



A Review of The Tipping Point and its Relationship to Kids at Hope

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In his best seller, *The Tipping Point*, author Malcolm Gladwell explores the magic moment when an idea, trend or social behavior crosses a threshold and is embraced by the country. Although Gladwell carefully analyzes a number of trends in diffusion theory, epidemics and the like, one of his most compelling descriptions is offered in a study about how Iowa farmers accepted a new corn seed which was introduced to them in 1928.

According to the researchers Bruce Ryan and Neal Gross, who studied the spread of the new corn seed in Greene County, Iowa, in the 1930's this new product was far superior in every respect to any seed the farmers had used before. To their surprise, even when proven superior, it wasn't adopted all at once. Here is what they discovered:

Of the 259 farmers who were part of the study only a handful started planting the new seed by 1932 and 1933. From 1934-36 another 43 changed to the seed. Sixty-one of the farmers chose the seed in 1937 followed by 46 farmers in 1938, 36 in 1939 and 14 in 1940. Beginning in the 1941, 12 years after the seed had been introduced and its effectiveness proven, five of the farmers had still not changed.

It is amazing how difficult it is under the best of circumstances to have people see how change can improve situations especially when they are truly invested in current efforts. Accordingly, it can be concluded that most people make decisions on their level of comfort and/or their self-interest rather than a greater common good. Most of us would like to think we could think outside the box. The reality is we are too invested inside the box to truly show the courage to venture outside of its security. It's a myth that only comforts us but offers no true value to those who are waiting to be let in the box.

Yet the researchers did find change, albeit painstakingly slower than one would have predicted considering that these farmers could see with their own eyes how much better the new seeds performed from planting to harvest.

What they discovered and what is applicable to our understanding of new initiatives such as Kids at Hope (which is recognized by a number of credible professionals and practitioners as the Youth Development Strategy for the 21st Century) is that true innovation comes from outside our institutional thinking. It comes

from what Ryan and Gross call Innovators, those adventurous, risk taking individuals who are usually bored living inside the box. However, it is further proven that Innovators can't move a new idea, trend, or product by themselves. They need what the researchers refer to as the Early Adopters. This group is made up of opinion leaders in the community, the respected, thoughtful people who watch and ultimately analyze what the Innovators are up to. In the Iowa seed farmer experience these were the 43 farmers who adopted the corn seed from 1934-36. The largest group that changed to the hybrid seed corn came to be known as the Early and Late Majority. This group which began to use the new seed corn from 1937-39 is quite skeptical, will never try anything first and will wait until the Early Adopters prove it is safe to change. The last group is known as the Laggards, those people who are quite traditional and never see a reason to change.

When Ryan and Gross plotted this progression they found it created a perfect epidemic curve. It started slowly with Innovators, picked up steam with the Early Adopters, and took off with the Early and Late Majority. Ultimately, in came the "struggling" Laggards.

This interesting study and studies of diffusion theory like it offer great insights when launching anything new. Sometimes we believe we need to convince everyone that a new proven idea has merit. That fact is we don't. However, we do need to seek out the Innovators and Early Adopters for their leadership and credibility. The trick is figuring out who is who. We have, through trial and error, been sold on the fact that some people or groups are Innovators or Early Adopters, when in fact they are in the Early and Late Majority or Laggard categories. This isn't to judge and suggest one group or person has more overall value than another. It is however, to strongly suggest where one has to invest their time, talent and resources when it is time to introduce a new idea, concept or initiative.

Kids at Hope believes that if we are truly concerned about our children we have to accept the fact that what we are currently doing is not working as effectively as it can. It may be a good seed corn, but is far from the superior hybrid seed corn we know we can create and deliver. We must be willing to suspend our self-interest and find a strategy that doesn't disconnect us but connects all we do on behalf of children with a common innovative strategy.

Kids at Hope is currently advertising for Innovators and Early Adopters. Early and Late Majority and Laggards need not apply at this time but we will need you in the future.