

The Tipping Point. – Malcolm Gladwell
Abacus publishing – ISBN 0 349 11346 7

In May 2000 Malcolm Gladwell, a journalist for the Washington Post, published a book called ‘The Tipping Point’. It was to revolutionise our thinking about change. It was based on years of study about changes in society. He looked at such cases as Hush Puppies – a brand that was in terminal decline but recovered to their highest sales ever within two years. He looked at the crime epidemic in New York City in the mid 90’s, which rose dramatically year after year, but then suddenly fell by 65% in one year.

Through these and many other studies Malcolm Gladwell drew some conclusions about change that led us to re-think some of our key beliefs regarding change. He related his findings on change to epidemics, and discovered that three factors impact on change:

1. Contagiousness

Some interventions in change seem to ‘catch’. They seem to pass from person to person at great speed, often with no real visible means of detecting how this happens.

2. Little causes can have big effects.

We are conditioned to think that to make big changes we need to make big interventions. Actually a well placed small change can have expediential results.

3. Change is gradual only to a point, once this point is reached (The Tipping Point), change then happens at a dramatic pace.

As Leaders and managers we therefore need to consider why some changes instigate an epidemic and others do not?

Epidemics are a function of:

- θ the people who transmit infectious agents (“The Law of the Few”)
- θ the infectious agent itself (“The Stickiness Factor”)
- θ the environment in which the agent is functioning (“The Power of Context”)

He goes on to draw our attention to the three principal factors that influence the tipping point:-

1. The law of the few
2. The stickiness factor
3. The Power of Context

The law of the few recognises that it is only a few key people who are really responsible for change. (This may depend on an individual’s social patterns, contacts, ability to influence etc). This is not about procedure or process. Even in today’s

technological world word of mouth is still the most important factor behind rapid change.

“Six degrees of separation” states that we are all linked to each other in some way through six steps. However further research on this shows that actually there are a select few who are ‘connectors’. These are people with a special gift for connecting others, making social links, networking. They pass on change messages.

Another group are called ‘mavens’, these are people who accumulate knowledge. They have information on the workplace and they have ‘insider’ information since they keep their ears close to the ground. Mavens have a desire to help you by using the information they have. These mavens can start word of mouth epidemics. They tend to convince others through their knowledge ‘expertise’.

The third and final group that are directly responsible for ‘the tipping point’ are ‘salesmen’. Their outlook is persuasive and positive and they attract people who then want to listen to and agree with them.

- θ Mavens - one who accumulates knowledge
 - ♣ love to share it with other people/help them

- θ Connectors - people with a special gift for bringing the world together
 - ♣ they span many different social and business arenas
 - ♣ masters of the “weak tie” connections

- θ Salesmen
 - ♣ persuade others
 - ♣ non-verbal clues are key (the “nodding” experiment!)

The stickiness factor recognises that many messages go in one ear and out the other. ‘Stickiness’ means that a message makes an impact, you cannot get it out of your head and it sticks in your memory. The stickiness factor says that there are specific ways of making a contagious message memorable. Relatively simple changes in the presentation and structuring of information can make a big difference in how much of an impact is made. If you pay careful attention to the structure and format of a message then you can dramatically enhance the stickiness of the message. Relevance, telling a story, eliciting interaction and repetition are a few of the key factors that lead to ‘stickiness.’

The power of context recognises that people behave differently to the same situation according to the context of the situation. For example a recent study showed that when a person comes across a person who has collapsed, if they are on their own there is an 85% chance that they will help this person. However if they are in a crowded area then there is only a 31% chance of them helping this person. The context shapes the behaviour.

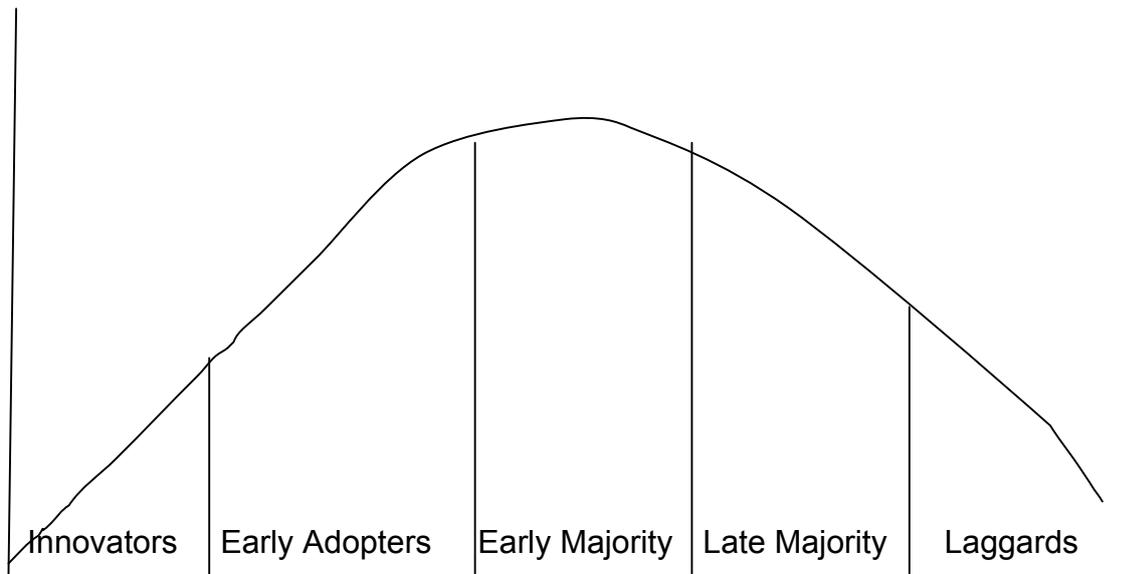
Epidemics can be tipped by tinkering with the smallest detail of the immediate environment. This element suggests that contrary to previous popular belief, we are acutely sensitive to the context around us.

The second element to the power of context is ‘groups’ - in which change can be supported, practised and nurtured. In large groups such as a whole department there is substantial evidence that indicates that 150 people is significant in terms of belonging, culture and change. It highlights the power of unity with everyone in a complex

enterprise sharing a common relationship, philosophy, understanding or goal. Groups produce a way of becoming interdependent, of relying on each others skills and abilities rather than doing it all yourself. The phenomenon of peer pressure is an important factor in change.

The paradox of the epidemic is that in order to create one large contagious movement, you often have to create many small movements first.

The diffusion model illustrates how an idea (or a behavioural change) moves through a population.



Attitudes of Early Adopters and Early Majority are very different.

As stories spread certain events get omitted (ie “levelling”), while others get “sharpened” as the story “gravitates in memory toward what is familiar or has some special emotional significance.”

The Connectors, Mavens and Salesmen carry out this modifying process so the idea appeals to a wider range of people (i.e. the Early Majority).

Most contagious ideas are seeded in a number of areas/aspects people are in contact with. Contagiousness is about the messenger, stickiness about the message. An example of this being smoking – sticking with it depends on some overall pleasure from the first experience (even if otherwise aversive).

In summary, to make something (ie an idea, a behavioural change, a message) likely to ‘tip’:

- manipulate size of group to improve its receptivity to new ideas
- tinker with presentation of information to improve its stickiness
- find and reach the few, special people who hold so much social power.