

The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference  
By Malcolm Gladwell, (2000, 2002)

Reviewed by John Durel

We are accustomed to thinking of organizational change as a deliberate, evolutionary process. Leaders develop a strategic plan, with a vision and goals, and a timetable for gathering resources and taking action. The actions are rational, designed in a logical way to move the organization toward its goals. The timetable usually runs from three to five years, and although the results may not be precisely as envisioned, there is an assumption of moving forward at a steady pace and in a particular direction. We conceive of the plan as a roadmap that takes us from where we are to where we would like to go.

Malcolm Gladwell, in *The Tipping Point*, examines another kind of change, one that is unexpected and occurs in an extraordinarily short time. Why is it that, all of a sudden, a particular brand of clothing or a particular novel becomes wildly popular? The makers of Hush Puppies were astounded in 1995 when demand for their product increased fourfold in one year. It was not the result of a strategic plan. The publisher of *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* was pleased with a respectable sale of 15,000 copies in hardcover in 1996, and totally surprised by the success of the paperback, which ultimately hit the best seller list and sold 2.5 million copies.

What accounts for such dramatic, unplanned success? According to Gladwell, such changes come about because of little things that tip the balance, moving something from ordinary to extraordinary. Little changes in the way a product or service is designed and communicated to the public can have big effects on how the public responds.

Leaders of organizations can use the insights presented in this book to increase their odds of success. By paying attention to little things, they may be able to make a big difference.

### **Infectious Behavior**

The key to sudden and dramatic change is infectious behavior, much as a flu bug passes from one person to another. In a social sense this is called word-of-mouth marketing, as one person tells another about a particular product or service. However, not all people are equal in the process of spreading the word. Instead, three particular types individuals make it happen.

- **Connectors.** These are people who know a lot of other people. They have a knack for making friends and acquaintances. They know people from many different walks of life. They are able to cross social and economic boundaries. When they walk into a crowded room of strangers, their impulse is not just to hang with people they know, but to meet as many people as possible. Their importance to the word-of-mouth

process is not that they have a few good friends, but that they are liked by a lot of acquaintances.

- **Mavens.** These are people who accumulate detailed information about products or services in which they are interested. They like to research options and make comparisons. Also, they are happy to share what they know. They can tell you what, in their opinion, is good or bad about something you are considering, but they will leave it up to you to choose. They are important in the word-of-mouth process because their endorsement is respected and viewed as unbiased.
- **Salesmen.** These are not the slick types who are just out to make a sale. Rather they possess charm and charisma, and are able to persuade others to take their point of view. Their personalities are such that they affect not only what others think, but also how others feel. In the word-of-mouth process others will enthusiastically accept and adopt the salesman's opinion about a product or service.

Each of these three types of people plays a crucial role in spreading the word. To influence word-of-mouth about your organization, you should cultivate relationships with all three types. Find people who fit these descriptions, and make sure you keep them informed of who you are and what you do, especially when you are offering something new.

### **Stickiness**

An infection will not spread if the product or service fails to *stick* in the mind and heart of the recipient. Something can be sticky if it is:

- **Easily understood:** the recipient easily grasps what the product or service is. If it is confusing, the recipient will turn his attention elsewhere. Gladwell cites a study of Sesame Street, one of the stickiest of television programs, in which the producers discovered that children were attracted to the program, not when they were stimulated by color and movement, but when they easily understood what was happening; and they turned away from the program, not when they were bored, but when they were confused.
- **Practical:** it is easy and convenient for the recipient to participate.
- **Personal:** the recipient sees the connection to her own needs or interests.
- **Memorable:** once someone participates, the experience leaves a lasting, positive impression. If that person is a connector, maven or salesman, word will begin to spread.

### **The Power of Context**

Just as we often think of change as evolution, we tend to think of human behavior as rooted in deeply held beliefs and personality traits. However, there is ample evidence that the way we act has as much to do with circumstance as it has to do with what is inside of us. Gladwell cites an experiment at Princeton in which seminarians were asked to prepare a 15 minute talk on a passage from the bible. Just prior to making his presentation, each seminarian met with the head of the study to go over what he had prepared. He was then

directed to walk to another building where people were waiting. Along the path between the buildings someone was lying, obviously hurt. The purpose of the experiment was to see which seminarians stopped to help.

For those who stopped, there was no correlation with seminarian's purpose for joining the seminary. Those who had joined primarily to minister to the poor and needy were no more likely to stop than those who had joined for other reasons. Also, there was no correlation between the bible passage chosen for the talk and the likelihood of stopping. Seminarians on their way to talk about the Good Samaritan were just as likely to pass the stranger as were the others who had prepared talks on other topics. The only variable that made a difference was whether or not the seminarian thought he had enough time. Of those who were told that they needed to hurry because people were waiting, 10% stopped to help. Of those who were told that they had time to spare, 63% stopped.

Sometimes a little change in the environment in which the product is experienced or the message is received can tip the balance. Crime declined quickly in New York City in the mid-1990s, not because of long term economic or demographic trends, but because police focused on "quality of life crimes." Small changes in the context can change human behavior. For a nonprofit organization, this might mean that an especially warm greeting at the beginning of a constituent's experience, or an especially welcoming environment, would turn a satisfactory occurrence into a remarkable one. I had such an experience recently at the Constitution Center in Philadelphia, where the use of a live actor to narrate the introductory multi-media program (instead of the customary recorded narration) made that occasion for me both personal and memorable.

The implication is that little changes in the context can make a big difference. This means that as you plan to make changes in your organization, you do not have to think only in terms of big things. Making the right small changes can tip the balance.

### **The Power of Groups**

The leader of any social or religious movement soon discovers that one needs to create a community of believers or followers if change is to persist. Acting in groups is fundamental to human nature. Sudden change can occur when an idea catches on in a group, and moves from group to group. *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* became a best seller when book groups in northern California became enthusiastic about it.

People tend to belong to several groups. Most have a sympathy group, those ten to fifteen people for whom they care deeply. Other groups vary in size and intensity. 150 appears to be the maximum number of individuals with whom we can have a genuinely social relationship, where we have an understanding of who they are and how they relate to us.

Nonprofit organizations function in groups: staff, board, volunteers, friends, members, etc. Leaders should consider strategies for using these groups to tip the balance toward a desired change. For example, if an organization has thousands of members, it might look

within the larger group for smaller, special-interest sub-groups, no more than 150 members in size, and target these sub-groups for particular experiences or messages. This would likely be more effective than a mass message to the undifferentiated whole.

### **Band-Aids**

In dealing with organizational improvement, we usually deride the notion of putting a band-aid on problems. We feel we must go to the root of the issue. However, Gladwell points out that the real band-aid has been very valuable over the years, enabling countless individuals to continue to work, play, or walk with a blister or cut. Sometimes band-aids are a “good-enough” solution to a problem.

### **Application**

The concepts presented in *The Tipping Point* fall under a simple statement:

*Sometimes little changes yield big changes.*

As with any process of change, we do not know in advance what will work. The concepts presented in this book are worth learning and trying. Read the book and then use it to test your intuition. Manipulate the size of a group. Tinker with the environment. Reach out to a few special people. See if you can make this work for you.