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COLLABORATION HEALTH CARE

ALIGNING INTEGRATIVE HEALTH CARE AND WELLNESS TO IMPROVE HEALTH CARE TODAY



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Creating An Epidemic With An Idea

In his 2000 book "The Tipping Point; How Little Things Can Make A Big Difference," New York Times writer Malcolm Gladwell explored the world of epidemics. Not epidemics in the clinical sense of the word, but epidemics that are created with new products, messages, or ideas that spread just like viruses do. He was curious to see if he could identify any common factors that may have created a "tipping point" for a concept or idea; those times when the new idea simply "tips" or takes off. Gladwell looked at some obscure topics like how Hush Puppies suddenly became fashionable again, why Paul Revere was the rider we remember when there was actually another one on the same mission at the same time, and why Sesame Street and Blues Clues became fashionable for children (and parents) as an educational and social intervention for families. If updating his work, he might look at how the iPod created an "epidemic" in virtual communication, and how social networking has become a primary method of communication in our society. In many respects, we have little tipping points in our lives developing all around us. We just need to look.

The principles Gladwell discovered can be used by organizations to create their own tipping points (and is part of our Tipping Point Workshop for Health Care Organizations). The principles can be integrated into a basic business strategy and can sometimes provide an interesting self-evaluation to see if you are near a tipping point of your own.

The Tipping Point principles can also be applied to a broader industry. We were curious to see if a "tipping point" might be on the horizon in our health care reform discussions. We wondered if the stars were aligned and the factors were in place to create a tipping point that might ultimately result in a reformed delivery model with broad acceptance by stakeholders, a common context, and fair. You have to judge for yourself. But we don't think so.

A Health Care Tipping Point- Are We Close?

An epidemic is defined as an event "affecting or tending to affect a disproportionately large number of individuals within a population, community, or region at the same time." We've experienced epidemics with the growth of the internet, social networking, and personal computers. We're still coming out of an epidemic created by all of the events leading to the meltdown of our financial system. Individual companies have their own epidemics when they experience rapid growth or precipitous decline as part of their business lifecycle.

In "The Tipping Point; How Little Things Can Make A Big Difference," Malcolm Gladwell looked at some obscure epidemics of the past and identified three principles common to all of them. They include: The Law of the Few, The Stickiness Factor, and the Power of Context. We'll look at these three principles in the context of our health care debate to determine if a "tipping point" might be on the horizon in health care.

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The Law of the Few

Having the right people communicate your message is critical to create a tipping point. We are all familiar with Paul Revere's ride through the Massachusetts countryside to warn colonists of the British invasion. What few realize is that there were actually two riders set out on the same urgent mission, with the same message, covering the same number of towns. Why is it that we all remember Paul Revere and very few of us have even heard of William Dawes (the other rider)?

Gladwell describes three types of individuals critical to creating a tipping point for a product, idea, or concept: Connectors- these people are simply well-networked and they are respected for their opinions. Mavens- are people who thrive on information and are the folks that love to research the best car deal, the best restaurant, or the newest business ideas. People respect mavens due to their knowledge and information. Salesmen- are the people that can make you believe in an idea even when you don't want to. They have the outward personality and passion behind the topic that can help push people to their way of thinking.

Connectors, mavens, and salesmen are all unique personalities required to generate the "buzz" necessary to creating a tipping point. Paul Revere was especially unique and was actually a combination of all three. It's the right combination of connectors, mavens, and salesmen that make the difference and can tip an idea towards creating an epidemic.

For Health Care: The health care system certainly has its share of connectors, mavens, and salesmen. The problem is that they are all fragmented in separate and individual silos and many times with separate and individual messages. While we started the health reform discussions in March 2009 with all stakeholders coming together to share a common vision and mission, we have since fragmented once again into many subgroups reflecting the structural reality of our existing health care system. All segments have their individual connectors, mavens, and salesmen; they just aren't working together to create the tipping point for the health care system as a whole.

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A Health Care Tipping Point? (con't)

The Stickiness Factor

The average consumer experiences over 250 commercial messages per day and hundreds of thousands of other media impressions. What is it that allows certain messages; "Where's the Beef?"- Wendy's; Just Do It- Nike; Tastes Good Like a Cigarette Should- Winston; break through the clutter and become memorable and help create a tipping points for these products?

Gladwell determined that while connectors, mavens, and salesmen are critical to carrying a message- you also need to have a "sticky" message to carry. These are messages that are memorable, many times novel, and relevant to the audience you are targeting. Sticky messages stay with you and move us to action. These messages aren't simply creative advertising gimmicks but are created as part of a larger strategy to communicate a message that is sometimes larger than the message itself. Sticky messages are critical to create tipping points.

For Health Care: So far almost \$60 million has been spent in health care reform ad spending. (Interesting statistic: The largest media buys to-date have been in Las Vegas; New Orleans; Portland, Maine; Fargo/Bismarck/Minot North Dakota; homes of some hotly contested political campaigns). We're expected to reach \$100 million by the time all of this is over. The messages have been partisan and (so far) haven't been particularly "sticky." The infamous Harry and Louise ads of the 90s were definitely sticky as they turned public opinion (created a negative epidemic?) and were the final nail in the coffin for the Clinton reform initiative. The Town Hall meetings of August 2009 were sticky as the topic itself moved individuals to action. But overall, we are missing a common "sticky" message of providing a fair, efficient, and effective health care delivery system that our whole country can get behind.

The Power of Context

"Epidemics are sensitive to the conditions and circumstances of the times and places in which they occur." The revival of Hush Puppies in the late nineties occurred because they were being worn by kids in fashionable areas of the East Village- which helped others see the shoes from a different perspective. Paul Revere's ride was at night- a time when most people were home and heard the message from a Connector they all knew and respected.

Gladwell argues that timing and context are critical to creating tipping points and epidemics of new ideas or concepts. Epidemics can be created, tipped, or reversed simply by tinkering with the smallest details of the existing environment and changing the context.

But you also need a community of believers sharing a common vision and goal to take advantage of the opportunity. And you don't need mass participation to create a tipping point. The "rule of 150" implies that 150 seems to be "the maximum number of individuals with whom we can have a genuinely social relationship, knowing who they are and how they relate to us." Above 150 things tend to become confusing and bureaucratic. But small groups of common believers with the right message, and the right connections can be very powerful forces to create tipping points for a particular idea, product, or concept.

For Health Care: There is no doubt that today we have the right context to create a tipping point to fix our health care system. We are all aware there is a problem and the health care reform activities have been very visible to the general public. There are hundreds of advocacy and political initiatives underway with health care reform; some with similar goals and others arguing the opposite. Nevertheless no group has developed the base

that is required to create a tipping point for their own point of view. And while the context may be right today, the realities facing us from a national economic perspective may, in fact, "tip" the health care reform discussion in the other direction. Context can change rapidly in the world we live in today. While the timing may be right today (context), no single idea has built a strong enough community of believers to tip health care in any particular direction. We remain fragmented and deeply divided.

In Summary

One of the biggest challenges facing our health care system is the fragmentation of stakeholders participating in it.

The key to creating a real "tipping point" in health care will involve having the right connectors, mavens, and salesmen in place to spread a sticky message to a community of individuals linked to a common vision or idea. These small communities will grow and become the powerful forces required to create the epidemic of the idea or concept throughout the rest of the population.

We just don't see a tipping point happening collectively in health care right now. We do believe there are opportunities for individual segments of (and organizations in) the health care marketplace to create their own tipping points and grow beyond where they are today- they will just need to recognize the opportunities that are out there, understand the brutal realities of the marketplace, and make sure their connectors, mavens, and salesmen are ready.

Something To Think About

"A man should look for what is, not for what he thinks should be."

Albert Einstein

"Always bear in mind that your own resolution to succeed is more important than any other."

Abraham Lincoln