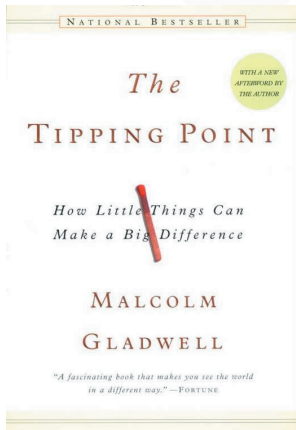




How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference

A summary of Malcolm Gladwell's *The Tipping Point* with Quick Action Ideas by Trey Pennington



The Tipping Point

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Published by Bay Back

Books, an imprint of Brown, Little and Company

280 pages

My Rating: ●●●●○

[to be a five dot, the book would need to have more specific application]

Theory: ●●●●●

[more conceptual and theoretical than "how to"]

Practice: ○○○○○

[no "how to"]

If you find this summary helpful, please pass it along to someone else. If Mr. Gladwell's concepts sparked a great idea that works for you, please share it with me. If you'd like help applying these insights to your work, let me know: ideas@treypennington.com [864] 360.6013

The Hush Puppy brand was dead. They sold only 30,000 pairs of shoes in 1994. Then something happened. In 1995 they sold 430,000 pairs and then four times that many in 1997.

Crime increased steadily in New York from the 1960s through the mid-1990s and then something happened. Violent crime and murders dropped dramatically. Annual murders dropped from 2,154 in 1992 to 770 by 1997.

In *The Tipping Point*, Malcolm Gladwell offers an explanation for such mysterious changes: ideas and behaviors spread and change just like epidemics do. He defines three characteristics of epidemics: contagiousness, little causes have big effects, and dramatic change can happen in a moment. He defines that moment as the Tipping Point.

Gladwell identifies "three agents of change": the "Law of the Few, the Stickiness Factor, and the Power of Context." The Law of the Few concerns the messengers or carriers of the epidemic. The Stickiness Factor focuses on the qualities of the message itself, and the Power of Context suggests external, environmental factors influence the spread of ideas and social behavior more than most folks realize.

The Law of the Few

Everyone has heard of Paul Revere and his famous midnight ride. Most have never heard of his partner, William Dawes. Both traveled throughout the areas surrounding Boston on the same day with the same message, "The British are coming." Revere rallied enough minutemen to turn back the British and is remembered for it. Dawes was unable to get the attention of his "marketplace" or stir them to action and is justly forgotten.

While their message was identical, their results were vastly different. The difference is found in the characteristics of the messengers themselves. Revere knew everyone. He was a Connector. Dawes was an unknown outside Boston and remains unknown today.

In spreading an idea epidemic, some people are more important than others. The most important ones are the Connectors, Mavens, and Salespeople. Connectors seem to know everyone. Their Rolodexes are bulging or they've used up all the memory on their Palms. Its not that they know a lot of people *like themselves*. Instead, they know a multitude of people from a wide variety of social circles and are comfortable in any circle. Bringing people together gives them joy and they see the potential in every relationship. They don't connect with people so they can get what they want. They connect with people because that's truly what they enjoy doing.

You've probably heard about the famous research that gave rise to the idea that everyone is connected to anyone else through six degrees of separation. Gladwell says the common conception of six degrees of separation misses the big point. Unless you're a Connector, you're not linked to everyone else in six steps. Instead, there are a very few people who are linked to everyone else in just a few steps. You and I are linked to the rest of the world through them!

Mavens are walking encyclopedias of knowledge. Just as the Connectors collect names and addresses, Mavens collect all the statistics and available information on a subject or product. They not only know which digital camera takes the highest quality pictures, they know where to buy it at the best price, the warranty options, and how to get the most out of the camera. You would never consider buying such a piece of equipment without talking to the Maven first. When you do talk with him, the Maven is ready to help. The Maven not only knows all the details, he delights in sharing them with you. What he won't do, though, is attempt to persuade you. That's the role of the Salesman.

Gladwell has a tough time describing the Salesman—"He seems to have some kind of indefinable trait, something powerful and contagious and irresistible that goes beyond what comes out of his mouth, that makes people who meet him want to agree with him. It's energy. It's enthusiasm. It's charm. It's likability. It's all those things and yet something more" (73). There is something inherent in the personality and character of the Salesman, something artistic, subtle, ethereal, something that encourages others to "synchronize" with him. His personality simply draws others into his own "rhythms." In a sense, the Salesman receives the messages, repackages it, translates it, and communicates it persuasively to others through the force of his personality.

To spread a social epidemic, you need all three: Mavens are the "data banks" that provide the message; Connectors are the "social glue" to spread the epidemic; and Salespeople are the ones who translate the message to the unpersuaded. All three messengers matter.

The Stickiness Factor

The epidemic needs more than messengers. It needs a message. The content of the message matters. Some messages are ignored and some are heard. Being heard is not enough. The message must be memorable enough to create change. Gladwell calls this the stickiness factor.

After reading Gladwell's presentation on the stickiness factor, I sensed he didn't fully develop the *how to* portion of his case. Reviewing the section for the third time I saw Gladwell himself realized he didn't tell how to: "The Law of the Few says that there are exceptional people out there who are capable of starting epidemics. All you have to do is find them. The lesson of stickiness is the same. There is a simple way to package information that, under the right circumstances, can make it irresistible. All you have to do is find it" (132).

While he doesn't fully develop how to make your message stickier, he gives good advice: Don't assume the world is as you think it is. Don't assume the effects you think you see flow from the causes you think you see. Instead, be willing to see the world from a different angle and test, test, test, your message before you attempt to start an epidemic with it. Be willing to do what is exactly opposite of what all the experts recommend.

The Power of Context

Epidemics demand a contagion and a carrier, but they don't happen in a vacuum. Epidemics require a context. In the context of epidemics, little things can make a big difference. "Epidemics are sensitive to the conditions and circumstances of the times and places in which they occur" (139). The escalating crime wave in New York came to an end because the transit authority wiped all the graffiti off all of the subway cars, cleaned them up, and kept them clean, and then arrested every person who attempted to get on the subway without paying the \$1.25 fare. Gladwell says people are

influenced more by factors in their environment, even such seemingly insignificant factors, than you might think.

Physical environmental factors are significant and so are social environmental factors. Gladwell gives credit to John Wesley for creating a booming religious movement—Methodism—by maintaining rigorous contact with a multitude of small congregations. Rebecca Wells' book, *The Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* steadily grew from a regionally popular paperback to a nationwide, best-selling phenomenon as Wells followed Wesley's example. Wells performed her book for groups of mothers and daughters across the country as she watched her book ride atop the best-sellers list for forty-eight weeks. If you're wanting to create your own contagious movement, you may need to do what Wesley and Wells did—create “many small movements first.”

Hush Puppies blossomed and New York crime dwindled because two good movements reached the tipping point. The right people influenced people near them by sharing an intriguing idea in a way people cared about. It all happened in an environment that enabled the idea to be remembered and then passed on to others. That's all you need to start your very own epidemic.

While Gladwell doesn't tell you the steps you need to follow to start your own epidemic, he at least gives you an idea of some of the necessary ingredients. More importantly, he lets you know it is at least within your reach. Anybody CAN start an epidemic.

Quick Action Ideas: Putting The Tipping Point to work in your business

1. Recognize that you cannot start an epidemic on your own. You will need the help of Connectors, Mavens, and Salespeople. Gladwell doesn't tell you how to find them but he knows you need them. Fortunately, the Mavens will find you. If you change the names Connectors and Salespeople to Centers of Influence, you may have an easier time finding these undervalued and hard to find epidemic partners.
2. Be willing to focus your marketing communication efforts on highly targeted and select groups and give groups information in a way that they can pass it on to others.
3. Make your product or service something worth talking about. Seth Godin hammers this point home in two of his recent works, *Purple Cow* and *Free Prize Inside*. I'll be posting summaries and actions points from both shortly at www.treypennington.com.
4. Don't assume anything. You don't know what that little thing will be—that something else—that will make your message tip. Instead, be willing to test your product, service, message, promotion, etc. before you roll it out. This certainly isn't anything new to anyone who's ever read a marketing book. Even so, it's worth saying. Few people actually DO IT. Who has the time to test?
5. Pay attention to the details. Whatever it is that makes your message tip may be something you'll never see, but your customer will. Maybe it's the lighting in your foyer that makes a prospect enjoy an unusual sense of peace about doing business with you.
5. Remember that it is far more important for a few people to remember your message than it is for many people to hear it.
6. Be patient. The big take-away from Gladwell's book is it takes time to start an epidemic. While epidemics seem to break out overnight, the carriers and contagions have been active for a long time before that magic moment, the tipping point, happens converting stockpiled potential into an epidemic. Make your product memorable. Keep looking for key groups and influence leaders. Test your message to see if people are understanding and remembering it. Pay attention to all the details. All it takes is a little something else. It's not the big things that create epidemics. It's the confluence of a lot of little things done together in the right places over an extended period.

7. Focus on the human factors of your business. Web sites, email, fax machines—the communications technology explosion makes it possible for you to have more contact with more people more often. That means you have even more ways to overwhelm people with information even faster than before. “When people are overwhelmed with information and develop immunity to traditional forms of communication, they turn instead for advice and information to the people in their lives whom they respect, admire, and trust” (275).

My Take

Gladwell’s book is well written and intriguing. I’m not surprised that it has been so popular for so long. Even so, there are a couple of big thoughts in his work that require more contemplation.

First, he says the environment determines behavior. Gladwell’s presuppositions regarding the origin and nature of man (evolution and advanced animal, respectively) open the door to his conclusions throughout the *Power of Context*. While his thesis *people behave differently in different contexts* has merit (consider how much you’re willing to pay per ounce of Coca-Cola at a vending machine, in a restaurant, and in the grocery store, for instance), Gladwell goes two or three steps further. He says, “our inner states are the *result* of our outer circumstances” (152, emphasis mine). Few would argue environmental and situational factors have *no* influence on our behavior as human beings. Gladwell gives too much weight to such factors—“when we think only in terms of inherent traits and forget the role of situations, we’re deceiving ourselves about *the real causes of human behavior*” (158, emphasis mine). To Gladwell, the environment is more important than one’s thoughts, principles, and character: “Character, then, isn’t what we think it is or, rather, what we want it to be. It isn’t a stable, easily identifiable set of closely related traits, and it only seems that way because of a glitch in the way our brains are organized. Character is more like a bundle of habits and tendencies and interests, loosely bound together and dependent, at certain times, on circumstances and context. The reason that most of us seem to have consistent character is that most of us are really good at controlling our environment” (163). Even if one were to accept such a statement as true, you’d still wonder, “Okay, if I’m good at controlling my environment, WHY am I and why would I care?” Gladwell minimizes the quality and content of human thinking: “...the convictions of your heart and the actual contents of your thoughts are less important, in the end, in guiding your actions than the immediate context of your behavior” (165).

To be fair to Gladwell, I must consider the context of his work. He did not embark upon a journey to explain all human behavior. What he does say is human behavior is a complicated bundle of functions that are influenced by more factors than most of us realize. Where we are, what we’re seeing, how we’re defining what we’re seeing, who’s seeing us, what we’re thinking about—are all factors that influence our behavior.

In my work with children with disabilities and their parents, I’ve seen many people consistently defy overwhelming and debilitating environmental and situational factors to live victorious lives. Their beliefs, thoughts, character, and decisions—their “inner states”—lifted them over and beyond the environmental factors Gladwell sees as driving human behavior.

Secondly, Gladwell’s “broken windows theory” sounds good but seems to have been debunked in the years since he wrote *The Tipping Point* (See Poking Holes in the ‘Broken Windows Theory’ at <http://chronicle.com/free/v47/i22/22a01401.htm>), though the theory is still popularized today. Gladwell offers what many of us are looking for—simple answers to solve our problems. The simple answer is: things are usually more complicated than that. ***Even so, at least two Power of Context concepts are worth contemplating: 1) people are influenced by the confluence of all the small things in their environment, things we often overlook and never purposefully consider, and 2) small groups have a profound influence on the spread of a social virus.***