

Inclusive recreation: the tipping point is within our sight

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Article:

Malcolm Gladwell, a regular contributor to the New Yorker, wrote the book *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* (2000), which immediately became a national bestseller. Readers are intrigued by his unique presentation of his conclusions concerning why some ideas, behaviors and products start epidemics and others do not. Gladwell contended that social epidemics spread as viruses do, making significant impacts on our everyday lives. He described the "tipping point" as the one dramatic moment when everything changes all at once to create a social epidemic.

Gladwell analyzed and connected numerous seemingly unrelated events of social change to develop his ideas and reach his conclusions. For example, he grappled with and provided explanations for how a staggering 64.3 percent decline in the New York crime rate occurred during a short five-year time period in the early 1990s. He addressed how Hush Puppies reemerged as a fashion statement in early 1995 when its manufacturers had considered the shoe brand to be all but dead. And possibly his most well-known example was his explanation of how Paul Revere's historic ride through the streets of Boston and surrounding communities led to the change in status of colonists to revolutionists. In each case, it took only small, seemingly insignificant changes for a social epidemic to commence.

He connected three factors that were consistent across each social epidemic, that when combined in just the right fashion, led to the "tipping point" where a concept, idea, product or behavior suddenly have significant impact. He referred to these three agents of change as the Law of the Few, the Stickiness Factor and the Power of Context.

According to the Law of the Few, exceptional people exist who are essential in spreading an infectious idea, whom he referred to as connectors, mavens and salesmen. Connectors are individuals who have special gifts that bring the world together. They are affiliated with numerous diverse social circles allowing the message to spread across interest areas, professions, cultures, etc.

Mavens are the information specialists who provide the message to others and their known expertise guarantees that the recipients of this message will pay attention and take the message seriously. Salesmen have the charisma and skills to convince others and make the message so appealing that it becomes infectious. These few people drive the social epidemic.

The Stickiness Factor relates to how memorable the delivered message is; that is to ask, does the message have impact? Is the message so memorable that it can spur others to action? Gladwell contended that simple changes to a message and its packaging, under the right circumstances, could possibly make it irresistible and sticky in the minds of a large number of people.

Finally, Gladwell suggested that the Power of Context addressed how sensitive human beings are to their environment. Often, small details in the immediate situation serve as the key to moving people to change in substantial ways. Something as simple as group size can affect the behaviors of individuals within the group.

According to the author, the paradox of epidemics is that, "in order to create one contagious movement, you often have to create many small movements first." A message can often take hold within small groups. As additional groups become infected with a similar message, an epidemic is created.

So what do these factors have to do with parks and recreation, and the inclusion of people with disabilities in community recreation service delivery? Signs exist signaling that we are on the verge of a "tipping point" when the provision of inclusive services becomes state-of-the-art across North America.

It is likely that inclusive recreation will transform from a legally-mandated service that agencies address primarily because it's the law (and politically correct), to an embraced and genuine philosophy that welcomes and accommodates people of all abilities.

It is as if the philosophy and accompanying best practices supporting inclusion are in a cart approaching the top of a steep hill. Through the decades of the 1970s, '80s and '90s, recreation practitioners, advocates, family members and researchers have collaborated to pull the inclusion cart up the steep hill of recreation service delivery in an effort to reach the "land of inclusive opportunities." At times, substantial energy pushed and pulled the cart up the hill. At other times, the force of gravity took its toll and the cart rolled backwards. Nonetheless, the peak, or "tipping point," is currently in our sights.

With one final pull, the cart will glide swiftly down the other side of the hill, and inclusive service delivery will proliferate and flourish within the field of recreation, facilitating stronger and healthier people and communities along its path. What is exciting about Gladwell's perspective is that his identified three change agents, the Law of the Few, the Stickiness Factor, and the Power of Context, can be used to deliberately move positive epidemics forward.

We have that power to make a difference. It is important to keep in mind that if we don't continue on this path of progress, we are at risk of losing momentum and miles of hard-fought gains, as the inclusion cart rolls backward down the hill. This could set the movement and field back several decades.

Who among us are the connectors, mavens and salesmen, willing and capable of spreading the infectious message and know-how? What are the timely adjustments to or re-packaging of the community inclusion message that needs to transpire in order for inclusive recreation services to become so contagious that they cannot be resisted by the families, practitioners and agency administrators who have yet to be touched by their influence?

How can enclaves of inclusion advocates throughout North America create the context of support necessary for the inclusion message and its accompanying best practices to be properly nurtured to its fullest potential? These questions sit before us. Our answers in the not-too-distant future will help determine the fate of inclusive recreation service delivery. Gladwell provides insights to ponder:

Those who are successful at creating social epidemics do not just do what they think is right. They deliberately test their intuitions ... What must underlie successful epidemics, in the end, is a bedrock belief that change is possible, that people can radically transform their behavior or beliefs in the face of the right kind of impetus.

Remember, "With the slightest push--in just the right place--it can be tipped." Are we up to the task?