

THE IMPORTANCE OF OPINION LEADERS IN AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION

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ABSTRACT

The importance of opinion leaders in the diffusion and adoption of improved agricultural practices is described and discussed. Opinion leaders are those individuals who have a greater-than-average share of influence within their community because they modify the opinions of others in an informal manner. One can distinguish between two types of opinion leader—namely, polymorphic and monomorphic leaders. Opinion leaders usually conform closely to the norms of their social system. They make use of unbiased and technically accurate sources of information, and they are better equipped than their followers, in terms of knowledge, insight and judgement, to put innovations to practical use. Opinion leaders are usually cosmopolitan in their attitudes. They mix well with other people, are of relatively high social status and tend to be more innovative than their followers. The personal influence of opinion leaders is very important in the persuasion stage of the innovation-decision process. It is also important in uncertain situations and in influencing relatively late adopters. It follows, therefore, that an extension officer, if he is to be successful as a change agent, must become acquainted with, and win the confidence and regard of, opinion leaders in his district. This ability to exploit leaders will help to determine the success or failure of his extension programme.

Introduction

Agricultural extension is, fundamentally, speeding up the diffusion and adoption of improved agricultural practices. The objective is to reduce the gap between research findings and their practical application in the field. The agricultural extension officer plays an important role in projecting innovations and ideas, but so too do the farmer and others in the community who disseminate information. To accelerate this diffusion of information, it is necessary to determine what sources of information are used by a specific farming community. Cownie⁵ concluded, from a survey he conducted among cane farmers in Natal and Zululand, that the most important source of information on improved practices for sugarcane production, other than that provided by the extension services of the Experiment Station, is the producer's fellow farmer.

In the course of his investigation Cownie⁵ found that growers with limited educational qualifications looked to their fellow farmers as their most important single source of information. In contrast, growers with matriculation or higher educational standards, regarded the extension officer of the S.A.S.A. Experiment Station as their most important information source, followed by field days and then their fellow

farmers. The "fellow farmer" is therefore an important source of information, but it is the "opinion leaders", among these farmers who have the greatest influence in spreading ideas.

Classification of leaders

Leaders may be classified as follows:

Nominal leaders

These are leaders in name only. An example is an honorary president (Schoeman¹⁵).

Professional leaders

These are people who, in the normal conduct of their professions, serve as leaders in a community. The group includes magistrates, clergymen, extension officers and bank managers.

Formal leaders

These are people who serve the community on committees or in established organisations. They may be appointed by the organisations concerned to act as spokesmen at conferences and symposia. There are two classes of such leaders:

- (a) appointed formal leaders, and
- (b) elected formal leaders.

Local leaders

These are usually sociable, pleasant members of the community. They do not necessarily perform as clear-cut leaders, but they are usually popular amongst their fellows, and respected by the community (Van Zyl²⁰).

Opinion leaders

In every farming community there are people who will be pointed out by their fellow men as leaders to whom they can turn for advice and guidance on farming problems (Van Zyl²⁰). Rogers¹³ describes opinion leaders as "those individuals who have a greater share of influence because they take the lead in influencing the opinions of others". Opinion leaders retain their status as leaders by virtue of certain abilities, aptitudes and knowledge which they have mastered. They seldom fulfil a prominent position in public life and are often unaware of their leadership function (Bekker³).

It will be clear from the foregoing that all members of a community participate in the diffusion of ideas. Some may influence and communicate ideas to only one or two of their fellows, whereas others may prove to be sufficiently influential to communicate ideas to a large number of people. The latter are true opinion

leaders and since they can play a significant role in any extension programme, they need to be sought out and used by an extension officer.

Opinion leadership

Two types of opinion leader can be distinguished, the general or "polymorphic" leader who gives advice on a wide range of subjects, and the specialised or "monomorphic" leader who advises on only one (Sen¹⁶). It is considered by some that opinion leaders in a conservative or traditional community are mainly polymorphic. In contrast they suggest that opinion leaders in a modern progressive community tend to be predominantly monomorphic (Rogers and Shoemaker¹⁴).

However, where specific aspects of agricultural production are concerned — as would be the case when advice is needed on the choice of variety, the width of row spacing or the fertilizing of sugarcane — it is probable that only one opinion leader will be approached for advice. On the other hand, two opinion leaders may be asked for advice on topics as different as, say, cane growing and cattle farming.

Characteristics of opinion leaders

How do opinion leaders differ from their fellow farmers? The following generalisations help to answer this question:

Social norms

Opinion leaders usually conform closely to the norms of their social system. When the system's norms favour change, opinion leaders become more innovative, but when the norms are traditional, opinion leaders are not particularly innovative. Opinion leaders are often very similar to their followers (Rogers and Shoemaker¹⁴).

Sources of information

Most opinion leaders tend to make greater use of unbiased, technically accurate and cosmopolitan sources of information, than do their followers. In consequence they also command more accurate and more up-to-date information. Furthermore, the higher intellect and better education of most opinion leaders enables them to make good use of technical information to resolve their farming problems (Jacobs⁷). Many researchers, including Emery and Oeser,⁶ Van den Ban¹⁸ and Siepker¹⁷ have found that opinion leaders show a marked tendency to make greater use of extension officers than do non-leaders. In contrast, however, Kolbe⁹ found that opinion leaders in the Settlers Soil Conservation district at Warmbad, Transvaal, had little or no contact with extension staff. In other instances it has been established that opinion leaders maintain direct contact with agricultural research workers.

It can be concluded that, in terms of knowledge, insight and ability to put innovations to practical use, opinion leaders are usually better equipped than those

others in the community who usually depend for ideas on information passed from one to another by word of mouth.

Cosmopolitanism

Opinion leaders are less prejudiced, both in terms of their sources of information and social association, than are non-leaders. It has been shown by various research workers that opinion leaders usually have greater contact than do non-leaders with cities, towns and other areas outside their own communities.

Social participation

Opinion leaders are usually cultured people who mix easily and are interesting to listen to. They do not necessarily fulfil the role of formal leaders, but Kritzinger¹⁰ and Blomerus⁴ — working in South Africa — have shown that there can be a very real overlap in the roles of opinion and formal leaders. Thus, Blomerus⁴ found that 44,4% of a sample of opinion leaders also played a part in formal leadership. When an opinion leader is used to fulfil the duties of a formal leader, he may find that he now has to conform, at least in part, with his public. This may well prevent him acting as freely as he has done in the past, and in time may impair his role as an opinion leader (Van Zyl²⁰).

Social status

Opinion leaders usually enjoy a higher social status than their followers (Bekker³). Indeed, Lionberger¹² has shown that farmers tend to seek advice from people who are their social superiors, provided the social difference is not too great. Blomerus,⁴ Siepker¹⁷ and others have also found that opinion leaders usually have larger farming enterprises, higher gross income and better standards of education than the non-leaders. These attributes directly or indirectly, play a part in their higher social status.

Innovativeness

Opinion leaders are recognised as competent authorities or "experts" and in consequence as sowers of sound advice. It seems logical therefore to assume that opinion leaders will adopt or reject innovations or new practices before their followers. In fact Kolbe⁹ found that opinion leaders have a better-than-average knowledge of innovations and that they are usually pointed out as being sound, neat and practical farmers. (See also Alleman² and Blomerus⁴.)

Studies have shown that opinion leaders are more innovative than their followers. This, however, does not mean that they can be classified as innovators (Bekker³). Opinion leaders can be found for every category of those who adopt new ideas, but they seem to predominate in the category "early adopters". In conservative communities opinion leaders tend to be rather cautious and in these circumstances they may be found predominantly in the "early majority" category (Rogers¹³). To illustrate this point, the cate-

gories used to define rates of adopting innovations are given in Fig. 1. The community consists of:

- Innovators: 2½% of the total (some opinion leadership)
- Early adopters: 13½% of the total (greatest opinion leadership)
- Early majority: 34% of the total (some opinion leadership)
- Late majority: 34% of the total (little opinion leadership)
- Laggards: 16% of the total (very little opinion leadership)

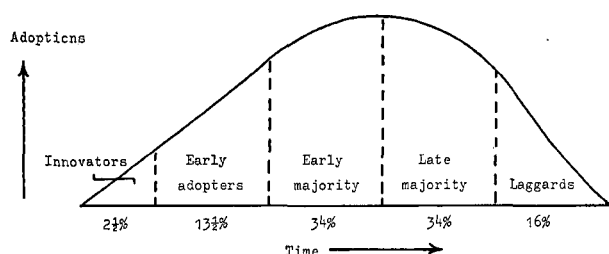


FIGURE 1 Adopter categories, based on the relative time of adoption of innovations (Rogers, 1962).¹³

People seem to be influenced most effectively by opinion leaders within their own adopter category, or by those from a more innovative group.

Early adopters seem to have greater contact with extension agents than any other category. Farmers in the "early majority" category do obtain their ideas largely from extension agents, but they also derive them from members of the "early adopters" group. Those in the "late majority" group get their ideas from peers who are found mainly in the late majority or early majority categories. Laggards normally make contact only with their immediate neighbours and with friends and relatives with similar values.

Finally, it is worthwhile stressing that the more innovative individual will have a marked influence on the opinions of his fellow farmers, because of his practical experience of the innovation (Rogers¹³). It must, however, be remembered that there is not a very marked difference between the standards of an opinion leader and his followers. If there were a very marked difference between an individual and the rest of the community, then he would be considered as an outsider, and labelled "not one of us". A person of this type will seldom be asked for advice, as he is regarded as someone operating on quite a different plane.

Identification of opinion leaders

Opinion leaders, being similar in so many ways to their followers, cannot easily be "identified". It is important, however, that they should be traced, and three techniques have been used to help secure a reliable identification.

Sociometric technique

Farmers are asked to whom they turn, or would turn, for advice regarding certain aspects of farming practice. It can generally be assumed that if five farmers select one and the same man, then this man can be classified as an opinion leader. The drawback to this technique is that all the farmers in an area would have to be questioned. Despite this, it is the soundest method, and so far the only one that has proved to be successful in South Africa.

The self-designating technique

A questionnaire is presented to a potential "candidate". Using a series of specially selected questions, the researcher tries to find out the extent to which the farmer sees himself as a possible opinion leader. This technique has not proved to be reliable in South Africa.

Identification through key informants

This method involves asking leading farmers who know the community, to point out the opinion leaders. This technique too has not so far been successful in South Africa.

The pattern of information flow

Two questions arise once the opinion leaders have been identified. Firstly, does the opinion leader serve a definite, and important, role in extension? Secondly, can the farming community not be served in the same way by distributing bulletins, newsletters, journals, or by organising symposia? Research has shown that persuasive mass communication does not necessarily have a direct influence on the opinions and ideas of people. However, it can and does have an influence through a range of mediating factors. According to Klapper⁸ these factors are classified as:

- (a) Predisposition of the human being, including selective-exposure, -perception and -retention.
- (b) Groups and group norms.
- (c) Dissemination of information from one individual to another.
- (d) The nature of mass media in a free enterprise society.
- (e) Opinion leaders.

Lazarsfeld¹¹ found that ideas often move from the radio or written word to the opinion leader, and from him to the less active members of the community. It is important to bear in mind, however, that the opinion leader has a marked influence on the concept involved, as his own predisposition will come to the forefront.

Through selective exposure, a person reads and listens only to the features which interest him. As a result of this selective perception, he interprets ideas in a way that suits his own viewpoint and thought. As a result he tends to retain selectively only those facts, ideas and figures which he finds to be in accordance with his preconceived views. Information acquired through mass or group media will therefore be selected

and sifted by a person, before the accumulated knowledge is ready for distribution to others. The knowledge which the follower receives at the end of the communication chain would therefore have been remodelled. The result could be that an idea reaches the farming community in a form which, due to distortion, differs substantially from the original. To avoid this the extension officer needs to pay particular and personal attention to opinion leaders, ensuring that misinterpretations, distortions and vaguenesses are clarified. In this way he can ensure that correct information is effectively distributed.

This two-phase or two-step flow of information is an over-simplification. Most people become aware of an idea through the mass media. This idea is then discussed with fellow farmers, and it is at this point that influence plays its part, the idea being adapted to each individual's taste, or an interpretation being derived from the opinion leader for a group. There is therefore a multiphase flow of ideas (Rogers¹³), but even then the opinion leader still plays a key role.

Personal influence and its significance

Personal influence plays an important part in decision making by farmers. Rogers¹³ argues that personal influence is more important and more effective in decision making than the mass media. Other research workers in this field agree that it is impossible to ignore social relationships in a study of the diffusion of innovations.

The question now arises — when is personal influence by fellow farmers really important? Although personal influence is obviously involved throughout the process of diffusion and adoption it is of greatest importance at certain specific stages. Four stages or functions are currently recognized, namely: knowledge, persuasion, decision and confirmation. The innovation-decision process usually begins with *knowledge*. At this stage the individual learns of the existence of the innovation and gains some understanding of how it functions. At the *persuasion* stage the individual develops a favourable or unfavourable attitude towards the innovation. The *decision* stage is reached when the individual becomes involved and has to choose either to adopt or reject the innovation. At the *confirmation* stage, the individual seeks support for the decision he has made, but he may reverse this decision if at this point he is exposed to conflicting views about it.

Some forms of communication media play more important roles than others at different stages in the innovation-decision process. Thus, mass media usually have a greater impact at the awareness-knowledge stage than at any other stage (Rogers and Shoemaker¹⁴).

Persuasion stage

Personal influence is of great importance at the persuasion stage of the innovation-decision process, and less important at others (Rogers¹³).

At the persuasion stage, the farmer is already confronted with the facts and has reached the point where

he is weighing the pros and cons. The opinion leader may, at this stage, have an overwhelming influence. A farmer will more readily accept an idea that has proved itself under farming conditions. This is why the opinion leader, who has already put the idea into practice, will have such great influence on his fellow farmers.

Uncertain situations

When a farmer is uncertain about an innovation he will seek advice from a fellow farmer more readily than he otherwise would. In these circumstances the personal influence of peers is particularly important. Thus, if an innovation involves great economic risk, the farmer will rely heavily on personal advice from his peers.

Relatively late adopters

Because a late, or relatively late, adopter does not make full use of either mass media or the available extension services, he is more susceptible to personal influence by his peers than the earlier adopter. Late adopters are usually sceptical about new ideas or innovations and they need to be convinced by their fellow farmers that a new idea can be put to practical use in their area (Rogers¹³). It is possible too that many farmers, at an early stage in the diffusion of an innovation, will have very little knowledge of the subject. As a result, interaction amongst farmers may be small or even non-existent. At a later stage, most farmers will have some knowledge and experience of the innovation, so the chances are greater that later adopters will be influenced as a result of personal contact with fellow farmers (Rogers and Shoemaker¹⁴).

It must be emphasised that the late adopters of improved practices are usually sceptics and less progressive in their approach to innovations than earlier adopters. They rely far more on advice from their peers than on that available from extension officers or sales agents.

Discussion

The question "why does a farmer resist change and innovation?" is not one which can be answered by teachings traditional to agriculture. It relates to people and how to both understand and use them. The extension officer needs this understanding, and an ability to combine this technical knowledge with an appreciation of the social situation in his area. Only then can he really undertake constructive work (Agenbach¹). It is for this reason that knowledge of the structure of opinion leadership is important for the ultimate success of extension. The importance of opinion leaders or of fellow farmers is illustrated in Table I. It is clear from this that while mass media are of tremendous importance in creating an awareness of an innovation, it is the "fellow farmer" that is the vehicle which leads to the *adoption* of the innovations. Extension officers take second place. To operate efficiently as a change agent therefore, an extension officer must get to know the opinion leaders in his area. He must ensure that the idea that he has in mind is made clear to his

TABLE I

The influence of communication media on the awareness and adoption stages (Van den Ban¹⁹)

Information sources	Awareness % farmers	Adoption % farmers
Mass media	70	3
Demonstrations and meetings . .	6	12
Extension officers	3	23
Fellow farmers	13	51
Traders	3	4
Other combinations	2	3
No reply	3	4

opinion leaders, so that they in turn can project the correct information to their followers.

Opinion leaders should be visited regularly by the extension officer, so that discrepancies and uncertainties are cleared up. The extension officer must also ensure that the opinion leader executes a new practice with success and precision. This is very important, as, if the new practice does not prove to be successful, then irreparable damage can be done to his extension plan and the image and prestige of the opinion leader can be impaired. The extension officer must, therefore, be quite certain that a new practice will be beneficial in his area before he starts to urge its adoption.

It has been pointed out that farmers will accept most readily innovations that have been seen in practical use. Some innovators, however, tend to be reckless in their adoption of a new idea, whereas an opinion leader is more wary and adopts a concept only if he is convinced it can be made to work. It is this attribute which gives him a higher credibility rating than the general innovator. When he succeeds in his new enterprise he will tell his fellow farmers about it and this will induce rapid adoption of the technique among his followers. However, should an opinion leader fail to succeed in a project, the extension officer can expect strong opposition in any further attempts to promote adoption of the practice. It must be remembered that opinion leaders will not readily accept every innovation. They may and they sometimes will, reject an idea. If an opinion leader dislikes the extension officer, or the innovation, he can cause a great deal of harm, and this can result in the failure of the project. It is essential therefore for the extension officer to win the confidence and regard of these men, so that he can help them to understand and accept the advantages of a project.

This analysis of the importance of opinion leaders does not mean that extension activities should be concentrated exclusively on these people, while forgetting about the remaining farmers. There will always be a section of the farming community who will be antagonistic towards extension officers and research workers. These farmers seldom make use of publications and relatively few of them will attend meetings and symposia. They will instead turn to other farmers for advice, discarding the extension officer as a man "with no practical experience", whose knowledge is obtained exclusively from books. To help these farmers improve their standards of productivity, the only avenue available is through their opinion leaders.

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