



3 Infectious Commitment

Andrea Shapiro

What can be done to spread the passion for profound change throughout an organization? Andrea Shapiro, an internal consultant at Nortel Networks, a leading telecommunications company, brought the eye of a cognitive psychologist and systems thinker to the problem. She designed "Applying the Tipping Point to Organizational Change," a computer simulation, as a tool for inquiry among team members faced with this dilemma.

What if ideas and patterns of behavior move through human communities the way infectious diseases do? It is intriguing to think that the same mechanism that governs the spread of, say, a flu virus, also governs the dissemination of ideas. Evidence is mounting that this may be the case.

For example, sociologist Jonathan Crane has studied the effect of positive role models in a neighborhood—professionals, managers, and

teachers—on the lives of nearby teenagers. When the number of these “high-status” workers dropped below 5 percent, teen pregnancy and school dropout rates doubled. At the 5 percent “tipping point,” neighborhoods go from relatively functional to wildly dysfunctional social patterns virtually overnight. There is no steady decline: a little change has a huge effect.

At Nortel Networks, I wondered if an organization could “catch” commitment in the same way. With the input of change agents, I designed our tipping point computer model around a principle of epidemiology: When more people are getting a disease than are being cured of it, the disease will tip into an epidemic. The speed at which the epidemic spreads depends on the all-important ratio between the number of people being infected and the number of people being cured. If slightly more people become ill than are cured, and if nothing else changes, the disease will slowly become an epidemic. By contrast, if many more people get sick than are cured, the disease will spread like wildfire. In this simulation, the “disease” is the strongly held belief that a particular change will transform the organization for the better. The means of infection is exposure to committed change advocates.

The simulation begins with an organization of 20,000 people, of whom the vast majority are apathetic. Five hundred people advocate change. Another five hundred are “incubating”: They have been exposed to new ideas, and are testing them against their own experience on the job. The goal of the simulation is to get all twenty thousand people to become advocates—in the shortest time, at the lowest possible cost.

In the game, players manipulate on-screen levers to do the kinds of things that executive and line leaders can do: They can hire new advocates; expose employees en masse by sending people to one-size-fits-all training classes or conducting poster and tent-card campaigns; increase the time available to advocates for contact and conversation with others; provide financial incentives for altered behavior; improve the infrastructure for supporting the change; or change their own behavior, to lead by example and “walk the talk.” As in real life, each lever has a cost, and there may be delays before the effects are felt in the organization.

All of these factors increase the number of advocates in the short run, but some have side effects that end up reducing the number of advocates in the long run. For example, massive training investments, if ramped up too quickly, will produce resistance in people that undermines the entire effort. I weighted these factors in the model based on continuing conversation with change advocates in our organization—and we keep revising

The simulation described here, “Applying the Tipping Point to Organizational Change,” is available as a tool for inquiry from GKA Associates. For more information, see <http://www.fieldbook.com/resources.html>. Also, see “The Tipping Point,” by Malcolm Gladwell, *The New Yorker*, June 3, 1996; Gladwell is currently writing a book about this subject. Another good reference is *Micromotives and Macrobehavior*, by Thomas Schelling (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978).



The figure of 500 “advocates” in an organization of 20,000 people has been criticized by some “Tipping Point” model users as too optimistic. — Andrea Shapiro

the model to reflect the experiences and reactions of people who play “Applying the Tipping Point to Organizational Change.”

As with all management simulations, the value of the model is not in its predictive power but in its power to catalyze reflective conversation. Nonetheless, a number of surprises have emerged. Conventional thinking tells us that great changes have great impact. But nonlinear systems such as change initiatives don’t work that way. A big change, such as hiring a large number of new advocates, can have a frustratingly small impact. And a small change, such as increasing the amount of time that leaders spend setting a good example (“walking the talk”) can make a dramatically large impact, by pushing the flow of new advocates past the tipping point in a way that permanently affects the population.

This simulation is most effective when used in group interventions. The teams talk about their assumptions about organizational change and commit to a strategy. Then we try each team’s strategy on the simulation to determine which team can make the change in the shortest amount of time, for the least amount of money. Dealing with the model helps people re-evaluate with their own situation. One leadership team, planning a “tent card” campaign, rethought their approach after an hour and a half working together on the simulation.

The simulation, and the tipping point idea that underlies it, provide an opportunity to articulate your own mental models about profound organizational change. What factors do you believe make a difference to the spread of new ideas? How do those factors influence one another? Why would you choose some factors and not others? And what could be done to increase the power of particular factors that seem to “tip over” the balance from apathy to interest?

For information on how to facilitate this kind of conversation, see “Using Microworlds to Promote Inquiry,” *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*, p. 534.



Strategy Perspective

Learning through Action Workshops

www.4-perspective.com

Andrea Shapiro, Ph.D.

Principal

919 368 3505

andrea@4-perspective.com