

Network Conditions for Organizational Change

Cathleen McGrath

Loyola Marymount University

David Krackhardt

Carnegie Mellon University

Understanding the overall network structure of organizations can help managers to support change. This article describes three different network theories of change, exploring the underlying assumptions and implications of each model. First, the E-I model predicts that cross-departmental friendship ties will help generate positive response to change in organizations by fostering trust and shared identity. The viscosity model predicts that introducing controversial (not clearly good or bad) change into the periphery of an organization and carefully regulating the interaction of innovators and nonadopters provides the best chance that it will diffuse successfully. Finally, the structural leverage theory presents a mathematical model that supports broad diffusion of clearly superior change, informing as many people as possible about the change.

Keywords: social networks; change; diffusion; innovation

Networks are a natural focus for change agents. We often look for central opinion leaders to be the leverage points for change (Baker, 1994; Rosen, 2000). Once we have identified them, we focus our change efforts on them, and according to the theory, the rest of the organization follows (e.g., Krackhardt, 1992). But one issue that has often been overlooked is the nature of the network as a whole and how that affects change efforts. That is, what is the shape of the network as a whole, and how does that shape affect the speed or even probability of a successful change?

Cathleen McGrath is an assistant professor in the Department of Management, College of Business Administration at Loyola Marymount University.

David Krackhardt is a professor of organizations in the H. J. Heinz III School of Public Policy and Management and the Graduate School of Industrial Administration at Carnegie Mellon University.

THE JOURNAL OF APPLIED BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE, Vol. 39 No. 3, September 2003 324-336

DOI: 10.1177/0021886303258267

© 2003 NTL Institute

