



Dear ODyssey,

My organisation has just announced plans to transform the workplace into an open-concept office. Some employees have voiced their displeasure because of the smaller cubicles and shared workspaces that the move will bring about. However, the senior leadership says that the move is essential to increase staff collaboration, which has been highlighted as a key priority in the recent town hall session.

My OD team has been tasked to bring the change message across the organisation. How can I effectively engage people in accepting the new office arrangement and where should I begin?

*Yours sincerely,
Practitioner*

Engaging the Social Network in Spreading Change

By Geraldine Ling

Dear Practitioner,

A major change in the office environment requires more than just physical adjustments from its employees. There will be changes in the way people work and interact with each other.



Chris Heywood, a senior property lecturer at the University of Melbourne, summed the dynamics behind adopting open-concept offices. He said in an interview with The Sydney Morning Herald: "There are a whole lot of psychological and place attachment issues in any change process . . . but we don't recognise that connection. There are...issues that come into play and (senior management) needs to actively manage the change process."¹

The frustrations and confusion behind the change need to be acknowledged in order to effect successful change across all levels in an organisation. After all, this is a massive change which will find your entire organisation uprooting from what it has been used to for, perhaps, decades.

To maximise the reach of your change messages, you need to go beyond the conventional approach of structuring a change process.

¹ Louisa Hearn, "'Sardine rage' rules in the shrinking office", The Sydney Morning Herald, March 3, 2011, accessed July 22, 2011, <http://www.smh.com.au/executive-style/management/sardine-rage-rules-in-the-shrinking-office-20110302-1bemg.html>.



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RECOGNISE AND TAP ON THE INVISIBLE NETWORKS

In every organisation, different types of networks exist. There are the formal networks, where hierarchy is spelt out clearly, as seen on organisation charts.

Then there are the informal networks, which are usually harder to identify and plentiful in numbers. Most large organisations, said a 2007 McKinsey Quarterly article², have dozens, if not hundreds, of informal networks. Such networks include peer groups, communities of practice, or task forces.

Some of these networks don't even have a name - they could be the group of colleagues you eat lunch with or the ones you play tennis with. And these informal networks organise and re-organise themselves and extend their reach via emails, cell phones, social networking sites, and other accessories of the digital age, reported McKinsey.

As the writers of the McKinsey article studied these networks, they were struck by one thing. Significantly much more information flows through these networks than their formal counterparts.

But these networks can be hard to understand, simply because of their dynamic and ungoverned nature. Sometimes called social networks, they have properties and functions that are neither controlled nor even perceived by the people within them, said social scientists Nicholas Christakis and James Fowler in their book, *Connected*.³

What is also interesting to note from Christakis and Fowler's research is that people have a tendency to influence and copy one another. But to what degree they do so hinges on two fundamental aspects: connection – *who is connected to who* - and contagion – *what, if anything, flows across the ties between people*. For example, just think of your regular lunch group and how members of your group will likely make the same type of food choices as each other over time.

Let's now look at how you can tap on the power of these invisible social networks to strengthen your communications plans such that you can better engage employees.

Author and journalist Malcolm Gladwell gives some insights.⁴ In his ground-breaking book on social epidemics, *The Tipping Point*, Gladwell argues that there is a 'magic moment' when an 'idea, trend, or social behaviour crosses a threshold and spreads like wildfire'. Just as a single, sick person can start a flu epidemic, so can a small, but precisely targeted push cause a fashion trend or a product's popularity, he says.

This tipping point is partly triggered by a theory - The Law of the Few. Any social epidemic is dependent on a few people with a particular and rare set of social gifts. These people include the connectors and salesmen. Your likelihood of employees accepting change improves if you identify these two types of people and reach out to them. They will then promote your change message in their respective spheres of influence, increasing the likelihood of acceptance among employees, organisation-wide.

² "Harnessing the power of informal employee networks," McKinsey Quarterly, accessed July 22, 2011, http://www.mckinseyquarterly.com/Harnessing_the_power_of_informal_employee_networks_2051

³ Nicholas Christakis and James Fowler, *Connected* (London: HarperPress, 2010), 16-24.

⁴ Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2000), 30-88.

SPREAD THE MESSAGE 'AFFECTIVELY' THROUGH CONNECTORS

Connectors are simply, people who know a lot of people.

To make things a little clearer, let us look at psychologist's Stanley Milgram's ground-breaking study, on the six degrees of separation.

In his study, he asked 160 people living in Omaha in the United States to separately mail a package to a stranger living in Boston (about 2000km away, slightly under the distance between Singapore and Hong Kong). To get the package across, each person had to write his or her name on the packet and send it to someone they knew who could get the package closer to the Boston stranger.

Milgram found that most of the letters reached the Boston stranger in about six steps, hence the familiar term, the six degrees of separation.

But what Gladwell emphasised was this: Not all degrees of separation were equal. He saw, in the study, that the Boston stranger finally had the package passed on to him by the same three friends. This means, says Gladwell, that a very small number of people are

linked to everyone else in a few steps – and the rest of us are linked to the world through those special few.

In other words, connectors know a lot of people and have a gift of making friends and acquaintances. They are the ones who will not hesitate to tell their networks about the wonderful new restaurant they tried or the good movie they watched last week. Do you know people like this in your organisation?

Connectors, says Gladwell, are extraordinarily powerful. They give us access to the opportunities and worlds which we do not belong in. Using connectors to pass the change message along will help augment your town halls and formal group meetings. The message is now made more compelling, because recipients are also hearing the message from a person they know personally.

To reach out to the connectors, let them be the first to know the latest news and updates and encourage them to spread the word. It would help if they also knew that they had gotten a preview of the information before everyone else. This way, they would be

likely to, on their own, share those pieces of information with their contacts.

On another note, for long-term change success, we should also, as internal OD practitioners, try to be the 'connectors' in the organisation we serve.

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Sell persuasively through salesmen

While connectors simply pass messages along, they do not persuade people to buy whatever they are saying. That job is left for the salesmen, a term Gladwell uses for people who are able to persuade and convince others into accepting the ideas, products or behaviour they are promoting.

Salesmen are crucial to selling the change message because at times, people may be unconvinced by the message that connectors are passing along. They are needed for their knack of persuasion in convincing these people of the worth in changing.

Social psychologist Robert Cialdini's theories give us an insight why salesmen can help change the minds of the people around them. One of his six principles of influence, termed "liking"⁵, states that people prefer to say yes to those they like. People are also more likely to favour those who are physically attractive, similar to themselves, or who give them compliments.

And salesmen, notes Gladwell, are likable. They seem to possess that inimitable X-factor, that indefinable power which draws people to them and agree with whatever they are saying. "It's energy. It's enthusiasm. It's charm. It's likability. It's all those things and yet something more," writes Gladwell.

In that light, these are perhaps the most important people that OD practitioners should engage. To get them as allies of the change team, you can instil a sense of ownership in these salesmen by giving them more formal roles in the change process, perhaps as change agents. This way, you would be able to better rally their support and energy for the change.

More importantly, you need to communicate the compelling and attractive benefits of the change to them so that they can help to persuade their contacts in their networks.

While tapping on informal networks can help to augment your change plan, you cannot depend on it alone. You still need to cater the change messages to reach the masses. This means coming up with a clear and compelling change vision, actively engaging your formal sponsors and reaching out to your stakeholders. As you go through the change process, remember to be as authentic as possible. See your connectors and salesmen as fellow travellers in this journey for change. Sincerity may just win more hearts than you think.



Dear Practitioner,

As Gladwell shows, little things can make a big difference. Instead of solely targeting your change message to the masses, it will be worthwhile to tap on the invisible networks in your organisation to help you in the journey of change

In short, this is how it works: We inform the connectors of the importance and details of the change message, the connectors spread the word and the salesmen step in to convince employees of the change's importance.

So as you can see, recognising the influence of social networks and rallying the right people can help you spread your change messages effectively – and like wildfire – in your organisation.

*Yours sincerely,
ODyssey*

Contact us!



We welcome your thoughts and feedback about this article or any OD-related topics that you are interested in. Please email us at cscollege_COD@cscollege.gov.sg.

Key takeaways

To spread change messages effectively:

Harness the power of informal networks.

1

Rally the connectors to spread the word.

2

Tap on the salesmen to influence others.

3

⁵ Influence at work, "Dr Robert Cialdini and 6 principles of persuasion," http://www.influenceatwork.com/Media/RBC/E_Brand_principles.pdf