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IRF Incentive Research Foundation

FEBRUARY 2022

Social Reinforcement and Peer Recognition Networks

After two years of pandemic-driven disruption, many of us have become amateur students of epidemiology. The manner in which contagions diffuse – or do not – should concern leaders across every industry, but not just to combat Covid-19. The spread of *social* contagions will play a critical role in late-stage and post-pandemic recovery. In all but the smallest firms, behavior change and the sharing of important information and ideas depends on organizational social networks – especially now when a much greater percentage of the workforce is working remotely than was the case two years ago.

According to recent and groundbreaking research by Damon Centola at the University of Pennsylvania, the conventional wisdom about information and idea diffusion through networks proves fundamentally wrong in critical ways. Centola points out that most theorists and students of social networking assume that ideas spread quickly and efficiently along "weak ties" – big networks of people loosely associated with each other. This "small world" and "six degrees of separation" theory, proposed by Mark Granovetter and others, works very well for simple ideas and information – and for highly-transmissible diseases – but not where a potential contagion involves complex ideas, new technology adoption, or substantive behavior change.

> **"Social networks are the primary pathways for the spread of new social norms."**
> - Damon Centola,
> Director, Network Dynamics Group,
> University of Pennsylvania

In his 2013 book about effective marketing, *Contagion: Why Things Catch On*, Jonah Berger promotes the obvious truth that **when it comes to making significant buying decisions, most people turn to the close and strong ties of family and friends,** not commercials on TV, Twitter comments, or even Amazon reviews. Likewise, in his 2020 book, *The Rules of Contagion*, epidemiologist Adam Kucharski argues that when it comes to important ideas, whether about gun control or politics, "friends influence friends."

Today's workplace is nothing if not a place marked by the exchange of complex ideas and constant change – whether technological or behavioral.

It almost goes without saying that people do not change their behaviors or beliefs easily. Where proponents of a complex idea or behavior change can simplify their ideas, normal network diffusion through the shortcuts of weak ties might work. But most important ideas do not simplify. In these cases, social norms, and the social reinforcement of close peers – "strong ties," in other words – often make the difference.

In his most recent book, *Beyond Collaboration Overload*, Babson College professor Rob Cross speaks to the **challenges of excessive and unnecessary collaboration at work.** Cross asserts that upwards of 85% of employees' time is now spent collaborating across organizational networks. Cross' research suggests that the hubs and connectors most vital and central to organizational social networks are those most at-risk of leaving. Indeed, in a recent interview I conducted with Cross, he told me these employees are those *least* interested in returning to the office.

To improve well-being and productivity, Cross argues that leaders should take measures to lighten the collaborative demands on employees. Importantly, he also emphasizes the importance of purpose in driving energy and resilience through organizational networks. Purpose and energy, says Cross, often emanate from appreciation spread by peer recognition networks and platforms.

Leaders should design and implement peer recognition networks to serve multiple purposes.

As Centola argues in his research and in his 2018 book *How Behavior Spreads*, **the more complex an idea or adaptation, the greater the uncertainty and the more "social proof" a person needs to adopt and spread it.** In many cases, even if a person knows a new technology, idea, or innovation can deliver great benefits, they might still resist. If its value depends on others adopting it, or it requires a threshold of early adopters to make it credible, it fits the description of a complex contagion. **Credibility often depends on adoption by close peers as this provides "social reinforcement."** The larger the consequences of adopting a new technology or behavior, the more the need for peer reinforcement.

> **"It seems that giving is more engaging than getting. My sense is that peer-to-peer recognition is effective in building appreciative cultures, and that plays to the purpose."**
> - Rob Cross, Babson College professor

Even in minimally complex cases, field experiments by Centola and others show that clustered networks of close ties (i.e., peer networks) result in 40% greater adoption than random networks of loose ties. Ideas spread faster in the latter, but conversion happens far more frequently in the former. Empirical research suggests that behavior changes in populations – getting vaccinated, for example – follow the same rules. And with harder behavior change – quitting smoking, for example, close networks and the influence of multiple peers proves even stronger (Centola calls them "wide bridges"). Encouragingly, given the closeness of peer networks – the continuous reinforcement from friends, co-workers, etc. – complex behavior change tends to stick.

I'm convinced that peer recognition networks present an important, underutilized, and readily available tool to improve employee well-being *and* to drive critical change in organizations.

As Professor Cross points out, the pandemic – with its endless Zoom calls and constant emails, texts, and Slack messaging – has exacerbated meaningless and productivity-destroying collaboration, contributing to employee stress, anxiety, and burnout. However, **peer recognition exchanges deliver meaningful messaging and demand no further collaboration.**

Though Professor Centola does not address peer recognition networks directly, his findings suggest that they are ideal vehicles to promote the spread of complex ideas and positive behavior change. By their very nature, well-managed peer recognition networks – which connect people through appreciation, and therefore trust – lay the foundation for social proof and reinforcement. This is especially important now in the face of a profound shift toward remote and hybrid work arrangements.

Peer networks should be engineered to spread positive ideas and behavior change.

Some people have exponentially more connections than others. The social networking lexicon refers to them as hubs or brokers because they can spread information to hundreds or thousands of people very quickly, and they often link disparate people, teams, and divisions in organizations. Yet, while hubs may spread simple ideas and information very effectively (by the same principles described above), they do not, according to Centola, deliver the peer reinforcement necessary to spark the adoption of complex ideas or behaviors. Worse because hubs loosely connect more people, they make visible all the people who do *not* adopt new ideas, behaviors, or innovations; this slows adoption rates.

Professor Centola's work demonstrates that big networks connected by hubs weaken wide bridges. In fact, the bigger and weaker a person's network, the more social reinforcement they require to make the change. In other words, ever wider bridges become necessary. **Those interested in spreading positive behaviors or encouraging new technology adoption are likely to get results by 'seeding' their ideas in peer recognition networks.** This avoids exposing potential early adopters to wider, looser networks, and can make the difference between success and failure.

Leaders tend to overemphasize the importance of individual hubs or brokers who bridge network gaps between divisions and teams. Again, the width of the bridges between co-workers matters more in the adoption of new ideas, technologies, behaviors, etc. than the single reinforcement hubs and brokers provide. **Leaders should deploy peer recognition networks that encourage more ties between clusters** (teams, groups, etc.). How? Simply by aligning the things peers recognize and reward each other for with desired behavior change, technology adoption, or consideration of new ideas.

As every experienced reward program designer knows, incentives intended to change people's thinking, behavior, or decision-making, require careful thought. Don't design according to your hunches alone. Experiment. Think deeply, for example, about the kind of peer interaction and appreciation that can promote positive behaviors by focusing attention ("social relevance") on the people exhibiting those behaviors. In other words, proactively manage and monitor peer networks to ensure that employees are appreciating and rewarding the things you want them to.

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