

# Spreading New Ideas

BY BILL ROBINSON

*Innovation spreads through people who adopt and adapt demonstrated success. We can foster this through creating networks of people, supporting adoption and adaption, and demonstrating success.*

**ONCE A NEW IDEA** emerges, how does it spread? Or, from a practical perspective, how can we enhance the spread of new ideas that are deemed beneficial?

## Diffusion of Innovation

In the 1960s, Everett M. Rogers, in *Diffusion of Innovations* (<http://www.stanford.edu/class/symbys205/Diffusion%20of%20Innovations.htm>), attempted to answer these questions. His research, based primarily on farmers, has recently been popularized by Malcolm Gladwell (<http://www.gladwell.com>). However, today, researchers and practitioners of change still often make the mistake of assuming either that everyone is the *same* or everyone is completely *different*. They do not take into account the particular differences among people that hamper or facilitate the flow of new ideas. At the heart of *Diffusion of Innovations* is the assumption that there are five types of individuals: Innovators, Early Adopters, Early Majority, Late Majority, and the rest.

In farming, no one expects that all farmers are going to come up with new seeds or new farming practices. A few, self-selected, risk-comfortable Innovators tend to experiment with new techniques and new seeds. They have many failures and some successes, of which the Early Adopters then

make use. The next group, the more risk-averse Early Majority, do not adapt the new idea until they see that it has been successfully employed by the Early Adopters. Only when the majority has adopted and implemented these new ideas, are those in the Late Majority ready to get on the bus. The rest, by then only a small remainder, may never get the message. Following a *Diffusion of Innovations* approach, we would focus our resources first on finding innovations and connecting those new ideas to those most likely to adopt them early on and toward others.

Imagine your typical high school fashion scene. The Innovators are the eccentrics, continually trying out all sorts of new clothing ideas. The Early Adopters will borrow selectively from them, and by wearing these new clothing ideas, they then become fashionable. The Early Adopters are the influential cool kids, whom everyone else watches to see what they should wear.

## In Jewish Education

While simple in theory, the *Diffusion of Innovations* approach is complex in practice. Many of the conditions and relationships that allow for the spread of ideas in other areas of life may not be as strongly present or as welcome in Jewish education, which is marked by a high degree of teacher autonomy and isolation. Educators spend the overwhelming amount of time with their students. The amount and quality of educator-to-educator contact is limited. To be successful at diffusing innovations, we need to build networks that bring Innovator educators into contact with Early Adopters, and the latter into contact with the Early Majority, and so on. Second, rather than expecting change to germinate from all or even most educators, we need to catalyze and support idea creation among a select few Innovators. Third, for Early Majority educators, hearing about the new idea is not enough; they need to be shown how it has been successful elsewhere before they open themselves to something new.

## Catalyzing and Spreading Innovation

We must also recognize that ideas change as individuals not only *adopt* them but

also *adapt* them to the environments in which they work. In this manner, ideas are like viruses or genetic mutations in which the individual becomes the carrier. Each time an idea is transmitted, it adapts to and reshapes the environment of the individual in which it finds itself. Richard Dawkins (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wEVt5e2w32w>) has explored this concept in his work on memes. David Gershon, in "Social Change 2.0: A Blueprint for Reinventing Our World" ([http://www.sustainablecitynetwork.com/blogs/david\\_gershon/article\\_5b8f63d2-eea0-11df-8077-0017a4a78c22.html](http://www.sustainablecitynetwork.com/blogs/david_gershon/article_5b8f63d2-eea0-11df-8077-0017a4a78c22.html)), also shows the same process of continual adaptation in his work spreading new environmental ideas throughout individual neighborhoods and throughout the world.

In this way, the boundary between creating an innovative idea and adapting one become very fuzzy. Sparking and spreading innovation are arguably more similar than different. To quote briefly from Rob Cross (<http://www.robcross.org>), the author of *Driving Results through Social Networks: How Top Organizations Leverage Networks for Performance and Growth* (John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 2009):

*"The term innovation usually conjures up an image of a brilliant employee or sequestered team creating the next lightbulb, sticky note, or software program. Too many companies today hold to this heroic vision when, in fact, this is not how innovation usually happens. The legendary story of 3M's Post-it Notes is one of collaboration and evolution that unfolded among research scientist Spencer Silver, product developer Art Fry, and countless others. Even Thomas Edison's success depended on a team—from fifteen engineers in his Menlo Park laboratory to financier J.P. Morgan to men such as Samuel Insull who grew the utilities that made electricity a profitable business...History teaches us that most breakthrough innovations are recombinations of existing ideas or technologies, the integration of which occurs*

*through networks. Now more than ever, important innovations arise from the flow of knowledge and capabilities across internal and external networks. Although traditionally these networks have formed serendipitously, it is becoming increasingly important for leaders to cultivate them in targeted ways."*

The catalyzing of innovation, like the diffusion of innovation, relies on networks of people and resources coming together to share ideas and learn with one another. As Thomas Friedman (<http://www.thomasfriedman.com>) has written, it used to be that businesses succeeded by owning knowledge and keeping it to themselves; today, businesses succeed by tapping



Each time an idea is transmitted, it adapts to and reshapes the environment of the individual in which it finds itself.

into and making use of a continual flow of new knowledge existing outside their organizational boundaries. To be successful in Jewish education today involves connecting into collegial networks of educators to find and share the newest and best ideas for engaging and educating the next generation of Jews.

The success of Project InCiTE now presents its greatest challenge. To date the work of Project InCiTE Fellows, primarily as Innovators and Early Adopters, have developed many new and exciting opportunities. Now it is our collective task to engage the Early and Late Majority, and ultimately the rest, in this new era of innovation in Israel engagement. ■

**BILL ROBINSON** is Chief Strategy Officer at the Jewish Education Project. He holds an Interdisciplinary PhD in the social sciences from Rutgers University. Before coming to The Jewish Education Project, Bill was Director of Education and Research at the Steinhardt Foundation for Jewish Life. Previous positions include Director of Education at Anshe Emeth Memorial Temple in New Brunswick, New Jersey; Managing Director of the Joseph Slifka Center for Jewish Life at Yale; and Staff Researcher for the Council for Initiatives in Jewish Education, where he also served as Planning Consultant to the Jewish Federation of Greater Atlanta. Bill is the coauthor of several articles and policy briefs on Jewish education.

