem than it is to take right action. He writes, “No one is coming to save you. And if we’d like to go where we claim we want to go – to accomplish what we claim are our goals – there is only one way. And that’s to meet our problems with right action.”

The first part of taking action is simply to begin. People may be hindered from action because of fear or because of some other factor that is holding them back, but he says the first step is to “Take the bat off your shoulder and give it a swing.” He maintains that most people could be doing more or trying harder to get where it is they want to go. And while beginning to take action is important, equally important is persistence. We must refuse to give in to failure, and we must quiet the noise around us that is keeping us from our goals. He believes that a lack of persistence is what stands in the way of most people achieving their goals. When obstacles arise, discouragement is acceptable; quitting is not.

When a person takes action, they will fail. It is an inevitable part of the process. He finds failures to be beneficial, however, because “Failure puts you in corners you have to think your way out of. It is a source of breakthroughs.” He acknowledges that failure hurts, but he insists that the only way to make sure “we don’t benefit from failure – to ensure it is a bad thing – is to not learn from it.” Because of this, he does not want his reader to merely keep doing the same thing repeatedly with the same failing results. Rather, he wants his reader to listen to failure and find ways to improve because of it.

Holiday then moves on to describe The Process, a philosophy and method coined by the highly successful football coach, Nick Saban, of the University of Alabama. Saban would tell his players to focus on what they need to do at this exact moment rather than to look far ahead at future goals. As Holiday says, “Excellence is a matter of steps,” and it requires people to excel at each of these steps successively while blocking out distractions. He believes this is a relaxing process because even the largest tasks are “just a series of component parts.” While goals are important, the process of achieving them “is about doing the right things, right now. Not worrying about what might happen later, or the results, or the whole picture.” Two factors are critical to taking steps. First, a person needs to perform each step, each task, with excellence, believing that nothing is beneath them. They must maintain this commitment to excellence. Second, they must remember the maxim, “think progress, not perfection.” This requires people to look at where they want to go and accept, when necessary, imperfect solutions that can still end up bringing them to their goal. Sometimes this requires acknowledging that one way of doing things is impossible but then using this acknowledgment as an impetus to finding another way to solve the problem.

Will

Finally, Holiday turns his attention to the will. He calls the will “our final trump card” because it is the one thing that can never be taken from us. Even in the worst and the most immutable of circumstances, people still have the power to “turn it into a learning experience, a humbling experience, a chance to provide comfort for others.” This insistence on learning and growing is what he defines as will. Will allows for a person to find purpose in suffering.

Holiday writes, “If Perception and Action were the disciplines of the mind and the body, then Will is the discipline of the heart and the soul.” To exemplify what he means by this, Holiday turns his attention to President Abraham Lincoln who suffered tragedy in his life and also suffered from melancholy that would be labeled as depression today. President Lincoln used his suffering as a way to help others. He used what he suffered to help him lead the country during one of its most tumultuous times. Holiday claims that the will is what can allow people to be happy despite the horrific things that can happen to them.

Holiday goes on to ask his reader if they are prepared in case a worst case scenario ever does happen. He says that nobody is born prepared for such times. Rather it is through mental practice that people can develop the steel backbone that is sometimes necessary to handle the sometimes exceedingly difficult periods of life. This strengthening is best done during good times so that we have it to rely on during difficult times. Stoics refer to this steel backbone as the Inner Citadel, and it can never be taken from a person by outside forces. This Inner Citadel can only be strengthened through challenges and difficulties. As Holiday says, “The path of least resistance is a terrible teacher. We can’t afford to shy away from the things that intimidate us. We don’t need to take our weakness for granted.”

Part of this preparation for obstacles involves anticipating or thinking negatively. By this, Holiday encourages his readers to always make sure to include disruption in their plans. This requires people to come up with answers to some of their “what if...” questions, and then to go further and understand that if the worst really does happen that they will be okay. Holiday states that people will never be happy if they are looking to have other people always come through and for things to always go right because they simply will not. He does not see this attitude as pessimism because it can help people dig out from under weaknesses and manage setbacks as they come. Holiday knows that things could always be worse. He believes that it is an act of hubris to believe that we can control everything and that this idea of control is reinforced by breakthroughs that have made it possible for people to live more safely alongside

nature. But people cannot control everything, and he believes that this is fine. He says, “The way life is gives you plenty to work with, plenty to leave your imprint on.”

Because something can be learned from every experience and because people can use their will to choose how to respond, Holiday believes that people can learn to love everything, even their obstacles. He writes, “We have to put our energies and emotions and exertions where they will have real impact... This is what I’ve got to do or put up with? Well, I might as well be happy about it.” He understands that this is a foreign concept to many but that if we acknowledge that our opportunities come to us through our adversities, we can learn to love the obstacles because they provide fuel for our growth.

Perseverance is required for all that Holiday asks of his reader. This is different from persistence. Persistence requires a person to keep working despite obstacles until an objective is achieved. Persistence, however, is about looking at the big picture and is what gives a person the will to keep on fighting. This is important because there are many obstacles in life. We do not suddenly come to the end of them when we overcome one. Perseverance requires both energy and endurance. He believes that more people fail because of a lack of will than they do because of external circumstances. When people are faced with impossible situations, he believes one way they can shore up their will is by changing the focus from themselves onto how they can help other people, and he uses the example of Prisoner of War James Stockdale who used his time as a prisoner to help shore up his fellow captives.

Holiday is a stoic, and he ends his book by explaining how these principles of stoicism have been passed down through the years. He uses these principles to help guide his reader from perception to action and through the will. Right perception is necessary in order to take action. Choosing to and performing actions is critical to moving forward. No one gets anywhere without taking steps, and those steps must be rightly ordered. It is about focusing on the next step in front of us and taking that step. Both training our perception and acting on our goals requires will. It is the glue that holds the others together. Holiday breaks his book into three different sections, Perception, Action, and Will. Each of these sections is then broken down into smaller chapters pertaining to one small aspect of the larger principle. Because of this, his book is readable and easy to digest. He uses examples throughout history to exemplify his ideas, and these leave his readers with the impression that the greatest obstacles in life can be flipped and can, indeed, lead us to become stronger, better people, proving the maxim that what does not kill us makes us stronger.