The Tipping Point

How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference

Malcolm Gladwell

New Afterword by Malcolm Gladwell

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Reviewed by Lydia Morris Brown

Introduction

On the same day that Paul Revere rode north from Boston, spreading the word that the British were coming, William Dawes rode west carrying that same message. How is it that Revere’s ride is heralded to this day, while the endeavors of Mr. Dawes barely rate a footnote in history? How is it that Hush Puppies, the classic American suede shoe, went from sales of only 30,000 pairs in 1994 to 430,000 in 1995, and a record 1,720,000 in 1996? And, why, between 1992 and 1997, did murders in New York City decline by 64.3 percent and total crimes by almost half?

The Tipping Point examines why ideas, messages, and behaviors are often ignited by one or two people to spread like contagious diseases, changing society suddenly and unexpectedly. Assembling a cornucopia of anecdotes and facts, to illustrate concepts in epidemiology, psychology, sociology, and group dynamics, Gladwell answers two fundamental questions that lie at the heart of what educators, parents, marketers, business people, and policymakers would like to accomplish: Why do some ideas/behaviors/products start epidemics and others do not? And, what can individuals
deliberately do to start and control positive epidemics of their own?

PART I: EPIDEMICS AND THE PRINCIPLES OF EPIDEMIC TRANSMISSION

In 1994, Wolverine, the company that makes Hush Puppies—the classic American brushed-suede shoe—had just about decided to phase out this once famous brand. Sales had fallen to 30,000 pairs annually, mostly to backwoods outlets and small-town family stores. Then, in 1995, the company sold 430,000 pairs. The next year, it sold almost 2 million pairs, and the year after that, still more. Suddenly, Hush Puppies were once again a staple of the young American-male wardrobe.

In 1992, New York City experienced 2,154, and 626,182 serious crimes were reported. But then, at some mysterious and critical point, the crime rate tipped. Within five years, murders had dropped 64.3 percent to 770 and total crimes fell by almost half to 355,893.

According to Gladwell these occurrences are textbook examples of epidemics in action and illustrate the premise that ideas, products, messages, and behaviors spread in the same manner as do viruses. The rise of Hush Puppies and the fall of a city’s crime rate may not seem to have very much in common; however, they share a fundamental pattern: First, they are typical of how contagion spreads. Second, in both cases, little changes had big effects. And, third, both changes occurred rapidly.

These three characteristics mirror the three principles that define how an outbreak of measles moves through a grade school, or how the flu attacks every winter. However, the third trait is the most important. It is the principle that makes sense of the first two and that provides the greatest insight into why modern change occurs the way it does. It is what Gladwell calls the Tipping Point—that one dramatic moment in an epidemic when everything changes all at once.

From 1995 to 1996, the number of children born with syphilis increased by 500 percent in the city of Baltimore. The Centers for Disease Control believed that crack cocaine was the little push that syphilis needed to become a raging epidemic. John Zenilman, a John Hopkins expert on sexually transmitted diseases, thought that the breakdown of medical services in the city’s poorest neighborhoods was the cause. And, John Potterat, a leading epidemiologist blamed it on a diaspora that occurred in East and West Baltimore at the time.

Potterat noted that, for years, syphilis had been confined to these specific regions of Baltimore until two housing projects were demolished and people also began moving out of the old row houses in the same neighborhoods. With this housing dislocation, people were forced to live in other parts of the city, and they took their syphilis and their sociosexual behaviors with them.

Gladwell maintains that there are two striking elements about these three explanations. The first is that none
suggests any dramatic occurrence (i.e., it takes only the smallest change to shift an epidemic’s equilibrium significantly). Crack had existed in Baltimore for years, but a subtle increase in the severity of the problem was enough to set off the syphilis epidemic. The STD clinics were not shut down completely; the number was just scaled back from 17 to 10. And, all of Baltimore was not hollowed out. It simply took the demolition of a handful of housing projects, and the abandonment of homes in some key downtown neighborhoods, to send syphilis soaring.

The second fact about the three explanations (and Gladwell believes that this is perhaps the more interesting of the two) is that all describe a very different way of tipping an epidemic. In suggesting that the introduction and growth of an addictive drug can so change the environment that a disease tips as a result, the CDC was talking about overall context. However, Zenilman’s assertions were about the disease itself. When the clinics were cut back, syphilis was given a new life, transforming from acute infection to chronic infection.

As for Potterat, he focused on the people. He maintained that the disease was carried by a particular kind of individual—very poor, sexually active, and probably drug-using. And, when this kind of person is suddenly transported to a new location, where syphilis was never before a problem, the disease would have an opportunity to tip—to be jolted out of equilibrium.

Because it seems as though epidemics are a function of the people who transmit infectious agents, the infectious agent itself, and the environment in which the agent operates, epidemics are, thus, tipped in more than one way. Gladwell calls these three agents of change The Law of the Few, the Stickiness Factor, and the Power of Context.

The Law of the Few is an example of the 80/20 Principle of economics, which is the idea that in any situation, roughly 80 percent of the work will be done by 20 percent of the participants. It is a principle that explains why 20 percent of all motorists cause 80 percent of all accidents, 20 percent of beer drinkers drink 80 percent of all beer and, in most societies, 20 percent of the criminals commit 80 percent of all crimes.

However, when it comes to epidemics, says Gladwell, this disproportion becomes even more extreme: a tiny percentage of people do the majority of the work (i.e., in a given process or system, some people matter more than others). Accordingly, the success of any kind of social epidemic is heavily dependent on the involvement of people with a particular set of social gifts—people the author calls Connectors, Mavens, and Salesmen, who control word-of-mouth epidemics.

Even in this era of mass communications, word of mouth is still the most important form of human communications. In fact, many advertising executives believe that, precisely because marketing efforts are so ubiquitous today, word-of-mouth appeals have become the only kind of persuasion that most people respond to anymore. Nonetheless, word of mouth remains very mysterious. People pass on all kinds of information to each other all the time. However, it is only rarely that such an exchange ignites an epidemic.

This is where Connectors and the concept of six degrees of separation come in. Six degrees of separation does not mean that everyone is linked to everyone else in just six steps, but that a very small number of people are linked to everyone else in a few steps. The rest are linked to the world through those special few. Thus, word of mouth is not one person telling another about a new restaurant, and that person telling a friend, who tells another, and so on. Rather, it begins when, somewhere along the chain, someone tells a Connector.

These special few—these Connectors—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, subcultures, and niches, and to bring them all together. This ability to span many different words is a function of something intrinsic to their personality—some combination of curiosity, self-confidence, sociability, and energy that helps them relate to the people they meet. While most individuals constantly choose whom they would like to know and reject those who do not look right, who live in the “wrong” place, or those whom they have not seen in years, Connectors choose to know everyone.

“Those people who link us up with the world, who bridge ... who introduce us to our social circles—these people on whom we rely more heavily than we realize—are Connectors, people with a special gift for bringing the world together.”

Just as there are specialists, connecting people to people, there are also other specialists—Mavens—who connect people to information. (Gladwell notes that, sometimes, these two specialists are one and the same.) Known as either “price vigilantes” or “Market Mavens,” they have information on many different products, prices, and/or places, and they can be found in every walk of life and in every socioeconomic group.

Yes, they are obsessed with how to get the best deal; however, when they figure out how to do this, they want to tell others. They are socially motivated experts, and this is what sets them apart. It is not so much what they know but how they pass it along. Gladwell contends that the fact that Mavens want to help, for no other reason than they like to help, represents a more compelling recommendation (and an extremely effective means of getting someone’s attention) than the opinion of the paid expert.

A Connector might tell 10 people where to stay in Los Angeles, and half of them might take this advice. A Maven might tell five people where to stay, but make the case so emphatically that all of them take the advice. This is where Salesmen come in. They are a select group with the skills to sway those who are unconvinced.

Salesmen have an enormous amount of influence over others. They are very good at expressing emotions and feelings, which means that they are far more emotionally contagious than most. “There are carriers, people who are very expressive, and there are [also] people who are especially susceptible. It’s not that emotional contagion is a disease. But the mechanism is the same” (Hatfield, Cacioppo, and Rapson, Emotional Contagion).

It is a well-known principle in virology that not only do epidemics tip because of the extraordinary efforts of a few select carriers, sometimes they also tip when something happens to transform the epidemic itself. Take, for example, the infamous flu pandemic of 1918. When the flu broke out in the spring of that year, it was relatively tame. But over the summer, the virus underwent some strange transformation and ended up killing between 20 and 40 million people, worldwide, over the next six months.

Nothing had changed in the way in which the virus was being spread. Rather, the virus had suddenly become much more deadly. This, says Gladwell, is the Stickiness Factor, and it has enormous implications for the way social, as well as viral, epidemics are regarded. It says that there are specific ways of ensuring that a message makes an impact (i.e., manages not not go in one ear and out the other).

Most people, as well as many marketers, talk loudly and repeat what they have to say, over and over, in order to ensure that what they say is remembered. However, Gladwell notes that direct marketers (the real students of stickiness) have found that small and subtle are more effective. In other words, in a society overwhelmed by a glut of information, what is needed is a subtle, but significant, change in presentation (one that makes the information more practical and personal) rather than an avalanche of new or additional information. Thus, the key is not in the inherent quality of the idea presented; instead, the key is to tip the message by tinkering on the margin, with an idea’s structure and format.

As Zenilman found, epidemics are strongly influenced by their context—the circumstances, conditions, and particulars of the environments in which they operate. Thus, the Power of Context says that human beings are much more sensitive to their environment than they may seem. Moreover, the kinds of contextual changes that are capable of tipping an epidemic are very different than what might ordinarily be expected.
During the 1990s, violent crime declined across the U.S. for a number of fairly straightforward reasons: The illegal trade in crack cocaine began to decline. The economy experienced a dramatic recovery. And, the general aging of the population meant that there were fewer people in the age range (males between 18 and 24) that is responsible for the majority of all violence.

During this same period, crime also decreased in New York City, but for reasons that are a little more complex. For one thing, the city’s economy was not only stagnant, recent welfare cuts had made the poorest neighborhoods even poorer. The decline in crack-cocaine trafficking was a factor, but it had been in steady decline well before crime dipped. Due to heavy immigration in the 1980s, the city’s population was getting younger rather than older. And, whereas the effects of these kinds of trends are usually gradual, in New York, they were anything but. Gladwell maintains that something else, which criminologists James Q Wilson and George Kelling call the Broken Windows theory, clearly played a role in reversing the city’s epidemic of violence.

It is their contention that if a window is broken and left unrepaired, people will conclude that no one is in charge and no one cares. Soon more windows will be broken, and a sense of anarchy will spread, sending a signal that anything goes—graffiti, public disorder, aggressive panhandling, mugging, robbery, etc. Thus, the impetus to engage in a certain kind of behavior is not coming from a certain kind of person but from a feature of the environment. A proliferation of broken windows becomes an invitation for individuals to commit more serious crimes, simply because the environment tells them they can get away with it.

Gladwell notes that most of the formal explanations for criminal behavior talk about criminals as people with stunted psychological development or as people who have had pathological relationships with their parents and, thus, lack adequate role models. Relatively new literature talks about genes that may or may not dispose individuals to crime. And, there are those who talk about crime as a consequence of the moral failure of parents, schools, and communities.

Essentially, these theories see the criminal as persons who are insensitive to the norms of normal society. The Broken Windows theory and the Power of Context say just the opposite. They propose that criminals are acutely sensitive to the environment, alert to all kinds of cues, and prompted to commit crimes, based on their perception of the world around them.

In the 1960s, liberals talked about the importance of environment in terms of such fundamental social factors as injustice, structural economic inequities, unemployment, racism, and decades of institutional and social neglect; thus, stopping crime would require heroic steps. However, the Power of Context says that little things in the environment matter most. Even the felonies occurring in New York City’s subway system could be prevented by doing away with the small expressions of disorder—graffiti and fare-beaters—which invite more serious crime.

Gladwell believes that the implications of this idea are enormous. He notes that the old understanding of handling crime epidemics leads to a preoccupation with defensive measures—putting extra locks on the door to slow the burglar down, incarcerating criminals longer, and/or moving to the suburbs—that do little in the way of prevention. However, once people understand that specific and relatively small elements in the environment (i.e., things that they can actually change), can serve as Tipping Points, their defensive defeatism is turned around.

The author has found that small close-knit groups also have the power to magnify the epidemic potential of a message or idea. For those interested in starting an epidemic (i.e., reaching a Tipping Point), there is a simple tenet that distinguishes a group with real social authority from a group with little power. He calls this tenet the Rule of 150—another unexpected way in which context affects the course of social epidemics.

Channel capacity, a concept in cognitive psychology, says that human beings can only handle so much information at once before becoming overwhelmed. This describes intellectual capacity—the ability to process raw information. However, the most interesting natural limit is perhaps what can be called social channel capacity. British
anthropologist Robin Dunbar argues that humans socialize in the largest groups of all primates because humans are the only animals with brains big enough to handle the complexities of that social arrangement.

Plugging in the neocortex ratio for Homo sapiens, he found a group estimate of 147.8 (approximately 150), which “seems to represent the maximum number of individuals with whom we can have a genuinely social relationship, the kind of relationship that goes with knowing who they are and how they relate to us.”

Thus, Gladwell concludes that if groups are to serve as incubators of contagious messages, they must be kept below the 150 Tipping Point. Above that point, structural impediments emerge that block the ability of the group to agree and act with one voice. Thus, crossing the 150 mark is a small change that can make a big difference, and this is the paradox of the epidemic: that in order to create one contagious movement, one often has to create many small movements first.

“**Innovators try something new. Then someone ... a Maven or a Connector or a Salesman ... sees it and adopts it. “[They] make things more palatable for mainstream people. They see what the really wired ... are doing. ... They start doing it themselves, but they change it a bit. They make it more usable.”**

By contrast, the Early Majority are big companies that must worry about how any change fits into their complex arrangement of suppliers and distributors. The goal of these pragmatists is to make incremental, measurable, and predictable progress.

Because the two attitudes are fundamentally incompatible, all kinds of high-tech products fail, never making it beyond the Early Adopters. The companies that make these products cannot seem to find a way to transform an idea that makes perfect sense to an Innovator into one that makes perfect sense to a member of the Early Majority.

Gladwell believes that this is where Connectors, Mavens, and Salesmen play their most important role (although Moore’s argument is entirely concerned with high technology, it also applies to other kinds of social epidemics). These special Few are the ones who make it possible for innovations to bridge the gap between Early Adopters and the Early Majority. They take ideas and information from a highly specialized world and translate them into a language that everyone else can understand. It is a process that can be analyzed by looking at rumor, the most contagious of all social messages.

Psychologists have found that a process of distortion is nearly universal in the spread of rumors. For example, in memory experiments, subjects were given a story to read or a picture to look at and then asked to reproduce what they had been shown. It was found that, invariably, significant leveling occurred. Although all but a few details were dropped, certain details were also sharpened. Sociologist Gordon Allport (*The Psychology of Rumor*) concluded that in the subjects’ effort to create meaning they condensed or filled in so as to achieve a better “Gestalt ... a simpler, more significant configuration.”

This is what Gladwell means by translation. In order to make an idea contagious, Mavens, Connectors, and Salesmen alter it in such a way that extraneous details are dropped and others are exaggerated so that the message itself acquires a deeper meaning. Thus, if anyone wants to start an epidemic, whether it is of Hush Puppies, behavior, or technology, he or she must employ Connectors, Mavens, and Salesmen to translate the message of the Innovators into something the rest of the world can understand.

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**PART II: THE FEW, THE STICKY, AND CONTEXT IN EVERYDAY LIFE**

Gladwell acknowledges that sometimes the problems and situations people face in everyday life do not always embody the principles of epidemics so neatly. For example, Geoffrey Moore argues that there is a substantial difference between the people who originate technological trends and ideas and the people who eventually take them up. These two groups may be next to each other on the word-of-mouth continuum, but they do not communicate with each other especially well.

Innovators/Early Adopters are visionaries who want revolutionary change—something qualitative that sets them apart from their competitors. They are just starting out with their small companies, but they are willing to take the risk of buying new technology before it has been perfected, or proven, or before the price comes down. Their goal is to make a quantum leap forward.
Teenage smoking is another of the great, baffling phenomena of modern life—a form of self-expression that in many ways mirrors Micronesia’s teen suicide epidemic. In the early 1960s, suicide in Micronesia was almost unknown. Then, mysteriously, it began to rise, steeply and dramatically, until by the end of the 1980s, there were more suicides per capita than anywhere else in the world.

For males between 15 and 24, the suicide rate in the islands is about 160 per 100,000—more than seven times higher than it is in the U.S. Thus, suicide has become commonplace, triggered by the smallest incidents. Teens take their own lives because they see their girlfriends with another boy, because their parents refuse to give them a few extra dollars for beer or money for a graduation gown, or because they are rebuked for making too much noise.

What is rare and random in Western cultures has become, in Micronesia, an adolescent ritual, with its own particular rules and symbols.

In virtually all cases, the victim is male, in his late teens, unmarried, and living at home. The precipitating event is invariably domestic—a dispute with girlfriends or parents. In most instances, the victim had never before tried or even threatened suicide. The suicide notes tend to express a kind of wounded pride and self pity (a protest against perceived mistreatment) rather than depression. The act itself typically occurs on a weekend night after a bout of drinking with friends. And, in all but a few cases, the victim observes the same procedure (almost a strict protocol) for taking his life.

According to anthropologist Donald Rubinstein, as the number of suicides has grown, the idea has fed upon itself, infecting younger and younger boys, transforming itself from something unimaginable to something compelling, and embedding itself in the local culture. This is why, says Gladwell, the suicide epidemic in Micronesia is so potentially relevant to the smoking problem—also a contagious epidemic of self-destruction, engaged in by youth, in the spirit of experimentation, imitation, rebellion. In both cases, it is a matter of mindless action that somehow has become an important form of self-expression.

Those who study suicide have observed that in some places and under some circumstances, the act of one person taking his or her own life can be contagious—suicides lead to suicides. David Phillips, a UC San Diego sociologist, has found that highly publicized suicides give other people, particularly those vulnerable to suggestion, permission to engage in a deviant act as well. “Suicide stories are a kind of natural advertisement for a particular response to your problems.”

People who die in highly publicized suicides—those whose deaths give others “permission” to die—are the functional equivalents of Salesmen and serve as a Tipping Point in word-of-mouth suicide epidemics. Moreover, the “permission” given is not a general invitation, but a highly detailed set of instructions, specific to certain people in certain situation, who choose to die in certain ways. Thus, it is not a gesture but a speech.

Teen smoking follows this same logic. Gladwell questioned adult smokers and found that smoking seems to evoke a vivid, precise, emotionally charged childhood memory associated with sophistication. Respondents consistently described the particular individual (the “Salesman”) who initiated them into smoking in precisely the same way: as an extrovert, who craves excitement, takes chances, and is defiant, sexually precocious, honest, indifferent to the opinions of others, impulsive, and aggressive. It is an almost perfect definition of the kind of person to whom many adolescents are drawn. These individuals are not cool because they smoke, they smoke because they are cool.

This simple point is essential in understanding why the war on smoking has stumbled so badly. (Since 1988, the total number of teen smokers in the U.S. has risen by 73 percent.) The anti-smoking movement has railed against the tobacco industry for making smoking cool and has tried to convince teenagers that smoking is not hip. However, the point is that smoking was never perceived as being hip but smokers are perceived as such. This epidemic is the same as Micronesia’s suicide epidemic, word-of-mouth epidemics, or the AIDS epidemic. They all began because of the extraordinary influence of a select few Salesmen.
In addition to illustrating the Law of the Few, the teen smoking epidemic is also an excellent illustration of the Stickiness Factor. Whether a teenager picks up the habit depends on whether he or she has contact with one of the Salesmen who give teenagers “permission” to engage in deviant behavior. This is contagiousness, which is in large part a function of the messenger.

But whether a teen likes cigarettes enough to keep using them depends on a different set of criteria—the individuals’ own particular initial reaction to nicotine. This is the Stickiness Factor, and it is primarily a property of the message. People who did not get a buzz from their first cigarette and who found the experience so awful they never smoked again are probably those whose bodies are acutely sensitive to nicotine and incapable of handling even the smallest doses.

Chippers are people, who, like social drinkers, remain in control of their habit. Every smoker starts out as a chipper; however, some remain chippers, never escalating to heavy smoking. Perhaps they have the genes to derive pleasure from nicotine, but not the genes to handle it in large doses. Meanwhile, heavy smokers may be people with the genes to do both. Nicotine is also known to relieve boredom and stress; thus, those who are in boring or stressful situations will smoke more than people who are not.

The critical point, often lost in the war-on-smoking rhetoric, is that what makes smoking contagious is completely different from the kinds of things that make it sticky. This means that when looking for Tipping Points in the war on smoking, it must be decided which side of the epidemic will be the most susceptible to attack. “Should we try to make smoking less contagious, to stop the Salesmen who spread the smoking virus? Or are we better off trying to make it less sticky, to look for ways to turn all smokers into chippers?”

As Gladwell notes, the anti-smoking campaign has focused on raising prices, curtailing advertising, running public health messages, limiting minors’ access, and foiling the influence of smoking Salesman. Nonetheless, during this broad, seemingly comprehensive campaign, teenage smoking has skyrocketed. He suggests that, instead of trying to tackle whole problem in this way, society needs to deal with the stickiness Tipping Points, which he believes are linked to depression and to the nicotine threshold.

Preliminary evidence has found that smoking and depression might have the same genetic root. Depression is believed to be the result, at least in part, of a problem in the production of key brain chemicals, serotonin, dopamine, and norepinephrine, which contribute to feelings of confidence, mastery, and pleasure. While such drugs as Zoloft and Prozac ameliorate depression because they prompt the brain to produce more serotonin, nicotine prompts the brain to produce more dopamine and norepinephrine. Not only do some smokers find it difficult to stop because they are addicted to nicotine, but also because without nicotine, they run the risk of a psychiatric illness.

It turns out, then, that if smokers are treated for depression, their smoking habit may be a lot easier to break. Glaxo Wellcome has tested the antidepressant, now marketed under the name of Zyban, in heavily addicted smokers, and found remarkable results. The drug’s initial success has proven that it is possible to find a sticky Tipping Point with smoking by zeroing in on depression and, thus, exploiting a critical vulnerability in the smoking-addiction process.

Gladwell has also found a second potential Tipping Point on the stickiness question, having to do with how smoking addiction develops. When teens first experiment with cigarettes, they are all chippers, and most quit, never smoking again. A few continue to chip for many years, without becoming addicted. And, about a third end up as regular smokers. However, it takes about three years to go from casual to regular smoking, and then, there is a gradual escalation for the next five to seven years. Thus, there is a three-year window to stop smoking from becoming an addiction.

In addition, nicotine addiction is not a linear phenomenon. It seems as though there is an addiction Tipping Point—a threshold. People who smoke below a certain number of cigarettes (it is not exactly the same for all individuals) are not addicted at all. But, if they go
above that number, they suddenly are. Neal Benowitz and Jack Henningfield, thought to be world’s leading nicotine experts, have made the educated guess that chippers are people able to smoke up to five cigarettes a day (between four and six milligrams of nicotine) without getting addicted.

Thus, they suggest that tobacco companies be required to lower the level of nicotine so that even the heaviest smokers (approximately 30 cigarettes a day) could not get anything more than five milligrams of nicotine within a 24-hour period. They argue that this level “should be adequate to prevent or limit the development of addiction in most young people. At the same time it may provide enough nicotine for taste and sensory stimulation.”

Teens would continue to experiment with cigarettes because the habit is contagious, because cool kids are smoking, and because they want to fit in (the same reasons they have always experimented). But, if nicotine levels are reduced below the addiction threshold, the habit would no longer be sticky. “Cigarette smoking would be less like the flu and more like the common cold: easily caught but easily defeated.”

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Bibliographic notes by chapter and a subject index are provided.

Remarks

The idea for Tipping Point came from Gladwell’s coverage of the AIDS epidemic when he was a reporter with the Washington Post. In learning about HIV, he was struck by the assumptions epidemiologists (those who study epidemics) have about how and why change happens and by how different these assumptions are from the way the rest of us view change.

The phrase “Tipping Point” comes from this serendipitous world. It’s the name given to that moment in an epidemic when a virus reaches critical mass. When depicted on a graph, the Tipping Point is that point at which the line on the graph suddenly shoots straight up. Fascinated by this concept, Gladwell asked, “What if Tipping Points also occur outside the medical realm, in every arena of society and, if they do, what are the practical implications for individuals, organizations, and communities?”

The Tipping Point is the “biography” of that discovery—the simple idea that “Contagiousness [i.e., the epidemic] ... is an unexpected property of all kinds of things, and we have to remember that, if we are to recognize and diagnose epidemic change.” The examples Gladwell uses to illustrate this idea—Paul Revere’s ride, the Hush Puppies trend, the popularity of Sesame Street, the rise of the Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood to bestseller status, the decline of crime in New York, the emergence of the Methodist Church, the Columbia Record Club treasure hunt, teen suicide and smoking, among others—demonstrate that contagiousness is not just a metaphor; it has real relevance in every sphere of our lives.

We emphasize the phrase “every sphere” to highlight the fact that this is no simple marketing how-to book. Yes, it presents a powerful and practical framework for developing insights into how to find the critical mass for products, innovations, and messages. However, it goes beyond this business application to provide out-of-the-box (but cogent) thinking about the counterintuitive basics of human behavior—thinking that can have a salutary effect on how society deals with the drug addicted, the Columbines, AIDS, the conditions that spawn a Bernie Goetz, and much more.

Although The Tipping Point is about change, and a way of understanding why change often happens so precipitously, it is also about hope in the form of “Band-Aid” remedies (“the inexpensive, convenient, and remarkably versatile [and effective] solution to an astonishing array of problems) and “the power of one.”

Reading Suggestions

Reading time: 15-17 hours, 313 Pages in Book

Although The Tipping Point is a synthesis of scientific research in epidemiology, psychology, sociology, and group dynamics, the science is nimbly illustrated with studies, examples, and anecdotes that speak to the general reader.

Despite this accessibility, Gladwell does, however, tend to be long-winded and iterative, revisiting and tweaking each facet of each key concept, time and again, from...
chapter to chapter. (Chapter 3, “The Stickiness Factor: Sesame Street, Blue’s Clues, and the Educational Virus” is especially dense). Moreover, you will find the paragraphs to be exceptionally long—many taking up almost an entire page and, thus, failing to provide the reader with much respite. These minor flaws will, however, neither detract from the book’s relevance nor prevent you from realizing new avenues of understanding and action.

Given the potential obstacles to your forward momentum, we suggest that you plan your reading schedule carefully, prepare to read only one chapter at a sitting (you may need several sittings to assimilate chapter 3 fully), and even set aside time to reflect on the material you’ve covered. A good portion of what you read may contradict the sense you’ve made of your world, so will need time to do your own tweaking and reassessing.

We believe that an excellent preparation for this task is to read the introduction, conclusion, and afterword before tackling the remainder of the text. This approach may help to whet your appetite and keep you focused through Gladwell’s iterations. Knowing the destination will keep you energized as you navigate the many double S-turns you will encounter along the way. Here again, we recommend pacing yourself by perhaps reading the introduction, conclusion, and afterword in, at least, two stages.

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