



## The Ripple Effect

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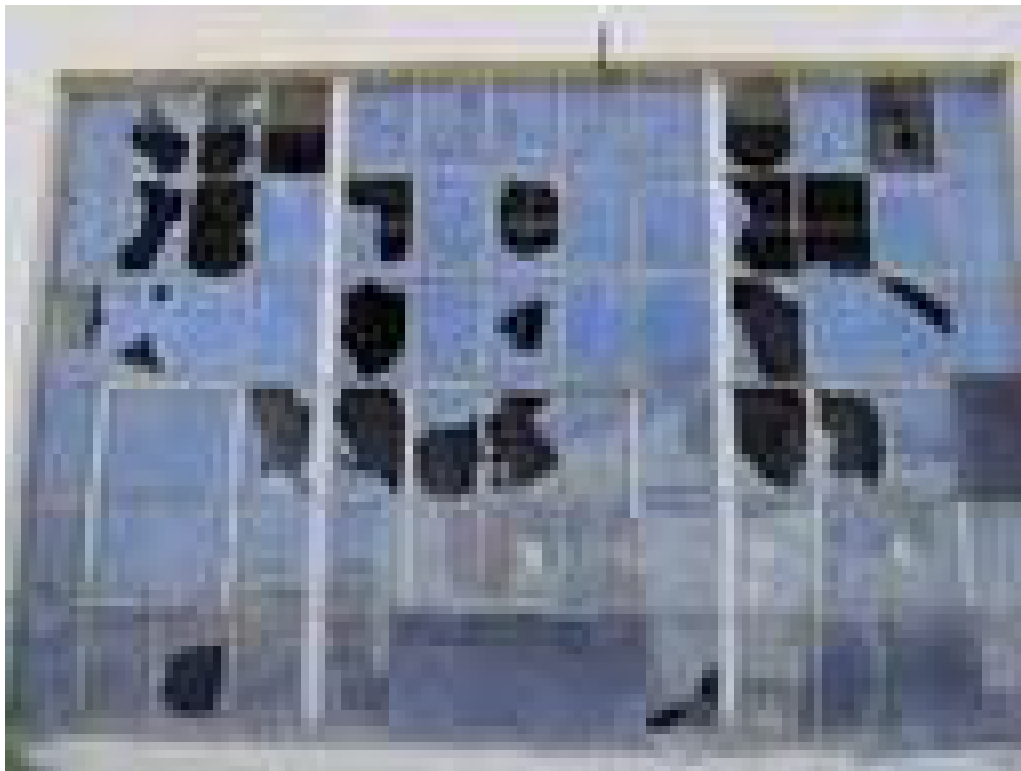
*Cultures emerge from life-changing environments. Environments emerge from small communities that foster discovery and self-disclosure. Create communities and environments. Culture follows.*

Everyone has thrown a small rock into a pond or a lake and watched the effect it has when it hits. When that little stone hits the surface, it makes a splash. Following that splash is a ripple effect. Starting with one small ring of water, new rings begin to spread outward in concentric circles. With a big enough splash, those rings can continue expanding out into the calm waters surrounding the starting point for several minutes.

Growing up, my family visited Lake Harrington in Kentucky every summer. I could spend hours throwing rocks into that lake, skimming them on the water's surface or trying to hit certain locations in the lake. My favorite memory from these moments was causing a ripple effect. I would throw a rock as far out into the water as I could, then watch to see if the circles of waves could return all the way to the banks of the lake where I stood. With a big enough rock and some calm water, it was amazing how that ripple effect could go on and on.

Organizations experience ripple effects too – both good and bad ones. It's the effect of small decisions on the culture of an ordinarily calm team or department. Those decisions are like rocks hitting the surface that cause an expanded effect into the atmosphere of the organization. For instance, George Kelling caused a wonderful ripple effect on the culture of New York City in the early 1990s. He was asked to study the rising crime rate that worsened each year within the five boroughs of the city. Violent crimes rapes, murders and drug traffic were soaring. At least until George Kelling threw a rock into the water there. After studying a high-crime neighborhood, he came back to the city officials with a suggestion: "The windows are all broken in that neighborhood. Instead of spending millions on new police officers, let's fix the windows and see what happens."

Almost immediately after replacing the windows and repainting the frames, crime and drug deals dropped more than 60 percent. This brought families out to their front porches again. People stayed outside and talked, even after dark. Vendors began to venture back into the area. This "crowd" further impacted the drug dealers. It forced almost every one of them to leave. George Kelling's decision was based on his "Broken Windows Theory." He said later that when windows are broken, it suggests to criminals that no one is watching and no one cares. When you replace the windows and paint the sills, it tells everyone that even the small things are being watched. His little theory had a ripple effect on the neighborhood. Crime rates went from extremely high to almost nothing. That's quite a splash.



**Reflect and Respond**

The ripple effect is occurring almost every day of our lives. Each decision we make has some corresponding effect on others.

Consider the ripple effect of a recent political decision made by a government leader, an athlete or a celebrity. Was it negative or positive?

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We all intuitively understand the ripple effect, but often we fail to take it into account when we make flippant decisions. What prevents us from seeing the ripple effect as leaders?

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Can you recall a time when a leader made a positive choice and you, as a team member benefitted from it?

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What enables leaders to make good decisions that affect their culture?

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