

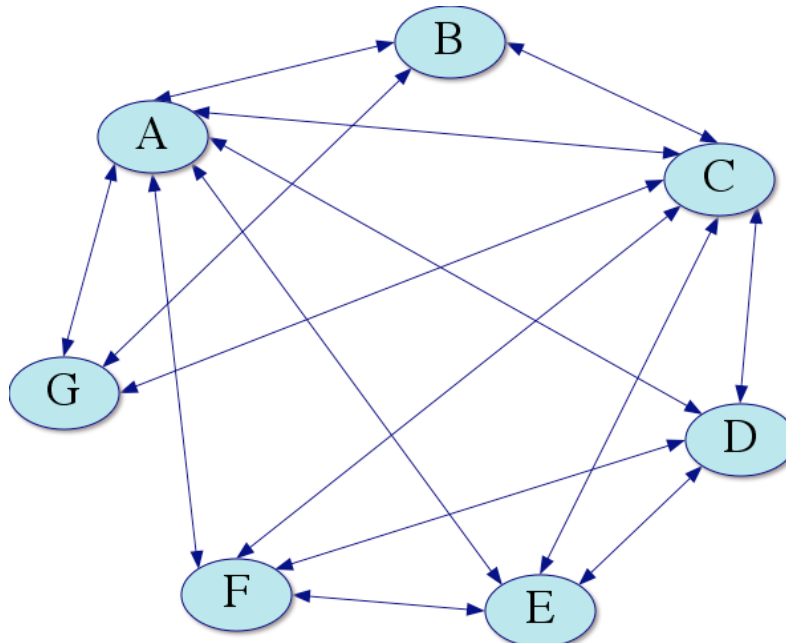
Overview:

This paper investigates the communication networks within a small, rural school system. The sample of individuals participating in the survey was chosen to show the pathways for dissemination of information from upper administration down to the classroom teachers. This survey employs a modified observation method to measure leadership and network links since the participants were asked to complete a survey, but were not requested to personally identify the leaders and were merely identifying whom they communicate with on a weekly basis. Results were verified with a short-term typical observation method that included a record keeping of who was seen speaking with who over a five day period.

A. Table of communication patterns in a small school system gathered from a survey identifying peoples responses about whether they communicate with their peers at least once per week.

talks		A	B	C	D	E	F	G
to		A	B	C	D	E	F	G
A		n/a	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
B		Y	n/a	Y	N	N	N	Y
C		Y	Y	n/a	Y	Y	Y	Y
D		Y	N	Y	n/a	Y	Y	N
E		Y	N	Y	Y	n/a	Y	N
F		Y	N	Y	Y	Y	n/a	N
G		Y	Y	Y	N	N	N	n/a

B. Scatter diagram of communication patterns table showing a connection between all individuals who communicate both ways at least once per week.



a) Who is(are) the opinion leader(s)?

The opinion leaders in this system are A and C because everyone in the system interacts with them at least once per week with some significant communication. Rogers categorizes the opinion leaders as those with the ability to influence others in a meaningful manner and with relative frequency. The following generalizations about opinion leaders are also true about A and C. In the case of educational opportunities for this school system, they "have greater exposure to mass media than their followers", "are more cosmopolite than their followers" and "have greater contact with change agents than their followers." (Rogers 316-317) Since A and C are the principal and vice-principal in the system, they are privy to a variety of information sources and resources that others are not. This exposure offers them a leadership position in the dissemination of innovations to the others. They also have a significant social network developed because of their long term interactions with the community, having both grown up locally.

b) Who is isolated in the organization?

The isolated individuals in this system are B and G because they only communicate with the opinion leaders and each other. This plays towards the generalization that, "interpersonal diffusion networks are mostly homophilous." (Rogers 307) Both B and G fill roles outside of the typical school network in more isolated administration roles. B is the superintendent and G is the special education director for the school union. These positions aside from creating physical barriers to diffusion by distance offer a degree of separation by status. The primary communication channels for them are through A and C which fill the internal administrative roles in this school system. G, the superintendent, is especially isolated because of her limited social network since G has only been in the community for a short period of time.

c) Where do sub-groups exist?

B and G represent a sub group that is connected to the system by A and C, the focal group. D, E and F also would be a subgroup that again is connected by A and C. This represents a radial personal network, a network in which the sub-groups have no connectivity except through the focal group. (Rogers 338) If the network criteria were expanded to include monthly rather than weekly communications, it would probably be all individuals communicating at least once and the network would look more like an interlocking personal network (Rogers 338).

d) Who connects the sub-groups?

A and C are the focal group, primary connectors, between the sub-groups. They are the primary communication conduits for the system as a result of their interaction with everyone on a regular basis.

e) Overall, how easy will it be for a change agent to use the communication channels in the organization? Explain your answer.

The change agent will be able to exploit the communication channels in this system fairly well because of the significant amount of bi-directional communication that takes place. The small scale and close relationship of the system is evident by the fact that no individual in the diagram is more than one link away from any information. Also, the fact that both A and C are opinion leaders, it offers a "targeting" mechanism to disseminate information rapidly by including both parties in the presentations of an innovation (Rogers 367). The system's members are relatively homophilous in their education, socioeconomic status and societal beliefs, which promotes their tendency to exchange ideas (Rogers 305). In this way, there is greater chance that each sub-group will be connected to the material with limited distortion assuming that the intent was clearly posed to A and C.

The homophilous nature of the outlined system is based on the small nature of the network, the requirements to participate in the organization, and the economic constraints of the area. As a small, rural school system, the participants are restricted entry by the governing body for educators. This is then further restricted by the economic constraints of the area that frown upon elitism. Hence, the pay scale is higher for the superintendent than the new teacher, but not by such an exorbitant amount that communication is overly restrictive. The principal, vice-principal, and teachers are only separated by approximately \$25,000.

The open system of communication should simplify the process of reaching a critical mass for a change agent. The critical mass is the point when an innovation is able to be self-sustaining (Rogers 349). In this school system, the small scale and high degree of communication make it relatively easy for the focal group to get new ideas to the various teachers. The challenges to overcome develop from the economic and knowledge difference relative to a specific innovation. The increased communication allows for training and modeling to assist in reducing the knowledge obstacles.

This has proven to be the case with the implementation of a new school student information system, laptop program, and trimester scheduling. Each of the above examples was a significant modification to the norm that was quickly adopted because of the strong communication network. Principal A proposed and received approval from B and the school board while at the same time educating the remaining staff on the new change. Within a few weeks, the implementations were able to be trialed and the knowledge base grew allowing for easier transitions. Overall, this system has the potential to be very flexible in the adoption of new innovations.

Rogers, Everett M. Diffusion of Innovations. 5th ed. New York: Free Press, 2003.