Identifying Opinion Leaders to Facilitate Change

Kathleen Hagen and Michael Simonson

Introduction

In Greek mythology, the gods punish Sisyphus by forcing him throughout eternity to push a huge stone uphill only to have it roll back down just before it reaches the top (Evans, 1970). Those of us in distance education may feel they are pushing multiple boulders uphill as advances in digital technology and changes in our student population are accelerating change on multiple fronts at a pace that can be difficult to keep up with. Technological innovations are changing the way courses are taught and how the content is delivered (Allen & Seaman, 2014; Frass, Cross, & Gardner, 2014; Howard, 2012; Mathews, 2012; Salter 2014, Simonson, Smaldino, & Zvacek, 2015). Resistance to change is more common than embracing it (Nesterkin, 2013). Many researchers agree that resistance to change is a strong human tendency and a multifaceted problem, whether it is an individual trying to adapt to change or an organization trying to change in a desired direction (Erwin & Garman, 2010; Kotter,

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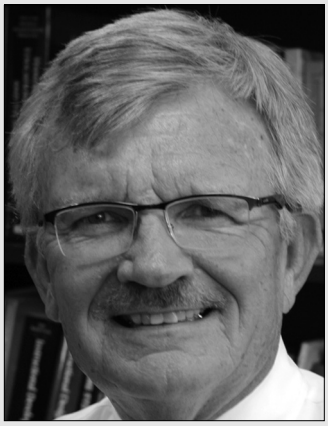

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2012; Mahdavian et al., 2012; Palmer & Dunford, 2002; Salem, 2008). Fortunately, Everett Rogers's theories of how innovations are diffused within communities continue to provide insight into how change can be facilitated and hastened (2003).

Rogers's theories of how innovations are diffused within communities have been the basis for much research. His theories contain information on what characteristics of an innovation make it easier or harder to adopt, characteristics of communities that make them more or less likely to accept change, the speed at which people adopt innovations, and the characteristics of adopters at each stage (Rogers, 2003). For those who wish to lead or manage change, one subset of adopters is of particular interest—opinion leaders. An opinion leader, as described by Rogers, is someone within a community who is in social contact with a number of people and who is widely respected for good decisions (Rogers, 2003). Rogers placed opinion leaders in the early adopters category. Those within that category accept an innovation after the innovators, but ahead of the early majority. An opinion leader's decision to adopt an innovation marks it as a good idea for the community, which leads to its wider acceptance (Rogers, 2003).

Dancy, Henderson, and Turpen (2016) conducted a study of physics faculty. Faculty members were queried on how they came to learn of educational innovations and decide to use them. Most responded they learn more from informal social contact with their peers than from the formal channels provided by change agents (Dancy et al., 2016). Change agents, those tasked with making a change in an organization or community, can accelerate adoption of an innovation by determining who in a community or organization is an opinion leader and getting that person to support the innovation. Rogers was most interested in opinion leaders who would serve as champions of an innovation, but noted that opinion leaders could also be resistant to change and hold back a community from adopting innovations (Rogers, 2003).

Identifying Opinion Leaders

Because opinion leaders are so influential within their communities, identifying them to be used to effect change has spawned a great deal of research. Valente and Pumpuang (2007) examined almost 200 studies in order to categorize the methods researchers used to identify opinion leaders. Each of the methods has drawbacks: lengthy time requirements, need for the change agent to become familiar with the community and its leaders, need to train opinion leaders in the desired change, or volunteers identifying themselves as opinion leaders when they are not. Additionally, opinion leaders can lose their effectiveness if members of their community begin to feel the opinion leader has become too closely aligned with the values of a change agent (Rogers, 2003). From a change agent's perspective, a delicate balance must be struck between moving an opinion leader to accept the innovation the change agent is trying to implement and keeping the opinion leader within the values of his or her community. In other words, being an opinion leader is not a permanent position. A change agent may need to identify others who could step into the role of opinion leader if the existing leader falls out of favor with his or her community. Thus, the ability to identify potential opinion leaders could be advantageous.

Given the various drawbacks of many of the methods used to identify opinion leaders, perhaps the best identification process is some sort of leadership survey. The candidates self-report and those with leadership scores above a certain threshold on the survey are tasked with being opinion leaders. The advantages of this method are that it is easy to implement, the potential opinion leader is possibly already an opin-

ion leader (Valente & Pumpuang, 2007), and the potential opinion leader is already a member of the group and thus probably shares its values and needs, or as Rogers put it, is homophilous with it (Rogers, 2003). The disadvantage of this method is that the survey respondents may not be objective and accurate about their leadership qualities (Valente & Pumpuang, 2007).

However, a survey not of leadership qualities but of attitudes toward opinion-leader-type behaviors could prove to be a better indicator of true opinion leadership than would a leadership-only survey, because the responses would be free from social acceptability bias or a respondent's desire to seem more important or powerful (Valente & Pumpuang, 2007). In fact, such an instrument could also serve to identify potential opinion leaders, individuals with the right combination of skills and attitudes to become opinion leaders within their community as soon as their community knows them well enough to trust their opinions. Such an instrument exists—the Opinion Leadership Index (OLI). The OLI identifies opinion leaders and potential opinion leaders based upon their attitudes toward four behaviors associated with opinion leaders (Hagen, 2016).

Attitudes and Behavior

Attitude research has a long history, and one of the central questions of the research has been whether attitudes can predict behavior. At various times the answers have been of course, no, and, more recently, it depends (Guyer & Fabrigar, 2015). Certain factors can make attitudes good predictors of behavior. According to Ajzen and Fishbein's theory of reasoned action (1980), the closer the intention to act is to the action, the more likely the action will take place because the intention will not be influenced by new information or unexpected events (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010). Time can alter intentions in other ways. When the time approaches for an intended behavior to be performed, any expectations of negative outcomes will grow more pronounced than will beliefs about positive outcomes. If the assumptions of negative outcomes become stronger than the expectation of positive outcomes, the behavior will not be performed (Ajzen, 1985). Second, beliefs about the outcome of the action will influence how a person acts. If a person thinks mostly good things will happen as a result of performing the action, he or she will have a more favorable attitude toward the action and is more likely to intend to perform the action (Ajzen, 1985). Third, when the attitude and subjective norm (the social pressure to perform or not perform a behavior) are in agreement, performing the behavior is much more likely. However, when the attitude and subjective norm are in conflict, performing the behavior depends on whether the attitude or the desire to comply with the subjective norm is stronger. People who exhibit traits toward authoritarianism favor compliance with subjective norms (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980).

Fazio (1990) developed a later model and stated there are different types of attitudes: attitudes that arise spontaneously as a reaction to context and attitudes that are deliberately formed. Attitudes that arise spontaneously, *spontaneous processing*, are a result of a strong association between an attitude object and the attitude such that simply seeing the attitude object will activate the attitude. Although such automatic attitudes are not consciously noted, they guide behavior by directing a person's perception of the attitude object to those aspects of it most in keeping with the attitude (Fazio, 1990). For people with a strong attitude-object association (such as a positive attitude toward birthday cakes), encountering the object and having either a negative or positive attitude toward it will direct them to focus on either the negative or positive attributes of the object and disregard other attributes (Fazio, 1990).

Fazio termed the other type of attitudes *deliberative processing* and stated they are formed by considering available information, weighing pros and cons, and anticipating outcomes. The types of decisions that would motivate a person to engage in the hard work of deliberative processing would be those considered by the decisionmaker to be important or those decisions for which the perceived cost of a wrong decision is high, termed *fear of invalidity* by an earlier researcher and appropriated by Fazio (Fazio, 1990). When these motivating factors are present, a person is more likely to rely less on mental shortcuts and rules of thumb and instead engage in information-gathering and reasoning (Fazio, 1990). Fazio points out that the motivating factors of fear of invalidity and recognition of the importance of a decision alone are not sufficient to cause a person to deliberate. The person must also have the opportunity (i.e., time) to engage in deliberative processing. When either motivation or opportunity are lacking, a person will likely revert to spontaneous processing. Fazio's model aspects of fear of invalidity and deliberative processing are especially applicable for the association of attitude and behavior for opinion leaders. Opinion leaders value their reputation for good decisions and are thus motivated to choose well (Rogers, 2003). Second, opinion leaders do not hastily make decisions to adopt an innovation (Rogers, 2003), which affords them the time to engage in deliberative processing.

When measuring attitudes to predict behavior, items in the measurement instrument should ask for the answerers' attitude toward performing the action themselves. Ajzen and Fishbein (1980) cautioned that the level of specificity or generality in the measurement of attitude toward the action must correspond with the level of specificity or generality in the intention to perform the action in order to obtain reliable data. They provide the example of a person being asked his or her attitude about vacations. If the behavioral intention being researched is the likelihood of a person going on vacation that summer, the attitude to be assessed should be favorability toward that person going on vacation that summer, not favorability to vacations in general or favorability to vacations sometime that year (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980).

Last, the type of instrument used to measure an attitude needs to be congruent with the type of attitude to be measured. For implicit attitudes, indirect measurements are better predictors of behavior than are self-reports. An implicit attitude gives rise to spontaneous behavior of which the person may not be aware. For explicit attitudes, self-reports are better predictors of behavior that is deliberative and under a person's conscious control (Guyer & Fabrigar, 2015). Considering that opinion leaders are motivated to behave in such a way as to maintain their communities' high regard (Rogers, 2003), their behavior is often deliberative, and their attitudes toward those behaviors have been carefully considered. Thus, the OLI is a good type of instrument to measure attitudes toward behaviors associated with opinion leadership: (a) it is a self report of attitudes which are under conscious control (Guyer & Fabrigar, 2015), (b) it assesses attitudes toward behaviors which respondents believe will be favorably received (Ajzen, 1985), (c) it measures attitudes toward behaviors which respondents will perform themselves (Ajzen, 1985), and (d) it assesses attitudes toward nonspontaneous behaviors which respondents are motivated to reflect upon in order to maintain their status within their communities (Fazio, 1990; Rogers, 2003).

Opinion Leadership Behaviors

Rogers's descriptions of characteristics of each adopter category led to four areas of behavior indicative of opinion leaders. Favorable attitudes toward those behaviors

would mark those individuals as opinion leaders, or potential opinion leaders (Hagen, 2016). The behaviors are openness, rational decisionmaking, self-monitoring, and sociability. Those behaviors combine to profile an individual able to embrace change after thoughtful reflection, interact well with a variety of people, and maintain a network of friends both within and outside of his or her community (Hagen, 2016).

Openness

Opinion leaders have been noted to be less dogmatic and more adventurous than are other adopters (Chan & Misra, 1990). In the five factor model of personality, those qualities come under the broad factor of openness, or openness to experience (McCrae, 1996). Individuals identified as high on the openness scale are "intellectually curious, are imaginative, seek variety, explore their inner feelings, have strong aesthetic sensibilities, and hold unconventional values" (Connelly, Ones, & Chernyshenko, 2014, p. 1). Openness allows for more readily changing attitudes, and closedness tends to maintain rigid attitudes (Bodenhausen & Gawronski, 2013). Individuals who desire certainty will tend to forget information not in keeping with previously held attitudes, thus preventing them from revising attitudes in light of new information (Bodenhausen & Gawronski, 2013). Openness "is manifested in 'the breadth, depth, and permeability of consciousness, and in the recurrent need to enlarge and examine experience'" (McCrae, 1996, p. 323). Continued research on results of openness testing has settled upon six facets unique to openness: "intellectual efficiency, nontraditionalism, curiosity, introspection/depth, aesthetics, [and] openness to sensations" (Connelly et al., 2014, p. 5). For the purposes of the OLI, ideal opinion leaders will score high in openness, but not so high that their desire for novelty overcomes their ability to choose wisely which ideas to accept. One of the traits distinguishing opinion leaders from innovators, the very first people to adopt an innovation, is opinion leaders deliberate slightly longer than do innovators before adopting an innovation (Rogers, 2003).

Rational Decisionmaking

As noted in the openness section, opinion leaders differ from the earliest adopters, the innovators, in waiting slightly longer to decide whether to adopt an innovation (Rogers, 2003). That time is spent considering the true benefits of the innovation regardless of how enticing the novelty of it might be (Rogers, 2003). Opinion leaders are confident of their judgment regarding various products (Chan & Misra, 1990), and those deemed to have more information about products are more persuasive (Ohanian, 1990). The opinions of opinion leaders are valued within their communities because they have historically made good decisions regarding adopting innovations (Rogers, 2003). For opinion leaders to maintain their status within their community, they must continue to exercise the same good judgment (Rogers, 2003). Opinion leaders choose innovations in advance of many of the other members of their communities. The opinion leader may come to learn of an innovation from an innovator within their community or from a contact outside of the community (Rogers, 2003). Rogers noted that opinion leaders are more cosmopolite than are other members of their community (2003). Even though an opinion leader may learn of an innovation from an innovator, the decision of whether to adopt the innovation rests with the opinion leader (Rogers, 2003). In the absence of a change agent trying to direct the decisions of an opinion leader, the opinion leader is left to choose whether to adopt an innovation with less than complete information (Rogers, 2003). However, a charac-

teristic of opinion leaders is their favorable attitudes toward risk (Chan & Misra, 1990). Research done using fMRIs revealed a difference in decisionmaking between those who are less affected by the framing of choices and those whose decisionmaking is based on an emotional response to how choices are framed (Miller, 2006). In observing the brain activity of the participants, those with more activity in the amygdala (an important center for emotion) were influenced by how the options were framed; those who were unaffected by how the options were framed showed less activity in the amygdala but greater activity in the orbital and medial prefrontal cortex, which moderates how emotions influence decisions (Miller, 2006). The author of the study speculated "people who are more rational don't perceive emotion less, they just regulate it better" (Miller, 2006, p. 601).

Given that opinion leaders adopt innovations before many of the other members of their communities (Rogers, 2003), they may have developed strategies to make decisions seem safer or to deal with any anxiety making a decision could engender. Huber, Huber, and Bär (2014) explored participants' actions in decisionmaking scenarios in which it was possible to defuse a risk. Participants were allowed to search for more information that would help them make a better decision. For decisions framed as negative outcomes, the participants were more likely to search for more information that would allow them to defuse the risk than they were to search for more information that would improve an uncertain positive outcome (Huber et al., 2014).

It could also be that opinion leaders are adept at using various types of emotional self-management to overcome the stress associated with difficult decisions. A study by Kamhalová, Halama, and Gurňáková (2013) found people who use active forms of emotional regulation, such as exercise and cognitive reappraisal, are better able to come to decisions quickly and make better decisions than are people who use passive forms of emotional regulation, such as waiting or procrastination.

Self-Monitoring

Self-monitoring ability allows people to function well and form relationships with diverse groups of people (Oh & Kilduff, 2008). This aggregate of skills and motivation (Parks-Leduc, Pattie, Pargas, & Eliason, 2014) is invaluable for opinion leaders, as it assists them in developing the network of out-of-group acquaintances who expose them to novel ideas (Granovetter, 1973) and in maintaining a within-group central position for dispersing ideas (Rogers, 2003). "Social network theorists tell us that attitudes are constructed, maintained, and altered essentially through interpersonal processes" (Erickson, 1988, as cited in Barry & Bateman, 1992, p. 555). Because opinion leaders change the attitudes of others within their group (Rogers, 2003), their interpersonal processes are likely of a high quality. Additionally, likability often translates to perceived trustworthiness, and those who are perceived as trustworthy will be more persuasive than those who are not (Ohanian, 1990).

Individuals can be high or low self-monitors. Those who are low self-monitors will behave according to the dictates of their personality and values, regardless of whether their behavior is appropriate for a given context. Those who are high self-monitors will adjust their behavior depending on the cues they receive from those around them regarding how their behavior is received. They strive to be perceived favorably. High self-monitors reap many benefits from their sensitivity and skill: more favorable performance ratings, large social networks, leadership status, and recognition for being accommodating. However, high self-monitors can also be seen as insincere, self-serving, and unethical when the behaviors are seen as solely in

pursuit of higher status (Parks-Leduc et al., 2014). Parks-Leduc et al. posit the ideal profile for a leader would be highly skilled in modifying his or her self-presentation and reading others' cues and yet only moderately motivated to achieve status.

Sociability

Rogers (2003) noted opinion leaders tend to belong to more organizations, attend more public events, and have a wider network of friends and acquaintances than do later adopters. Chan and Misra (1990) agreed opinion leaders are more socially active and gregarious than nonopinion leaders. Valente and Foreman's (1998) network analysis found opinion leaders were more well-connected within their communities and also had more outward connections compared to nonopinion leaders. Sociability serves to help create the network of friends and acquaintances necessary for opinion leadership: close ties within a community to whom the opinion leader disseminates information (Rogers, 2003), and weaker ties outside of the community who provide fresh ideas and perspectives (Granovetter, 1973).

However, sociability is not necessarily the result of a personality preference. Expressions of personality traits can vary, both cross-culturally (Allik & McCrae, 2002) and within an individual (Winter, Stewart, John, Klohnen, & Duncan, 1998). Researchers studying personality often choose between studying personality traits or studying motives. A longitudinal study of extraversion and the motives for affiliation by Winter et al. (1998) found both branches were necessary to explain human behavior. A sociable person will likely enjoy going to a party or other social function, but nonsociable people may also attend social events if they are motivated by a desire to establish or maintain relationships with others (Winter et al., 1998). Nonsociable people motivated for affiliation may have close relationships with a small circle of friends or prefer to engage with friends one-on-one as a way to maintain relationships without the intensity of large social events (Winter et al., 1998). In the OLI, sociability is measured by attitudes toward its importance and value rather than pleasurableness (Hagen, 2016).

Using the OLI

The Opinion Leadership Index went through three iterations in its development. Each group of responders was asked to provide feedback on the instrument and their comments helped shape and refine the OLI. One of the major changes was making the section on rational decision making context specific. Based upon respondents' comments regarding a lack of context to support their responses regarding decision making, all of the statements for rational decisionmaking were rewritten to place them in contexts appropriate for the population in which the instrument was originally intended to be used, faculty members in universities and colleges (Hagen, 2016). As noted by Gawronski, Rydell, Vervliet, & De Houwer (2010), contextual cues can be important in the stability of an attitude. It is likely that statements pertaining to rational decisionmaking should be rewritten to be contextually appropriate to the expected responders. Another major change was rewriting the statements regarding sociability to focus on its usefulness and value rather than on the pleasure of being sociable. Opinion leaders do not necessarily have to enjoy sociability provided they value social contact and maintain a large network of friends and contacts within and outside of their community (Winter et al., 1998).

A copy of the OLI meant to be administered using paper and pencil is provided in the appendix. Change agents are welcome to use the instrument to help them identify opinion leaders. Administrators are also encouraged to use the instrument among

Table 1. Ranges and Most and Least Common Scores

	Possible Range/ Actual range	Most Common Score(s), %	Least Common Score(s) %
Openness	15-3 /14-3	9, 25.6%	14 and 3, 0.77%
Rational Decisionmaking	20-4 /19-8	12, 24%	18 and 8, 0.77%
Self-Monitoring	20-4 /20-8	14 and 13, 17.8%	20 and 8, 0.77%
Sociability	20-4 /20-6	14, 17%	20 and 6, 0.77%

their faculty and staff. Following are steps for administering the OLI:

Read through the statements related to rational decisionmaking and ensure that the contexts used are appropriate for your community. Rewrite if necessary. (The rational decisionmaking statements are numbers 2, 5, 10, and 15.)

Inform members of the community that: (a) they are being asked to complete an attitude questionnaire, (b) there are no incorrect responses, (c) the survey can be completed in about 15 minutes, (d) the questionnaire is not anonymous, but the information obtained will not be shared with other members of the community.

Provide paper copies of the OLI to all the members of a community and ask them to complete it.

Collect the responses, making sure that respondents have included their name on the sheets.

Separate responses by construct. Statements for Openness are numbers 9, 11, and 12. Statements for Rational Decisionmaking are numbers 2, 5, 10, and 15. Statements for Self-Monitoring are numbers 3, 6, 7, and 14. Statements for Sociability are numbers 1, 4, 8, and 13.

Assign numbers to the categories. For the positively worded questions in each construct, *strongly agree* is 5, *agree* is 4, *neither agree nor disagree* is 3, *disagree* is 2, and *strongly disagree* is 1. For the negatively worded questions in each construct, the points are reversed: *strongly agree* is 1, *agree* is 2, *neither agree nor disagree* is 3, *disagree* is 4, and *strongly disagree* is 5.

The negatively worded statements for Openness are 9, 11, and 12. For Rational Decisionmaking 2, 5, 10, and 15. For Self-Monitoring 3, 6, and 7. All of the Sociability statements are positively worded.

Add the number of points for each construct. Those with the highest scores in each construct have the most favorable attitudes toward those behaviors.

For comparison, Table 1 shows highest and lowest scores for each construct plus the most common and least common scores from an administration to a group of faculty members in higher education.

Conclusion

The previous point for why it is important for administrators to identify opinion leaders and potential opinion leaders is that administrators can provide them opportunities to grow their networks of friends and acquaintances and provide them exposure to new ideas. Granovetter (1973) pointed out the importance of out-of-network contacts, and Rogers (2003) pointed out that opinion leaders tend to be more cosmopolite and well-traveled than are other members of their communities. Educational administrators can aid faculty members in developing out-of-network contacts by assigning the faculty members tasks that take them out of their department or college to interact with faculty members in other departments or colleges, by encouraging them to undertake tasks which will bring them into contact with community leaders, and by funding their

requests to attend out-of-area conferences (Hagen, 2016). Next, educational administrators can provide opportunities for opinion leaders and potential opinion leaders to disseminate the ideas they have acquired by hosting or encouraging informal social interactions among faculty members (Dancy et al., 2016).

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Appendix: Opinion Leader Index

In every organization, in every community, in every stable group of people, one or two people are the ones everyone turns to for knowing which ideas are winners and which ideas are losers. These people usually have good advice, but they do not force you to follow it. For newcomers to the group, it may take them awhile to become known for their good judgment, but it would be nice to be able to take advantage of their advice without waiting years to see if it's any good. The attitude questionnaire you are about to take will help find which people in your group are the best advice people and whether there is anyone waiting to be discovered to step into that role.

The following statements are designed to gauge your attitudes toward the behaviors described. When you answer, please consider your attitude as if the behavior described was something you would do. There are no right or wrong answers, so please feel free to answer as openly and honestly as possible. Please answer the statements by marking an X or a check mark in the box that best represents your attitude.

The questionnaire is not anonymous, but no one else will see your answers or scores unless you choose to share them.

Thank you!

Please print your name here.

	Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Disagree Strongly
1	Having a lot of friends is important.					
2	When deciding whether to change an acceptable method in your job to something new, trusting your feelings is a more reliable way to decide than trusting calculations.					
3	Acting with great caution to make sure no one is offended is not worth the effort.					
4	Having work colleagues drop in unexpectedly for a quick chat is a real pleasure.					
5	When making a decision about trying a new procedure for work, using intuition is best.					
6	Saying whatever is on your mind is honest.					
7	Having to consider other people's feelings gets in the way of getting things done.					
8	Developing a wide circle of friends and acquaintances is valuable.					
9	Being conservative is wise.					
10	When making a decision about learning a new piece of software, going with your gut feelings is best.					
11	Sticking with the tried and true is a good way to live.					
12	Being the first to buy a brand new piece of technology is foolish.					
13	Striking up a conversation with a stranger is a fun challenge.					
14	Constantly paying attention to others' feelings is necessary.					
15	When trying to decide between many similar products, going through all the steps of a reasoned decision is too difficult.					