

The Tipping Point

Malcolm Gladwell

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Introduction

This fascinating book, by Malcolm Gladwell talks about how little things can make a big difference. Though the book covers various social issues, business leaders can learn a lot about innovation, especially disruptive innovation by reading this book. If we think carefully, disruptive innovations share a lot with epidemics. Both result in major changes. So it is useful to understand how social epidemics occur.

Social epidemics share a basic, underlying pattern. First of all, they are clear examples of contagious behavior. The second distinguishing characteristic is that little changes have big effects. Finally, changes happen in a hurry.

These three characteristics – contagiousness; little causes having big effects; and change taking place not gradually but at one dramatic moment – are the same three principles that define how a disease spreads across the population. Of the three, the third trait – the idea that epidemics can rise or fall in one dramatic moment – is the most important, because it is the principle that makes sense of the first two and that permits the greatest insight into why change happens the way it does. Tipping Point is the name, Gladwell gives to that one dramatic moment in an epidemic when everything can change all at once. Innovators can learn a lot by identifying and anticipating tipping points.

The three rules of epidemics

Epidemics are a function of the people who transmit infectious agents, the infectious agent itself, and the environment in which the infectious agent is operating. Gladwell refers to these three agents of change as the Law of the Few, the Stickiness Factor, and the Power of Context.

In a given process or system, some people matter more than others. This is not a particularly radical notion. It is the 80/20 Principle in action. In any situation, roughly 80 percent of the “work” will be done by 20 percent of the participants. Social epidemics are driven by the efforts of a handful of exceptional people much lower than 20%. These are the sociable, energetic, knowledgeable and influential people, who play a key role in spreading the change.

This idea of stickiness has enormous implications for the way we regard social epidemics. We tend to spend a lot of time thinking about how to make messages more contagious – how to reach as many people as possible with our products or ideas. But the hard part of communication is message retention. Stickiness means that the message makes an impact. It sticks in people’s memory. The Stickiness Factor says that there are specific ways of making a contagious message memorable. To improve stickiness, heavy investments are not needed. A few simple changes in the presentation and structuring of information can make a big difference in how much of an impact it makes. So, people

with a new idea should know how to make a pitch, so that they create the maximum impact.

The Power of Context says that human beings are a lot more sensitive to their environment than they seem. The key to getting people to change their behavior, sometimes lies in the smallest details of their immediate situation. Thus, we may be helpful people. But if we are in a tearing hurry to reach our destination, we may totally ignore someone who approaches us for help on the way. We may not be criminals. But in some situations, seeing something which is really upsetting, we may commit a crime.

The three rules of the Tipping Point – the Law of the Few, the Stickiness Factor, the Power of Context – offer a way of making sense of epidemics.

The law of the few

In spite of the emergence of sophisticated electronic media, word of mouth is still the most important form of human communication. We need people who link us up with the world. These are connectors, people with a special gift for bringing the world together. We need to tap connectors if a new idea has to gain acceptance.

What makes someone a connector? The first criterion is that connectors know lots of people. They are the kinds of people who seem to know everyone. They have a truly extraordinary knack of making friends and acquaintances. They are people whom all of us can reach in only a few steps because, for one reason or another, they manage to occupy many different worlds and subcultures and niches. These are people, with a wide range of contacts, who seem to be all over the place.

Another group of people who create a disproportionately significant impact is Mavens. These are very knowledgeable people. Mavens, are not passive collectors of information. They not only know how to get the best deal but also want to tell others about it. A Maven is a person who has information on a lot of different products or prices or places. This person likes to initiate discussions with consumers and respond to requests.

A Maven is not a persuader. He's not the kind of person who indulges in arm twisting. A Maven is not only a teacher but also a student. Mavens are really information brokers, sharing and trading what they know.

In a social epidemic, Mavens are data banks. They provide the message. Connectors are the social glue: they spread it. But there is also a select group of people whom Gladwell calls Salesmen, who have the skills to persuade us when we are unconvinced of what we are hearing. Persuasion often works in unexpected ways. Part of what it means to have a powerful or persuasive personality to draw others into one's own rhythms and dictate the terms of the interaction. Little things can, apparently, make as much of the difference as big things. Non-verbal cues are as or more important than verbal cues. The subtle circumstances surrounding how we say things may matter more than what we say. Persuasion often works in ways that we do not appreciate. Salesmen are masters of the art of persuasion.

The Stickiness Factor

In epidemics, the messenger matters. Messengers are what make something spread. But the content of the message matters too. And the specific quality that a message needs to be successful is the quality of “stickiness.” Is the message so memorable, that it can create change, that it can spur someone to action?

According to a study done by one advertising research firm, whenever there are at least four different 15-second commercials in a two-and-a-half-minute commercial breaks, the effectiveness of any one 15-second ad sinks to almost zero. Much of what we are told or watch, we simply don’t remember. The information age has created a stickiness problem.

Retaining the attention of people and getting them focused on the message we are trying to send is not all that easy. Take the case of children. They do not just sit and stare at the television. They can divide their attention between a couple of different activities. There are predictable influences on what makes them look back at the screen.

Research has thrown up several interesting findings on how to get the attention of customers. In one experiment, two groups of five-year-olds were showed an episode of a popular TV Serial, Sesame Street. The kids in the second group were put in a room with many attractive toys on the floor. The kids in the room without the toys watched the show about 87 percent of the time, while the kids with the toys watched only about 47 percent of the show. But when they tested the two groups to see how much of the show the children remembered and understood, the scores were exactly the same. This result stunned the two researchers. Kids, they realized, were a great deal more sophisticated in the way they watched than had been imagined. The five year-olds in the toys groups were attending quite strategically, distributing their attention between toy play and viewing so that they looked at what for them were the most informative parts of the program. This strategy was so effective that the children could gain no more from increased attention.

Kids do not watch when they are stimulated and look away when they are bored. They watch when they understand and look away when they are confused. If we are in the business of educational television, this is a critical difference. It means if we want to know whether – and what - kids are learning from a TV show, all we have to do is to notice what they are watching. And if we want to know what kids aren’t learning, all we have to do is notice what they aren’t watching.

The Law of the Few says that there are exceptional people who are capable of starting epidemics. All we have to do is find them. The lesson of stickiness is that there is a simple way to package information that, under the right circumstances, can make it irresistible. All we has to do is find it.

The Power of context

Epidemics are sensitive to the conditions and circumstances of the times and places in which they occur. The Power of Context states that an epidemic can be reversed, can be

tipped, by tinkering with the smallest details of the immediate environment. The Power of Context says that behavior is a function of social context. Again it emphasises that what really matters is little things.

Character, is not what we think it is or, rather, what we want it to be. It is not 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 a consistent character is that most of us are really good at controlling our environment though we may not realise it. When it comes to interpreting other people's behavior, human beings invariably make the mistake of overestimating the importance of fundamental character traits and underestimating the importance of the situation and context.

According to Gladwell, the convictions of the heart are less important, in the end, in guiding actions than the immediate context of behavior. When we are trying to make an idea or attitude or product tip, we're trying to change our audience in some small yet critical respect. We're trying to infect them, sweep them up in our epidemic, convert them from hostility to acceptance. That can be done through the influence of special kinds of people, people of extraordinary personal connection. That's the Law of the Few. It can be done by changing the content of communication, by making a message so memorable that it sticks in someone's mind and compels them to action. That is the Stickiness Factor. But small changes in context can be just as important in tipping epidemics, even though that fact appears to violate some of our most deeply held assumptions about human nature.

Gladwell makes his point with an example. There is a world of difference between being inclined toward violence and actually committing a violent act. A crime is a relatively rare and aberrant event. For a crime to be committed, something extra, something additional, has to happen to tip a troubled person toward violence. Those Tipping Points may be as simple and trivial as everyday signs of disorder like graffiti, broken windows or shabbily maintained precincts. The implications of this idea are enormous. The previous notion that disposition is everything – that the cause of violent behavior is always “sociopathic personality” or “deficient superego” or the inability to delay gratification or some evil in the genes – is, in the end, the most passive and reactive of ideas about crime. It says that once we catch a criminal we can try to help him get better but there is very little we can do to prevent crime from happening in the first place. The old understanding of handling crime epidemics leads inevitably to a preoccupation with defensive measures against crime like putting an extra lock on the door and locking up criminals for longer, so that they have less opportunity to do the rest of us harm.

Once we understand that context matters, that specific and relatively small elements in the environment can serve as tipping points, that defeatism is turned upside down. Environmental tipping points are things that we can change: we can fix broken windows and clean up graffiti and change the signals that invite crime in the first place. Gladwell argues that using tipping point theory, crime can not only be better understood but also

prevented. Extending the logic, innovators must also think carefully and creatively how to make the new idea more acceptable to customers.

Spreading ideas

What Mavens and Connectors and Salesmen do to an idea in order to make it contagious is to alter it in such a way that extraneous details are dropped and others are exaggerated so that the message itself comes to acquire a deeper meaning. If anyone wants to start an epidemic, then he or she has to somehow employ Connectors, Mavens, and Salesmen in this very way. He or she has to find some person or some means to translate the message of the innovators into something the rest of us can understand.

We need to understand human psychology well if we want to know how a new idea can gain acceptance. Much of our decision-making is unconscious, subtle, complicated and not very well understood. For example, in the case of suicide, the decision by someone famous to take his or her own life has an unexpected impact. It gives other people, permission to engage in a deviant act as well. Suicide acts as an advertisement for a particular response to problems. Many people who are unhappy, have difficulty making up their minds because they are depressed. They are living with this pain. There are various options available like attending a religious discourse or watching an escapist movie. Suicide is another alternative.

Another social problem, smoking offers a lot of clues about how the human mind works. Gladwell feel it is absolutely essential to understand why the war on smoking has stumbled so badly. Over the past decade, the anti-smoking movement has railed against the tobacco companies for making smoking cool and has spent untold millions of dollars of public money trying to convince teenagers that smoking isn't cool. But people are well aware that smoking was never cool. Smokers are cool. Smoking epidemics begin because of the extraordinary influence of a select few who are responsible for driving the epidemic forward.

Conclusion

Getting people to do something different requires concentrating resources on a few key areas. The Law of the Few says that Connectors, Mavens, and Salesmen are responsible for starting word-of-mouth epidemics. If we are interested in starting a word-of-mouth epidemics, our resources ought to be solely concentrated on those three groups. No one else matters.

We have trouble estimating dramatic, exponential change. There are abrupt limits to the number of cognitive categories we can make and the number of people we can truly love and the number of acquaintances we can truly know. We throw up our hands at a problem phrased in an abstract way, but have no difficulty at all in solving the same problem rephrased as a social dilemma. All of these things are expressions of the peculiarities of the human mind and heart. They refute the notion that the way we function and communicate and process information is straightforward and transparent. In reality, it is messy and opaque.

If there is difficulty and volatility in the world of the Tipping Point, there is a large measure of hope as well. Merely by manipulating the size of a group, we can dramatically improve its receptivity to new ideas. By tinkering with the presentation of information, we can significantly improve its stickiness. By finding and reaching those few special people who hold so much social power, we can shape the course of social epidemics.

Tipping Points are a reaffirmation of the potential for change and the power of intelligent action. As Gladwell concludes, the world may seem like immovable and implacable. But with the slightest push, in the right place, it can be tipped. Innovating companies can certainly use the principle of Tipping Points to achieve greater success.