Leadership and Communication: Lessons from The Tipping Point

Todd A. Ward, Greg Smith, Ramona Houmanfar

Department of Psychology

University of Nevada, Reno

Abstract

The authors discuss *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* by Malcolm Gladwell in light of recent developments in Organizational Behavior Management (OBM). The book describes naturalistic cultural phenomena and cites research to support the idea that, under certain conditions, cultural practices can exceed a "tipping point" and create "social epidemics" across vast populations. Gladwell's formulations are based on three types of people – characterized by their knowledge, social connections, and persuasive power – and three "rules of epidemics." Gladwell describes of a variety of naturalistic events as they occur in our increasingly networked society, many of which can be potentially stimulating to those in OBM. The paper concludes with an attempt to explicitly join themes found in Gladwell's book with a recent behavior analytic account of the role of communication networks in the events leading up to the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

Keywords: network, tipping point, leadership, systems, communication, 9/11

Leadership and Communication: Lessons from The Tipping Point

In *The Behavior of Organisms*, Skinner (1938) noted "the only difference I expect to see revealed between the behavior of rat and man (aside from enormous differences of complexity) lie in the field of verbal behavior" (p. 442). But humans also differ in terms of the networks that transmit verbal stimuli within and across populations. Such networks constitute what some describe as a societal nervous system (van Dijk, 2006). Gladwell's (2000) book *The Tipping Point: How Little Things can make a Big Difference* focuses on this very topic.

The "tipping point" is a term that serves to describe a phenomenon whereby cultural practices are suddenly spread within and across populations – something Gladwell (2000) repeatedly refers to as "social epidemics." The phenomena discussed by Gladwell provides an opportunity to usher in the "new era" in Organizational Behavior Management (OBM) suggested by Austin (2008) that is characterized by an ever-increasing alignment of science and practice. In doing so, the current paper will extrapolate recent developments in a domain of OBM known as Behavioral Systems Analysis (BSA) to a variety of naturalistic events discussed by Gladwell. Some of these events will be familiar to those in OBM but many others will likely be of a novel sort that could further the already-expanding frontiers of behavior analysis into previously unconsidered areas.

The current paper will specifically focus on the role of leaders and communication networks on the spread of information within and across populations. However, because Gladwell's examples are not restricted to phenomena within

organizations, our definition of a leader must be broadened from those seen in recent behavioral publications on leadership behavior (cf. Houmanfar, Rodrigues, & Smith, 2009). What past discussions of organizational leaders have in common is that they all refer to the ability of leaders to provide a suitable physical and verbal context to facilitate employee performance. To be applicable outside of an organization, we apply Goltz' (2003) general definition of social power to our broadened conceptualization of a leader to refer to "the potential ability of one individual to influence another individual within a certain system" (p. 132). This definition seems to encapsulate phenomena outside of an organization while maintaining coherence with recent discussions of organizational leadership at the same time. This paper will conclude with an attempt to explicitly join general themes found in Gladwell's book with a recent behavior analytic interpretation of the events leading up to the 9/11 terrorist attacks (cf. Alavosius, Houmanfar, & Rodrigues, 2005).

The Law of the Few: Connectors, Mavens, and Salesman

Gladwell's (2000) ideas are based on three "rules of epidemics" (p. 15), referring to his repeated analogy between the spread of cultural practices and the spread of disease epidemics. The first rule is The Law of the Few, which states that if one wants to push a practice beyond its tipping point, one need not worry about *how many* people are exposed to the relevant stimuli, but rather *who* is exposed. Gladwell posits that if the right types of individuals contact certain stimuli, then certain practices can spread across many people or vast geographic areas rather quickly. Gladwell illustrates this concept by citing a study conducted by the famous social psychologist Stanley Milgram.

Milgram mailed a packet containing the name and address of a stockbroker who lived in Massachusetts to 160 people in Omaha, Nebraska. The packet instructed participants to write their name on the packet and send it to someone who they knew and who they thought could get the packet closer to the stockbroker. Surprisingly, Milgram found that most of the packets reached the stockbroker through only five-to-six intermediaries. Furthermore, he discovered that the stockbroker ultimately received half of the packets from only three people (Gladwell, 2000).

Those three people typify Gladwell's (2000) first critical class of people in the spread of social epidemics – Connectors. Connectors are leaders – they know a lot of people across a wide variety of social circles, can influence the behavior of many people, and facilitate the spread of practices across many people and places via elaborate communication networks. Connectors are similar to Sandaker's (2009) notion of a *hub*, which is regarded as a structural component of a behavioral system with a relatively high number of connections to other parts of a system, thereby acting as a prominent source of information dissemination. Gladwell's connectors certainly meet the definition of a hub in that they were highly influential in the spread of the packages across the country.

Connectors can certainly function as business leaders and as we march further into the globalized information age of the 21st century, the role of such leaders are changing. In today's world, the cultural-organizational milieu consisting of "all of the antecedent factors such as resources, cultural practices, and societal infrastructure"(Houmanfar, Rodrigues, & Ward, 2010, p. 89) in which leadership decisions are made, is rapidly changing due to the ever-increasing scope of the virtual

marketplace provided by the global network that is the internet (Houmanfar, Rodrigues, & Ward, 2010).

As such, behavior analysts will find it necessary to confront the emergence of E-commerce and its constituent varieties: I-commerce (i.e., internet-based commerce), M-commerce (i.e., wireless internet-based commerce), and U-commerce (i.e., ubiquitous commerce through any internet-capable device at any time in any place) (Wu & Hisa, 2008). With each evolution in E-commerce, space and time restrictions become increasingly nonexistent. Modern consumers have instant access to an infinite variety of products manufactured from countless businesses across the globe which increases competition exponentially. To thrive in this new milieu, leaders must adapt the structure of their organizational system through innovative decision-making and the dissemination of said decisions through adequately designed communication networks (cf. Houmanfar, Rodrigues, & Smith, 2009; Sandaker, 2009).

The second type of influential person is known as a Maven. While Connectors can be seen as "people specialists" (Gladwell, 2000, p. 59), Mavens can be seen as "information specialists" (Gladwell, 2000, p. 59). To illustrate the latter, Gladwell takes us back to the midnight ride of Paul Revere, who set out at 10pm on horseback to warn the Massachusetts colonies of the invading British troops. His two-hour trek across 13 miles "tipped" the message so well that the entire region was organized and ready to meet the British with strong resistance before dawn the next morning. Unbeknownst to many, Revere met up with another revolutionary that night, named William Dawes. Dawes set out at the same time and covered just as many miles and towns as Revere, but his ride hardly had any effect at all.

One reason for this, says Gladwell (2000), was because Revere was a Connector; he had friends in every conceivable social circle. He was an avid sportsman, businessman, art lover, card player, and pub frequenter. He was also a "go-getter" who, among other things, founded a fire insurance company, was put in charge of regulating the Boston market, and was elected the Boston health officer and Suffolk County coroner. When Revere set out on his famous ride he already knew most of the town leaders and knew on just whose door to knock. William Dawes, on the other hand, was not nearly as gregarious as Revere and, consequently, failed to spread the message.

However, Gladwell (2000) also describes Revere as a Maven (i.e., an "information specialist") mainly through his founding of a secret group that monitored and exchanged information on British troop movements. One may assume that status as either a Connector or Maven alone would not have resulted in that fateful message being tipped. Neither verbal descriptions of troop movements (i.e., a Maven characteristic) nor a large number of accessible listeners (i.e., a Connector characteristic) were sufficient in-and-of themselves to generate the widespread changes in behavior in response to Revere's message which led to the organized resistance that met the British troops the next morning.

A recent behavior analytic account of rumor and gossip in organizations may be said to investigate classes of "information-gathering" behavior which is the defining characteristic of Gladwell's (2000) Mavens (Houmanfar, Rodrigues, & Smith, 2009; Houmanfar & Johnson, 2003). They note that a primary function of such behavior is that of acquiring verbal information (e.g., rules) pertinent to management practices of the organization. From the standpoint of a leader, a prevalence of implicit rules (i.e., rules

that state part of a three-term contingency) and faulty communication networks can promote environmental ambiguity on the part of the employees. In these situations, rumor and gossip tends to emerge in an effort to disambiguate the situation which can lead to detriments in employee performance.

However, implicit rules given by leaders can also generate performance variability, which may be desirable in circumstances that demand creativity and innovation as may be the case in a marketing firm or in disaster preparedness (Alavosius, Houmanfar, & Rodrigues, 2005; Houmanfar, Rodrigues, & Smith, 2009; Ward, 2009). In such settings, explicit rules (i.e. rules that state a full three-term contingency) may overly restrict behavior and degrade performance. However, under routine organizational conditions (e.g., a manufacturing plant), explicit rules may be favored in that they tend to reduce variation whereas implicit rules may degrade performance.

Gladwell's (2000) third and final class of person is known as the Salesman. As the name might suggest, these people are highly likely to influence the decisions people make on a daily basis. Gladwell cites a study on persuasion conducted by Brian Mullen at Syracuse University. Mullen examined the role of television personalities' subtle facial expressions on the persuasion of TV audiences' voting decisions during the 1984 presidential campaign between Ronald Reagan and Walter Mondale. Mullen compared the facial expressions of Peter Jennings, Tom Brokaw, and Dan Rather while they discussed the candidates during the evening news. He found that Jennings, more than any other, showed positive facial expressions when talking about Reagan. Mullen then called up voters in various cities and found that the vast majority of those who voted for

Reagan primarily watched Jennings. Mullen concluded that Jennings' expressions affected voters' behavior.

Although this conclusion is clearly derived from a correlational study, such an effect seems possible and behavior analysts might want to consider the potential implications. What Gladwell is describing in this case could be relevant to Skinner's (1974) analysis of "Commands, Advice, and Warnings" (p. 132), and "Knowing Another Person" (p. 189). It seems plausible that the supposed persuasiveness of individuals like Jennings relate to their use of commands, advice, and warnings that explicitly or implicitly state reinforcing or aversive contingencies. Furthermore, it seems plausible that the facial expressions of these people could influence viewers' knowledge of the speaker as well as the speaker's referents (e.g., the presidential candidates). Knowledge, as used by Skinner, refers to the behavior of describing and predicting the behavior of another person. This descriptive behavior, says Skinner, is largely based on the facial expressions of other people.

Researchers in Relational Frame Theory (RFT) have already begun experimental work contributing to a behavior analytic understanding of persuasion (cf. Roche, Barnes-Holmes, Barnes-Holmes, & Hayes, 2001). For instance, Clayton (2005) (as cited in Roche et al) found that changing employees negative beliefs regarding a chaotic workplace (i.e., verbal behavior regarding the work setting) was much easier if a speech given by the manager built on the employees' existing relational network (e.g., telling the employees that a chaotic environment can foster freedom and creativity) as opposed to building a conflicting network. Research such as Mullen's could act as a stepping stone for behavior analysts to integrate RFT work on persuasion with variables related to

media, subtleties in body language, and the transformation of stimulus functions across viewers. Clearly, behavior analysts have the theory and experimental methodology to dive deeply into this unexplored domain.

The Stickiness Factor

The second rule of social epidemics is called The Stickiness Factor. Where The Law of the Few concerns reaching just the right people, The Stickiness Factor can be best summed up as follows: "There is a simple way to package information that, under the right circumstance, can make it irresistible. All you have to do is find it" (Gladwell, 2000, p. 132).

To illustrate, Gladwell (2000) calls on Lester Wunderman, an advertising agent who created a highly successful advertising campaign for Columbia Record Club during the 1970s. The campaign involved a set of TV commercials informing the viewing audience that if they could find a gold box on order coupons in *TV Guide* or *Parade* magazines, they could send in the coupon and receive any record for free. Wunderman arranged this such that every magazine ad contained the gold box: a simple yet powerful manipulation that rejuvenated the company by making the audience active participants in the advertising.

As another example, Gladwell (2000) cites the highly successful children's show *Blue's Clues*, one of the only shows to rival the long-time success of *Sesame Street.* *Blue's Clues* was "sticky" (i.e., irresistible to children) because all of the content was brought down to a toddler's level; this is something that even *Sesame Street* failed to fully accomplish. The show had one main character, Steve, a blue dog named "Blue," a mailbox named "Mailbox," and would present puzzles and riddles to the television

audience who would "help" Steve figure out the answer. All speech was relatively slow and contained long pauses in between questions to the audience – something that would drive adults crazy, but that the kids loved. In addition, the show did something unprecedented in broadcasting – it replayed the same episode five times a week.

Replaying episodes resonated with the kids because they found something new and interesting in the show each time they watched it. In other words, the children came to respond to different stimuli upon each iteration of the show within a week. As a result, *Blue's Clues* clobbered *Sesame Street* in the ratings.

The phenomena described by "stickiness" seem to be characterized by increased response rates across many individuals with respect to a stimulus. In the case of Columbia Record Club, the new ads eventually increased responding with respect to their catalog of records. This increase was likely due to the implementation of more explicit rules provided in the advertisements. Regarding *Blues Clues*, the massive increase in viewers was presumably a function of its stimuli optimally matching the repertoires of most toddlers.   Skinner (1974) defines a repertoire as "what a person…is capable of doing, given the right circumstances" (p. 152). One could say that the slowness, simplicity, and repetitiveness of *Blues Clues* created just the right circumstances to maximize children's involvement in the show.

One could further say that the properties of *Blues Clues* were the optimal circumstances to match a toddler's repertoire because they were aesthetically pleasing. Hineline's (2005) discussion of aesthetics in behavior analysis seems especially relevant to "stickiness." Hineline's main point is that people don't always adopt practices simply because they are the most effective but "simply on the basis of how it looks or whether it

seems 'user-friendly'" (p. 16). In the case of *Blues Clues*, however, aesthetics also

enabled its success as a teaching tool. For behavior analysts in general, however,

interventions are frequently rejected even though they are commonly the most effective

because they lack aesthetic appeal to consumers (Hineline, 2005).

The recent special issue on consumer behavior analysis in the *Journal of

Organizational Behavior Management* (JOBM) is highly relevant to the Stickiness

Factor. In it, Hantula and Wells (2010) note that "the cutting edge of OBM research is

pursuing challenges presented when we look around and outside the organization" (p.

87). Consumers are an integral component in the milieu of factors to which leaders must

sensitize and constantly adapt if their organization is to survive. The Stickiness Factor

reminds us that objective laboratory data regarding performance improvement may act to

persuade behavior analysts that a performance technology should be adopted, but the

general public may need more than that.

The Power of Context

The final rule of social epidemics is called The Power of Context. As the term

suggests, he acknowledges the pervasive role of context on behavior and devotes two

chapters to this rule alone. One example of The Power of Context involves "the magic

number one hundred and fifty" (Gladwell, 2000, p. 169), which seems to be a critical

number affecting group phenomena.

For instance, Gladwell (2000) discusses a billion-dollar company called Gore

Associates who manufactures, among other things, Gore-Tex. Gladwell largely attributes

their success to the fact that the company never let the number of employees working at

any plant exceed 150. Often, groups with memberships below 150 amplify the impact of

coworkers' behavior via social consequences, especially if someone is not performing as they should be.

This number, according to Gladwell (2000), is also found in the organization of military units, hunter-gatherer societies, and the modern Hutterites. The communities in the latter two examples tend to break off and form separate, smaller, communities when their population approximates 150. The logic follows that if a population approaches 150, the group becomes much harder to manage and begins to lack cohesiveness. Although networks are not explicitly mentioned in this example, they are implied in that the management of any group requires a communication network of some sort.

Glenn and Malott's (2004) analysis of component complexity could help explain why the performance of individuals in certain groups begins to deteriorate when the population approaches 150. Component complexity increases as the number of people or processes (e.g., departments) increase in an organization. Such complexity can negatively impact performance by creating redundancies and inefficiencies within the organization.

Glenn's (2003) account of the evolution of metacontingencies could also serve to demystify the "magic" of 150. She briefly mentions that as aggregate products begin to exert control over groups, the aggregate is dual functioning in the sense that it maintains both the behavior of the group members as well as the interlocking contingencies in which their behavior is nested. As the size of the group grows, this dual function begins to deteriorate such that the aggregate "comes to have little or no consequent functions with respect to the behavior in the interlocking contingencies" (p. 237). Group membership approaching 150 members could create a similar disconnect between

individual contingencies and the aggregate products of the group such that the effects of leadership decisions deteriorates as seen in the performance of group members.

A recent study by Abernathy (2001) seems to be one of the few behavior analytic studies that have investigated group size specifically. In his study, Abernathy analyzed organizational performance among 4,289 employees across several organizations. He found that performance scorecards, which provided quantitative feedback on employee performance that is then converted into incentive pay, were consistently effective when the scorecards were based on 1-12 employees. Once the group size exceeded 12 employees, the incentive system drastically lost their effectiveness in maintaining employee performance.

Gladwell and the Behavioral Analysis of the 9/11 Commission Report

Many of the phenomena discussed in Gladwell's (2000) book can be characterized as behavioral effects made possible by our networked cultural environment. The before-mentioned behavioral translations of the data and theory in Gladwell's book could have immediate relevance to today's world, particularly with respect to terrorism. Although a number of behavior analytic publications related to terrorism have appeared in recent years (cf. Alavosius, Houmanfar, & Rodrigues, 2005; Dixon, 2006; Dixon, Dymond, & Rehfeldt, 2003; Dixon, Rehfeldt, Zlomke, & Robinson, 2006; Mattaini, 2003a, 2003b; Nevin, 2003; Sidman, 2003), the author's felt that Alavosius et al.'s analysis of the 9/11 terrorist attacks was especially relevant to the present discussion.

Alavosius et al. (2005), analyzed the 9/11 Commission Report and focused on the integral role of communication networks in relation to the vulnerability of the U.S as well as the sophistication of Al Qaida in organizing their operations. Regarding the U.S.,

various communication networks that, ideally, would coordinate intelligence information

between agencies such as the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Central Intelligence

Agency (CIA), National Security Agency (NSA), and Immigration and Naturalization

Services (INS) were lacking. This lack of coordination led the Commission to describe

the isolated networks of each agency as "stovepipes" (Alavosius et al., p. 668). In the

context of the current paper, the stovepipes can be seen as a result of policies formulated

by various leaders within the agencies and in the government more broadly.

For instance, some of the would-be hijackers were actually being tracked in their

travels to and from the U.S (Alavosius et al., 2005). The CIA alerted foreign countries to

these people such that their global travels could be monitored. However, the CIA failed

to alert the FBI and INS in the U.S., which allowed these people to repeatedly reenter the

country unnoticed. In another instance, the NSA was monitoring communications

between two of the future hijackers and verified their identities. Although the NSA was

able to identify these people from their communications, their primary function was to

respond to requests from the CIA. According to Alavosius et al., the lack of

bidirectionality in communication between the CIA and NSA prevented the identities

known to the NSA to be integrated with critical background information from the CIA

that would have raised the significance of these two people substantially. Because the

networks within all of these agencies were not optimally integrated, the Commission

concluded that the U.S. government may have been able to prevent the 9/11 attacks if

such integration had been in place ahead of time.

Al Qaida, by contrast, could be conceptualized behaviorally as a "high

performance organization that managed to sufficiently conceal its operations and yet

coordinate and execute a one-day attack upon the USA that literally changed the world"
(Alavosius et al., p. 667). While uncoordinated communication networks apparently
increased the vulnerability of the U.S., Alavosius et al. also attribute the success of Al
Qaida to their own highly coordinated networks. Such networks allowed Al Qaida to
recruit, train, and support terrorists in operations around the globe. In addition, Al Qaida
succeeded in concealing their existence and thwarted efforts to eliminate the organization
so much so that 19 hijackers resided within the U.S. for months and utilized U.S.
resources (e.g., flight schools) right under the nose of the government.

A reinterpretation of this analysis from Gladwell's (2000) perspective might
revolve around Connectors (i.e., people specialists) and Mavens (i.e., information
specialists). The contrast between the U.S. government and Al Qaida is similar to the
contrast made earlier between the effects of Paul Revere versus William Dawes. Both
riders covered the same distance, reached the same number of towns, and carried the
same information. However, Revere's ride had a history-changing impact, while Dawes'
did not. Even though both riders carried the same information, Revere had many social
connections and knew just the right people to contact. Dawes didn't. Similarly, both the
U.S. government and Al Qaida had sufficient information relevant to each other, but the
U.S. lacked connections between agencies and, consequently, did not spread that
information between agencies. Had these agencies been networked differently, the
significance of those tracked before 9/11 could have been significantly altered.

Conclusion

In recent years, OBM has been expanding. The unit of analysis in OBM is
increasingly concerned with the broader contexts in which performance is nested. An

integral component in the broader context pertains to leadership behavior. Leaders have

a relatively high degree of power to influence the physical and verbal stimuli contacted

by others. As exemplified most comprehensively in the recent special issues of JOBM

regarding behavioral systems and consumer behavior (Vol. 29, 2-4; Vol. 30, 2) the effects

of leadership decisions go well beyond employee performance to affect the larger milieu

in which the organization operates. At the same time, leaders must sensitize and adapt to

the ever-changing milieu as the global society becomes ever more networked as we

progress further into the 21st century. Gladwell's (2000) book, with its focus on our

networked society and the people who exert powerful effects within it, is well suited to

facilitate this exciting time in the evolution of OBM. Gladwell's book provides a forum

for those in OBM to tie recent research to a variety of interesting naturalistic examples

that many of us have likely never considered. In short, Gladwell can help usher in the

"new era" of OBM in which science and practice are becoming increasingly

interconnected (Austin, 2008).

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