

Reflections on Identifying Change-Gates

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In 1995 Everett Rogers wrote *Diffusion of Innovations*. This is a landmark work, ably reviewed online by Greg Orr. As this article was written from an African village, Orr's work, which I have as a download, serves as the primary source of Roger's ideas—how a cultural outsider seeking to introduce change can identify and cooperate with the cultural insiders who can best introduce change into their community.

The change model

This section is based on an on-line summary of Rogers by Orr (2003) which outlines the social change pattern developed by Rogers. Rogers (per Orr) presents the idea that a decision for or against adoption of an innovation by a given individual is based on a risk/benefit decision. He goes on to identify five groups within a society in regard to accepting an innovation into their daily lives: 1) innovators, 2) early adopters, 3) early majority, 4) late majority, and 5) laggards. The rate of adoption forms a bell curve when graphed across time. This makes sense to me and seems reasonable based on my experience. I like Rogers' terms, but I may be using them slightly differently than he does. Therefore I will provide a short summary of my understanding of Rogers' five segments of change adoption as Orr presents them, then move on to the early stages of adopting change to interact with the idea of introducing change.

To say a decision for or against adoption of an innovation based on a risk/benefit decision means people either consciously or subconsciously ask: "Will xxx work? Will I be rejected by my peers/family if I xxx? If I accept xxx innovation, will the benefit outweigh the cost?" Since individuals vary in the degree of acceptable risk, society-wide adoption of an innovation proceeds from a few individuals who have a high cultural risk tolerance, through those with a mild risk tolerance, and on to the majority, until only a few hold-outs remain.

Typically, the innovators are a small number of the overall population. They tend to have a high acceptance of the cultural risk factors, and embrace many new elements of life. Some of these new elements work out and some fail. The early adopters have a slightly lower tolerance of cultural risk than the innovators. They see signs of success or failure in the innovator section, and make their decision accordingly. A change begins to gain momentum at the point where early adopters begin to

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embrace it. The early majority is comprised of people with a mild risk tolerance, who are willing to try new things. This is the most rapid expansion phase of adoption for the innovation. By the time the late majority begin to embrace the new innovation, it hardly seems new any more. It has been proven safe and effective via the experience of many community members, and so those with a low cultural risk tolerance can confidently participate in the change. Laggards may end up accepting the change through sheer necessity or peer pressure, or they may never accept it, forming a dissenting minority within the society in regard to a particular change.

The model in action

Janie and I have witnessed this pattern multiple times. In Peru, the Arabela village underwent language shift from Arabela to Quechua and was in the process of adopting Spanish along this pattern. More recently, we have seen cellular telephone usage in Nigeria follow it. In our working area of Nigeria, where no cellular service is available (mid-2005) there are innovators and early adopters with cellular telephones to be used when they travel out.

The question now comes up as to how we, as cultural outsiders, can utilize this insight to promote a desired cultural change. Rogers (per Orr) provides an indicator by pointing out that one of the more significant risk factors is that of risking social disapproval. If the people around me and my societal authority figures, will reject me should I embrace an innovation, I am very unlikely to do so. Thus introducing change must seek to change the opinion of the population regarding the change, even the opinion of those who do not implement the change during the innovation or early adoption periods. Who, then, shapes the opinions of a society? Who are the opinion leaders? And equally important, how does a cultural outsider initiate a positive interaction with them?

Where does one start?

So far, all the theoretical concepts presented above were present in my mind from various cultural anthropology classes and discussion as far back as the early 1980s, although not as clearly defined, stated, and labeled. Still, as Janie and I entered into community development assignments in cross-cultural settings, we knew that we would need to find people to help us present the innovations to the community. Several key factors marked our early contacts in the communities we have worked with. First, we thought in terms of vision/goals, not in terms of specific programs. Second, we sought out cultural mentors that would guide us in appropriate interaction with the people of the community we hoped to work with. Third, we presented ideas to a large number of individuals and asked “How would you start something like this?” The repetition of similar responses served to validate a given approach as appropriate in that setting. A number of people were willing to help us in these roles, and yet these people did not end up being the ones through which the initial steps toward introducing the innovation were implemented. We needed someone with something more than advice for us to follow.

We have come across these individuals with “something more” and over time we coined the term “change-gate individuals” for use in our conversations about our work. Change-gate individuals provide effective entry points through which positive innovations can enter a community or a society. It is our experience that by thoughtfully, intentionally, seeking out change-gate individuals beneficial change can be successfully brought into the daily fabric of life in a society. But what, exactly, is it one looks for to identify such a person?

Janie and I have been surprised at who the change-gate individuals have been in our various development experiences. It is perhaps best for me to start with who was not effective as a change-

gate, and some thoughts on why that was the case. Later, I will look at who was effective as a change-gate, and provide some thoughts on why that was. Finally, I will comment on how the different categories of people do play a role in introducing change after an effective change-gate has been found.

Ineffective change-gates

The easiest people for an outside change agent to reach and intentionally introduce change to are the innovators. However, we have found that people who quickly embrace most or all new ideas are not effective change-gate individuals. The earliest adopters of change may be seen as culturally marginal by the majority. As marginal individuals, they do not have as strong a fear of societal rejection as others would. They are, perhaps, even looking for acceptance from outside social units because their own society has in some form or another rejected them. Even when they are solidly accepted by their community, they are known to have a sporadic track record of embracing new ideas, with both failures and successes on their innovation scorecard. The bulk of the community takes a “wait and see” attitude to new ideas that are brought to them by members of the innovator set. A cross-cultural change agent using innovators as change-gates will find a quick acceptance by a few, but no true community enthusiasm, or at least, not for a considerable period of time.

The group of people we had expected to be effective change-gates is comprised of established leadership: traditional kings, political office holders, denominational and local church leadership. These people have a high public profile, such that their name on a promotional poster would guarantee widespread acceptance, and their participation in a public program draws large crowds. We found these people to be important elements in the introduction of change. They are the group I call opinion leaders. However, in our experience they were not the right people for a cultural outsider to first approach with a new idea. The people in these positions hold a responsibility to maintain stability in the community. They are the keepers of the status quo, the proven methods of coping with life, the orthodox practices. New things are suspect. Changes might upset the existing balance of power. This group has high demands on their time, and very little space in their lives to add another element that requires something from them. In addition, innovations might fail, and the members of this group have a significant personal interest in *not* failing.

We found that young adults were not effective change-gates in the communities where we have worked. While they are often enthusiastic for new ideas, the majority of society responds to the upcoming generation as people who are still forming the skills of discernment. They are seen as not yet having suffered the various blows life brings, and so they do not know what is needed in terms of improvements and enduring community good.

The older generations in a community have discernment, and can consider the potential of a new idea in light of a lifetime of experience. However, they lack the energy to undertake the activities needed to promote a new idea. Since it is the ability to initiate change activities that characterizes a change-gate individual, it is rare for an older person to function in this role.

The wealthy people in a society make poor change-gates for many of the same reasons that kings and politicians make poor change-gates. Those in the upper echelons have very busy schedules. They have found a way to satisfy their personal needs, and often their business and social activities are both done outside the communities and societies of their birth. These people may be looked up to as examples of what can be done by a special few, but they are not seen as providing a viable model of life for the majority of the community.

The poor end of the social spectrum also proves to be ineffective change-gates. While they are willing to embrace ideas that provide a hope of improvement, their daily lives are full of the struggle to survive and they end up with very little time for new things. Neither do they have excess resources to see them through if the innovation fails to provide the promised result. In addition, the majority of a society, even if they themselves are also poor, do not see the poor lifestyle as something to be desired and emulated, and so people from this segment of society are not powerful representatives for the desired innovation.

The final group that is not a good change-gate lacks a single identifying term in English. The idea is that of the successful mono-cultural individual. These people seem to positively address all the negatives listed above. They are respected throughout the society, they are neither too young to be listened to nor too old to be active. But, being both effective and comfortable in their society, they see little need for introducing change. Our experience has shown us that introducing change requires a tremendous amount of input in various forms: human energy, financial, and planning activities. The person who has found answers to personal needs within the system does not want to put out extensive effort to change their society.

Effective change-gates

All this brings me to an attempt to describe the profile of an effective change-gate individual. A primary characteristic of people in this group is that they have had successful interactions with outside cultures while retaining the respect of their own society and community. We have found that these people are in the early career stage of their lives. They are far enough out of school to have established a reputation for success in a given field, but are not yet at the top leadership position. They tend to be in business at mid-management level, or in governmental mid-management posts (above clerk and below the top position of the area.) They have an understanding of the procedures and mechanisms that function to provide community leadership. They know the politicians and kings, the denominational leaders and pastors, and they know how to get opportunities to talk to these people in a way that insures they are willing to listen. They are often not people with high public profiles.

An effective change-gate person can recognize the potential good in a given innovation, and can anticipate some of the pitfalls that might occur during the attempt to implement it. They will be able to absorb concepts and end goals from the outside change agent and reshape them into community acceptable forms without compromising the ultimate intention of the introduced change. They can interact with the outside change agent, both accepting input from them and also rejecting ideas or activities that seem right and natural to the outsider but which would not be effective in the society where the change is to be introduced.

When a person with these qualities is presented with an idea that will genuinely benefit their community, it can serve as a vehicle by which they can establish themselves as benefactors of the community. The change effort then becomes a win-win-win situation. The outside change agent can effectively bring about the desired change, the community benefits from the positive innovation, and the individual gains in community stature, which is itself an asset that can lead to more opportunities for the individual.

The change-gate in action

It has been our experience that the change-gate individual serves the change process in two ways: they become the pathway to the opinion leaders, and they serve as the promoter of the innovation to

the broader community. As the pathway to the opinion leaders, our change-gate contacts have often used our presence as outside experts as their purpose for requesting interviews with high level government officials. The change-gate person brings the new idea to the opinion leaders as “We the local community want this, and right now is a window of opportunity because of the presence of the expert advisors.” Through their skilled interaction with influential people, change-gate individuals obtain their approval to carry out change-oriented activities throughout the society.

In spreading the innovation to the wider community, a change-gate person will often serve as the spokesman for the innovation in public venues such as church services and community information meetings. This allows the general population to become aware of the change via a trusted community insider, thus reducing the perceived risk of social rejection should an individual embrace the new idea.

Change gate people can recruit other change-gate people in the community to participate in implementing the innovation. They can organize pilot projects and other small scale implementations that draw in the members of the innovator and early adopter groups that are most trusted by the wider community. This helps the introduced innovation spend relatively little time in the slow growth stages of innovation diffusion, and quickly reach the early majority stage.

A third way change-gate people have helped development projects we have been part of is that they come to serve as representatives of the effort to outside agencies willing to help. This allows a cultural insider voice to be heard by the agencies, rather than the voice of a cultural outsider.

All this leads to a pattern of intentional change introduction that varies from the pattern that occurs in non-directed change introduction. In non-directed change, the change is promoted at random in the society, most often by exposure to other societies, commercial advertising, etc, and it is first embraced by innovators. The change passes into the early adopter and later stages via a form of social osmosis in the order set forth by Rogers.

The tipping point is marked by opinion leader adoption. Well-informed opinion leaders communicate their approval or disapproval of an innovation, *based on the innovators' experiences*, to the rest of the social system. (italics mine)

In this pattern change must survive a period of time in the hands of people with high tolerances to cultural risk, during which it faces the possibility of being stigmatized as something done only by culturally marginal people.

The element introduced here, that of intentionally thinking about change-gate individuals, allows an outside change agent to seek approval of opinion leaders¹ directly. Change then flows along this path: change agent to change gate to opinion leaders to early adopters and forward from there. This pattern makes the change quickly feel safe to people with lower cultural risk tolerance.

Concluding thoughts

There are many more aspects of identifying effective change-gates that are less tangible than what is listed above. In the type of development work we are active in, language development and translation, change-gate people must have character qualities such as genuine concern for the good of the overall population, humility, and willingness to forego opportunities of self-advancement in order to

¹ It seems that Rogers' use of opinion leaders differs from mine. His “opinion leaders” function as trend-setters, whereas my use of the term focuses on the concept of people whose approval for the change reduces the perceived risk of societal rejection involved in adopting the change.

participate in the language development process. These qualities, which make the change-gate person a trusted individual in their own society, are not easily discerned by cultural outsiders upon first meeting a person. However, we have had wonderful experiences where our initial contacts in a community were with people in the groups above that are listed as poor change-gate potential segments of the population. In these cases, the individuals we first interacted with introduced us to genuine change-gates. Thus insider discernment of these intangible qualities was at work even when we had no way of evaluating them.

As with all broad generalizations, there are significant exceptions to the patterns, and we have known people who are politicians and pastors and other “non-effective” segment members that indeed did serve as effective change-gates. The ever-present elements we have seen in effective change-gate individuals are: 1) an openness to new ideas, 2) a genuine concern for the good of the community, 3) someone respected by the mainstream of the society, 4) a deep understanding of the decision making processes and mechanisms in the community, and 5) a willingness to give of their time, insight and resources to insure effective diffusion of the beneficial innovation.

It is also important to keep in mind that the change-gate concept focuses on the first and very earliest steps of introducing change. The population segments I have mentioned as not being effective change-gates do, later on, play important roles. In our Nigeria experience, the youth have provided the primary implementational energy once society leaders had provided their stamp of approval. The role of the change-gate person was to guide the process of securing the stamp of approval.

Addendum

I have made a conscious choice to write this in generalized terms in place of giving specific examples. Many of the effective change-gates individuals with whom we have worked are very humble people and would be embarrassed to be identified and praised for what they see as simply doing what is right for their neighbors and community. Also, if I were to detail the non-effective change-gate experiences, there would be a great potential of offending people without intending to. Many people who did not function well as change-gates did make very significant positive contributions to the change effort at later stages in the process. In personal interaction with individuals interested in pursuing these ideas, I will be able to provide examples and instances to illustrate the various elements presented here regarding the identification of and the ongoing cooperation with change-gate individuals in a community.

Recommended Reading/Bibliography

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