

IDENTIFYING OPINION LEADERS

One of the key roles of senior managers and service improvement project leaders is to identify and work with local opinion leaders to accelerate the spread of innovation and good practice throughout local, regional and national systems.

The concept of the opinion leader in the role of spreading good practice is that this person is usually amongst the first to know about new ideas and that their peers look to them for guidance about whether the innovations should be adopted or not. They have an important role influencing the behaviour of others in the system.

It is worth noting Rogers' innovativeness-needs paradox; namely, the person who most needs the innovation is often the last person to adopt its use. Early adopters often implement new practices even though they are not in the greatest need for the change. Using opinion leaders and early adopters to implement new practices may reflect a 'line of least resistance' approach to change and may not make sufficient impact on overall improvement objectives.

Rogers suggests the target 'audience' involved in adopting a new practice can be segmented into groups according to the time they take to change their behaviour; from innovator, early adopter, early majority through to late majority and laggard. It is essential to note that these terms are descriptors for a specific innovation and are not 'personality' types.

Individuals can be both innovators and laggards, depending on the innovation or good practice. Thus, to identify early adopters and opinion leaders the specific area of practice needs to be taken into account. It is important not to make the assumption that because the person was an opinion leader for one innovation that they might also be an opinion leader for another, entirely different innovation.

Characteristics of Opinion Leaders

- Higher social status
- More years of formal education
- Greater literacy
- Higher aspirations and ambition
- Tend to belong to larger groups
- Demonstrate empathy, rationality
- Exposed to and uses variety of media
- Greater knowledge of innovation

(Reference: Rogers, E (1995) The Diffusion of Innovations (4th Ed), The Free Press, USA)

The term 'opinion leader' can often be misleading or cause resistance within the group you are working if their perceptions don't match yours.

Some alternatives are:

- *Role model*
- *Key influencer*

You might spot an opinion leader at a meeting by the way they:

- *Ask interesting questions*
- *Bring additional information with them*
- *Hold the attention of their peers*
- *Make connections that seem irrelevant*

Ways to identify opinion leaders

(1) Ask Questions

Project leaders can continually ask questions to discover opinion leaders. Some useful questions are:

- "Who would you turn to for advice on this topic?"
- "You are always learning new ways of doing things. What was the last time you can remember doing something different? Where / from whom did you get the idea?"
- "Before you implement something new, is there a specific person with whom you check it out?"

(2) Do an Analysis

One method of identifying opinion leaders is to ask the questions above, and specifically relate it to the goals of the intended change, and then map the results on a matrix. Put the initials of each person both at the top and along the side of the matrix. Then mark in each square who most frequently listens to the opinion of whom.

When you total up the results the key opinion leaders will be those with the higher scores I.e. the most people would refer to them for advice and their opinion on a subject.

What can go wrong?

I thought someone who had lots of local connections and contacts would be an opinion leader but this doesn't seem to have worked out that way? Individuals who have dense personal networks, lots of tightly woven and inter-related contacts often don't have the contact with external people that would help them spread the word of an innovation or hear about new ideas. Look for individuals who have good local networks, but also lots of external contacts and interests.

We did an analysis of opinion leaders but the people in the group disagree with the results.

This is very personal information and some people may not like to have it shared. So check before you do the analysis. Your assessment may highlight someone as an opinion leader that no-one would have expected. Alternatively it might indicate that someone who thought they were an opinion leader aren't really seen by their colleagues as one. All of this would need careful facilitation. It's important to think through what you intend to do with the information before you start an analysis.

Just using the term 'opinion leader' seems to cause resistance.

This term is value laden and turns some people off in a negative way. It is sometimes useful to use the term "key influencer" or "role model".

There isn't an opinion leader in the group in which I work.

There will be one somewhere. Look outside the immediate group. To whom are the members of the groups talking?

If you have any comments about this bulletin, any experiences you would like to share on this topic, then please email Sarah Fraser on sfraser881@aol.com