

College of Business Book Review by Vittal Anantatmula

Title: "The Tipping Point"

Author: Malcolm Gladwell

Publisher: Little, Brown and Company, 1271 Avenue of Americas, New York, NY 10020

Length: 279 pages

Price: \$24.95

Reading time: 8-10 hours

Reading rating: 10 (1 = very difficult; 10 = very easy)

Overall rating: 4 (1 = average; 4 = outstanding)

Malcolm Gladwell presents the tipping point as the biography of an idea in a social context. The tipping point is defined as the moment of critical mass, the threshold, or the boiling point and is considered a moment of great sensitivity. Changes made right at the tipping point will lead to enormous consequences and it is where revolutionary changes become almost a certainty.

The author argues that ideas, products, behaviors, and messages spread like virus. He identifies three reasons for their virus-like effect; inflexion of contagious behavior, little changes causing big effects, and change happening at one dramatic moment (not a gradual change). To elaborate the tipping point idea further, the author addresses a couple of questions in the book:

Why is it that some ideas or behaviors or products start epidemics and others don't?

What can we do to deliberately start and control positive epidemics of our own?

A social epidemic is an outcome of the message, the messenger, and the context. When a change happens in one or more of these three, the epidemic tips out of equilibrium. The author refers to three change agents as *the law of the few*, *the stickiness factor*, and *the power of context*.

*The law of the few* points to those few people who are linked to everyone else in a few steps. They fall in three categories; connectors, mavens, and salesmen. Connectors are important for not only the number of people they know but also the kind of people they know. They are curious, confident, and energetic. And they have credibility in different social circles. Maven is the one who accumulates knowledge. Mavens habitually amass knowledge and act as information brokers by sharing and trading information. Salesmen are the people who are optimistic with persuasion and convincing skills. Connectors are the social glue, mavens are data banks, and salesmen are critical to tipping the word of mouth. Unlike these people, most of us do not have the time, energy, or inclination to maintain contacts with so many people.

*The stickiness factor* is in the content of the message. The author contends that epidemic ideas or messages have elements that make them sticky. They are simple and seemingly trivial. The author uses the *Sesame Street TV program* as an example to illustrate the idea; the TV program was built on a simple insight that if you can hold the attention of children, you can educate them. It is not necessary that the quality of the message alone contributes to stickiness; presentation and repetition are also important. The idea or message, to be capable of turning into epidemic, has to be memorable. It should have the ability to move us to action.

*The power of context* tells us that epidemics are sensitive to the conditions and circumstances of the times and places in which they occur. The underlying concept is that

behavior is a function of social context. The author uses the New York City crime situation in 1980s and early 90s to illustrate the idea. The city administration controlled minor and seemingly insignificant quality-of-life crimes, which were the tipping points for violent crimes. Further, the administration focused on tinkering with the smallest details of the immediate environment like removing the graffiti to control the crime.

An effort to increase the knowledge and awareness of breast cancer and diabetes among the black community in Southern California serves as a good example. Georgia Sadler, a nurse by profession, used the conventional approach of setting up seminars in churches. However, it did not work. Finally, beauty salons, stylists, and a message that is combined with gossipy tidbits did the trick.

The tipping point is a powerful idea. However, we have to believe that a change is possible. Further, we have to realize the influence of our surroundings, and the society. Finally, we must believe that we can tip social epidemics.

Vittal Anantatmula is an assistant professor of management in the College of Business at Western Carolina University. For previously reviewed books visit our Web site at [www.wcu.edu/cob/bookreviews](http://www.wcu.edu/cob/bookreviews).