

In organizations, regardless of how bad things are now, many persons resist change. Most often the reasons for resisting are centered on status, money and job complications. In today's organizational climate, change is inevitable. People should understand what is taking place and be prepared to deal effectively with change.

For decades, scholars and practitioners have studied why people adopt certain innovations (or make change) and reject others. Change and innovation is a key topic in the organizational communication process. Most major firms have change agents, consultants or trainers on site to assist with the change process. Because of advances in technology and human relations, change is an ongoing process in most organizations. However, the majority of changes fail.

Rogers suggests that changes fail primarily because organizations and change agents do not target the people in communication networks who determine if change will be adopted and continued. Rogers suggests that "an individual's network links are important determinants of his or her adoption of innovations."¹ This chapter reviews the network roles of people in organizations, the influence each role has on change and the conditions needed for successful change.

Change and communication network roles

The roles discussed here are primarily representations of roles some employees play in an organization's informal communication network. Each role affects the diffusion of a new idea. Most personnel realize that to produce change they need the support of upper management (the formal network). However, people in the informal network (those not listed on the organization's hierarchical chart, but who may be highly influential) also are integral to any successful change process. Six critical roles and their influence on change are reviewed.

The first role is called a **bridge**. This is a person who connects two or more groups in a system because of the person's position as a member of one of the groups. Figure 1 illustrates a bridge. Bridges are important in the change process because they have a close and influential relationship with the other members of their primary group, and they establish strong communication links with other groups.

Change agents should target the bridge to assist with introducing an organizational change. If a bridge accepts the change, then that person might persuade the primary group and possibly influence other groups about the change. Because the bridge exchanges information between that person's primary group and members of other groups, the person influences at least two groups in the organization.

A **liaison** is a person who links two or more groups in a system without being a member of any specific group. This individual does not have a primary group connection (like a bridge) but serves as a link between or among groups (see Figure 2). This person is often referred to as a *linker* or *linking pin* within organizations.

Rogers and Agarwala Rogers note that "liaisons are positioned at the crossroads of information flows in an organization. Liaisons have been called the cement

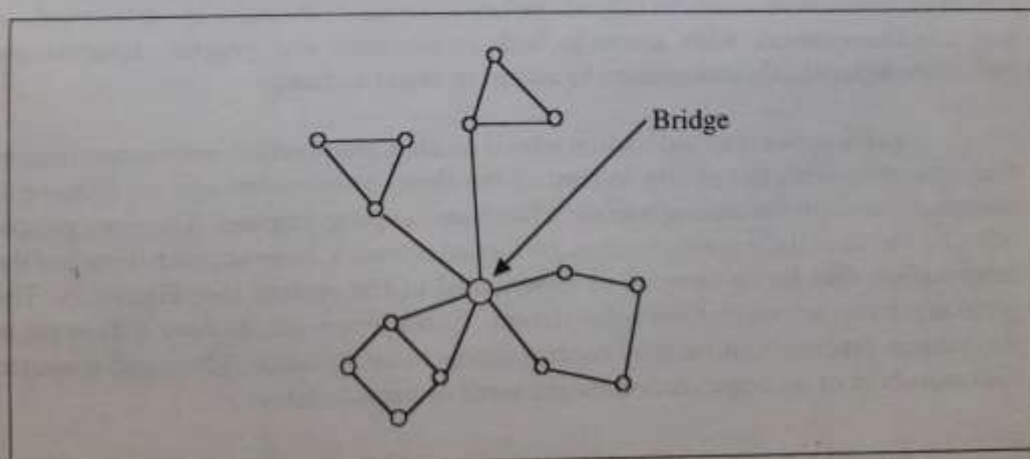


Figure 1. Bridge connecting organizational groups as a group member

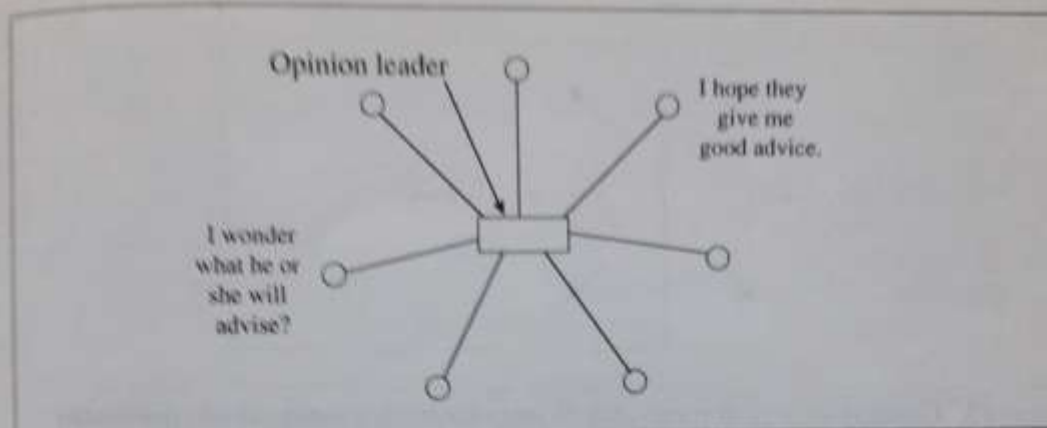


Figure 4. Opinion leader acts as informal leader in the change process

Another critical informal role in the change diffusion process is the **opinion leader**. Others in the system view this person as an informal leader who can provide valuable information or advice about the change or innovation. Opinion leadership is an individual's ability to influence other people's attitudes or behaviors in a desired way. These informal leaders are not born or appointed; their influence is not a function of their formal position or status in the system. Opinion leadership is earned, maintained and perpetuated by competence, accessibility, homophily, willingness to communicate, and referent and expert power with others (followers). Opinion leaders can be highly influential because other persons in the organization allow opinion leaders to influence their attitudes and behaviors.

A **cosmopolite** is an individual in a primary organization who has a high degree of communication with the external society that may affect the organization. These people are similar to gatekeepers in that "they control the communication flow by which new ideas enter the system."³ Cosmopolites are usually well-versed, well-traveled and highly educated persons who have affiliations with national and international organizations. They are often in professional occupations with high migration rates, such as regional sales manager or public relations (see Figure 5). Cosmopolites are great resources to most systems and can be very influential in terms of change. Their education, travel and expansive contacts outside their own organization give openness to the system and can assist with needed change.

Last but not least is an established group of persons that can be highly influential in the organizational change process. These are the "old boys and old girls."⁴ There is no illustration for these persons...just picture an 800-pound gorilla.

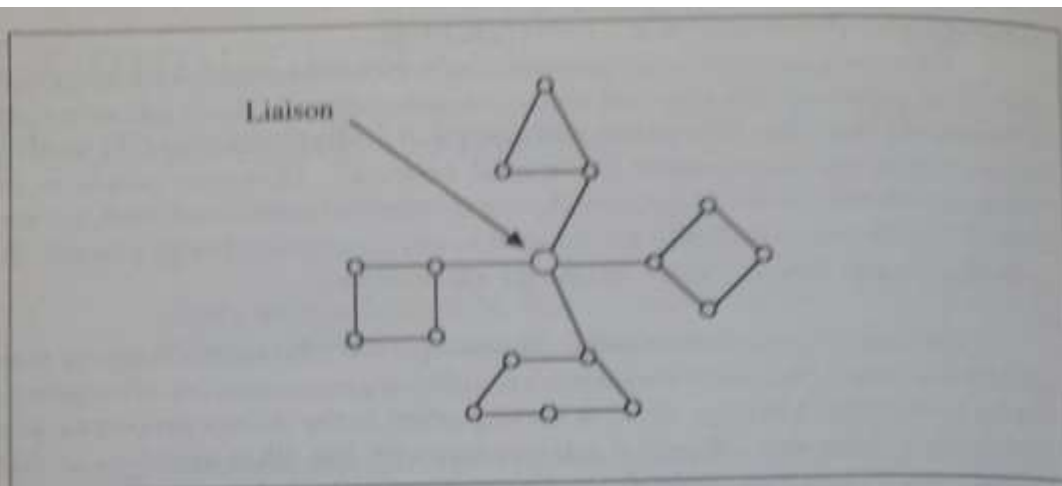


Figure 2. Liaison (not a group member) connecting organizational groups

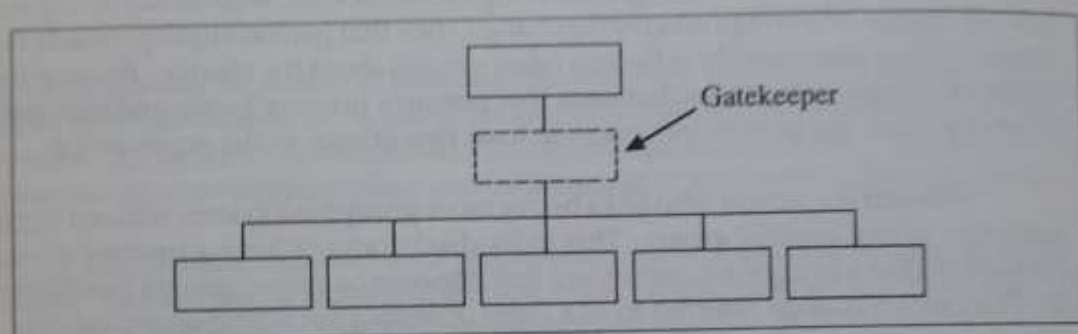


Figure 3. Gatekeeper screens or filters information vertically

that holds the structural brick of an organization together; when the liaisons are removed, the system tends to fall into isolated cliques."² Being at the crossroads of information systems, with access to both information and people, liaisons can influence individuals and groups to accept or reject a change.

A **gatekeeper** is an individual who is located in a position in the communication structure with the ability to control the flow, progression and movement of messages throughout the organization (see Gatekeeping chapter). These are people who, by virtue of their positioning in the formal network, have access to much of the information that flows upward or downward in the system (see Figure 3). The gatekeeper can screen or filter information. Gatekeepers can be very influential in the change process because they control access to information, ideas and concerns that members of an organization might want or need to have.

and poor use of the change. Simply put, forced change usually fails.⁵ So for a new idea to have a possibility of success, it usually must have the support of both groups of leaders gained only through effective communication with each group.

People who are expected to implement the change should be **involved from the initial stages of the change process**. This means that *critical personnel* such as opinion leaders, liaisons, managers and the others should be involved if the change is to succeed.⁶ When critical personnel who might support and diffuse the innovation are excluded from the change process, the change may fail miserably.

Every change must be **customized to each specific organization**. All too often, people forget this principle. A person cannot assume that what worked at IBM will work at Ford or vice versa. Often a change that works in one organization will be incompatible with another organization. Each organization has specific rules, regulations, norms, culture and personnel that make it different from any other organization.⁷ Thus, an innovation must be adapted to each specific organization. People in many of the informal network roles can assist with this adaptation. Opinion leaders, old boys/girls and others can identify problem areas in the proposed change and suggest corrective action. If complications occur during adoption, time must be taken to iron them out or the innovation is almost certain to fail.

Every change must show **obvious, positive results soon** or the change may be discontinued. This is a common practice in American culture. For example, many health and beauty products suggest when and how customers should look for positive results. If a customer buys an expensive, whitening toothpaste that boasts results in seven days or less, the buyer will begin looking for positive results within a week. Unless the change is obvious, the buyer will revert to the previous toothpaste. Organizations need to inform people what the results will be, when to look for the outcomes, and they must assist employees in observing the positive results.

Lastly, change that is **gradual, carefully organized and orderly** is more likely to be accepted than change that is **forced, massive, unpredictable, disorganized or disorderly**. Often during quick changes things seem unpredictable and disorganized.

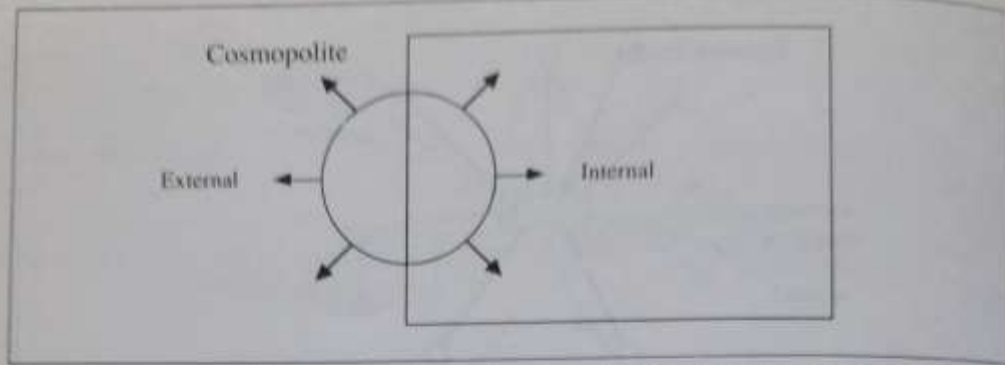


Figure 5. Cosmopolite communicates to organization's external environment

These persons have been in the organization longer, have communication connections throughout the system and know "who is really talking to whom and about what." They know where all the skeletons are buried. In fact, they probably buried a few! Their influence comes from knowing the system's informal communication network better than most of the formal leaders. This is not to suggest that they are all "chronologically old," although some might be. In technology industries, for example, many are very young, but they have been in the organization longer.

The old boys and girls can influence change in either a positive or negative way. If this group supports the change, it has a higher likelihood of being implemented; if not, the change may have little chance of success. People who want the change need to work with the old boy/girl network, regardless of the difficulty. It may only take one old boy or one old girl to stop a change that could benefit all. Making these people part of the process helps the change move through the system.

Necessary conditions for change

The organization must **have or create the needed resources**. The resources most organizations need for change are: personnel, time, finances, space, equipment and so on. If these "slack" (not currently being used) resources are not available or cannot be allocated, then change is not likely to occur. The informal network can often help others secure needed resources. While every group has members with good ideas, many organizations lack the resources to make the good ideas realities.

As suggested earlier, for change to be considered, the new idea must be **supported by both the formal and informal communication networks**. If either of these leaders say "NO," then the change is not likely to be adopted. True, the formal leaders can introduce a change and force members of the organization to use the new idea. However, this type of coercive change usually results in a low adoption rate

Even if the change is working as anticipated, quick, massive changes give the impression of chaos. Effective use of communication channels and designated personnel gives sources information from receivers about making the needed changes and how to go about achieving the desired changes.⁸

This is the right way to pursue change, and it also involves the people who will be implementing the change. Once information is accrued concerning the change and the necessary people become committed, the process can be implemented gradually and carefully so that everyone will have an opportunity to incorporate the change and make it work.⁹

Ref: "Predicting innovativeness", Organizational realities: The politics of change, clarifying comm. Theories etc.