

Seth Godin: The tribes we lead



So sometimes I get invited to give weird talks. I got invited to speak to the people who dress up in big stuffed animal costumes to perform at sporting events. Unfortunately I couldn't go. But it got me thinking about the fact that these guys, at least most of them, know what it is that they do for a living. What they do is they dress up as stuffed animals and entertain people at sporting events.

Shortly after that I got invited to speak at the convention of the people who make balloon animals. And again, I couldn't go. But it's a fascinating group. They make balloon animals. There is a big schism between the ones who make gospel animals and porn animals, but -- (Laughter) they do a lot of really cool stuff with balloons. Sometimes they get in trouble, but not often. And the other thing about these guys is, they also know what they do for a living. They make balloon animals.

But what do we do for a living? What exactly do the people watching this do every day? And I want to argue that what we do is we try to change everything. That we try to find a piece of the status quo -- something that bothers us, something that needs to be improved, something that is itching to be changed -- and we change it. We try to make big, permanent, important change. But we don't think about it that way. And we haven't spent a lot of time talking about what that process is like. And I've been studying it for a couple years. And I want to share a couple stories with you today.

First, about a guy named Nathan Winograd. Nathan was the number two person at the San Francisco SPCA. And what you may not know about the history of the SPCA is, it was founded to kill dogs and cats. Cities gave them a charter to get rid of the stray animals on the street and destroy them. In a typical year four million dogs and cats were killed, most of them within 24 hours of being scooped off of the street. Nathan and his boss saw this, and they could not tolerate it. So they set out to make San Francisco a no-kill city: create an entire city where every dog and cat, unless it was ill or dangerous, would be adopted, not killed. And everyone said it was impossible. Nathan and his boss went to the city council to get a change in the ordinance. And people from SPCAs and humane shelters around the country flew to San Francisco to testify against them -- to say it would hurt the movement and it was inhumane. They persisted. And Nathan went directly to the community. He connected with people who cared about this: nonprofessionals, people with passion. And within just a couple years, San Francisco became the first no-kill city, running no deficit, completely supported by the community. Nathan left and went to Tompkins County, New York -- a place as different from San Francisco as you can be and still be in the United States. And he did it again. He went from being a glorified dogcatcher to completely transforming the community. And then he went to North Carolina and did it again. And he went to Reno and he did it again.

And when I think about what Nathan did, and when I think about what people here do, I think about ideas. And I think about the idea that creating an idea, spreading an idea has a lot behind it. I don't know if you've ever been to a Jewish wedding, but what they do is, they take a light bulb and they smash it. Now there is a bunch of reasons for that, and stories about it. But one reason is because it indicates a change, from before to after. It is a moment in time. And I want to argue that we are living through and are right at the key moment of a change in the way ideas are created and spread and implemented.

We started with the factory idea: that you could change the whole world if you had an efficient factory that could churn out change. We then went to the TV idea, that said if you had a big enough mouthpiece, if you could get on TV enough times, if you could buy enough ads, you could win. And now we're in this new model of leadership, where the way we make change is not by using money or power to lever a system, but by leading.

So let me tell you about the three cycles. The first one is the factory cycle. Henry Ford comes up with a really cool idea. It enables him to hire men who used to get paid 50 cents a day and pay them five dollars a

day. Because he's got an efficient enough factory. Well with that sort of advantage you can churn out a lot of cars. You can make a lot of change. You can get roads built. You can change the fabric of an entire country. That the essence of what you're doing is you need ever-cheaper labor, and ever-faster machines. And the problem we've run into is, we're running out of both. Ever-cheaper labor and ever-faster machines. (Laughter)

So we shift gears for a minute, and say, "I know: television; advertising. Push push. Take a good idea and push it on the world. I have a better mousetrap. And if I can just get enough money to tell enough people, I'll sell enough." And you can build an entire industry on that. If necessary you can put babies in your ads. If necessary you can use babies to sell other stuff. And if babies don't work, you can use doctors. But be careful. Because you don't want to get an unfortunate juxtaposition, where you're talking about one thing instead of the other. (Laughter) This model requires you to act like the king, like the person in the front of the room throwing things to the peons in the back. That you are in charge, and you're going to tell people what to do next. The quick little diagram of it is, you're up here, and you are pushing it out to the world. This method -- mass marketing -- requires average ideas, because you're going to the masses, and plenty of ads. What we've done as spammers is tried to hypnotize everyone into buying our idea, hypnotize everyone into donating to our cause, hypnotize everyone into voting for our candidate. And, unfortunately, it doesn't work so well anymore either. (Laughter)

But there is good news around the corner -- really good news. I call it the idea of tribes. What tribes are, is a very simple concept that goes back 50,000 years. It's about leading and connecting people and ideas. And it's something that people have wanted forever. Lots of people are used to having a spiritual tribe, or a church tribe, having a work tribe, having a community tribe. But now, thanks to the internet, thanks to the explosion of mass media, thanks to a lot of other things that are bubbling through our society around the world, tribes are everywhere.

The Internet was supposed to homogenize everyone by connecting us all. Instead what it's allowed is silos of interest. So you've got the red-hat ladies over here. You've got the red-hat triathletes over there. You've got the organized armies over here. You've got the disorganized rebels over here. You've got people in white hats making food. And people in white hats sailing boats. The point is that you can find Ukrainian folk dancers and connect with them, because you want to be connected. That people on the fringes can find each other, connect and go somewhere. Every town that has a volunteer fire department understands this way of thinking. (Laughter)

Now it turns out this is a legitimate non-photoshopped photo. People I know who are firemen told me that this is not uncommon. And that what firemen do to train sometimes is they take a house that is going to be torn down, and they burn it down instead, and practice putting it out. But they always stop and take a picture. (Laughter)

You know the pirate tribe is a fascinating one. They've got their own flag. They've got the eye patches. You can tell when you're running into someone in a tribe. And it turns out that it's tribes -- not money, not factories -- that can change our world, that can change politics, that can align large numbers of people. Not because you force them to do something against their will, but because they wanted to connect.

That what we do for a living now, all of us, I think, is find something worth changing, and then assemble tribes that assemble tribes that spread the idea and spread the idea. And it becomes something far bigger than ourselves, it becomes a movement. So when Al Gore set out to change the world again, he didn't do it by himself. And he didn't do it by buying a lot of ads. He did it by creating a movement. Thousands of people around the country who could give his presentation for him, because he can't be in 100 or 200 or 500 cities in each night.

You don't need everyone. What Kevin Kelley has taught us is you just need, I don't know, a thousand true fans -- a thousand people who care enough that they will get you the next round and the next round and the next round. And that means that the idea you create, the product you create, the movement you create isn't for everyone, it's not a mass thing. That's not what this is about. What it's about instead is finding the true believers. It's easy to look at what I've said so far, and say, "Wait a minute, I don't have what it takes to be that kind of leader."

So here are two leaders. They don't have a lot in common. They're about the same age. But that's about it. What they did, though, is each in their own way, created a different way of navigating your way through technology. So some people will go out and get people to be on one team. And some people will get people to be on the other team.

It also informs the decisions you make when you make products or services. You know, this is one of my favorite devices. But what a shame that it's not organized to help authors create movements. What would happen if, when you're using your Kindle, you could see the comments and quotes and notes from all the other people reading the same book as you in that moment. Or from your book group. Or from your friends, or from the circle you want. What would happen if authors, or people with ideas could use version two, which comes out on Monday, and use it to organize people who want to talk about something. Now there is a million things I could share with you about the mechanics here. But let me just try a couple.

The Beatles did not invent teenagers. They merely decided to lead them. That most movements, most leadership that we're doing is about finding a group that's disconnected but already has a yearning -- not persuading people to want something they don't have yet.

When Diane Hatz worked on "The Meatrix," her video that spread all across the internet about the way farm animals are treated, she didn't invent the idea of being a vegan. She didn't invent the idea of caring about this issue. But she helped organize people, and helped turn it into a movement.

Hugo Chavez did not invent the disaffected middle and lower class of Venezuela. He merely led them.

Bob Marley did not invent Rastafarians. He just stepped up and said, "Follow me."

Derek Sivers invented CD Baby, which allowed independent musicians to have a place to sell their music without selling out to the man -- to have place to take the mission they already wanted to go to, and connect with each other.

What all these people have in common is that they are heretics. That heretics look at the status quo and say, "This will not stand. I can't abide this status quo. I am willing to stand up and be counted and move things forward. I see what the status quo is; I don't like it." That instead of looking at all the little rules and following each one of them, that instead of being what I call a sheepwalker -- somebody who's half asleep, following instructions, keeping their head down, fitting in -- every once in a while someone stands up and says, "Not me." Someone stands up and says, "This one is important. We need to organize around it." And not everyone will. But you don't need everyone. You just need a few people -- (Laughter) -- who will look at the rules, realize they make no sense, and realize how much they want to be connected.

So Tony Hsieh does not run a shoe store. Zappos isn't a shoe store. Zappos is the one, the only, the best-there-ever-was place for people who are into shoes to find each other, to talk about their passion, to connect with people who care more about customer service than making a nickel tomorrow. It can be something as prosaic as shoes, and something as complicated as overthrowing a government. It's exactly the same behavior though.

What it requires, as Geraldine Carter has discovered, is to be able to say, "I can't do this by myself. But if I can get other people to join my Climb and Ride, then together we can get something that we all want. We're just waiting for someone to lead us."

Michelle Kaufman has pioneered new ways of thinking about environmental architecture. She doesn't do it by quietly building one house at a time. She does it by telling a story to people who want to hear it. By connecting a tribe of people who are desperate to be connected to each other. By leading a movement and making change. And around and around and around it goes.

So three questions I'd offer you. The first one is, who exactly are you upsetting? Because if you're not upsetting anyone, you're not changing the status quo. The second question is, who are you connecting? Because for a lot of people, that's what they're in it for: the connections that are being made, one to the other.

And the third one is, who are you leading? Because focusing on that part of it -- not the mechanics of what you're building, but the who, and the leading part -- is where change comes.

So Blake, at Tom's Shoes, had a very simple idea. "What would happen if every time someone bought a pair of these shoes I gave exactly the same pair to someone who doesn't even own a pair of shoes?" This is not the story of how you get shelf space at Neiman Marcus. It's a story of a product that tells a story. And as you walk around with this remarkable pair of shoes and someone says, "What are those?" You get to tell the story on Blake's behalf, on behalf of the people who got the shoes. And suddenly it's not one pair of shoes or 100 pairs of shoes. It's tens of thousands of pairs of shoes.

My friend Red Maxwell has spent the last 10 years fighting against juvenile diabetes. Not fighting the organization that's fighting it -- fighting with them, leading them, connecting them, challenging the status quo because it's important to him. And the people he surrounds himself with need the connection. They need the leadership. It makes a difference.

You don't need permission from people to lead them. But in case you do, here it is: they're waiting, we're waiting for you to show us where to go next. So here is what leaders have in common. The first thing is, they challenge the status quo. They challenge what's currently there. The second thing is, they build a culture. A secret language, a seven-second handshake, a way of knowing that you're in or out. They have curiosity. Curiosity about people in the tribe, curiosity about outsiders. They're asking questions. They connect people to one another. Do you know what people want more than anything? They want to be missed. They want to be missed the day they don't show up. They want to be missed when they're gone. And tribe leaders can do that. It's fascinating, because all tribe leaders have charisma, but you don't need charisma to become a leader. Being a leader gives you charisma. If you look and study the leaders who have succeeded, that's where charisma comes from -- from the leading. Finally, they commit. They commit to the cause. They commit to the tribe. They commit to the people who are there.

So I'd like you to do something for me. And I hope you'll think about it before you reject it out-of-hand. What I want you to do, it only takes 24 hours, is: create a movement. Something that matters. Start. Do it. We need it. Thank you very much. I appreciate it. (Applause)