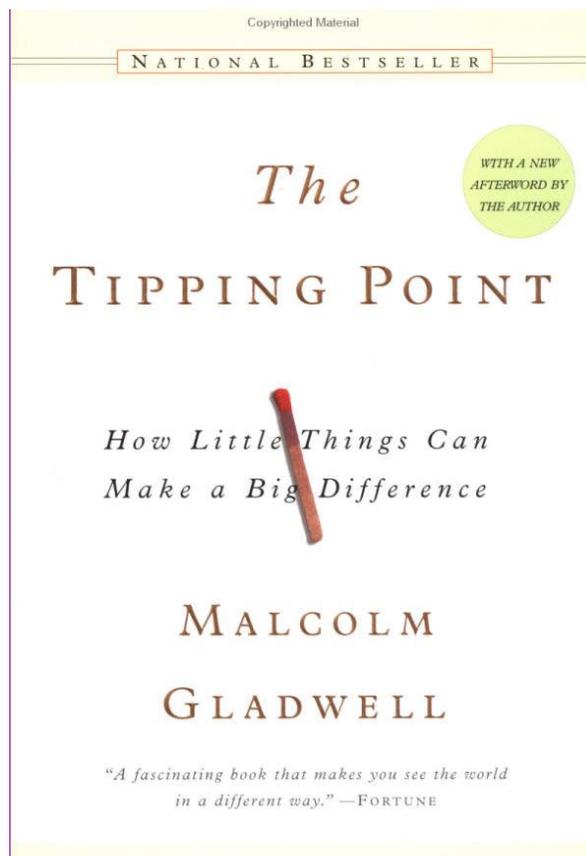


Leaders BOOK SUMMARIES



The Tipping Point **How Little Things Can Make A Big Difference**

About the Author

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Introduction

For Hush Puppies—the classic American brushed-suede shoes with the lightweight crepe sole—the Tipping Point came somewhere between late 1994 and early 1995. The brand had been all but dead at that point, with sales down to 30,000 pairs per year. But then something strange happened. Hush Puppies became “hip” and in 1995 sold 430,000 pairs. The next year it sold four times that, and the next year even more.

How did that happen? A few kids, whoever they were, began buying Hush Puppies precisely because no one else would wear them. Then the fad spread to two fashion designers who used the shoes to promote their wares. No one was trying to make Hush Puppies a trend, but that’s exactly what happened. The shoes passed a certain point in popularity and they tipped. Within two years a \$30 pair of shoes went from a handful of downtown Manhattan hipsters to every mall in America.

In New York in the 1980’s and early 1990’s drugs, gang warfare, and crime in general were rampant. In 1992 there were 2,154 murders and over 600,000 serious crimes. But then something strange happened—the crime rate began to turn. It tipped. Within five years murders dropped by 64% and total crimes by almost half. There were long-term trends across the country that caused crime to drop, but nothing that explained why it plunged in New York so much more than in other cities, nor why it all happened so quickly.

The Tipping Point is about a very simple idea. It is that the best way to understand fashion trends, the ebb and flow of crime waves, or any number of other mysterious changes is to think of them as epidemics. Ideas and products and messages and behaviors spread just like viruses do.

The rise of Hush Puppies and the fall of New York’s crime rate are textbook examples of epidemics in action. They share a basic, underlying pattern. First, they are both clear examples of contagious behavior. Second, in both cases little changes had big effects, and third, both changes happened in a hurry--they didn’t just build slowly and steadily.

Of the three, the third trait, that epidemics can rise or fall in one dramatic moment, is the most important, because it is the principle that makes sense of the first two and that permits the greatest insight into why modern change happens the way it does. The name given to that dramatic moment in an epidemic when everything can change all at once is the Tipping Point.

The point of all this is to answer two simple questions that lie at the heart of what we would all like to accomplish. Why is it that some ideas, behaviors, or products start epidemics and others don’t? And what can we do to deliberately start and control positive epidemics of our own?

Chapter 1: The Three Rules of Epidemics

There are three basic factors that impact epidemics. I call them the Law of the Few, the Stickiness Factor, and the Power of Context.

When we say that a handful of East Village kids started the Hush Puppies epidemic, what we are really saying is that in a given process some people matter more than others. It may be because of how sociable they are, or how energetic or knowledgeable or influential among their peers. The Law of the Few says that one of these exceptional people found out about the trend, and through social connections and energy and enthusiasm and personality spread the word.

Epidemics tip because of the efforts of a few select carriers; they also sometimes tip when something happens to transform the epidemic agent itself. That's a well-known principle in virology—viruses evolve and can get more contagious, or more deadly. In its early days, HIV was much different than it is today. For one reason or another, the virus became a lot deadlier. Once it infected you, you stayed infected. It stuck.

The same thing happens with social epidemics. Messages can be sticky—once they get in our heads, they stay there. Advertisers spend a lot of time and money trying to figure out how to make their ads “sticky.”

The Stickiness Factor says that there are specific ways of making a contagious message memorable; there are relatively simple changes in the presentation and structuring of information that can make a big difference in how much of an impact it makes.

One of the most infamous incidents in New York history is the 1964 stabbing of Kitty Genovese. She was chased by her assailant and attacked three times on the street as 38 of her neighbors watched from their windows. None called the police. In studying the event, it was found that one factor that influenced people's behavior was how many other witnesses there were. Studies showed that if people were the only ones to see an incident, they were much more likely to offer help; the more others that were around, the less likely they were to help. In other words, humans are a lot more sensitive to their environment than they realize... and that is the Power of Context.

Chapter 2: The Law of the Few

Paul Revere's ride is perhaps the most famous historical example of a word-of-mouth epidemic. A piece of extraordinary news traveled a long distance in a very short time, mobilizing an entire region to arms. Not all word-of-mouth epidemics are this sensational, but it is safe to say that word of mouth (even in this age of mass communications) is the most important of human communication.

Why was Revere's ride so successful? The success of any kind of social epidemic is heavily dependent on the involvement of people with a particular and rare set of social gifts. I call them Connectors, Mavens, and Salesmen.

In the late 1960's, Stanley Milgram conducted an experiment to find out how human beings were connected. Milgram got the names of 160 people in Omaha, Nebraska and gave each of them a packet with the name and address of a stockbroker who lived in Boston. Each person was told to send it to someone they thought would get the packet closer to the stockbroker. If you lived in Omaha and had a cousin living near Boston, you might send it to him on the grounds that, even if he didn't know the stockbroker, he would be more likely to be able to get it to him in two or three or four steps. Milgram found that most of the letters got to the stockbroker in five or six steps. (That's where we get the concept of six degrees of separation).

The really interesting thing about the results is that many of the letters followed a similar pattern. The majority of the letters were delivered by just three men. Dozens of people, chosen at random, send out letters independently. They go to all kinds of different people around the country, but eventually half of those letters end up in the hands of the same three men. Six degrees of separation doesn't mean that everyone is linked to everyone else in just six steps. It means that a very small number of people are linked to everyone else in a few steps, and the rest of us are linked to the world through those special few. Those people are Connectors.

What makes a Connector? First, and most obvious, is that they know lots of people. They are the kinds of people who know everyone. They have an extraordinary knack for making friends and acquaintances. Many of us shy away from cultivating acquaintances, because we don't want to wrestle with how to maintain meaningful contact. Classic Connectors have mastered what sociologists call the “weak tie,” a friendly yet casual social connection.

Connectors are important for more than simply the number of people they know. Their importance is also a function of the kinds of people they know. They are often able to move between different worlds, social groups, and subcultures. 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, with the result that they know lots of different people in those worlds.

This explains why Paul Revere's ride was so successful. He was a classic Connector. He was very outgoing, a fisherman and hunter, a cardplayer, theater-lover, a frequenter of pubs, and a successful businessman. He was active in several social groups. He knew all the important people of his day. So when the British started marching, Revere knew exactly who to contact to spread the word. Word-of-mouth epidemics are the work of Connectors.

It would be a mistake, however, to think that Connectors are the only people who matter in a social epidemic. Just as there are people who we rely on to connect us to other people, there are also people we rely on to connect us to new information. There are people specialists, and there are information specialists. I call them *Mavens*.

The word *Maven* is Yiddish, and it means one who accumulates knowledge. But they aren't just passive collectors of information. It isn't just that they are obsessed with how to get the best deal on a can of coffee. What sets them apart is that once they figure out how to get that deal, they want to tell you about it too. A *Maven* is a person who has information on a lot of different products or prices or places. And they like to share their information. They are the helpers in the marketplace; they love to use their knowledge to benefit others.

Why are *Mavens* so important in starting epidemics? They have the knowledge and social skills to start word-of-mouth epidemics. What makes them influential, however, isn't what they know but how they pass it along. The fact that *Mavens* want to help, for no other reason than because they like to help, turns out to be an awfully effective way of getting someone's attention.

A *Maven* wants to educate and help, but he isn't really a persuader. In a social epidemic, *Mavens* are data banks. They provide the message. Connectors are social glue: they spread it. But there is a select group of people—*Salesmen*—with the skills to persuade us when we are unconvinced of what we are hearing, and they are as critical to the tipping of word-of-mouth epidemics as the other two groups.

What makes *Salesmen* so good at what they do? There are a lot of factors—ability to use logic, make a presentation, etc. But there are other, more subtle factors that are important. *Salesmen* connect emotionally with people, and even influence other people's emotions. They are "senders." They are emotionally contagious—people who get around them tend to become aligned emotionally with them. Their emotional state changes to be more like the sender, which gives the sender tremendous influence. This ability marks *Salesmen*.

Chapter 3: The Stickiness Factor

In epidemics, the messenger matters: messengers are what make something spread. But the content of the message matters too. And the specific quality that a message needs to be successful is the quality of "stickiness." Is the message—or the food, or the movie, or the product—memorable? Is it so memorable, in fact, that it can create change, that it can spur someone to action?

In the 1970's there was a showdown between direct marketer Lester Wunderman and the advertising firm McCann Erickson over the Columbia Record Club account. They had a competition to see who would win the account. Columbia ran ads in *TV Guide* and *Parade* magazines in 26 markets. Wunderman and McCann each ran television ads in 13 of the markets to see who would cause the greatest increase in response. When results were tabulated, Wunderman had four times the response that McCann produced, despite them spending more money and running ads in prime time, while Wunderman's ran in the wee hours of the morning.

The key to his success was something he called a “treasure hunt.” In every magazine ad, he put a little gold box in the corner of the coupon. Then his TV commercials told the “secret of the Gold Box.” Viewers were told that if they could find the gold box, they could write in the name of any record on the Columbia list and get it free. When they rolled out the ad in the next year, their profits increased dramatically.

If you look closely at epidemic ideas or messages, as often as not the elements that make them sticky turn out to be small and seemingly trivial.

We all want to believe that the key to making an impact on someone lies with the inherent quality of the ideas we present. But the reality is that the way the ideas are presented determines if they stick or not. There is a simple way to package information that, under the right circumstances, can make it irresistible. All you have to do is find it.

Chapter 4: The Power of Context (Part One)

Epidemics are sensitive to the conditions and circumstances of the times and places in which they occur. And the kinds of contextual changes that are capable of tipping an epidemic are very different than we might ordinarily suspect.

During the 1990’s violent crime declined across the U.S. for a number of reasons. In New York the decline was dramatic. Something else was clearly involved in the decrease in crime in New York.

The best explanation for the decline comes from Broken Windows theory, developed by James Q. Wilson. Wilson argued that crime is the result of disorder. If a window is broken and left unrepaired, people walking by will conclude that no one cares and no one is in charge. Soon, more windows will be broken, and the sense of anarchy will spread throughout the neighborhood. In a city, relatively minor problems like graffiti, public disorder, and panhandling are all the equivalent of broken windows, and are invitations to more serious crimes.

This is an epidemic theory of crime. It says that crime is contagious, just as a fashion trend is contagious. The Tipping Point in this epidemic isn’t a kind of person. It’s something physical like graffiti. The impetus to engage in a certain behavior is coming from the environment.

New York adopted the Broken Windows theory as a guide to attacking crime. They focused on little things—eliminating graffiti, stopping fare-jumpers (people who would jump the turnstile in order to ride the subway for free), enforcing laws against public drunkenness, etc. Crime began to fall quickly, even dramatically, in the city.

Broken Windows theory and the Power of Context are the same. They are both based on the premise that an epidemic can be reversed, can be tipped, by tinkering with the smallest details of the immediate environment. Behavior can be shaped by environment. Liberals have been saying this for years, but in this case we are talking about something different. Usually the idea relates to fundamental social factors: injustice, unemployment, racism, etc. But the Power of Context says that what really matters are little things.

Chapter 5: The Power of Context (Part Two)

In the late 18th and early 19th century, the Methodist movement became epidemic in England and North America, tipping from 20,000 to 90,000 followers over just 5-6 years in the 1780’s. Methodism’s founder, John Wesley, was not the best preacher of the time (that was George Whitefield), nor was he a great theologian. His genius was organizational. Everywhere he went he organized his converts into religious societies, which were then subdivided into smaller classes of about a dozen people. High commitment was expected, and people were expelled if they didn’t live up to Methodist standards. In other words, these groups stood for something.

Wesley realized that if you want to bring about a fundamental change in people's beliefs and behavior, a change that would persist and serve as an example to others, you need to create a community around them, where those new beliefs could be practiced and expressed and nurtured.

Small, close-knit groups have the power to magnify the epidemic potential of a message or idea. If we are interested in starting an epidemic, what are the most effective kinds of groups? Is there a simple rule of thumb that distinguishes a group with real social authority from a group with little power at all? As it turns out, there is. It's called the Rule of 150.

As human beings, we can only handle so much information at once; after that we get overwhelmed. The same is true for our emotional energy. We can only maintain a deep connection with somewhere between 10 and 15 people. To be close friends with someone requires a minimum investment of time. It also takes emotional energy; caring about someone can be exhausting. At a certain point, at somewhere between 10 and 15 people, we begin to overload, just like we do when we are trying to handle too much information.

For our purposes, there is another limit we need to pay attention to. It could be called our social channel capacity.

In studying human organizations, it turns out that 150 is the maximum number of individuals with whom we can have a genuinely social relationship, the kind that goes with knowing who they are and how they relate to us. Putting it another way, it's the number of people you would not feel embarrassed about joining uninvited for a drink if you happened to bump into them in a bar.

The number 150 shows up again and again in human organizations, around the world in different cultures and throughout history. In the military, functional fighting units cannot be larger than 200; Hutterite religious groups have a strict policy that every time a colony approaches 150, they split it in two and start a new one. One Hutterite leader said, "Keeping things under 150 just seems to be the best and most efficient way to manage a group of people. When things get larger than that, people become strangers to one another."

The rule of 150 suggests that the size of a group is another one of those subtle contextual factors that can make a big difference. If we want groups to serve as incubators for contagious messages, we have to keep groups below the 150 Tipping Point. Above that, there begin to be structural impediments to the ability of the group to agree and act with one voice.

If we want to develop schools in disadvantaged communities that can successfully counteract the poisonous atmosphere of their surrounding neighborhoods, this tells us that we're probably better off building lots of little schools than one or two big ones. The rule of 150 says that congregants of a rapidly expanding church or social club, or anyone in a group activity banking on the epidemic spread of shared ideals needs to be particularly cognizant of the perils of bigness. Crossing the 150 line is a small change that can make a big difference.

Chapter 6 & 7: Case Study

In Iowa in 1928, a new corn seed was introduced that was superior in every respect to the seed that had been used for the preceding decades. But it wasn't adopted all at once. Only a handful of farmers used it in the beginning, and then the numbers began to slowly increase until by 1941 all the farmers except two were using the new seeds.

The handful of farmers who started using the new seeds were the Innovators, the adventurous ones. The next group, which was slightly larger, were the Early Adopters. They were the opinion leaders in the community; respected, thoughtful people who evaluated what the Innovators were doing and then followed suit. The next group, the largest, were the Early Majority and the Late Majority, the deliberate and the skeptical mass, who would never try anything until they saw the leaders try it first.

The message here (the new seeds) was highly contagious and very sticky. The farmers could see the difference the seeds made at harvest. It's hard to imagine how that particular innovation *couldn't* have tipped. But often the spread of a new idea is actually quite tricky.

The attitudes of the Early Adopters and the Early Majority are actually incompatible. Innovations don't just slide effortlessly from one group to the next. There is a chasm between them. This is where the Connectors, Mavens, and Salesmen play their most important role. They are the ones who make it possible for innovations to cross the chasm. They are translators: they take ideas and information from a highly specialized world and translate them into a language the rest of us can understand.

It works like this: the Innovators try something new. Then someone—a Connector or Maven or Salesmen—sees it and adopts it. They see what Innovators do and they tweak it. They start doing it themselves, but they change it a bit. They make it more usable.

Maybe there's a kid who rolls up his jeans and puts duct tape around the bottom because he's the one bike messenger in the school. The translators like that look, but they wouldn't use duct tape. They'll buy something with Velcro. They look at something and say, "it's a little off. But there's a way I can change it and make it okay." Then it takes off.

That's what is meant by translation. What Mavens and Connectors and Salesmen do to an idea in order to make it contagious is to alter it in such a way that the rest of us can understand and connect with. And then an epidemic can develop.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

The first lesson of the Tipping Point is that starting epidemics requires concentrating resources on a few key areas. The Law of the Few says that Connectors, Mavens, and Salesmen are responsible for starting word-of-mouth epidemics, which means that if you are interested in starting a word-of-mouth epidemic, your resources ought to be solely concentrated on those three groups. No one else matters.

The second lesson of the Tipping Point is that the world does not accord with our intuition. Those who are successful at creating social epidemics do not just do what they think is right. They deliberately test their intuitions. Lester Wunderman's gold box sounded like a silly idea until he proved how much more effective it was than conventional advertising.

What must underlie successful epidemics, in the end, is a bedrock belief that change is possible, that people can radically transform their behavior or beliefs in the face of the right kind of impetus. By manipulating the size of a group, we can dramatically improve its receptivity to new ideas. By tinkering with the presentation of information, we can significantly improve its stickiness. Simply by finding and reaching those few special people who hold so much social power, we can shape the course of social epidemics.

In the end, Tipping Points are a reaffirmation of the potential for change and the power of intelligent action. 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.



From the Pastor's Perspective

The Tipping Point has several insights that can make a big difference for any pastor or leader if they take them into account.

Gladwell's insights into the Law of the Few—the role Connectors, Mavens, and Salesmen have in spreading an epidemic, is one that stands out. Whether trying to lead a change in your church or organization, or planting a new church, it can make a huge difference if you relate to them wisely.

I have often heard about the importance of identifying “influencers” in your organization if you want to lead change. Gladwell takes this a step further by breaking down the “influencers” into specific categories. I know people who fit each of the categories, and I think his descriptions are accurate.

I found myself particularly thinking about the Connectors in terms of church planting. A challenge for any planter is how to build relationships. One approach is to identify the Connectors in your town. Every town, every organization has them—people who just seem to know everyone. They may never actually come to your church or get involved in your ministry, but you can meet a lot of people through them. If you can identify them, it makes it easier, and more natural, to meet many others.

The same is true for leading your church or organization. If you can get the Connectors, Mavens, and Salesmen on board with the direction you want to go, they will actually lead the people. Their influence will be critical in moving the organization as a whole forward in a unified, harmonious way.

The Law of Context is also important. Little things in the environment can have a big impact on what people do. For example, one problem in many churches is assimilation—helping new people get involved in the life of the church. All too often, the process is very unclear. Simply making clear what people's “next step” is would help many churches improve. People can't take a step if they don't know what it is.

Similarly, lack of good signage within the building can create an invisible barrier for people. It's a little thing, but it can decrease people's comfort level and make it less likely they will return. A small thing, but if it is attended to can make it a little easier for people to feel comfortable and get involved.

I suspect his application to churches—that they should consider multiplying when they get to 150—will be somewhat controversial. It fits with the idea of the “200 Barrier” and explains in part why some churches don't break that barrier. While there is certainly a lot more to it, it's worth the time for every pastor to think through how they are structuring their church. Does the structure facilitate or inhibit movement towards goals?