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<u>*Futurist Book Group Discussion*</u>

The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference

Malcolm Gladwell
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Synopsis of the February 2008 meeting of the Futurist Book Group (WFS Washington DC Chapter); summarized and reviewed by Ken Harris

On February 6, 2008, the Futurist Book Group of the National Capital Chapter of the World Future Society discussed *The Tipping Point*. Perhaps because the book is well known and was a New *York Times* best seller, we had one of the largest turnouts in the group's four-year history. The book is yet another in our line of readings like *The Black Swan* by Nicholas Nassim Taleb and *The Long Tail* by Chris Anderson, which examine how change happens. Rather than attempting to forecast the future or to spin alternative future scenarios, these books provide ideas on things to look for when contemplating what the future might bring.

Chock full of examples, *The Tipping Point* compares social change to disease epidemics. In fact, Gladwell borrows the term "tipping point" from epidemiology. He shows that a "Tipping Point" occurs when gradually occurring change very suddenly becomes explosive change. His book examines the three kinds of people who make explosive change happen, two laws of change, and the contexts in which change occurs. Connectors, Mavens and Salesmen are the three kinds of change agents. Here is how Gladwell characterizes Connectors:

> *"This is what Connectors are like. They are the Rod Steigers of everyday life. They 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 and subcultures and niches."*

The vital role of connectors is that they can and do widely transmit information about change because they know so many people—not just their close friends but, even more importantly, their casual acquaintances, people who are not like them and who connect them to new information.

For their part, mavens accumulate lots of detailed information. Gladwell says, "The word *Maven* comes from the Yiddish, and it means one who accumulates knowledge." They are also socially motivated and want to help you make decisions using their unique expertise. Gladwell uses the example of price Mavens, whom supermarket managers fear because they know whether posted claims of low prices are correct or not; they are also called "price vigilantes" he says. According to Gladwell:

> *"Mavens have the knowledge and the social skills to start word-of-mouth epidemics. What sets Mavens apart, though is not so much 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."*

Salesmen have unique ability to persuade others of the correctness of a course of action. The core of their talent is an ability to quickly counter and overcome any objections a customer may have. One shortcoming of Gladwell's argument that came out in the group's discussion is that Gladwell never really explains who sells the salesmen on a new idea. Clearly, someone could be both a Maven and a Salesman. In the Maven role, he or she would learn about an idea, and, in the Salesman role, convince others of it. So much the better for spread of the idea if one or more of the "customers" happen to be Connectors. But, suppose the Salesmen are not Mavens and do not have unique knowledge. Do Salesmen simply have an emotional need to convince people of an idea they believe they can sell whether they believe it or not? Gladwell doesn't say.

These three types of exceptional people—Connectors, Mavens and Salesmen—are the ones who start and spread social epidemics and cause change to reach Tipping Points. However, they are a small minority of the population—the 20% of the people who do 80% of the work. Although Gladwell does not directly say so, that social change epidemics cannot occur without their efforts is what he calls "The Law of the Few." This is the first of his two laws of change.

The second law is what he calls "The Stickiness Factor." This refers to another essential element of a social epidemic—its staying power. Gladwell attributes the success of the children's television programs *Sesame Street* and *Blues Clues* to their stickiness. Both programs' producers did extensive research on how children watched television and used the results of their research in design of the programs. Contrary to "conventional wisdom" of child psychologists, they found that children do not watch television like zombies. In reality, they watch when what is on the screen interests them and they understand it. With further research, the producers were able to tailor the segments to match their young viewers' interests to keep their ratings high and *Sesame Street* on the air. Nickelodeon's *Blues Clues* eventually bested *Sesame Street* in the ratings because its producers found two ways to make *Blues Clues* even stickier than *Sesame Street*. First, they found that children did not understand the puns intended to appeal to parents on *Sesame Street* and made *Blues Clues* dialogue completely literal. Second, they found that, unlike adult audiences, children enjoy repetitions of the same program even to the extent they know what will happen next, so they repeated each episode several times with the added benefit of reduced production cost. The latter point rang a bell with parents in the discussion who could recall reading the same stories to their children endless times. The group's discussion of stickiness was extended as participants recalled numerous advertising jingles that they could not get out of their heads such as, "Winston tastes good like a cigarette should."

Another of Gladwell's key points is his discussion of "The Power of Context." Change cannot occur unless the context for it is right. Context is a broader concept than timing; it refers to the total environment surrounding a potential social epidemic. With his discussion of the decline of the crime rate in New York City, Gladwell shows that epidemics can be stopped when the context in which they thrive is changed. In the 1980s, crime was rampant in New York, especially on the subway system with people decorating subway cars with graffiti and evading paying fares by jumping over or ducking under subway

turnstiles. These acts were crimes but were not punished as such because police felt they had far more serious crimes to deal with like murder and armed robbery. However, in the mid-1980s, following the advice of consultant George Kelling, a criminologist, the New York transit authority hired David Gunn as Director to oversee a multi-billion dollar re-building of the subway system. Gunn believed in the "broken windows" theory, which Kelling and another criminologist James Q. Wilson had propounded previously. That theory says that by not fixing broken windows, one creates a feeling that no one is in charge and encourages more broken windows and more offenses. In other words, by not fixing broken windows, one creates a "context" in which crime is OK. Gunn steadfastly held to his belief that, by cleaning subway cars and punishing fare evaders, crime on the New York subways would go down, and it did! Not only were painting graffiti on subway cars and fare evasion greatly reduced, but people arrested for fare evasion were often found to be guilty of serious crimes, so the arrests had added benefit. The concept was so successful that it was applied citywide, and New York became a very safe city even though sociological indicators like lower average age of the city's population pointed to an increase in crime.

FUTURE*takes* readers will find *The Tipping Point* an easy and entertaining read—a tribute to Gladwell's talents as a staff writer for *The New Yorker* magazine and former *Washington Post* reporter. Nevertheless, they will find it very thought provoking. They probably will conclude, as did the group, that it is like *Divine Secrets of the Ya Ya Sisterhood*, one of Gladwell's examples, a true "book group" book (i.e., one that inspires discussion from many points of view). They may even find inspiration for a new point of view in their work as another discussion participant and I did.

POINTS FOR THE CLASSROOM *(send comments to forum@futuretakes.org):*

o *To what extent is Gladwell's analysis of social change applicable to the social transformations that you have observed or with which you are otherwise familiar? How applicable will his analysis be to forthcoming social changes within the next decade?*

o *Many new ideas never gain enough support, even among Connectors, Mavens, and Salesmen, to lead to social change. There are several reasons for this. First, the change agents themselves (and many other people) have diverse "pet issues," and gaining consensus on priorities is often difficult. This challenge is compounded by information overload, in which there is substantial competition for attention. Case in point – the growing number of blogs. Another factor is the challenge of leveraging the "stickiness factor," given the short attention spans and continuing desire for novelty in some parts of the world. Nonetheless, some ideas do attract grassroots support to eventually culminate in social transformation. What unique characteristics do these "successful" ideas share?*