

The First Follower Role in Diffusion of Innovations: Implications for Followership Development

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Abstract

The follower's role is vital in the leadership process because one cannot exist without the other (Alegbeleye & Kaufman, 2019; Chaleff, 2008). The role followers play can be related to causal agents because they influence leaders' attitudes, behaviors, and organizational outcomes (Ete et al., 2007). The "first follower" concept originated from the TED2010 talk by Derek Sivers on "how to start a movement" (Sivers, 2010). The video of a dancing guy used for the presentation depicted a movement, and other followers joined the movement because of the first follower's action. According to Sivers (2010), a first follower is brave and plays a crucial role in the movement. The first follower can be linked with the innovator in the Rogers (2003) adopter categories. As gatekeepers, the innovators are willing to express new ideas, they are venturesome, and they bring innovations from outside the system (Sahin, 2006). The first follower attribute of trying things first and having a unique idea makes others emulate followers and shows other followers how to follow (Sivers, 2010). Thus, the process of social influence the first follower has on other followers goes along with the attributes and influence of a leader. If adopted by organization leaders, leadership educators, and consultants, the principle of the first follower will help to increase efficiencies and improve productivity through the first follower teaching others.

Short Description of Poster and Interactive Display

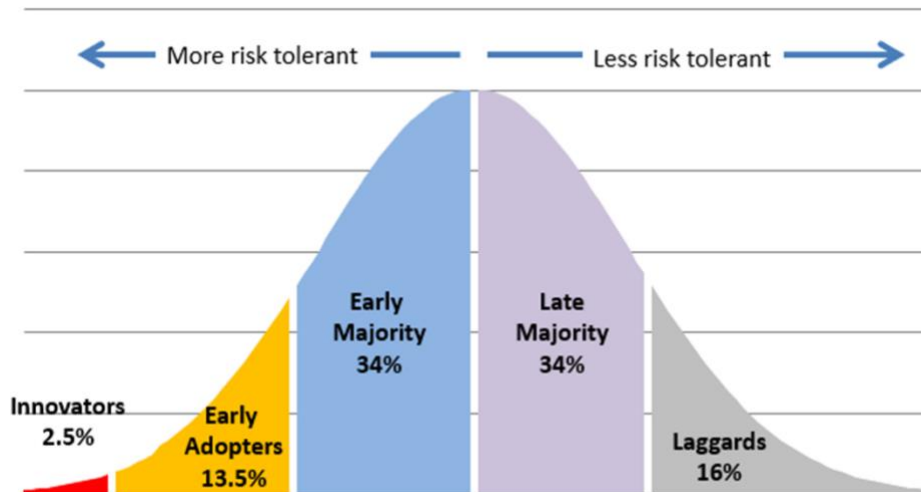
This poster and interactive display explore the concept of the first follower and its implication for followership development. The first follower concept originated from the TED2010 talk by Derek Sivers on “how to start a movement,” and the interactive display provides insight into the first follower role in Rogers’ diffusion of innovations. If adopted by organization leaders, leadership educators, and consultants, the principle of the first follower will help to increase efficiencies and improve productivity through the first follower teaching others.

First Follower: A Key Element in Followership Development

The first follower plays a crucial role in the followership process by standing out, embracing ridicule, and publicly showing others how to follow. The first follower attribute of trying things first and having a unique idea makes others emulate followers and shows other followers how to follow (Sivers, 2010). Just like Sivers mentioned the best way to create a movement, is to courageously follow and show others to follow. Similarly, innovation is best diffused when the innovator makes the other adopter see the benefits of the innovation and motivates them to adopt. Thus, the process of social influence the first follower has on other followers goes along with the attributes and influence of a leader. The first follower is a key element in followership development for their role in initiating and supporting change and contributing towards achieving the organizational goals. The first follower (innovator) is risk tolerant, they have an adequate understanding of the innovation’s usefulness and are ready to take risks. Their decision to embrace innovation/ideas or initiate and support change within the organization provides validation and credibility to the innovation/ideas and fosters the culture of followership.

Figure 1

Adopter Categories Based on Innovativeness



Note. Image by Mullany (2018), adapted from Rogers' (2003) *Diffusion of Innovations*.

Adopter Categories and the Influence on Organizational Outcomes

Innovators: they represent a low percentage of people in the adopter's categories. However, their role is very crucial in the diffusion of innovation because they bring innovation from outside of the system. They dare to do things outside of organizational culture. They are willing to experience new organizational ideas. They are action-oriented and opportunity-focused.

Early adopters: they adopt an innovation if they are convinced about the benefits of the innovation. They are more limited by the boundaries of the social system. However, they are grounded in organizational goals and respected by peers.

Early majority: they adopt the innovation just before the other half of their peers adopt it. They are pragmatic- they don't act without concrete evidence. They are deliberate in their thinking but need an extra push for organizational performance.

Late majority: they have a similar population size to the early majority, but they are conservative. They usually adopt innovation because of peer pressure and economic necessity.

They have low organizational performance because they act based on peer pressure.

Laggards: they are skeptical about innovation and its outcomes. They are usually very critical before they adopt innovation and adopt when they are certain innovation will not fail. They need more mentoring because they can negatively influence organizational goals.

Implications for Followership Development

The first followers (innovators) are venturesome and willing to experience new organizational ideas. Their in-depth understanding of the usefulness of innovation is a vital characteristic needed to motivate others to try new things. The first follower role in the diffusion of innovation highlights the need for a collective effort to achieve organizational goals that value followers as active contributors. It also highlights the vitality of capacity building that enhances followers' ability to support and initiate positive change within the organization, through constant motivation from the first follower. This is very important for organizational development because first-follower innovativeness can motivate and influence other employees to deliver. Similarly, recognizing the role of the follower in the organization implies a dynamic interaction between followers and leaders. If adopted by organization leaders, leadership educators, and consultants, the principle of the first follower will help to increase efficiencies and improve productivity through the first follower teaching others.

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