

Tipping Points: Implications for Record-Keeping by Organizations

Owen Ambur, September 28, 2008

In *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*, Malcolm Gladwell addresses the dynamics associated with “that one dramatic moment in an epidemic when everything can change all ...” (p. 9) He notes “... plenty of advertising executives ... think that precisely because of the sheer ubiquity of marketing efforts ... word of mouth appeals have become the only kind of persuasion that most of us respond to anymore.” (p. 32) Moreover, he suggests:

... when it comes to finding out ... new information ... “weak ties” are always more important than strong ties. Your friends, after all, occupy the same world that you do... Your acquaintances, on the other hand, by definition occupy a very different world than you. They are much more likely to know something that you don’t... Acquaintances ... represent a source of social power, and the more acquaintances you have the more powerful you are.¹ (p. 54)

A corollary truism is that records we discover in the course of traversing other regions of the world (e.g., via the World Wide Web) beyond our locale enable us to learn more and potentially generate greater added value than the information we use every day and have committed to memory. With respect to the limitations of human memory and thus the problem for advertisers, Gladwell notes:

We have become ... overwhelmed by people clamoring for our attention... this surfeit of information is called the “clutter problem” ... Much of what we are told or read or watch, we simply don’t remember. The information age has created a stickiness problem. (pp. 98 & 99)

On the other hand, the information age also holds the potential to obviate the need to remember that which we can easily retrieve and access exactly when needed. However, despite the wonders of the Web and full-text search “engines” like Google, we still have a long way to go to approach anything near ideal precision and recall at anytime, much less every time information is required to supplement and bolster our memories and habitual behaviors.

Gladwell asserts, “There is a simple way to package information that, under the right circumstances, can make it irresistible.” (p. 132) However, depending upon one’s position, that can be good or bad – good for the person or organization trying to influence us but bad for those of us who are thus persuaded to take actions that may not be in our own best interest in the long run.

He also says, “in ways that we don’t necessarily appreciate, our inner states are the result of our

¹ For more information on social power and particularly French and Raven’s views on the bases of social power, see <http://ambur.net/French&Raven.htm>

outer circumstances.” (p. 152) Presumably, it would be better if we were more aware of the relevant aspects of reality that make us feel as we do at any point in time but it seems that many of us would rather merely “live in the moment” and simply *experience* our emotions, rather than understand why they occur.²

In *Made to Stick* Chip and Dan Heath note their book is a complement to *The Tipping Point* since it identifies “the *traits* that make ideas sticky” and thus hold the power to affect our thoughts and actions over time. (p. 13) The Heath brothers embellish upon Gladwell’s treatise by outlining six principles of sticky ideas (pp. 16 - 18):

- Simplicity
- Unexpectedness
- Concreteness
- Credibility
- Emotions
- Stories

Gladwell highlights the “Power of Context” and notes that “what really matters is little things.” (p. 150) He argues that “honesty isn’t a fundamental trait... [It] is considerably influenced by situations.” (pp. 157 & 158) In that regard, his views are certainly in accord with those of Charles Ford, who says everybody lies; the only difference is a matter of degree.³ Thus, the importance of creating, maintaining, and sharing complete and high-quality records increases with the degree to which circumstances (context) create incentives for and/or enable dishonesty to occur with potentially adverse impacts on the interests of others.

Ironically, due to the Fundamental Attribution Error (FAE), the risk of such impacts may be increased by placing unwarranted trust in others based upon our impression of their character, judging from their behavior in other circumstances in the past. Gladwell notes FAE occurs when “human beings invariably make the mistake of overestimating the importance of fundamental character traits and underestimate the importance of the situation and context” when interpreting the behavior of others. (p. 160)

FAE is supported by the lack of good and complete records documenting the relevant aspects of the situation and context, as well as intents, actions, and results. However, Gladwell observes:.

There is something in all of us that makes us instinctively want to explain the world around us in terms of people’s essential attributes ... We do this because ... we are a lot more attuned to personal clues than contextual cues. The FAE also makes the world a

² In *Things That Make Us Smart*, Donald Norman suggests that of the various dangers associated with the ill design and misuse of cognitive tools, the one that poses the greatest peril is that of “*experiencing when one should be reflecting ... where entertainment takes precedence over thought.*” (p. 27) For more on Norman’s views, see <http://ambur.net/smart.htm>

³ For more on Ford’s views, see <http://ambur.net/Lies.htm>

much simpler and more understandable place. (p. 161)

Further establishing the need to document contextual issues, he argues “the convictions of your heart and the actual contents of your thoughts are less important, in the end, in guiding your actions than the immediate context of your behavior.” (p. 165)

Gladwell notes that “Environmental Tipping Points are things we can change.” (p. 167) While we cannot change basic human nature, we can change the way that organizations create, manage, and share records, and better records are a key tipping point for changing the behavior of human beings in organizational settings.

Gladwell raises the concept of *channel capacity*, which in cognitive psychology refers to the amount of “space” in our brains for certain kinds of information. (p. 175) He says, “Man evolved to feel strongly about few people, short distances, and relatively brief intervals of time ...” (p. 177) In other words, humankind is not well suited to taking into account many records of reality compiled by many people over lengthy periods of time across vast distances, in a world that is ever shrinking in the Cyber Age.

Those human attributes contribute to what he calls “the paradox of the epidemic,” which means that many small movements often must be created in order to stimulate a single contagious movement. (p. 192) Normally “epidemics” and “contagion” are considered to be bad things, raging out of control of those who are adversely affected by them. However, in the context of Gladwell’s discourse, they are considered to reflect the potential for good, at least from the perspective of those who are able to leverage the dynamics required to stimulate them. On the other hand, the thought that anything out of the control of those who are affected might be considered to be good thing is an assumption warranting skeptical consideration.

Indeed, Gladwell himself notes that the stories that motivate action are often *leveled* – by leaving out “all kinds of details that are essential for understanding the true meaning.” They are also *sharpened* – by making more specific the remaining details. (p. 201)

Even in the discipline of records management it has been taken as dictum that someone must “declare” a record for it to become a record, thus systematically supporting both the leveling and sharpening. However, that faulty logic has recently been challenged by changes in the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure relating to the discovery of *electronically stored information* ([ESI](#)). Essentially, the meaning of those rules is that anything that exists on electronic media is in fact a record and subject to discovery in litigation, regardless of whether anyone has “declared” it to be a record or not... a thought that is frightening to those who have grown accustomed to the luxury of leveling and sharpening the record of their own actions.

Finally, after leveling and sharpening have occurred, Gladwell notes that *assimilation* also takes place, by changing stories so they make more sense to those spreading rumors. (p. 202) In *Rumor Psychology: Social and Organizational Approaches*, DiFonzo and Bordia note that “rumors are an enduring feature of social and organizational landscapes. They attract attention, evoke emotion, incite involvement, affect attitudes and actions – and they are ubiquitous.” (p. 3) They

arise when reliable information contained in reliable records is lacking. Moreover, DiFonzo and Bordia observe that information that does not conform to our stereotypes may be excluded in order to support the telling of “a tidy story.” (p. 167) Indeed, as Gladwell points out, [In memory experiments, invariably] “significant leveling occurs. All but a few details are dropped. But certain details are also, simultaneously, sharpened.” (p. 202)

Nevertheless, Gladwell suggests, “The Band Aid solution is actually the best kind of solution because it involves solving a problem with the minimum amount of effort and time and cost.” (p. 256) In addition, he asserts, “There are times when we need a convenient shortcut, a way of making a lot out of a little, and that is what Tipping Points, in the end, are all about.” (p. 257) Toward that end, he further asserts:

... we are about to enter the age of word of mouth ... paradoxically, all of the sophistication and wizardry and limitless access to information of the New Economy is going to lead us to rely more and more on very primitive kinds of social contacts. Relying on the Connectors, Mavens, and Salesmen in our life is the way we deal with the complexity of the modern world. This is a function of many different factors and changes in our society ... three [of which are:] the rise of isolation, particularly among adolescents; the rise of immunity in communications; and the particularly critical role of the Maven in the modern economy. (p. 265)

No doubt, on the margins, where good information, in reliable records, is lacking Gladwell is right. However, the assumption that adolescents are increasingly isolated seems paradoxical in the era of Facebook, cell phones, text messaging, and virtually nonstop usage of various social networking technologies. Moreover, although we may be growing more immune to the myriad messages that others aim to impose upon us, as evidenced by the new rules of civil procedure, we are now much less immune from being confronted with and held accountable for the records we ourselves create.

Gladwell rightly notes: “In the traditional economy ... value comes from scarcity... But the logic of the network is exactly the opposite. Power and value now come from abundance...” However, evidence of how quickly his views have become outdated is his assertion: “This is why e-mail is supposed to be so powerful: it’s the ultimate tool for easily creating ... personal networks. (p. 272) As is becoming widely recognized E-mail is far from being the “ultimate tool” of social networking and not merely because folks have become “immune” to it, but because better alternatives are developing.

Gladwell correctly observes that when enough people develop immunity, an epidemic ends. (p. 273) However, his prescription is clearly wrong. The antidote to bad information is good information, not more bad information that has been leveled, sharpened, and assimilated by rumor mongers, regardless of how beneficent or malign their motivations may be.

Beginning to draw his argument to a close, Gladwell asserts:

Belonging to large network may be a wonderful thing, and the larger the networks are,

theoretically, the more powerful they are. As networks grow in size, however, it is also the case that the time and nuisance costs borne by each member of the network grows as well... The phone network is so large and unwieldy that we are increasingly only interested in using it selectively. We are getting immune to the telephone. (p. 273)

What makes e-mail so susceptible to immunity is the very thing that made them so attractive ... how easy and inexpensive it was to reach people. (p. 274)

Again, however, he misses the most important point, which is not the size of the network but the degree to which it supports the needs and interests of its participants, individually and directly.

We have not become immune to the telephone, but to being troubled with calls that are of little or no interest to us and/or imposed upon us at inconvenient times by those who have something other than our own personal interests in mind. In that regard, E-mail is marginally better because we can deal with it at the time of our own choosing rather than when someone else decides to ring our phone and disturb our tranquility. However, it is still far from being the “ultimate” tool for connecting people based upon their immediate, shared personal interests at any particular point in time.

Gladwell suggests, “When people are overwhelmed with information and develop immunity to traditional forms of communication, they turn instead for advice and information to the people in their lives whom they respect, admire, and trust.” (p. 275) However, in *The Wisdom of Crowds* James Surowiecki notes that expertise is “spectacularly narrow.” (p. 32) So the wisdom of relying upon advice and information provided by even the most highly respectable, admirable, and trustworthy people is highly suspect. Certainly, it is no substitute for reliable records containing exactly the right information that is most relevant to one’s immediate needs and interests.

Gladwell concludes, “In a world dominated by isolation and immunity, understanding [the] principles of word of mouth is more important than ever.” (p. 280) However, in a world in which human beings strive for a future that is better than the past, it is not word of mouth but rather the effective management and sharing of high-quality records that truly matters... Pass the word.