# Organizational Change through Diffusion of Innovation

Leaders often expect change to take hold soon after it's announced. Much of the frustration with change comes because it takes longer than leaders expect. By definition, leaders are champions of change—they see the need, create or endorse the innovation, and want to see it completed. By the time the rest of the organization is grappling with the implications of the need, leaders are often on to the next challenge. Leaders of organizational change, need to have realistic expectations. Although every individual and every organization is different, there are common trends that occur when individuals and groups respond to change. Knowing what to expect can help you be more patient, more strategic and, so, more effective.

1. *Some people are ready for change now and others need some time.* Research by Everett Rogers (1964, 2005) into adopting innovations suggests that only a small percentage of people are immediately ready for change. Members of an organization are likely to fall in one of the following groups:
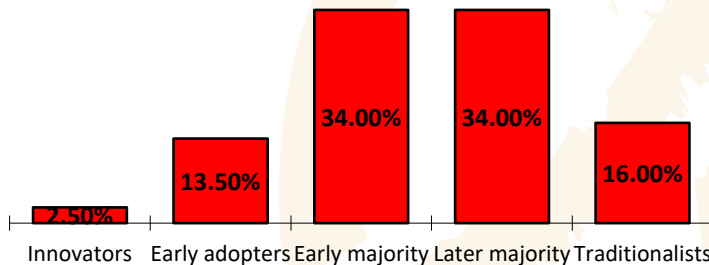
Most people take a wait and see approach. Gradually, as they see positive results, more and more embrace the innovation.

2. One implication of the above is that people will oppose or resist the change. They just aren't ready yet but they will provide you with critical information regarding what they value about the organization and their experience with it. You can be more strategic by listening carefully and responding respectfully when resistance is voiced.

3. *Over time, momentum for change should build* as more people take on responsibility, see results, and become more at ease with the changes. Each segment focuses on the one ahead of it. Early adopters follow innovators, the early majority follows the early adopters, and so forth. Gradually the more resistant members may well accept the changes (even if not enthusiastically). And like with any policy or program, there may not be complete unanimity—a few people may never fully accept the changes. So focus on those most ready to change. Allow those who are most resistant to opt-out of change initially. Continue to communicate about the effort to *everyone* throughout, however.

4. *Why do some people resist change?* First of all, what you, an innovator or change agent, perceive as resistance may be the natural tendency for many people to wait and see how things go. Most people want to know if the potential benefits of change, any change, outweigh possible risks (real and imagined) and the inconvenience of disrupting habitual—and comfortable—ways of doing things. Traditionalists, especially, are concerned that what they have come to love and respect about the organization may forever disappear. Traditionalists are likely to ask—and it's a reasonable question—"what we've always done has made us who we are and is the reason for our success, so why should we change?"

Most likely, the proposed changes call for behavior that is unfamiliar. People may fear they will not be able to succeed in the new era. They may not agree with the chosen direction, although they may agree that there is a problem. The introduction of new people and ways can make the established members feel self-conscious and uncomfortable as they are required to think about behaviors and practices that were taken for granted.

Resistance may be due to any or all of the following:
- Lack of information, uncertainty
- Disagreement with the ideas
- Mistrust
- Not wanting to lose power or control
- Disruption of the well-know status quo
- Fear of failure
- Vulnerability
- Long-standing conflicts
- More work

Some of these factors may be "under the surface" and not fully recognized even by the resisters themselves.

Reference:
Rogers, Everett M. (2005). Diffusion of Innovations, Glencoe: Free Press

Heather Berthoud partners with social justice leaders and organizations to create enduring solutions for organizational effectiveness. She leads **Berthoud Consulting,** an **organization development company** that works with clients to align organizational purpose and practice. She can be reached at Heather@BerthoudConsuting.com and (202) 545-8749.

Each segment has its own needs and concerns. Some are listed in the chart below along with suggested approaches to involve all groups in the change process. It is important not to insist on uniformity or unanimity in this process. As you know, people are different.

	What to expect	How to involve
Innovators	♦ Want to experiment, create. ♦ Impatience at what they perceive to be slow progress	♦ Discuss realistic expectations for the change process ♦ Provide numerous educational resources for ongoing learning ♦ Provide opportunities to "try things out"
Early adopters	♦ Want to try early. Enjoy status, self knowledge, helping others. ♦ Fearful of saying or doing the wrong thing and not having enough information	♦ Provide numerous educational resources for ongoing learning ♦ Emphasize the reasons that diversity is important, including the moral argument ♦ Show how other organizations have effectively incorporated diversity
Early majority	♦ Will wait initially. Want to see benefits and peer acceptance. ♦ Are not convinced that change is beneficial or will work	♦ Emphasize the benefits of change for the organization (i.e., better recruitment, retention, fund raising, influence) ♦ Share examples of small and large successes within the organization to show that the efforts are making a difference ♦ Use specific examples, statistics, and hard evidence whenever possible
Later majority	♦ Want to delay. Will join if there is endorsement by authority and change by the majority. ♦ May question all efforts; look for apparent failures; not offer any assistance; actively opposed the efforts	♦ Respected leaders must provide strong and continuous support for the change effort ♦ Listen to this group's fears and take them into account when planning communications, programs, and policies ♦ Remember that seeing the early majority become committed is perhaps the most important motivation for later majority folks to adopt the change.
Traditionalists	♦ Want to avoid entirely. They will join to reduce their discomfort with being out of the majority and to comply with standards. ♦ Fear that they will lose what is most important to them about the organization and their role in it. May vigorously oppose the changes.	♦ Help this group express their fears. Indicate wherever possible how the changes will *enhance* what they value in the organization (building on a proud reputation). Listen carefully so you learn what it is they value that they perceive as being threatened. ♦ Be satisfied with behavior change; don't demand enthusiasm or full agreement.