

Domino Theory: Small steps can lead to big results

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(Phys.org) -- What if you could make a world-changing impact with one small act? Would you be more inclined to take that first step if you knew your action would gain momentum when aligned with the actions of others?

It might seem daunting for an individual to make big changes in society, but taking that first step can set into motion a series of events culminating in a big result. Entrepreneur Herb Morreale (CompSci '91) has distilled all his thoughts and ideas about how individuals can make an impact for the greater good into what he calls his “domino theory.”

As dominos placed on end knock each other in succession, all of the dominos fall due to the energy transferred by each impact. Like tipping over that first domino, one small act can set into motion a series of events that expands out into the world. Examples can be found throughout history. Rosa Parks struck a blow for civil rights when she refused to give up her seat on the bus. A Chinese student stood alone in Tiananmen Square to block military tanks in support of democratic reform. With a swing of a hammer, the Berlin Wall came down.

“I had been thinking about this for quite awhile and trying to understand the patterns of setting things into motion,” says Morreale. “One of the patterns starts with something inspirational. You have to inspire people. It’s in that inspiration that they will feel it here, in their chest. That gives them the motivation to do whatever the next step is.”

To illustrate the power of this process, he says it is possible in a topple of only a few dominoes to knock down a final domino that is many times greater than the mass of the first domino. Morreale carries a domino in his pocket as a tangible reminder of his theory and his passion.

“Domino theory is a framework that helps people understand that no matter how or small their hopes and dreams, they can accomplish them by seeing the world as a set of dominos,” he says. “All it takes is one small strategic action to set big things in motion and align with the actions of others.”

After graduating from CU-Boulder in 1991, Morreale and Trent Hein (CompSci '91) started XOR Inc., a Boulder-based company providing systems management services and a variety of Internet and e-commerce solutions. The company grew from two employees to more than 600. Morreale left XOR in 2000 to work on a variety of projects that eventually led to him founding five other businesses.

In 2002, while attending the Telluride Tech Festival, he began thinking about how small actions could set big results into motion. Those ideas developed into the domino theory, and the notion of “setting big things in motion.” In 2007, his theory inspired a blog and a nonprofit organization called [Topplers](#) —so named as a reference to dominos toppling over.

The mission of the organization is to inspire and motivate people to set big things in motion using the domino theory as its driving philosophy. Topplers gives people the opportunity to participate in or start a movement and to connect with others, giving their ideas the momentum to grow.

There are multiple branches on the Topplers site for taking actions, such as collecting stories from people who have performed random acts of

kindness, helping 100,000 students go to college, and creating an emergency response force to mobilize Boy Scouts and adult leaders.

An example of how this works is a woman who was inspired by the Topplers concept to write a book about adopting two children from Africa. She described her experience writing and publishing the book on the Topplers website. Her accomplishment set into motion another adoption of a child from Africa by an individual who read the book.

Another program supported by Topplers is the Domino Award. Morreale introduced his theory to [computer science](#) students by founding the Domino Awards, working with Professor Clayton Lewis. The Domino Awards are designed to inspire and support CU-Boulder students while honoring the impact that other computer scientists have made on society. Winners are selected based on their essays describing the impact computer scientists have made on society. Since creating the program, 10 students have received the Domino Award.

“Herb is a very thoughtful and reflective guy,” says Professor Lewis. “One of the things he thinks deeply about is how people can support one another and how they can work together performing acts of kindness and interacting in a positive way that enriches lives. The Domino Awards is a blending of the philosophical and the activist—how people can contribute and how people can benefit from that. The work started that way and has been growing in strength. We’re really lucky to have Herb in our university community.”

Since leaving XOR, Morreale has been chief technology officer at Me.dium Inc. (eventually renamed One Riot and recently acquired by Walmart Labs) and Gold Systems Inc. Currently he is CEO of 6kites providing expertise in social business, and mobile and web application development. For more than 10 years he has been a member of the Industry Advisory Board for the Department of Computer Science at CU-

Boulder.

Morreale became interested in software development when he got his first computer in seventh grade. He credits the computer science department for improving his skills and for providing student leadership opportunities—two factors that have served him well as an entrepreneur and industry leader in social media.

“It all comes back to the genesis of trying something and seeing where it will go,” he says. “Ideas spur other ideas. You can think big and if you have the courage and ignore self-doubt, you can accomplish some pretty big things and inspire people to accomplish their own big things.”

Provided by University of Colorado at Boulder

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