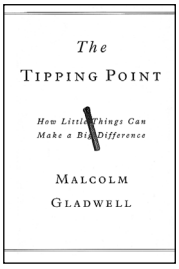
THE SYSTEMS THINKER®
BUILDING SHARED UNDERSTANDING
VOL. 11 NO. 5 JUNE/JULY 2000

ENCOURAGING THE "EPIDEMIC" SPREAD OF CHANGE

BY KELLIE WARDMAN O'REILLY



The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference
by Malcolm Gladwell

Why did the crime rate in New York City drop so dramatically starting in 1993? How is it that some products—such as Hush Puppies and Airwalk sneakers—suddenly become so popular that retailers find it virtually impossible to keep them in stock? Why is teenage smoking on the rise, even amid massive anti-smoking campaigns? And what do each of these phenomena have in common?

New Yorker staff writer Malcolm Gladwell explores these and many other scenarios in his recent book *The Tipping Point* (Little, Brown and Company, 2000), in an effort to understand how and why some trends become "epidemics." He writes, "The best way to understand the emergence of fashion trends, the ebb and flow of crime waves . . . the rise of teenage smoking, the phenomenon of word of mouth, or any number of the other mysterious changes that mark everyday life is to think of them as epidemics. Ideas and products and messages and behaviors spread just like viruses do." By studying patterns of extreme boom or bust, Gladwell believes that we can learn how to more effectively start and control positive "outbreaks" of our own.

Epidemics and the Tipping Point

What causes health-related as well as product- or idea-related epidemics? Gladwell outlines three basic principles that have an impact on this kind of escalation:

- Ideas are contagious—people can infect one another with intellectual "viruses" as well as physical viruses;
- Little causes can have big effects—we know through systems thinking that what goes into any transaction, relationship, or system is not necessarily directly related to what comes out;
- Change doesn't happen gradually but at one pivotal moment—"the moment of critical mass, the threshold, the boiling point."

The author says that these three concepts describe both how the flu or measles move through a grade-school classroom and how a few happy customers can turn a new, empty restaurant into a booming success. But Gladwell's book is not just about epidemics—it explores in detail the notion that all epidemics have a "tipping point." Gladwell defines the tipping point, which has been described in many classic sociology texts, as "that one dramatic moment in an epidemic when everything can change all at once."

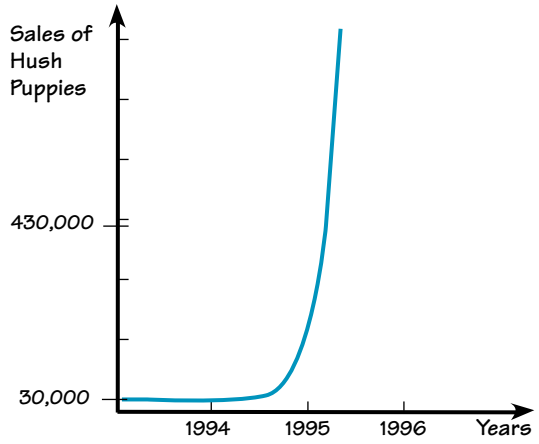
On a behavior over time graph, the tipping point is the instant when the line depicting a certain activity suddenly turns sharply upward or downward (see "The 'Tipping Point' for Hush Puppies"). And as Gladwell points out, there is more than one way to tip an epidemic. When an epidemic tips out of equilibrium, it is because some change has happened in one of three areas—the Law of the Few, the Stickiness Factor, and the Power of Context.

The Law of the Few

The first rule by which epidemics operate is that, in a given process or system, some people matter more than others. This principle explains why Paul Revere is famous for his midnight ride at the start of the American Revolution and William Dawes is not. Gladwell pinpoints three groups of people who are important in spreading an epidemic. Connectors—like Revere—have a special gift for bringing the world together and making friends and acquaintances. Paul Revere was not only a Connector, but he was also a Maven. A Maven is an information

Continued on next page ➢

THE "TIPPING POINT" FOR HUSH PUPPIES



The "tipping point" for Hush Puppies shoes came somewhere between late 1994 and early 1995. Sales rose from 30,000 pairs a year, to 430,000 pairs in 1995, to four times that in 1996. The fad was inadvertently launched by kids in hip clubs and bars in downtown Manhattan, who wore the shoes precisely because no one else would wear them.

➢ Continued from previous page

broker who accumulates knowledge about a lot of different products, prices, or places—and continually disseminates that information as needed. The third group of people important in an epidemic are Salesmen—those who have the skills to persuade others to take a certain course of action. All three kinds of people—Connectors, Mavens, and Salesmen—are crucial to launching any social epidemic.

The Stickiness Factor

The content of the message is just as crucial as the messenger. Is the message—or product—so memorable that it can create change by spurring someone into action? The book explores how the producers of some children's television programs, such as *Sesame Street* and *Blue's Clues,* continually conduct research into the "stickiness"—or appeal and memorability—of different episodes. They have found that when episodes are not "sticky," children get bored and divert their attention elsewhere. Merely moving characters to different spots on the screen, combining various individuals in one segment, and repeating shows at certain intervals all influence the presentation of the ideas and the effectiveness of the final message. As Gladwell writes, "There is a simple way to package information that, under the right circumstances, makes it irresistible."

He also points out that the line between a customer's hostility toward and acceptance of an idea is sometimes a lot narrower than we might think. For instance, marketers have long known that small changes to a direct-mail package can dramatically affect results. Gladwell cites a series of integrated advertisements for Columbia Record Club that included a gold box on the order form, coupled with TV commercials that revealed the "secret of the Gold Box." The combination made the promotion enticingly "sticky," and the results of the campaign were unprecedented.

The Power of Context

The third and final rule in *The Tipping Point* is that "epidemics are sensitive to the conditions and circumstances of the times and places in which they occur." One could argue that Paul Revere's ride was successful because he made it at night—when people were at home in bed, not off working in the fields. When researchers studied the violent crime rate in New York City, instead of focusing on the crimes themselves, they focused on the context within which much of the crime was occurring—the subway, where minor offenses such as graffiti and fare-beating were prevalent. Police officers on the streets also cracked down on lesser offenses such as public drunkenness, quickly discovering that seemingly insignificant quality-of-life misdemeanors were tipping points for more violent crimes.

"Those who are successful at creating social epidemics do not do just what they think is right. They deliberately test their intuitions."

What Gladwell calls the "150 Tipping Point"—the maximum number of people you can have in a group without experiencing structural impediments to the group's ability to agree and act with one voice—is also related to this rule. Gore Associates, the multimillion-dollar high-tech firm that makes water-resistant Gore-Tex fabric, has designed its plants to include no more than 150 employees each for this reason. Essentially, "Gore has created . . . an organized mechanism that makes it far easier for new ideas and information moving around the organization to tip—to go from one person or one part of the group to the entire group all at once."

"Tipping" Toward Change

What do the ideas in *The Tipping Point* mean for people who are trying to create dramatic changes in organizations? Gladwell advises that starting epidemics requires concentrating resources in a few key areas. "If anyone wants to start an epidemic, then—whether it is of shoes or behavior or a piece of software—he or she has to somehow employ Connectors, Mavens, and Salespeople . . . to translate the message of the Innovators into something the rest of us can understand." Change agents ought to focus their efforts, then, on nurturing these groups.

The Tipping Point theory also demands that we reframe how we think about the world. Because of the limitations and peculiarities of the human mind and heart, the world does not operate in the way that we often assume it does. The author points out that, "Those who are successful at creating social epidemics do not do just what they think is right. They deliberately test their intuitions." And while we like to think of ourselves as autonomous and inner-directed, in reality, we are powerfully influenced by our surroundings, our immediate context, and the personalities of those around us. "That's why social change is so volatile and so often inexplicable, because [it] is the nature of all of us to be volatile and inexplicable."

Although it may seem like a long row to hoe toward significant change, Gladwell points out that simply by reaching the right people, we *can* shape the course of social epidemics. He writes, "Look at the world around you. It may seem like an immovable, implacable place. It is not. With the slightest push—in just the right place—it can be tipped." Our challenge is to find that leverage point and to set the forces of change into motion. ◘

Kellie Wardman O'Reilly is publications director at Pegasus Communications.

YOUR THOUGHTS

Please send your comments about any of the articles in **THE SYSTEMS THINKER** to the editor at janicem@pegasuscom.com. We will publish selected letters in a future "Feedback/Followup" column. Your input is valuable!

