

# Insights & Ideas

## Using diffusion techniques to accelerate the adoption of Change initiatives in organizations



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Effective Change Management is about accelerating the adoption of Change in an organization. Conventional approaches to change management attempt to move all employees through the change with the same approach and methodology by first managing endings and losses, creating strategies for moving through the neutral zone, and then implementing strategies for winning in the new “beginning”. In reality however, people are characteristically different in their agility and responsiveness to Change, regardless of which step they are in any change management process. More importantly, managers spend so much time responding to the resistance to change from a few laggards, and with time constraints they become frustrated when the change is not adopted as quickly as they had hoped. But, using techniques used by marketing and sociology researchers, managers can accelerate the adoption of change initiatives by differentiating their communication to target opinion leaders as a medium to persuade the majority in the organization.

Sociology and Marketing methods often study the rate of adoption of innovation and new technologies within various social systems (Rogers, 1995). Their studies found that any social system is normally distributed between innovators - who make up roughly 2.5% of the social system, early adopters - 13.5%, early majority - 34%, late majority - 34%, and laggards - 16%. Using their conclusions, the adoption of innovations in any social system can be accelerated by customizing and timing the messages about the Change to each adoption category. Similarly, the adoption of change initiatives can also be accelerated within an organization by customizing and timing the communication message and medium about the change initiative to different

adopter categories and leverage the opinion leaders in the organization. Here is how the adoption of Change can be optimized through customizing Change Communication strategies to fit each adopter category:

### Innovators

Innovators are venturesome. Their interest in new ideas leads them out of a local circle of peer networks and into more cosmopolite social relationships. They generally have the ability to cope with a high degree of uncertainty about a Change initiative at the time of adoption. However, while an innovator may not be tightly connected to other members of the local system, they play an important role in launching the Change in the system by importing the idea from outside of the system’s boundaries.

### Suggestion:

Managers who implement Change should provide opportunities for innovators to attend conferences and visit best practice locations. These are the employees that will validate whether an external best practice can be incorporated successfully into the organization. Managers should have an “open door” for innovators and allow them to influence them. Involve them in focus groups (in the concept formulation); but not necessarily in the detailed design or implementation planning (leave that to the opinion leaders). Just “listening” to innovators keeps them engaged.



### Early Adopters

Early adopters are more an integrated part of the local social system than are innovators, they have the greatest degree of opinion lead-

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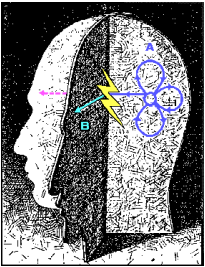
## Accelerating adoption of Change. cont..



ership and are generally sought by change agents as local missionaries. Others look to early adopters for advice and information about the Change, and because they are not too far ahead of the average individual they help decrease the uncertainty about new ideas by adopting it and conveying a subjective evaluation of the Change to near-peers through interpersonal networks.

**Suggestion:** Therefore, managers can help accelerate the adoption of change in an organization by including early adopters in discussions on implementation and in the “pilot” project. Because of their close links to the internal networks, managers should use early adopters to conduct “sanity checks” on how the implementation of Change is proceeding and how it is being perceived so that early adjustments / modifications can be made. Managers can also provide the early adopters with quick-hit key messages that supports the Change and counter-acts criticism from later adopters.

### Early Majority



The early majority crowd adopt Change just before the average member of a social system. They interact frequently with their peers, but seldom hold positions of opinion leadership. They may deliberate for some time before completely accepting the Change, but will eventually follow with deliberate willingness in adopting Change. They don't want to be the first to adopt; but they also don't want to be the last to adopt the Change.

#### **Suggestion:**

Managers can accelerate the adoption of change in this category by enabling the early adopters to present to these early majority. Managers can position the Change in a “social” medium by describing the successful adoption and application of the Change by others to ignite a reaction in the early majority of not wanting to be the last to adopt the Change. Managers can also recognize their early adoption by including their names and faces on announcements and newsletters.

### Late Majority

The late majority adopt Change and new ideas just after the average number in an organization. Adoption in this category may be an economic necessity and the result of increasing network pressures from peers. Change is often approached skeptically and cautiously, and do not adopt until most others in their system have done so. The weight of the system norms must definitely favor the Change before the late majority is convinced. The pressures of peers is necessary to motivate adoption and the uncertainty about a Change initiative must be removed before the late majority feel that it is safe to adopt.

#### **Suggestion:**

For managers, do not let the “noise” factor from this category distract you too much. Remain focused on the early adopters and the early majority. Mention the names of early majority team members who have already adopted the Change. Remember, this crowd adopts / adjusts mainly due to pressure from peers. Do not spend copious amounts of time justifying the case for Change to this category because their main concern relates to the uncertainties resulting from the Change. You can help them by outlining best and worse case scenarios that may minimize their uncertainty about the Change, and especially provide examples of negative situations that befell others that were not wise enough to adopt the Change early.

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## Accelerating adoption of Change. Cont..

### Laggards

Some people will resist change in any form no matter how beneficial or effective the Change Management has been implemented. Laggards possess almost no opinion leadership. They appear mainly isolated in their social networks. Their point of reference is usually the past, and their decisions are often made in terms of what has been done previously. These individuals interact primarily with others who also have relatively traditional values, and they tend to be suspicious of Change and change agents. Their resistance to a change initiative or new idea may be entirely rational from their viewpoint.

### Suggestion:

Do not let the "noise" factor from this category distract you at all. Anticipate their resistance as potential "noise" and identify these individuals so that you can de-sensitize yourself to their "noise". You can describe the Change to this group as "inevitable" and provide key messages to the early adopter and early majority crowd so that they can counter the criticisms. Accentuate the link between current success and previous change initiatives. You can isolate them by highlighting to early adopters and early majority that some would say: ".....". Ignore them, and after the Change, celebrate success by reminding the early adopters and early majority that the Change implementation was successful despite those that resisted the change.

In summary, most managers spend the bulk of their time responding to the late adopters and laggards, which together make up 84% of a normally distributed social system. Since managers only have limited time and resources, the adoption of Change initiatives can be accelerated by targeting and enabling the early adopters to advocate for the Change by involving them in pilot projects, equipping them with key messages, letting them carry the positive effects of the Change; and desensitize themselves to "noise" from later adopters and laggards, which traditionally consume most of their time. When this happens, managers can step back and let the opinion leaders do what comes naturally to them – influence.

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