

## **Safety Gone Viral: How To Get Innovations Adopted**

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### **Introduction**

How many times have you tried to institute a new practice, get people to adopt a new way to look at safety, or use improved equipment only to encounter resistance? Have you ever wondered why some safety initiatives fizzle and others take off? Getting to critical mass is key to any change becoming part of the culture. But how?

Social scientists have spent decades researching how innovations and change are adopted (or not) within social groups. Everett Rogers, a sociologist, is one of the best known researchers in this area and synthesized hundreds of studies across the world to develop his model of how change spreads and is adopted (2003). In his model, two key principles are involved in getting to critical mass:

1. Knowing where people are relating to adopting a change
2. The characteristics of the innovation that will influence whether individuals will adopt or reject the change

### **Know Where Your People Are**

People vary in how ready they are to adopt change (see Stober, 2009). When it comes to new initiatives or innovations within a group, individuals tend to fall into predictable categories of who adopts a change when. Rogers (2003) describes five categories of individuals related to any innovation: innovators, early adopters, the early majority, the late majority, and laggards. Being able to identify who is in what category can improve any safety professional's plan for getting a new initiative adopted.

#### **Innovators**

Innovators are the first people to adopt. They tend to be willing to take risks in making change—failure is not a huge worry. While this willingness to risk a change means it is easier to get Innovators to adopt a new idea, they have some characteristics that can decrease their influence in the larger group. They are sometimes seen as idealistic and “different” from others in their group. Innovators are often out in front of the rest of the group—change may come from them, however, often they are not the change agent that gets a new initiative adopted. Innovators enjoy

“experimenting” and being on the forefront, so safety professionals can leverage their strengths by engaging them to brainstorm new approaches and try things out early. It is important to recognize that while Innovators are creative and great sources of ideas, the safety professional will likely not be successful if they lean on Innovators as their main champions or spokespeople.

#### *Early Adopters: the Trendsetters*

Early Adopters, or The Trendsetters, are on the lookout for innovations that will help them move forward. Trendsetters tend to be strategic thinkers and willing to be “guinea pigs” if they see an advantage to the new initiative. They tend to be an “easy audience” willing to entertain a new idea and can be great advocates. They sometimes can still be seen as “too different” from the pragmatic majority, but if not, key opinion leaders are often found in this category. The effective safety professional can recruit Trendsetters to test new products, new initiatives. This category is also where safety professionals want to look for their champions who will be effective at taking the message out to others in the organization.

#### *The Early Majority: the Show Me Folks*

The Early Majority, or the Show Me Folks, tend to be comfortable with progressive ideas but need observable results to move into adopting a change. They tend to dislike complexity and can be more sensitive to what the change might cost them. Safety professionals trying to influence Show Me Folks need to demonstrate the value of a new initiative to win them over.

#### *The Late Majority: the Reluctant Joiners*

The Late Majority, or the Reluctant Joiners, tend to be pragmatists who dislike risk and are less comfortable with “new” ideas. But if they sense the wider group is moving towards a new initiative, they will work to “fit in.” Keeping things consistent is important to Reluctant Joiners, so safety professionals do well to make sure they communicate how new practices or initiatives fit in the big picture.

#### *Laggards: the Stubborn Mules*

Laggards, or the Stubborn Mules, are well known to most safety professionals. Stubborn Mules see high risk in adopting change. They often fear change and do not like unfamiliar situations. To influence Stubborn Mules, safety professionals will want to use opinion leaders that can help Mules feel comfortable.

It is critical in understanding these adopter categories that getting individuals to move categories is unlikely. A Stubborn Mule is unlikely to be an Innovator or Trendsetter. Rather than *trying to convert people* into a different category, it is more helpful to think about how to *move an innovation through* the different groups of adopters. And to move an innovation forward, it is important to recognize that each adopter category tends to evaluate the value of a particular innovation differently.

## **Innovation Characteristics That Influence Adoption**

Rogers (2003) identified five qualities of innovations that influence adoption. He showed that when an innovative idea or product had enough these characteristics, adoption within a group was more successful. Further, he defined which characteristics were most influential within which adopter categories.

1. **Relative Advantage:** The greater the perceived advantage, the quicker it catches on.
2. **Compatibility:** the more compatible and consistent the innovation is with the organization’s values and norms, the easier the innovation will be adopted. For Reluctant Joiners, compatibility with values and norms is a must. This also becomes important for Stubborn Mules to fall in line.
3. **Simplicity:** the easier the innovation is to understand, use, or put into practice, the more likely it is to be adopted as a positive change. “User-friendly” is important to the Show Me Folks and Stubborn Mules.
4. **Ease of trying it out:** the easier the innovation is to experiment with or try out, the better. Being able to trial the change is absolutely key to get Trendsetters onboard.
5. **Observable results:** the easier the innovation is to “see” or assess, the less uncertainty is present and the easier it is for discussions among peers. If an innovation is going to be adopted by the Show Me Folks, results must be observable and adopted by respected others. Stubborn Mules also need to see that others have succeeded in making the initiative work.

Knowing which of these qualities to leverage with which type of adopter can help a safety initiative go viral. The safety professional trying to get a new idea adopted needs to demonstrate how that idea meets the criteria important to the people in the adopter category he or she is trying to reach. While easily being able to try out the innovation is a key characteristic for Trendsetters, this is not a selling point for the Show Me Folks. The Show Me Folks need to be able to easily see results of how it well something works before they will even think about trialing the new idea. As you can see, understanding how to talk about an innovation when and to whom can make a huge difference in reaching critical mass for adopting a change.

|                   | Relative Advantage | Compatibility with Norms | Simplicity | Ease of Trialing | Observable Results |
|-------------------|--------------------|--------------------------|------------|------------------|--------------------|
| Innovators        | **                 |                          |            |                  |                    |
| Trendsetters      | ✓                  |                          |            | **               |                    |
| Show Me           | ✓                  |                          | ✓          | ✓                | **                 |
| Reluctant Joiners | ✓                  | **                       |            |                  |                    |
| Stubborn Mules    | ✓                  | ✓                        | ✓          |                  | ✓                  |

**Table 1. Key Characteristics for Adopter Categories.**

## **A Case Example: A New Type of Training Program**

Don, the HSE Director of a large industrial construction company, saw a new training program that uses iPad devices to deliver cognitive safety training in the field. He saw several advantages to using such an approach and knew he first needed to get the decision-makers and primary stakeholders onboard. He also knew that getting the program accepted in the field presented challenges too, as many workers had talked about various HSE initiatives in the past as “flavor-of-the-month.”

### *Decision-Maker Approach*

Don knew there were several key people he would need to convince that the training program was a good investment: the business unit President, the HSE Manager for the business unit where he wanted to deploy the program, and several operations managers. Don also recognized that within this decision-maker group, he had an Innovator, a Trendsetter, some Show Me Folks and Reluctant Joiners, and one Stubborn Mule.

Chuck, the Innovator operational manager, was always ready to try something new. Don knew it would be relatively easy to get Chuck on board but also recognized that Chuck would not be his most effective champion to enlist others' support. Although Chuck was bright and quick to recognize new advantages, he was also seen by some management as a bit of a loose cannon, always on to something different. He had a track record of trying a number of new approaches, only some of which worked, so people were often skeptical of something seen as "his idea."

Don saw a better champion in Terry, the Project Manager, who seemed to be a Trendsetter with the respect of the organization. Once Terry saw the benefit of an initiative or product, he was quick to want to get involved. As he was seen as someone who "knew how to get things done right," Don saw the advantage of getting Terry involved early and asking him to be part of a team talking with different stakeholder groups.

Dave, the business unit President, showed characteristics of a Show Me adopter. If Dave bought into the advantages of a new program and had a clear understanding of how a trial run would be assessed, Don knew that he would get behind the initiative. Dave had gotten to his present position by backing solid efforts and demanding results. Among some of the other operational managers, Steve and Jack were seen by Don as Reluctant Joiners. They were not going to jump on any bandwagons, but if the program was being accepted by other leaders and had a good business case for safety performance, they would likely agree to participate.

Don knew his biggest challenge would be convincing Janet, the VP of Finance that the investment in this training program, the iPads themselves, and the approach would pay off. Janet was known as being a "tough sell" on anything new. While not being antagonistic towards HSE efforts, she often was the last one to join any new initiative and seemed to be somewhat removed from "safety."

So how did Don tackle this group of decision makers? His first steps were getting his own HSE staff educated and excited about what this new way of training might deliver. It was mobile and relied on job-relevant examples broken up into small "micro-trainings" (see Stober & Putter, 41+ for a description). Then he set a meeting with Dave (the President) and Terry (the Project Manager) for an initial discussion.

In that meeting he started with the *relative advantages* of the initiative:

1. They had an ongoing issue with relatively minor incidents and were looking for ways to address "where people's heads are at." This approach did this.
2. An approach like this brings safety awareness into *daily* discussion in the field through deploying the training for 15 minutes at start of shift. There would be little impact on production, especially compared to classroom training, and small chunks are an effective learning method.

3. The delivery method was appealing and easy to use (iPads are “cool” and if someone could use an ATM, they could use the iPad app). This advantage also spoke the program’s *simplicity*.
4. They were already looking to use more apps for other purposes in the field, so iPads were already under discussion.

Next he discussed the *ease of trialing* in terms of a pilot deployment to both work out logistics and to get *observable results*, which Don knew would be key to getting Dave’s support. He also knew this would appeal to Terry’s interest in being on the forefront of a new, promising initiative and in being able to have input to how it would proceed. As an added point of discussion, Don promoted this initiative as an avenue for visibly investing in the company’s stated value of Safe Production. Don set up the agenda to ensure that the discussion of the new training program would address the biggest points of leverage for Dave-a Show Me, and Terry-a Trendsetter. Rather than trying to get either of them to be an innovator, Don brought the innovation to where they were.

After successfully enlisting Dave and Terry, he asked if they would arrange a meeting with the other key stakeholders and decision-makers: the other operational managers and the VP of Finance. He provided the bullet points they had previously discussed and asked Dave if he would be willing to speak to some of these in kicking off the meeting. By having Dave speak to the advantages, simplicity, pilot project, and how results would be assessed, Don both cemented Dave’s support and promoted the initiative’s *compatibility with existing norms* for the Reluctant Joiners and the Stubborn Mule. Asking Terry to discuss his agreement to pilot the program and why he was happy to do so would also lend credibility to the initiative. Don knew that Chuck, the Innovator, would be enthusiastic on the basis of the *relative advantages* alone. The meeting went well, and while Janet (the Stubborn Mule) was not enthusiastic, she was willing to wait and see what the results of the pilot would show. After all, she did not want to be seen as oppositional to efforts on safety by the other leaders.

Once Don had the support of these leaders, he met further with Terry and Chuck to brainstorm how to best plan the pilot. Chuck was happy to be involved as a thought contributor and Don was careful to test his ideas with Terry. Don asked Terry to be the head of the team planning and evaluating the training program to leverage Terry’s position as a respected opinion leader.

#### *Approach to Wider Deployment*

Don now had critical mass support among the leadership and could move forward. As Terry, Don, and the team identified where to conduct the pilot, they paid particular attention to selecting a project where they had enough Trendsetters who were respected opinion leaders to help drive the effort. Again, rather than trying to get a Stubborn Mule onboard at the start, they focused on selecting a project where they had people who were likely to fairly easily adopt this initiative as a positive move forward and who could credibly demonstrate its value.

As the pilot rolled out, the team continued to identify opinion leaders among Trendsetters and Reluctant Joiners who could be enlisted as champions and spokespersons for the value of the program. They also identified Innovators and Trendsetters who could be on the frontier of gathering feedback and anecdotes of how the program was being used and success stories. As time progressed, the results and stories became tools to help Reluctant Joiners and Stubborn

Mules see that this training program was becoming a valued aspect of the safety culture of their group. Show Me Folks saw the benefits of participation. As more individuals adopted the training program as a good thing, lagging Stubborn Mules were likely to feel some pressure to conform or risk being seen as an outsider.

## Summary

The adoption of a safety initiative will only go viral when critical mass is achieved. When enough people see the innovation as valued or even inevitable, its adoption and sustainability become viable. Safety professionals can benefit from decades of research that illustrate two key points for gaining critical mass: 1) understanding the different types of people and 2) what are the essential characteristics of innovations that get individuals in these categories to adopt something new. To get a safety innovation to go viral, the HSE professional can increase their success by acting on the following:

1. Which key individuals are in what adopter categories? Create a map of who is where.
2. How does my proposed innovation meet each of the 5 characteristics of successful innovations: relative advantage, compatibility with existing norms, simplicity, ease of trialing, and observable results? Develop talking points for each.
3. Develop a communication plan for mapping talking points to the adopter categories of the key individuals. Know your audience and what their biggest concerns are.
4. Who needs to be approached early to get involved in brainstorming and input? How can I use Innovators most effectively?
5. Who are my opinion leaders? What categories are they in (Trendsetters? Reluctant Joiners?) and when/how will I engage them?
6. Once an innovation is being implemented, who are my spokespeople who will enlist further adopters?
7. How will I address Reluctant Joiners and Stubborn Mules: rely on their sense of wanting to fit in? Use opinion leaders to address the characteristics of innovations to which they are most responsive?

Understanding how innovation and change spreads through an organization is vital for safety professionals. Change is hard enough for individuals; organizational change takes even more. The safety professional that takes advantage of what others have discovered about how innovations are adopted within cultures is likely to see their efforts succeed.

## Bibliography

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