

## **The creation of social tipping points: Rethinking influence**

There are many ways of understanding the creation of social tipping points and there are some differences between the macro- and micro-social levels. It's a hot topic these days as each 'interpretation' has implications for many people involved in diverse areas such as marketing, health promotion, disease prevention, political marketing and social change of all sorts. My key point in this book and in my consulting approach to management of change in organisations is that, in the latter, the mechanisms of real change are not that different. But it is only when we start to understand the internal organisational management of change in the same way as internal infections or internal fashions that we are in a strong position to create lasting change.

Business and organisational management have incredibly thick skin, impermeable to the application of social sciences, despite the music you may hear from HR and OD departments. Inside the borders of the firm, life is usually mechanistic and predictable (top down and cascade down communication), whilst outside the borders, life is more organic, erratic and irregular. The firm usually understands its external markets and may segment customers well, but it's usually unskilled and very sloppy in understanding its internal market. Employee segmentation is rudimentary. I call rudimentary a system that categorises people into high performers, low performers and the rest (OK, you have more than three baskets, but that still doesn't change anything). Usually, a system like this is maintained to allocate money on an annual basis (a weak behavioural reinforcement mechanism) or to trigger command and control interventions ('managing the poor performers'). In many cases I know, the HR department dictates that it *must* be a Bell curve-normal distribution and that people *must* fit into it. That is, a small percentage *must* be either high performers or poor performers. And it is extraordinarily common to even decide those numbers a priori. Managers then have to fit their departmental populations into the pre-assigned Bell curve as opposed to assessing their population first and then figuring out what kind of Bell curve – if any – they have. The metrics police rules with an iron hand. In that process, true understanding of degrees and qualities of influence amongst employees gets lost. The power law of influence and connectedness (small number with high connectedness and potential influence, big number with low levels of those) doesn't fit into the Bell curve of the HR department.

We must bring the mathematics of networks back to the understanding of daily life in organisations. And along with the mathematics, we must bring an understanding and classification of employees in different terms, such as ability to influence, to be listened to or to model behaviours. That different segmentation is crucial to understanding how the behavioural tipping point creates internal social change ('new

culture’). In my experience, there are four main mechanisms to create social tipping points:

1. **The Opinion Leader model.** Social infection starts with a small group of people who have a high level of influence through what they say, how they say it, the rationale behind it and what they do. At macro-social level, these people can be found, for example, in scientific communities where, as I have described before, a Matthew Effect is obvious. Similar models can be found in community leadership, religion or political life. Within the organisation there are always ‘opinion leaders’, even if those opinions are exercised in the post room or the cafeteria. In some cases you can jot down the names easily; in others, ‘opinion leaders’ are more subtle and perhaps hidden. The Change Champions described in the next chapter fall under this criterium. In *VIRAL CHANGE™*, we use this model extensively, ‘creating’ a Change Champions’ engine by finding its membership. In the Opinion Leader model, social tipping points occur when a critical mass is influenced and ‘changed’ by the Change Champions’ activity (their endorsement of the changes needed, their articulation of the facts, their activist behaviour and their viral leadership – see later in the book). In a simplistic way, the change equation here is:

$$\text{OPINION LEADERS} \times \text{CRITICAL MASS} = \text{CHANGE}$$

2. **The Critical Mass model.** It is easy to observe that many social changes, from fads to fashions to internal organisational routines (sub-cultures, ways of doing that have become ‘part of the furniture’), seem to appear without being triggered by an Opinion Leader. When critical masses start to behave in ‘phase transition mode’, like a single node as described before, and several of those critical masses collide, social change ‘suddenly appears’. Let’s take a simplistic example such as the use of the new Apple iPod. Mary bought one because she liked the feel of it and because she loved how different this thing is. Peter bought it because in his peer group at the advertising agency where he works most people have one. John is addicted to Apple any way so the iPod was a no-brainer. Pauline and Sharon are close friends and they just both did the same. Martin always buys anything new, sexy and slick - the iPod was a predictable choice. Uncle Peter bought two for his nephews after talking to a friend who did the same for his daughter’s birthday. Picture all this, multiply it by a factor of 100 or 1000 and inject another million reasons and you have a critical mass of people walking/sitting around with two white umbilical cords in their ears. There was no obvious Opinion Leader trigger; they all acted as a mini-Opinion-Leader in their own merit by imitating, social copying or conforming to the norm (either a social norm or a norm in their minds). In a simple way, the social change equation here is:

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$$\text{CRITICAL MASS} \times \text{CRITICAL MASS} = \text{CHANGE}$$

3. **The Early Adopter model.** This one sits somewhere in between the two mentioned above. The Early Adopter model is a favourite in the technology arena as a way to indicate that some people are more prone than others to initiate usage of a new technology. But it doesn't have to be limited to technology adoption. Some of the examples in the iPod's case above could well be categorised under early adopters. The terminology is so well-known that it is impossible to bury it in other models, but this model 3 borrows heavily from 1 and 2. The main subtle difference between the Opinion Leader and the Early Adopter is that the former is somehow more conscious and proactive, while the latter is more unconscious and reactive. The simple equation here would be:

$$\text{EARLY ADOPTERS} \times \text{CRITICAL MASS} = \text{CHANGE}$$

4. **The initial Big Splash model.** Recently it has become fashionable to criticise the influencing models, particular the one represented by model 1. And all because of ... Duncan Watts, who's quoted in this book several times. He maintains that influencers are less influent that they think, because social media, social networks and any other forms of vehicle for an initial big splash (which he calls 'big seed') make the chain of influence work even if the conversion rate (influencer → enthused) is modest<sup>1</sup>. This apparent revelation made him appear in the Harvard Business Review (HBR) top 10 breakthrough ideas of 2007 (which tells us more about the HBR than anything else). My respect for Duncan Watts is not affected by the media hype created around the apparent war between him and Malcolm Gladwell, author of *The Tipping Point* and proponent of the power of many kinds of influencers. I take the airtime consumed by this in the media since the May 2007 HBR article with a pinch of salt. The death of viral marketing and the death of the influencer - as many headlines read - have been grossly exaggerated. But I can understand the excitement: two big names, the pulpit of The New York Times and the blessing of HBR...it's simply too much to resist. Watt's equation could be described as:

$$\text{INITIAL CRITICAL MASS (BIG SPLASH)} \times \text{SMALLER CRITICAL MASS} \times \text{BIGGER OR SMALLER CRITICAL MASS} = \text{CHANGE}$$

Whilst models 1, 2 and 3 start small and go big, model 4 starts relatively big, then gets smaller (since the big splash is unlikely to produce a follower population of the same size) and then goes bigger in the same way as models 1, 2 and 3.

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<sup>1</sup> Watts, Duncan J., Peretti, Jonah, 2007, *Viral Marketing for the real world*, Harvard Business Review, Boston.

Watts, Duncan J., Sheridan Dodds, Peter, 2007, *Influentials, networks and public opinion formation*, Journal of Consumer Research

I believe that at any time, for any critical mass which is behaving as ‘a single node’ (3<sup>rd</sup> law of networks):

- a) it is probably impossible to trace back the chain of influence.
- b) all four mechanisms have probably acted at some point.
- c) the people who wanted that critical mass to exist don’t care much about the exact how and when or the combination of those mechanisms.

How can we translate all this to the inside of the organisation and **VIRAL CHANGE™**? The next chapter emphasises the use of Change Champions, which is model 1 of influence. Why? **VIRAL CHANGE™** practitioners like myself can’t afford to wait until ‘stuff happens’ (model 2), because we want to trigger the infection and spread it fast (model 1). So, **VIRAL CHANGE™** asks the Change Champions (model 1 and described in the next chapter) to be early adopters of change by default (model 3). Their behaviours will create a critical mass (model 2) and the infection of change and success will spread. I am perfectly happy (and so are the Change Champions working with me) to accept the three points I have referred to above within the organisation:

- a) When the new (sub)culture(s) is(are) active, visible, ‘established’; when change has been introduced, I am not going to spend a lot of time tracing back to the particular influence of a particular Change Champion or a group of them.
- b) Many mechanisms have probably played a role.
- c) The Champions and I will be celebrating, even if the local weather, an invisible hand or providence has intervened.