

A review of
The Tipping Point
by Malcolm Gladwell,
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Rating: 9

(The Official Ayers Rating Scale goes from 1-10. Anything lower than 6 is thrown out. This produces a net five-point scale from 6-10.)

All right. So you've got a great idea. You need to move it throughout the organization. What should you do? Well, perhaps you should think about Mavens, Connectors, and Salesmen. And perhaps you should also consider the factors of stickiness and contagiousness.

Gladwell makes the case that epidemics follow a kind of predictable course of events. If you want to create your own epidemic— of ideas or actions – you can learn from studying those cases. All you may need to do is apply a careful 'push' at the right spot at the right time on the right person.

Gladwell shows that small changes at just the right points can 'tip' a phenomenon from almost-but-not-quite successful to a major trend. He points out that,

“These three characteristics – one, contagiousness; two, the fact that little causes can have big effects; and three, that change happens not gradually but at one dramatic moment – are the same three principles that define how measles move through a grade school classroom or the flu attacks every winter. ... The name given to that one dramatic moment in an epidemic when everything can change all at once is the Tipping Point.” (p 9)

Contagiousness he identifies as largely a characteristic of the messenger. Stickiness, on the other hand, is largely a characteristic of the message itself.

“The specific quality that a message needs to be successful is the quality of 'stickiness.' Is the message – or the food, or the movie, or the product – memorable? Is it so memorable, in fact, that it can create change, that it can spur someone to action?” (p 92)

An effective message must be sticky. Beyond the message, however, we need to attend to the messengers and look more carefully at contagiousness.

He talks about the key people involved in spreading an idea through a population. He calls these roles *Mavens*, *Connectors*, and *Salesmen*. Each plays a different role and makes a different contribution in promoting changing. The two roles which are off the usual track are the Connectors and the Mavens. What role does the Connector play?

“Connectors are important for more than simply the number of people they know. Their importance is also a function of the kinds of people they know. ... The point about Connectors is that by having a foot in so many different worlds, they have the effect of bringing them all together.” (p 46-50)

The Connectors form bridges between communities through weak ties to lots of communities rather than strong ties to a single community. Mavens serve as

“ ... information brokers, sharing and trading what they know. ... In a social epidemic, Mavens are data banks. They provide the message. Connectors are social glue: they spread it. But there is also a select group of people – Salesmen – with the skills to persuade us when we are unconvinced of what we are hearing, and they are as critical to the tipping of word-of-mouth epidemics as the other two groups.” (p 69 – 70)

Mavens gather and store data and information, and Salesmen ... well ... salesmen sell.

Gladwell introduces the Rule of 150, quoting research that 150 seems to be the maximum number of people we can view as peers and have social relationships with. He suggests then that for a change to endure, it must become part of the way things are done for that group of 150. If your goal is

“ ... to bring about a fundamental change in people’s beliefs and behavior, a change that would persist and serve as an example to others, you needed to create a community around them, where those new beliefs could be practiced and expressed and nurtured.” (p 173)

Look to your message and make sure it has Stickiness. Look to your messengers and make sure you have the right mix of people to ensure that your message will be appropriately Contagious.

Gladwell also offers an alternative view of the much-despised Band-Aid Solution:

“The Band-Aid is an inexpensive, convenient, and remarkably versatile solution to an astonishing array of problems. In their history, Band-Aids have probably allowed millions of people to keep working or playing tennis or cooking or walking when they would otherwise have had to stop. The Band-Aid solution is actually the best kind of solution because it involves solving a problem with the minimum amount of effort and time and cost.” (p 256 – 257)

Sometimes you may not be able to create the revolution. If you can introduce a Band-Aid solution when that will serve the purpose, then holding out for an all-inclusive solution may not in fact be the best course of action. Apply a Band-Aid, help the Mavens notice it, feed it to the Connectors, support the Salesmen, and who knows ... maybe your idea will stick.