

## Title

The Use of Power in Diffusing and Adopting Innovations:  
A Proposed Framework for Educational Leaders

## Short Description

Educational leaders are faced with a myriad of challenges in today's ever changing world. Sometimes he will have a choice about when, how, and where to introduce new pedagogical refinements, instructional technology resources, or management practices, while at other times changes are mandated from above. Yet in both cases, understanding the basics of diffusion and adoption of innovation theory as well as power theory can be of great benefit. Knowing where and how these two concepts intersect provides a tool-set for leaders addressing change.

## Abstract

Educational leaders are faced with a myriad of challenges in today's fast-paced, ever changing world. With each passing day, a new pedagogical method, instructional technology resource, or management practice emerges for their consideration and implementation. Sometimes the leader will have a choice about when, how, and where to introduce it, other times the terms of the change will be mandated by supervisors. In either case, educational leaders are almost always faced with resistance to the proposed changes. The amount of resistance generated can be traced to the amounts and types of power being wielded by the resisters while the success of any counter-resistance strategies are dependent on the amounts and types of power being used by those leading the change initiative. This paper and presentation will look at the intersection of the theories related to power and the diffusion and adoption of innovations, because knowing where and how these two concepts intersect can provide a tool-set that helps educational leaders face a future based on change and innovation.

Briefly, an innovation is simply any product or idea that is new to the person or system to which it is being introduced. Innovations can be either disruptive or non-disruptive based on the level of cognitive dissonance experienced by the potential adopter. Innovations are generated in many ways, but commonly come from development, discovery, invention, problem-solving, or research channels. Diffusion and adoption of innovations scholar Everett Rogers (1995) noted that there are five key characteristics of an innovation: relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability, and observability. He also devised a system for classifying adopters: innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards. Educational leaders, in remaining aware of what innovations are, their characteristics, and the types of adopters they are working with, can begin to lay the foundation for a successful innovation introduction.

Similarly, understanding power and how it is acquired, managed, and used (Pfeffer, 1994; Caplow, 1984; Whetten & Cameron, 1984; French & Raven, 1968) can be of great benefit. Power, simply defined, is the ability to get things done as you want them, regardless of what others want. This basic definition of power has been expanded to include five specific types of power: coercive, expert, legitimate, referent, and reward power. Pfeffer (1994) articulated in his writings that there are two sources of power for leaders: personal attributes and structural sources. Whereas personal attributes are highly subjective and vary from leader to leader, structural sources can be easier to manage and understand. His four basic structural sources for power are: knowledge held access to resources, ability to make decisions, and network membership. Finally, structural sources of power have been tied to specific position characteristics (such as: centrality, criticality, flexibility, visibility, and relevance); thus, leaders that maintain awareness of their location (and the locations of others) within an organization can accurately gauge the power associated with a given organizational role.

In exploring the intersection between power and the diffusion and adoption of innovations (DAI), gaining an adopter's commitment and the management of an adopter's uncertainty emerge as primary vehicles for implementing a strategy that acknowledges power differentials in diffusing and encouraging the adoption of an innovation. Gaining commitment involves the formal process of requesting that the potential adopter use the innovation and receiving an affirmative answer. Managing the uncertainty and anxiety faced by a potential adopter is often cited as the best way to get commitment

*Commitment.* Gaining the commitment of potential adopters is a critical step in getting them to take ownership of (and begin to use) any new innovation. Salancik (1977) articulates a five point model for getting people to commit:

1. The commitment is stated in front of others;
2. There is public confirmation of the commitment;
3. It is voluntary;
4. It is specific; and,
5. It is appreciated as a gift.

By using this five step model in connection with an understanding of power dynamics, educational leaders can facilitate the process of commitment to a given innovation and speed its adoption throughout the system.

*Uncertainty.* Simply stated, uncertainty is what keeps adopters from integrating new innovations into their daily routines (Fuller 2000). Uncertainty can be considered from three different perspectives according to Gerwin (1988; cited in Rogers 1995): technical uncertainty, financial uncertainty, and social uncertainty. Technical uncertainty is the “degree to which it is difficult for an organization to determine the reliability, capacity, and precision of the new technology” (p. 397). Financial uncertainty “is the degree to which the implementation of the innovation will yield an attractive return on investment, and whether future returns can be forecast accurately” (p. 397). Finally, social uncertainty is the “degree to which conflict is likely to occur during implementation of the innovation” (p. 397). By managing the uncertainty surrounding an innovation a critical step is made in gaining the trust of potential adopters. Furthermore, managing uncertainty also allows leaders to create an environment in which the adopters can safely try out a new innovation and potentially reshape the power dynamics of the system.

This presentation and paper will introduce participants to the basic concepts of the theory behind adoption and diffusion of innovations and the fundamentals for acquiring and managing power. By understanding the relationship between adopter types and their respective characteristics and the overlay of power acquisition, management and usage techniques, gaining commitment and minimizing uncertainty, educational leaders can use this knowledge to create educational organizations ready to address a future based on change and innovation.

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