

The Tipping Point to career success

by Brent Maas

DO YOU EVER WONDER why some of your peers seem just a little more 'in the know' or have access to information and opportunities you do not? Have you ever presented to your management an idea for a new program or process and the response – if you get one at all – is lackluster, but when your more successful peer offers up the same idea, leadership embraces it with enthusiastic support?

Malcolm Gladwell, author of the best-selling book, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*, describes and dissects the unique social dynamic that occurs when an idea, attitude or product takes hold of the collective psyche. Consider: Why are low-rise jeans not considered hip this year? Who decides what shoes will be this year's footwear of choice? How did concepts like 'globalism' and 'eco-responsibility' capture the attention of the media, our awareness and our lawmakers to the point that we modify our behaviors and codify policies that reflect our renewed social and environmental consciousness?

Casual reflection may observe that 'just the right confluence of events took place to achieve a critical mass of momentum' for the idea/attitude/product to successfully permeate society – in other words, timing and good fortune. There may be some truth to this observation, but its expression does nothing to enlighten us as to how we may influence good luck and be more than passive reactors to external stimuli.

The tipping point phenomenon – that moment when novelty attracts mass appeal – is like an epidemic. "Ideas and products and messages and behaviors spread just like viruses do."¹ They are contagious, may represent only incremental change yet have major impact, and spread quickly. Gladwell observes that there are three rules of the tipping point: the "Law of the Few, the Stickiness Factor and the Power of

Context." Understanding all three rules may guide the procurement profession to achieve a tipping point, but the message underlying the 'Law of the Few' has immediate value for individual professionals seeking greater empowerment and effectiveness in their roles.

Gladwell's Law of the Few describes three distinct personality types that are especially successful at establishing or engaging networks:

- *connectors* - people who easily create relationships with others across diverse social circles;
- *mavens* - those who have such passion for a topic that they are a fount of knowledge in that area of interest and feel compelled to share their knowledge, just because they want to be helpful; and
- *salesmen* - great persuaders, not necessarily by virtue of superior logic or insidious forms of manipulation but, through their sensitivity and ability to adjust their interactive style to their audience.

Connectors, mavens and salesmen are not necessarily overachievers by intent. Generally, they do what they feel comes naturally – not anything outside the norm. The rest of us, of course, know better. We may have a trait in common with them, but they bring that quality to life in a way we do not. And they do so in the context of the people around them; through the networks of friends and acquaintances they have built

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or the ones in which they have become established.

We can all bring our connector, maven or salesman skills – even if not fully developed – to bear on the networks we have built for ourselves or – and here is our opportunity for greater professional success – the institutionalized networks that may already exist. Gladwell explains that particular types of people are vectors who use networks to spread attitudes, behaviors or information across a population. We, on the other hand, can apply our awareness of the importance of networks and their key participants to extract the valuable information brought into those networks.

Professional associations empower you to find success in the procurement profession

The *Associations Canada* directory highlights over 19,000 domestic and international professional associations. The sheer volume of organizations hints at the value of associating oneself with these types of groups, but at the individual level,

Alberta

Canada West Chapter of NIGP
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President: Ken Sanford, CPPB, C.P.P., C.P.M.
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British Columbia

Cascadia Chapter of NIGP
President: John Braybrook, CPPB
jbraybro@uvic.ca

Maritime Provinces

Atlantic Public Purchasing Association
Chapter of NIGP
www.appa-aapa.ca
President: Gerry Wilson
president@appa-appa.ca

Ontario

Ontario Public Buyers Association, Inc.
Chapter of NIGP
www.opba.ca
President: Kimberly Dooling, CPPB
kdooling@oakville.ca

Saskatchewan

Assiniboia Chapter of NIGP
President: Douglas Zimmer, CPPB
doug.zimmer@rghealth.ca
Parent Organization:
National Institute of Governmental Purchasing, Inc.
www.nigp.org

we only experience value after we have withdrawn useful information we might not have otherwise obtained, or perhaps forged a new bond with a kindred spirit because we shared from our experience or provided a helpful reference. It is that dynamic of both giving and gleaning that creates such strong feelings of affiliation and identity for members of a professional community.

These societies live because they grow from and attract connectors, mavens and salesmen. The associations are further strengthened and expanded by those of us who may be slightly less charismatic and are just trying to learn to do our jobs better or discover a new, more efficient way to do it. Each new member brings to the group their personal networks and library of experiences. The larger the organization, the greater the opportunity for diversity of contribution and the odds of success, finding (to use a public procurement-specific example) a template “requirements” document that saves you hours or days of development time. Another example, with perhaps larger ramifications, is learning from a maven the distinct short- and long-term benefits of asphalt-based and concrete-based road construction. From your newly found greater understanding of information you may have previously thought esoteric, you are better prepared to work toward a given project budget and deliverables goals and provide projected costs associated with the maintenance and upkeep of the roads.

Associations are concentrated centers of information giving savvy professionals an enormous base from which to draw. A resource like this becomes increasingly important the more physically remote we are or as we may be charged to support more of our agency functions without a commensurate expansion of human or financial resources. In Canada, several organizations cater to supply chain professionals, and government buyers may find some support from them. However, as these associations tend to be private sector focused and seek to capture those with interests ranging from raw material sourcing and manufacturing to logistics and retail distribution, the ‘government purchaser’ segment of those associations do not represent a substantial percentage of the membership. Thus, the network of public sector peers in these organizations and



the programs dedicated to support them may be rather anemic.

Fortunately, there are professional organizations in Canada that exclusively support purchasers spending public dollars (see list of NIGP chapters in Canada). University-based buyers might find useful the list of network resources available from the Ontario University Purchasing Management Association (www.oupma.on.ca). The Canadian Public Procurement Council may also be a supportive source.

We all bring our skills and intelligence, talents and experience to bear to meet the challenges of our daily responsibilities. By affiliating with our peers/colleagues through professional associations, we amplify our strengths and competencies and augment our innate resources. Recent advertisements by mobile phone service provider, Verizon, have capitalized on this concept, albeit with a more technology-oriented message: “It’s the *NETWORK*.” Picture the bewildered mobile phone user who is stunned to learn that there are a hundred people working in the background on his behalf. That is at the essence of what your professional association can do for you. Now extrapolate and imagine that each of those 100 people also have a hundred people supporting *them*. You begin to see the magnitude of power latent in professional associations – and you can draw from that and contribute to it.

Whether you see yourself as a budding or seasoned connector, maven or salesman, tapping into a professional network of colleagues is an act of empowerment that brings immediate benefit to your professional life and the lives of your peers. If you are still not certain of the value of accessing the resources of an association, ask a colleague. Chances are they will be a member of a professional society or know someone who is, or that someone will know someone. Hmm, sounds like a network. *MM*

¹ Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*, (New York: Little, Brown), p.7.

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