



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

- Gladwell, M. (2000). The Tipping Point: How Little Things Make a Big Difference, Little Brown: New York, NY.
 - A summary for educators
 - by Douglas W. Green EdD.

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Tipping Point: The biography of an idea

- It is a way to help understand the emergence of trends and mysterious changes that mark everyday life.
- Ideas, products, messages, and behaviors spread just like viruses do.
- Three key characteristics (p. 9)
 - Contagiousness
 - Little causes can have big effects
 - Change happens often in dramatic fashion

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High status workers and social problems

- Role models do matter
- Professionals, managers, and teachers are considered “high status” by the Census Bureau.
- When the number of such people drops below 5% in a neighborhood social problems like drop-outs and teen pregnancy explodes
- At the tipping point schools can lose control of their students and family life can disintegrate. (p. 13)

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Connectors: They know “everyone”!

- Sprinkled among every walk of life are a handful of people with a truly extraordinary knack of making friends and acquaintances. They are connectors.
- Connectors often span many different worlds and have some combination of curiosity, self-confidence, sociability, and energy.
- The closer an idea or product comes to a connector the more power or opportunity it has.

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The importance of “weak ties”

- Your friends “strong ties” occupy the same world that you do. As a result, how much do they know that you don’t.
- Your acquaintances “weak ties” occupy different worlds. They are more likely to know something you don’t. That is why they represent a source of social power.
- Weak ties with connectors are very useful.

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Mavens: Those who accumulate knowledge

- In addition to accumulating vast amounts of knowledge mavens usually also want to share it. This can be very effective in starting word-of-mouth epidemics.
- Mavens are teachers and students. They are not natural persuaders but the information they present can be persuasive.


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Salesmen: People who are born persuaders

- Some people have a hard to define trait that makes what they say powerful, contagious, and irresistible so the people want to agree with them. It may include energy, charm, enthusiasm, or likability.
- When people talk their volume and pitch fall into balance. People with persuasive personalities tend to draw others into their own rhythms and dictate the terms of interaction.

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Motor mimicry: Show someone a smile and they are likely to smile back.

- Emotions are contagious. This gives some people an enormous amount of influence over others. They are called emotional senders.
- Such charismatic people can infect other people with their emotions.
- Paul Revere was a good salesman who also had the particular genius of a maven and connector.

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Sesame Street was sticky but not perfect

- Sticky things are easy to remember. This is what all advertisers strive for.
- *Sesame Street* was most sticky when the children understood what was happening. If they were confused it didn't matter how splashy the content was.
- The Muppets were sticky. The lessons were often not sticky.
- Adult elements were added so parents would watch. This, however, made the show less sticky for children.

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Kids have longer attention spans that one might think

- Preschool learning theory at the time (Piaget and others) stated that children could not follow extended narrative.
- Now psychologists (Bruner and others) believe that the narrative form is absolutely central. It's the only way they have of organizing their world. (p. 118)
- For understanding, preschoolers need narrative to be perfectly literal without any wordplay or comedy that might confuse. This is what the creators of *Blue's Clues* did.

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What made *Blue's Clues* even more sticky?

- They found that kids would participate when asked which got them more involved.
- They borrowed the idea of repetition from *Sesame Street*. Each time children see something, they see it in a different way.
- *Blue's Clues* runs the same episode five times in a row.
- The law of stickiness says that there is a simple way to package information that under the right circumstance makes it irresistible. All you need do is find it. (p. 132)


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The Power of Context (Part One)

- The Law of the Few states that there are certain kinds of people who are critical in spreading information.
- The question of stickiness suggests that in order to make a difference ideas have to be memorable and move us to action.
- The power of context suggests that epidemics are sensitive to conditions and circumstance of the times and places where they occur. Imagine if Paul Revere did his ride in the afternoon when people were not at home.

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Why did crime dip radically in New York City in the 1990's?

- Crime is the inevitable result of disorder (Wilson and Coles, 1996) Things like graffiti, panhandling, and broken windows invite crime.
- Although graffiti did not seem like a big problem, it was symbolic of the collapse of the system. Winning this battle improved moral and allowed more important physical changes to take place.

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Subway fare beating – the next battle

- Like graffiti, fare beating was a symbol of disorder. At the time it was only a \$1.25 fare and police didn't think it was worth their time.
- At first, fare beaters were hand cuffed and lined up for others to see. Arrest time was streamlined. As it turned out, 1 in 7 of those arrested had an outstanding arrest warrant and 1 in 20 had a weapon. For the police it was like opening a box of Cracker Jack.

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Other quality of life crimes were next

- Squeegee men were banished.
- Repeat offenders for public drunkenness and urination were arrested. If you peed in the street you were going to jail.
- Throwing bottles in the street and minor property damage were no longer tolerated.
- In short, an epidemic was tipped by attending to the smallest of details.

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Fundamental Attribution Errors (FAE)

- A fancy way of saying that humans invariably make the mistake of overestimating the importance of fundamental character traits and underestimating the importance of the situation and context.
- We want to explain the world around us in terms of people's essential attributes: he's a better basketball player, that person is smarter than I am.

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F AE in action

- The birth order myth is a good example of the FAE in action. When older siblings are away from their families, they are no more likely to be domineering and younger siblings are no more likely to be rebellious than anyone else.
- People can control their context and allow their character to take over. Someone who is fun at parties is perceived as fun in all situations by people who only see the person at parties. They are probably less fun in hostile situations.

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Environment shapes character

- Studies of juvenile delinquency and drop-out rates demonstrate that a child is better off in a good neighborhood and a troubled family than in a troubled neighborhood and a good family.
- Other studies suggest that it is possible to be a better person on a clean street or in a clean subway than in one littered with trash and graffiti.

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The Power of Context (Part two)

- Groups play a critical role in social epidemics.
- John Wesley (a classic connector) was not the most charismatic preacher but he understood that changes he preached would only persist if there was a community to support them.
- The *Devine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* only became a best seller because of the reading groups of women who related to the content and spread the word. The group discussion made the content even stickier.

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What does correlate with brain size?

- Among primates, brain size correlates with the size of the groups that animals live in.
- This implies that brains evolve to handle the complexities of larger social groups.
- Humans socialize in the largest groups of all thanks to their large brains.
- Dunbar calculated a neocortex ratio for primates and found the maximum group size for each species. For humans this turns out to be about 150.

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The magic of 150 for human groups

- A study of hunter gatherer societies found an average village size of about 148.4.
- A religious group known as the Hutterites have a strict policy that when a colony approaches 150 they split in two. If groups get too big you start to become strangers and close-knit fellowship is lost.
- Gore (makers of Gore-Tex) designs plants that are staffed by about 150 people. They find that peer pressure is more powerful than boss pressure.

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Group Think – Transactive Memory

- It seems that we store information with other people. Couples do this automatically. Pairs who know each other remember more than pairs who do not.
- It can be argued that loss of joint memory helps make divorce more painful. The loss of transactive memory feels like losing part of one's own mind.

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Steps in the diffusion model for innovations

- Adventurous innovators are the first to try something.
- They are followed by early adopters. These are opinion leaders who the community watches.
- These two groups are visionaries who look for revolutionary change.
- The early adopters include mavens, connectors, and salesmen. They may alter the idea or product somewhat to better translate it to a wider audience. First to the early majority, then the later majority and the laggards.

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Case Study – Teen Smoking

- The law of the few and the stickiness factor result in teen experimentation with smoking and addiction.
- Smoking isn't cool, smokers are cool. They are the salesmen. Contagiousness is mostly a function of the messenger.
- Nicotine (the messenger in this case) is addicting for many. Stickiness is a primary property of the messenger.

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Who gets addicted?

- The question of how sticky smoking ends up to be depends on an individual's reaction to nicotine.
- Nicotine is only addictive in some people, some of the time.
- Many people can smoke without becoming addicted.
- Smokers who are depressed are in essence using tobacco as a cheap way to treat their own depression. This gives smoking stickiness with a vengeance.

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Can smoking addiction be controlled?

- There also seems to be a tipping point in terms of the amount of nicotine it takes to become addicted.
- Cocaine and heroin seem to be less sticky as smaller percentages of those who try these drugs become addicted. (0.9% of those who try cocaine become regular users.)
- Paying attention to the tipping point for cigarette addiction may make it possible to make smoking less sticky.

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To start an epidemic you need connectors, salesmen, and mavens!

- When Georgia Sadler tried to increase knowledge of breast cancer and diabetes in the black community in San Diego she tried using black churches. When that didn't work she tried hair dressers. She found them to be a little bit connector, salesman, and maven rolled into one. "Once you find someone who can manage your hair, you'll drive 100 miles to see her."

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Doug: How to improve school climate

- You need to focus your efforts on the key people be they students or staff.
- Find the people who influence others for better or worse and get them on your side.
- These are the people who either know everybody (connectors), know a lot (mavens), or influence others (salesmen).
- Notice who has many visitors to their room. Pay attention to groups talking to each other. Also look for subgroups or cliques that operate somewhat independently.

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Doug: What to do with key staff

- Find who others follow and figure out how to lead them.
- Work with them to lead together.
- If you can't lead or work with them then see if you can follow. Join their cause.
- Do them unexpected favors so they will see you in a good light.
- As a leader you may be criticized or treated badly by key people. Do not respond in kind. Take the high road and wear them down with kindness.

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Doug: Determine who is loved and respected

- Every school has people who may not be leaders but who are widely loved and respected.
- Make sure you love and respect them as well. Take care of these people.
- Better yet treat everyone with love and respect.

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Doug: Law of the few for students

- Student salesmen are key to the quality of a school environment.
- These students are liked and respected by other students for reasons that may not be obvious to adults.
- Such students who behave badly can sell their behavior to others. They include the cool kids who smoke and sell this behavior to others.
- Figure out who they are and work to reign them in. Stop small problems before they spread or turn into big problems.

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