

“The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference” by Malcolm Gladwell, Little, Brown and Company, New York, 2000

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In his 2006 book, Results Now, Mike Schmoker expresses his beliefs that most school improvement efforts have been resounding failures, that little has changed as a result of all of our strategic / school improvement planning, and that most often these plans do little more than take up a lot of our time to write. Many of us who have been involved in school improvement efforts over the years would, sadly, agree. Schmoker has long been an advocate of “the simpler the better” when it comes to school improvement efforts. Those plans with very concrete and focused action steps aimed at improving student achievement in a limited number of specific goal areas have a greater likelihood of truly impacting student learning.

The Tipping Point, by Malcolm Gladwell, has much to offer this conversation. Gladwell’s belief is evident in the title – that sometimes it is the smallest, least complex changes that make the biggest impact. The trick is in figuring out where the leverage points are and being very thoughtful about what changes are implemented.

Gladwell uses the word epidemic, or the quick and widespread acceptance of a new idea, to describe change. If a new idea catches on with enough people, it reaches the *tipping point*, becoming widespread and accepted – becoming an epidemic. He identifies three “rules” which predict how successful a desired change will be: the law of the few, the stickiness factor, and the power of context.

The Law of the Few (Who spreads ideas?)

The law of the few refers to the concept that it takes very few people to cause a new idea to spread, but the *right* people must be involved: connectors, mavens and salespeople, *Connectors* are those people who seem to know and interact with everyone. If you want information to be passed along to lots of people, connectors can make this happen. They move in many different social / professional circles and are connected to lots of different kinds of people.

Mavens are people who always seem to know a lot about many different things; they are “warehouses” of good information. Mavens are the people other people go to when they want to find out about something, get information about something, or hear the latest news.

Although mavens have lots of information, their goal is to share that information, not to convince anyone of anything. *Salespeople* are the people who are the good persuaders – they are the people who can convince others to try something new or to “buy into” a change. People watch salespeople to see what they are doing and then follow suit.

According to the law of the few, the connectors, mavens and salespeople must be “on board” for an idea to spread or for a proposed change to be successful.

The Stickiness Factor (What are the characteristics of a good idea?)

The stickiness factor refers to a person’s reaction to a new idea based on how attractive or “do-able” it appears to be. Simply put, it refers to how attractively a new idea is “packaged”. The “stickier” a new idea is – how exciting it is, how do-able it is, how meaningful it is, how understandable it is, how practical it is – the more likely it is that it will reach the tipping point and become an epidemic.

The Power of Context (How does environment impact which ideas spread?)

The nature of the environment and the context of a new idea impact the likelihood that an idea will spread and become an epidemic. The *broken windows theory* is based on the fact that an idea can be “tipped” by changing an aspect of the environment. Gladwell uses the example of the decrease in crime in the New York subway system when the graffiti was cleaned up, broken windows were repaired, and subway cars were cleaned. The environment allowed or caused a change in behavior to occur – a reduction in crime. Negative or positive issues or characteristics within the environment of an organization will impact the success or failure of a new idea.

The *rule of 150* represents the idea that change occurs more readily in groups of 150 or less and that once a group reaches 151 change has a significantly lower chance of success. When organizations, such as schools, are larger than 150 members (teachers), smaller units must be formed and established if we are serious about implementing new ideas.

Throughout this book, Gladwell gives many practical examples to illustrate the three rules of change and the power of reaching the tipping point. Although the examples are not school-related, they are clear and convincing,

and the reader can easily generalize the concepts described to the school setting.

The Tipping Point has much to offer educators if we are serious about changing our track record in school improvement – and ultimately, if we are serious about truly improving the achievement of all students.

After reading, discussion questions might include:

- School change takes many forms – ranging from introducing a new instructional strategy to changing the school year calendar or the daily schedule for students. Consider a new idea or a change your school has been discussing. How would you define the tipping point? When and how will you know that the change has become accepted practice and has been fully implemented?
- Can you think of a time that a school improvement strategy did not have the desired effect on student achievement? Instead of being the fault of the strategy itself, might it be that the new strategy was never really implemented – that it never truly reached the “tipping point”?
- Who are the connectors, mavens and salespeople in your school? Are they involved in current school improvement initiatives? If not, how could you involve them?
- Think of an initiative included in your most recent school improvement plan. How “sticky” is it? How could it be made “stickier”?
- What are some variables within the context of your school that may impact whether a new idea is successful or not? Think of the broken windows theory and the rule of 150 as you discuss this question.