

The Tipping Point
by Malcolm Gladwell

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Tipping point: that one dramatic moment in an epidemic when everything can change all at once

Synopsis:

The Tipping Point presents a new way of understanding why change so often happens as quickly and unexpectedly as it does. Gladwell introduces us to the particular personality types who naturally spread new ideas and trends, the people who create the phenomenon of word of mouth. He argues that ideas, behaviors, messages, and products often spread like outbreaks of an infectious disease. These are social epidemics, and the moment when they take off, when they reach their critical mass, is the "tipping point." Examples discussed in the book include:

- In the mid 1990s syphilis was under control in Baltimore. Then from 1995-1996 it increased by 500%. Baltimore's syphilis problem tipped out of control as a result of several small incidents. It was jolted out of equilibrium.
- In 1992-1997 crime fell dramatically in New York City. The crime reduction epidemic was tipped by attending to small problems.
- In the 1970's and 1980's, Micronesia had teen suicide rates ten times higher than anywhere else in the world. Teenagers were literally being infected with the suicide bug, and one after another they were killing themselves in exactly the same way under exactly the same circumstances

Gladwell says there are three characteristics that distinguish a tipping point and explains them using the analogy of an epidemic. First, the idea is contagious; second, big effects come from little causes, and third, change happens all at once, not gradually. In order for something to reach the tipping point, there are specific circumstances that must be in place. These are the three rules Gladwell says are essential to a product or idea reaching the tipping point.

Rule 1: The Law of the Few: There are three types of people who are crucial if an idea is going to be tipped:

- **Mavens** – "the data banks who are fans of the idea and who understand and appreciate its significance.
- **Connectors** – "the social glue" who spread the idea throughout their wide circle of acquaintances.
- **Salesmen** – "the senders" who can persuade from the outside. They influence the "carriers" who receive the message and act on it.

Rule 2: The Stickiness Factor: Stickiness is the packaging that makes an idea memorable and irresistible.

Rule 3: The Power of Context: Epidemics are sensitive to the conditions and circumstances of the times and places in which they occur. There are two factors to consider when talking about context, the environmental aspects and our social networks.

Gladwell suggests that we think of what it would be like to be able to fashion an epidemic that would produce the change you want in a community or the larger society. Change that seems to be way beyond your reach or influence can actually be "tipped" by actions that we may help to orchestrate.

Discussion questions:

1. How would you relate "the law of the few", "the stickiness factor," and "the power of context" to effective organizational change?
2. The rule of 150 states that the size of a genuine social network is limited to about 150 members. The number arises from cross-cultural studies in sociology of the maximum size of a village. It is theorized in evolutionary psychology that the number may be some kind of limit of average human ability to recognize members and track emotional facts about all members of a group. What is the implication of the "150 rule" to organizations and people in general?
3. Do you think trends that spread like epidemics can be anticipated, or must they only be identified as such in hindsight? What do you think is currently a potential social epidemic?
4. What are the lessons you take away from the *Tipping Point*? What information will help you drive change in your organization?
5. Imagine what it would be like if the conditions affecting the poor were suddenly hit by similar sudden, large scale epidemics. Domestic violence rates fall, substandard housing is upgraded, schools become effective, smoking ceases, teen pregnancy declines, etc. How can we trigger, or tip, these epidemics?