

Toward the Tipping Point

Leadership and Community Transformation

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The relationship between leadership and change is as murky and tenuous as our understanding of change itself. We observe change, comment on change, experience change both as victims and as beneficiaries. Consciously or not, we participate in the creation of change or the maintenance of the status quo—all this with little understanding of change itself.

Leaders are charged to be visionaries and change agents: that is, to see the desired future and make it happen. We understand that some combination of talent, training and experience is needed for this. We also recognize something called charisma that gives some leaders an edge of influence over others.

Certain types of change are clearly desirable: better schools, ample employment opportunities, affordable health care for everyone, a cleaner environment, higher degrees of civic participation. We expect our current leaders to be working toward these goals, and we seek future leaders who will achieve them. Yet if we do not clearly understand the nature of change and the relationship between leadership and change, our progress will be limited. Indeed, we may even regress. Considerable effort may be expended with little result, and the desired future may continue to elude us.

We may at times feel ourselves akin to the old quip about the weather: “Everyone's talking about it but no one is doing anything about it.” Other than giving us a focus for our hope, or frustrations, what role can we reasonably expect leaders to play in creating the desired future? Malcolm Gladwell provides some tantalizing insights in his best-selling book, [The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference](#):

The Tipping Point is the biography of an idea, and the idea is very simple. It is that the best way to understand the emergence of fashion trends, the ebb and flow of crime waves, or, for that matter, the transformation of unknown books into bestsellers, or the rise of teenage smoking, or the phenomena of word of mouth, or any number of the other mysterious changes that mark everyday life is to think of them as epidemics. Ideas and products and message and behaviors spread just like viruses do.

Gladwell describes three traits of epidemics that also apply to social change: that change is contagious, just like a virus; that very small causes can have dramatic and disproportionate effects; and, that when change manifests, it tends to happen suddenly rather than gradually.

Of the three, the third trait—the idea that epidemics can rise or fall in one dramatic moment—is the most important, because it is the principle that makes sense of the first two and that permits the greatest insight into why modern change happens the way it does. The name given to the one dramatic moment in an epidemic when everything can change all at once is the Tipping Point.

Gladwell points out that change may be in progress for a long time before it manifests. He illustrates this with the example of a lily pond. The number of lilies doubles every day, and it

takes thirty days to fill the pond. On the twenty-ninth day, it is only half full. A few days before that it will seem nearly empty. In the last days, it tips.

The idea of dramatic, logarithmic change arising from relatively small causes is admittedly counter-intuitive. However, Gladwell teases out some of the “natural laws” that help us understand the mechanics of change, both epidemiological and social: “The three rules of the Tipping Point—the Law of the Few, the Stickiness Factor, the Power of Context—offer a way of making sense of epidemics. They provide us with direction for how to go about reaching a Tipping Point.”

While he cites several epidemics of disease to illustrate how a very small number of “transmitters” plays a crucial role in spreading the infection, he goes on to observe that “social epidemics work in exactly the same way. They are also driven by the efforts of a handful of exceptional people...it's things like how sociable they are, or how energetic or knowledgeable or influential among their peers” that sets them apart. He calls this the “Law of the Few” and goes on to describe the characteristics of “the Few” and the role they play in change. He describes the “Connectors,” who know a wide range of people in different circles and share information across social or geographic boundaries; the “Mavens,” who enjoy developing expertise and sharing it with others; and, the “Salesmen,” who have an almost uncanny knack for influencing others.

The Stickiness Factor is the fairly straightforward idea that an interesting message is easier to communicate than a mundane one. Paul Revere, Gladwell points out, would not have raised the countryside if he had only been announcing a sale on pewter mugs at his silver shop. Unfortunately, bad news about our communities, or stereotypes perpetuated in the media about the mountains, are far too “sticky,” while local success stories are not. The nightly news reflects the stickiness of bad news.

Finally, the Power of Context shows us how important the details of our surroundings can be. Gladwell illustrates this with the phenomenon known to criminologists as the “broken window” theory:

If a window is broken and left unrepaired, people walking by will conclude that no one cares and no one is in charge. Soon, more windows will be broken, and the sense of anarchy will spread from the building to the street on which it faces, sending a signal that anything goes. In a city, relatively minor problems like graffiti, public disorder, and aggressive panhandling...are all the equivalent of broken windows, invitations to more serious crimes.

We need not look far to see the applications of these principles to Appalachian communities. We know the power of the few, the folks who are doing everything in a community already. We have seen the “stickiness” of negative messages that persuade citizens that “nothing good will ever happen here.” We can bear witness to the power of context in towns with empty storefronts, broken windows, and buildings, parks or houses in ill repair.

But change can tip either way. Tupelo, Mississippi, in the 1930's, was the county seat of the poorest county in Mississippi. Today, it is one of the fastest growing and most successful cities in the South. Dr. Vaughn Grisham, professor of Sociology at the University of Mississippi, has studied the remarkable story of Tupelo's transformation. He describes the "Tupelo Model" of development as a pyramid with five layers, starting at the bottom with human resource development; then leadership development; organization development; community development; and, at the top, economic development. But before all that, he points out, leaders are needed to get the whole process started.

One such leader in Tupelo was George McClean, editor and owner of the local paper, and a natural born salesman. Still, even he could not "sell" the idea of community development in Tupelo until he realized he needed to place it in the context of self-interest. When the business people of Tupelo realized they could make more profit if the whole community was prosperous, they were willing to invest the necessary financial resources. Self-interest made the idea of community development "sticky."

The story of Tupelo is a long one, but it began to tip when local business people invested the funds that enabled local farmers to create a dairy industry that paid off the investment in less than two years. Once a community begins to tip, possibilities blossom as people see a return on investment rather than an endless drain on resources.

In Gladwell's illustration of the lily pond, the pond appears to fill suddenly but the lilies have actually been growing over time without much visible evidence. Likewise, communities may need to do extensive work in the realms of human development, leadership development, organization development and community development before economic development can begin to tip. Change may be taking place for a long time before it manifests in concrete measures as employment rates or median family income. The concept of "social capital" provides one way to measure the long, slow change that precedes the "tipping" of a community.

In his landmark book, Making Democracy Work, Robert Putnam described social capital as the "networks, norms and trust" that make it possible for a community to function well. Communities with a wealth of social capital tend to be more prosperous and to demonstrate more effective and inclusive governmental institutions. Social capital can be measured with indicators such as newspaper readership, voter turnout, and participation in both civic and recreational organizations.

Social capital is created when good things happen, such as park cleanups and main street renovations, or when communities pull together to solve problems or celebrate success. Likewise, social capital declines when a plant closes, when there is real or perceived injustice, when trust is violated. Social capital is a reflection of the "power of context" in communities.

Leadership development serves and supports this kind of community transformation. The diverse teams that take part in the Brushy Fork Leadership Program enable participants to build new networks and become better “Connectors.” The information they gather about resources and models of community development encourages them to function as “Mavens” who disseminate this information to others. They have the opportunity to exercise their abilities as “Salesmen” as they tell others about their project. The successful projects that teams complete speak directly to social capital and the Power of Context as they affirm to the community its own best attributes.

In countless Appalachian counties, much work remains to be done. It takes time, and a wide range of programs, to help communities reach the Tipping Point. As we apply resources to leadership development, it is important that we not think about how to avoid duplication of efforts, but rather how to be actively engaged in coordination of efforts so that we build effectively on work already done. Through participation in the Community Collaborative, Inc., Brushy Fork and other agencies, organizations and institutions are working effectively together to serve West Virginia's communities. The Collaborative also serves as a forum in which to share resources, ideas and lessons learned. Gladwell's work is relatively new. We need to explore more ways in which the lessons of The Tipping Point can be applied to leadership and community development in Appalachia. These new insights into the nature of change may have tremendous implications.