



SPREAD GOOD PRACTICE BY WALKING IN MY SHOES, NOT TREADING ON MY TOES

BY SARAH W. FRASER

For a time, members of my work team called me a “laggard” because I preferred not to use a laptop and LCD projector in our development workshops. I had a number of reasons for my decision, not the least of which was that I thought it would reduce our ability to adjust to a group’s dynamics, which we had done satisfactorily using old-fashioned overhead transparencies.

The dictionary definition of laggard suggests that I am failing to keep pace. In slang parlance, I am viewed as a convict, someone to be sent to prison and punished. In other words, to me, laggard feels like a derogatory term. I don’t like it, and calling me names is more likely to entrench me in my views than make me change.

The Complexities of Human Behavior

In *Diffusion of Innovations* (The Free Press, 1995), E. M. Rogers characterizes individuals along a scale according to the time they take to adopt an innovation. He uses the categories innovator, early adopter, early majority, late majority, and laggard. He points out that the term laggard is not meant to be negative, suggesting that the real issue may not lie with the individual, but with the environment, processes, and relationships within which the individual operates. But try telling that to the person who’s been labeled!

I believe that I am actually an “innovator”; after all, I was the one who suggested we use handheld electronic organizers to manage our schedules. And what if I adopt some things quickly and others not at all? The complexity of human behavior requires a more sensitive, fluid, and expansive point of view than most simple classification systems offer.

The spread of standard fax-based forms for general practitioners to use when referring patients to secondary-care physicians demonstrates this point. When our agency implemented a pilot project in Buckinghamshire, United Kingdom, in 1999, we found that some GPs consistently used the colorectal cancer referral form but not the lung cancer referral form, and vice versa. This study suggests that some individuals are both “innovators” and “laggards,” depending on the circumstances. We also found that some of the general practitioners who were quick to adopt the new practice had initially been identified by colleagues as laggards. The lesson I learned is to be cautious about my own and others’ prejudices and assumptions.

Change is emotional stuff. Your perception and stereotype of me can have an enormous impact on whether I resist or accept an innovation. Why? Well, when I feel I’m being unfairly labeled:

- I may become alienated—more so if I am made to look foolish in front of my peers;
- I may take exception to your characterization and withdraw;
- I may see your condemnation as giving me status in the “underground resistance movement” against the change initiative;
- I may start to believe that I can’t change.

“Footwork” for Change

Successful change agents, on the other hand, have mastered the ability to step into someone else’s shoes. They put aside their own preconceptions and take the time to observe and gather data. From this informal research, they develop meaning, make assumptions, and draw conclusions. They may even

alter their own mental models as a result of the discussion and inquiry.

So, the next time you encounter resistance to change:

- Take the time to engage in a dialogue with the presumed “laggards,” recognizing that your own point of view may not be the “right” one.
- Display a genuine curiosity about others’ views and feelings.
- Help them to explain their reasons for rejecting the change initiative.
- Remember that their perspective is rational to them. Try to understand their point of view.
- Identify the assumptions that both sides are holding, bring these into the open, and discuss them.
- Show your position in a way that others can see it.
- Test, using different “what if” cases, to see whether the “laggards” are ready to accept the change.
- If this doesn’t work, slow the process down, keeping the dialogue honest and open.

In summary, instead of calling me a laggard, try to find out—and help me make explicit—my personal threshold for accepting and adopting an innovation. Under what conditions will I accept the proffered change? I may surprise you. I may even surprise myself.

Yes, I did eventually agree to buy and use an LCD projector. I met a colleague from another organization who had been through a similar process. He recognized my point of view and helped me see his. But my team members still call me a laggard because I won’t agree to having a dishwasher installed in our work kitchen . . .

Maybe now they’ll see my point of view. ■

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