

THE STORIES WE TELL: USING STORY TO SPUR THE DIFFUSION OF HRD INNOVATIONS

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INTRODUCTION

In the past, human resources (HR) professionals often had time, resources, and the specific mission to diffuse new human resource development (HRD) innovations into their organizations. In today's change based, resource starved, and knowledge intensive economy, new HRD innovations are entering the workplace at a rapidly accelerated pace. For HR professionals, it is just barely possible to keep abreast of the most significant changes and trends in HRD. Yet, their mission remains to continuously train, educate, and lead their organizations in the acceptance and use of these new HRD innovations in spite of constraints well beyond their control. The use of story by these professionals, however, could shift the resource demands and increase the speed that HRD innovations are accepted and put into practice throughout an organization.

DIFFUSION OF INNOVATION

According to Rogers (1), an *innovation* is “an idea, practice, or object that is perceived as new by an individual or other unit of adoption ... (thus) if the idea seems new to the individual (or unit of adoption), it is an innovation” (pg. 11) regardless of its date of creation. An innovation can consist of tangible products (e.g. the personal computer), intangible ideas (e.g. business processes), or both.

In Rogers' (1) research he articulates five categories in which potential adopters can be classified: innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards. Innovators are the first people within a given population to adopt a new innovation. They tend to belong to a wide array of social networks, maintaining many contacts that provide them with access to new ideas and products. Spence (2) notes their primary hallmark is “the ability to think confidently in the abstract” (pg. 44). Innovators are also faced with a duality of citizenship in the social networks to which they belong; being both insiders and outsiders at the same time. This characteristic limits their ability to be successful in the role of a change agent, but permits them the flexibility, and grants them the status, to be able to introduce new innovations into the various social systems to which they belong.

The early adopters tend to be a little more cautious than their innovator counterparts. They watch and monitor the innovator's experiences with the innovation, yet their tendency to be open to new ideas and products puts them ahead of the rest of the population. Early adopters have as much social status and clout as their innovator counterparts, which grant them a wide degree of latitude in the level of sophistication

with their social network contacts. This sophistication often places the mantle of change agent upon the early adopter, which is a role best suited for this category of adopter.

Generally more cautious than the innovators or early adopters, but certainly more open to change than the laggards, the early and late majorities can make or break an innovation's adoption into an organizational system. The early majority, according to Spence (2), consists of members who are very deliberate in their decision making process but they quickly follow their early adopter colleagues. While not being leaders themselves, by being out front in their adoption of a given innovation, they can become allies of the change agent as they work on getting the late majority and laggards to use the innovation. The late majority almost always needs gentle coaxing, but sometimes, Spence (2) states, "overwhelming pressure from their peers" needs to be utilized (pg. 45). The late majority is generally conservative and considerable evidence must be presented to overcome their skepticism.

The laggards are the last segment of a population to adopt an innovation. Spence (2) characterizes them as being "alienated from what must seem to them to be a world which is moving far too fast" (pg. 46). The laggards are extremely conservative in the way in which they view the world and can be very resistant (and at times outright hostile) to change and those seeking to implement it. Intensive interpersonal interactions are required between change agents (and their allies) and the laggards in order to facilitate the adoption of a given innovation.

STORY

According to Denning (3) a story is either a written or oral account of true or fictitious happenings (either a singular event or a series of events). When considering stories for use as a tool to enhance the diffusion of HRD innovations, most will be oral accounts using one of two basic frameworks. Denning (3) indicates stories can either be oral and ephemeral (such as anecdotes, rumors, gossip, or jokes) or they can be oral and enduring (such as fables, parables, myths, and legends).

Simmons (4) outlines six basic types of stories that can be used in a variety of situations, including diffusing new HRD innovations into organizations. The six story types include: "Who I Am," "Why I Am Here," "The Vision," "Teaching," "Values in Action," and "I Know What You Are Thinking." By providing a brief description of each of these six story types, human resources professionals can gain a better understanding of how they work and how to apply them to their own specific situation.

The "Who I Am" Story

The first question that is asked by people in an organization when confronted with a new innovation being introduced by a change agent is: "who is this person?" The change agent's response will set the stage for further interest by potential adopters in the innovation by creating a sense of knowing and credibility. The critical mistake made at this stage, however, is that change agents will answer the question by providing a laundry list of achievements, educational or work credentials, and their own past experience with

the innovation. Instead, Simmons (4) suggests that a “Who I Am” story will establish credibility by demonstrating who you are, what you stand for, and why you should be listened to. In particular, the “Who I Am” story should be focused on a personal aspect of one’s life, but remain authentic, and it should be delivered in a way to help dispel any preconceived negative attitudes toward the change agent.

The “Why I Am Here” Story

Once the change agent has established who he is, he will want to be honest and establish why he is there. The “Why I Am Here” story allows him to do that. In particular, the “Why I Am Here” story allows a change agent to show the potential adopters both what they stand to gain as well as what he stands to gain. In introducing an HRD innovation, human resources professionals are doing so in order to improve the quality of the work environment, the ability of employees to do their jobs better, or improve the way in which they deliver other human resource services. Presenting the gains for both parties, through the use of a story, is critical in order to secure lasting change and adoption of the innovation.

“The Vision” Story

“The Vision” story provides more specific details about the benefits and outcomes potential adopters will enjoy if they choose to adopt the innovation. More importantly though, it is crafted in a way that is relevant and meaningful to the potential adopters. For example, a change agent telling a story about how the introduction of coaching will cut her work time on employee job satisfaction issues in half, is hardly inspiring (or relevant or meaningful) to the managers that would benefit from coaching. Instead, the change agent might tell a story about how coaching was used by a similar manager in another organization to reduce turnover, increase employee satisfaction, or increase productivity.

The “Teaching” Story

Teaching stories are used to communicate how something should be done, rather than providing direct instruction on what is to be done. Change agents introducing an HRD innovation will want to share a story with the adopters that illustrates how it will change the work environment or culture when implemented. Focusing on the mechanics of the innovation (while important and the topic for formal instruction) may not provide the adopters with a cognitive framework within which to apply the innovation back in the workplace.

The “Values in Action” Story

“Values in Action” stories are like testimonials and show adopters that the change agent is willing to practice what he says. “Values in Action” stories also serve as verbal demonstrations of the innovation based on actual use. Thus, the best “Values in Action” stories are those in which the change agent discusses how he has adopted the innovation and the impact that it has had on his job performance.

The “I Know What You Are Thinking” Story

Finally, the “I Know What You Are Thinking” story is one that is used to diffuse skepticism or address past adoption failures of similar innovations. Simmons (4) refers to this type of story as the one “that makes people wonder if you are reading their minds” (pg. 23). By addressing the potential adopter’s skepticism, concerns regarding past failures, or fears about the new innovation from the outset, you can incorporate them into stories and disarm them early in the adoption process.

LINKING STORY TO DIFFUSION OF HRD INNOVATIONS

While any of the six story types can be used to address the needs of each of the five basic adopter types (innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards), there are clear relationships between specific stories and adopter types (see Table 1). In addressing the needs of innovators and early adopters, “Who I Am” and “Vision” stories will play a critical role. Change agents must introduce themselves to these initial adopters and let them know that they are capable of understanding the value and intricacies of the innovation. Additionally, change agents must be able to share the vision of what the innovation can and will do for the innovator and early adopter in order to convince them to adopt. For early adopters in particular, “Values in Action” stories showcasing innovator experiences can also help them to make a favorable decision to adopt a new HRD innovation.

Members of the early majority group will want to hear stories from change agents regarding the motivations of the change agents, how it is being used now (“Values in Action”) how the innovation fits into their job responsibilities (teaching), and how it will make their lives better (benefits/vision). The late majority has similar needs, but they are more focused on the impact that the innovation will have on their job and on the organization (teaching/vision/“I Know What You Are Thinking”). In addressing the needs of laggards, “I Know What You Are Thinking” stories will hold the most power for a change agent. The earlier that any objections, skepticism, or potential fears can be addressed and dispelled, the sooner that laggards will move into the adoption cycle.

CONCLUSION

As human resource professionals become comfortable in the construction and use of the six types of stories, they can be better prepared to address the various needs and concerns of each of the five basic adopter types. Human resource professionals can be assisted in their development of these skills by incorporating story telling / delivery, story development, and discussion about the role of a change agent into human resource development curricula. Through the use of case study, role plays, and story delivery sessions, students of human resources development can gain vital understanding about the role stories can play when introducing new HRD innovations into their organizations.

REFERENCES

(1) Rogers, Everett M. “Diffusion and Adoption of Innovations,” 1995, New York, The Free Press.

(2) Spence, W.R. "Innovation: The Communication of Change in Ideas, Practices and Products," 1994, London, Chapman & Hall.

(3) Denning, Stephen. "The Springboard: How Storytelling Ignites Action in Knowledge-Era Organizations," 2000, Boston, Butterworth Heinemann.

(4) Simmons, Annette. "The Story Factor: Inspiration, Influence, and Persuasion Through the Art of Storytelling," 2002, Cambridge, MA, Perseus Publishing.

TABLE 1: Adopter & Story Type Relationships

	INNOVATOR	EARLY ADOPTER	EARLY MAJORITY	LATE MAJORITY	LAGGARD
<i>Characteristics</i>	Knowledgeable Strong Networks High Social Status	Leadership Abilities Strong Networks Knowledgeable High Social Status	Very Deliberative Average Knowledge Network Access Socially Acceptable	Very Skeptical Can be Influenced Ignore Mass Media Not Well Connected	Minimal Networks Preserve Status Quo Values Traditions High Stability Needs
<i>Issues Faced</i>	Insider/Outsider Role	Everyone is Watching	Invisibility	High Information Needs	Openly Hostile
<i>Typical Position Characteristics</i>	+ Flexibility + Visibility	+ Centrality + Relevance + Visibility	+ Criticality + Relevance	- Flexibility - Criticality	- Visibility - Centrality - Criticality
<i>Typical Role</i>	Innovator	Change Agent	Ally of Change Agent	Follower	Resistor
<i>Story Type to Use</i>	“Who I Am” “Vision”	“Who I Am” “Vision” “Values in Action”	“Why I Am Here” “Teaching” “Vision” “Values in Action”	“Teaching” “Vision” “Values in Action” “I Know What You Are Thinking”	“I Know What You Are Thinking”