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January 2007
Words: 1,072

Review of

The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Difference

by Malcolm Gladwell

This is the book that launched Malcolm Gladwell into the stratosphere. Since its publication in 2000, *The Tipping Point* has been a monster hit. As I write this, in January 2007, it still ranks as one of the leaders on best-seller charts—number 37 on the Amazon.com list of non-fiction best-sellers.

The Tipping Point is a fun read and full of insights—but you probably already knew that. There's no need to write one more conventional book review. So let me take a different slant. This website is concerned with the errors in thinking that undermine business books. We should ask: Is Gladwell's book free from those errors, or does it exhibit some of them, too?

For the most part, Gladwell's analysis and presentation are sound. He doesn't claim to have gathered vast quantities of data and subjected them to rigorous analysis, as so many pretentious business books do. Nowhere does he make the claim of scientific rigor. His tone is informal, not self-important. Yet there's a basic problem, and it's suggested in the subtitle: *How Little Things Can Make a Difference*. Yes, little things *can* make a difference, but how often *do* they? Are the examples in the book typical and rather commonly encountered, or are they exceedingly rare? And what separates the successes from the *might-have-beens*?

Gladwell's basic approach is to select examples based on the outcome—that is, he chooses things that have already *tipped*, whether a popular shoe style, or a best-selling book, or law abiding behavior in New York City, or the propensity for teen suicide in American Samoa. He then works his way backwards to explain how something small and innocuous managed to grow, gathered momentum, and eventually *tipped*. Take his first example, the resurgence of Hush Puppies. Gladwell traces the remarkable comeback of this shoe to a series of small things that cascaded: initial popularity among a few people, who wore them at some hot Manhattan night clubs, from where the style spread, and eventually a once-popular brand came back into vogue.

All of which makes a fine story, but only because we begin with the outcome and work backwards. To understand fully the phenomenon of social diffusion, it's not enough to look only at examples of things that successfully *tipped*. We also have to look at things that might have caught on, but never did. Only by comparing successes against failures can we discern what leads to *tipping* and what does not. Gladwell's approach is therefore illustrative of a common error which I call *The Delusion of the Wrong End of the Stick*. If you select your sample based on outcomes, you can find a number of antecedent conditions and might then be tempted to conclude that those antecedents had a causal impact on the outcome. Maybe they did, and maybe they did not, but you have no way of knowing if you study only successful outcomes. You're grabbing the wrong end of the stick.

In at least one instance, Gladwell does offer a comparison between something that *tipped* and something that did not. He argues that the reason why Paul Revere so effectively spread the news about the arrival of the British redcoats, while William Dawes was ineffective, was because Revere was a “Connector” and a “Maven” who knew which doors to knock on and which people to tell. Yet apart from this example, Gladwell doesn’t have much to say much about ideas or practices that fail to tip. We never know, to use a statistical term, the base rate of the population. For every example of a successfully resurgent shoe brand, how many never recover? Are Hush Puppies a one-in-ten phenomenon, or a one-in-a-thousand long-shot? How many shoes were worn by cool people in hot night clubs but never took off? Unless you also compare successful tips with those that don’t you don’t have a full picture.

All of this is important for both descriptive and prescriptive reasons. From a descriptive standpoint, if we only examine things that *tipped* but don’t compare them to things that did not, we have an incomplete understanding of the phenomenon. But there’s a prescriptive dimension, too, since we don’t know whether a give set of actions, individually or collectively, will make a significant difference in the likelihood of *tipping*. If we actively seek out Mavens and Connectors and Salesmen, will our chances of *tipping* improve greatly, or only somewhat, or imperceptibly? If you’re thinking of laying out funds to publicize your book or shoes, that’s not a trivial matter.

Speaking as the author of a soon-to-be-published book, I would naturally like my book to reach a wide audience. I know that most business books don’t sell very well. A handful do reasonably well, and a very few do exceedingly well—but usually because they offer over-blown formulas for success. So the question becomes: Can the ideas in *The Tipping Point* help me do things that might get my book to catch on?

In fairness, Gladwell makes no claims about offering a formula for *tipping*. Yet he does offer an implicit performance hypothesis: devise an idea that is “sticky,” have it taken up by people who are Connectors, Mavens, or Salesman, and you’ll improve the chances of tipping. By how much can you improve your chances, and can you really stack the odds so that *tipping* becomes likely, and not just a remote possibility? Without a study of the full population, rather than just an examination of successes, we really don’t know. That’s the stuff of scientific inquiry, not what we are likely to find in a popular and intriguing best-seller.

In spite of these limitations, *The Tipping Point* is an engaging book that offers some ideas about the way that things catch fire. Have I tried to apply some of the lessons? You bet. This website, and the articles posted on it, are part of an effort to get the word out—to help my book to reach a wide audience. So if you want to follow an example of a book in search of a tip—stay tuned. Over the next months, I’ll keep you posted on how things are going.

And while you’re at it, if you like the ideas in *The Halo Effect* ... please tell a friend.