

Use Individual Adoption Styles to Bust Through Organizational Change Resistance

Published: 6 November 2015

Analyst(s): Elise Olding, Bard Papegaaij

One aspect of change that is often ignored is that different people change at different speeds. The Individual Adoption Style framework presented here helps CIOs and business transformation agents focus their energy on the individuals best-suited to be influencers for change for the organization.

Key Challenges

- Employees change at different speeds and are at different places in their adoption of change.
- The "big bang" or waterfall approach used by many CIOs assumes everyone responds the same to the change program.
- Employees that are reluctant to change are often the most vocal and demanding, causing CIOs to spend most of their time trying to convince these employees to change, at the expense of supporting and encouraging the ones more willing and ready to embrace change.
- It is easy for CIOs to become frustrated with the challenges of organizational change and end up blaming their organizations and the employees for being risk-averse.
- Encouraging and engaging with the diversity of views needed to create profound change can be daunting.

Recommendations

As CIO or business transformation leader, you must:

- Identify and leverage individual adoption styles to lead successful change.
- Find and support early adopters, instead of focusing too much on resisters.
- Use individual adoption styles to improve teamwork and collaboration.
- Use individual adoption styles to break down your organization's barriers to change.

Introduction

One aspect of change that is often ignored is that different people change at different speeds.¹ The vast majority of change programs implicitly assume that change will happen at the same time and the same speed for everyone involved. In reality, the process of change in any group of people is more like running a long-distance race: Even when all runners start at the same time and from the same position, after a while, they will be spread out along the length of the course. Even when all your employees start from the same position at the beginning of your change program, you will find some employees eagerly embracing change and taking initiative, while others will soon fall behind or are reluctant to even getting started.

For change leaders, it is tempting to focus on those who are reluctant to engage with the change program. Because the objectors are often more vocal and demanding than the willing, it is easy to get caught up in listening and responding to complaints and reasons for change not to happen. "We tried that before and it never worked," "We would change if the conditions were right," "We're too busy to have time for this" — all frequently heard and draining the energy of the change leaders. At the same time, the employees who are embracing the program and willing to change at a fast pace begin to notice they are not getting any attention. Like runners nearing the end of the race, wondering why nobody is cheering them on or handing them water and energy snacks, they may end up demotivated and slow down, or stop altogether.

Informal surveys with CIOs at Gartner workshops, conferences and analyst inquiry calls show that many of these CIOs spend their time and energy on the early stages of the change program, where change is being discussed, decided on and prepared for, rather than in supporting and executing the later stages, where change is actually happening. Because they end up focusing so much on trying to get their slow and reluctant employees to join the change program, at Gartner, we often hear our clients claim their organization is change-resistant and unwilling to engage with the change program.

This is very unfortunate. The ability to change, and change quickly, is crucial to the survival of any organization, especially in the rapidly changing environment created by digital business. But the prevalent hierarchical and waterfall approaches have a poor track record of successful and sustainable change. Clearly, a different approach is needed.

To begin with, rather than spending most of the available time and energy on those who won't or can't change, spending more time, attention and energy on the pace-setting early adopters is much more effective. By identifying these early adopters and using them to influence change, CIOs can keep the momentum and help all employees cross the finish line.

This research introduces the individual adoption styles (IAS) framework. This framework helps CIOs:

- Improve the overall speed of change of their organizations.
- Find the early adopters that can positively influence others in the organization.
- Identify individual adoption styles to improve communication.

Analysis

Identify and Use Individual Adoption Styles to Lead Successful Change

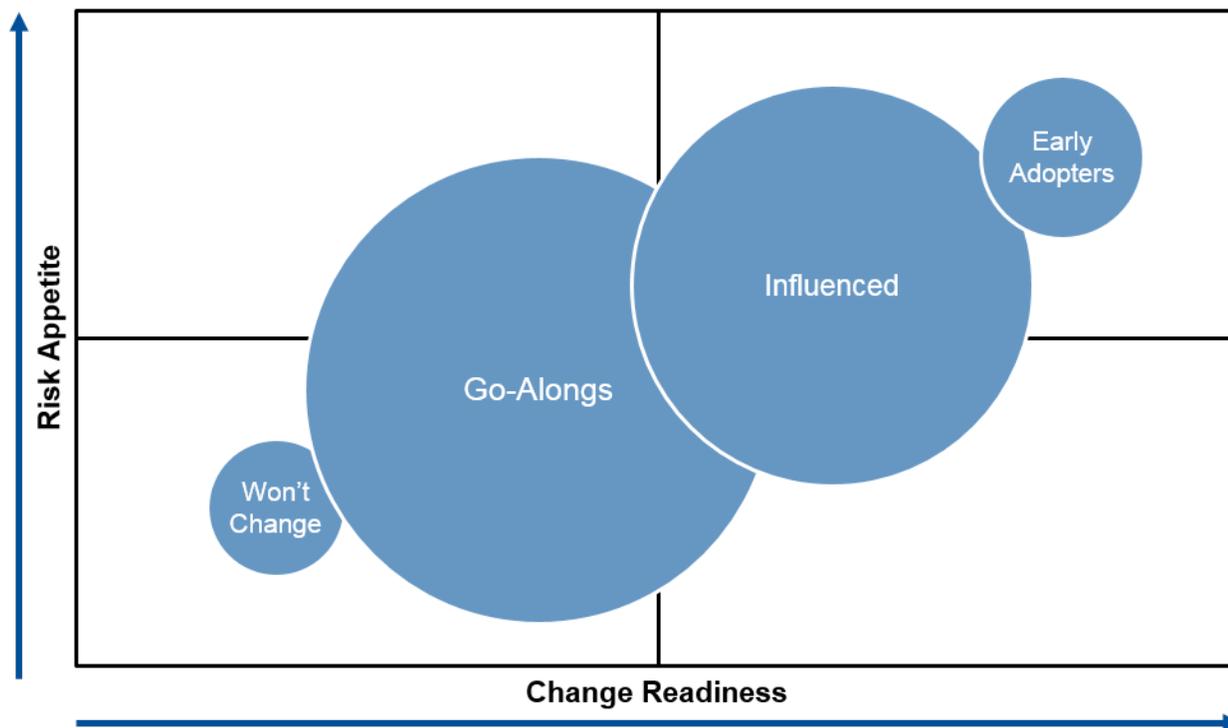
Gartner has defined four adoption styles that have been vetted with hundreds of CIOs worldwide.² Awareness and use of these four simple categories help you put your energy in the right places to produce visible progress and increase change success.

The four adoption styles are:

- Early adopters
- Influenced
- Go-alongs
- Won't change

Figure 1 depicts the four styles. The percentage for each style will vary by organization. In general, there will be fewer early adopters compared with the other groups. The readiness to change is predicated on the risk appetite. One employee's appetite for risk may be greater than another. This is not a positive or negative trait. CIOs and business transformation leaders who understand the interaction of styles can use them effectively to accelerate change in their organizations.³

Figure 1. People Change at Different Speeds, Depending on Risk Appetite



Source: Gartner (November 2015)

"Early adopters" are first followers. They are generally willing to give a try to new ideas, ways of working and behaviors. They have high risk tolerance and thrive on trying new things and being creative without needing a lot of certainty. They recover quickly from failures and use what they learned from their failures to find and try different approaches.³

"Influenced" are the group who watch the early adopters. They are willing to accept some risk, but feel more comfortable trusting a new direction and trying new behaviors when a number of their colleagues are on board.

"Go-alongs" are a cautious group. They want to see how situations play out and understand consequences before they are open to adopting a new situation. They will not be convinced by early adopters and, in fact, are skeptical of them, viewing them as cavalier, with the potential to do damage to the organization or unnecessarily disturb the way work is performed. They are willing to change, but require more stipulations and conditions to be met before they will adopt new behaviors.

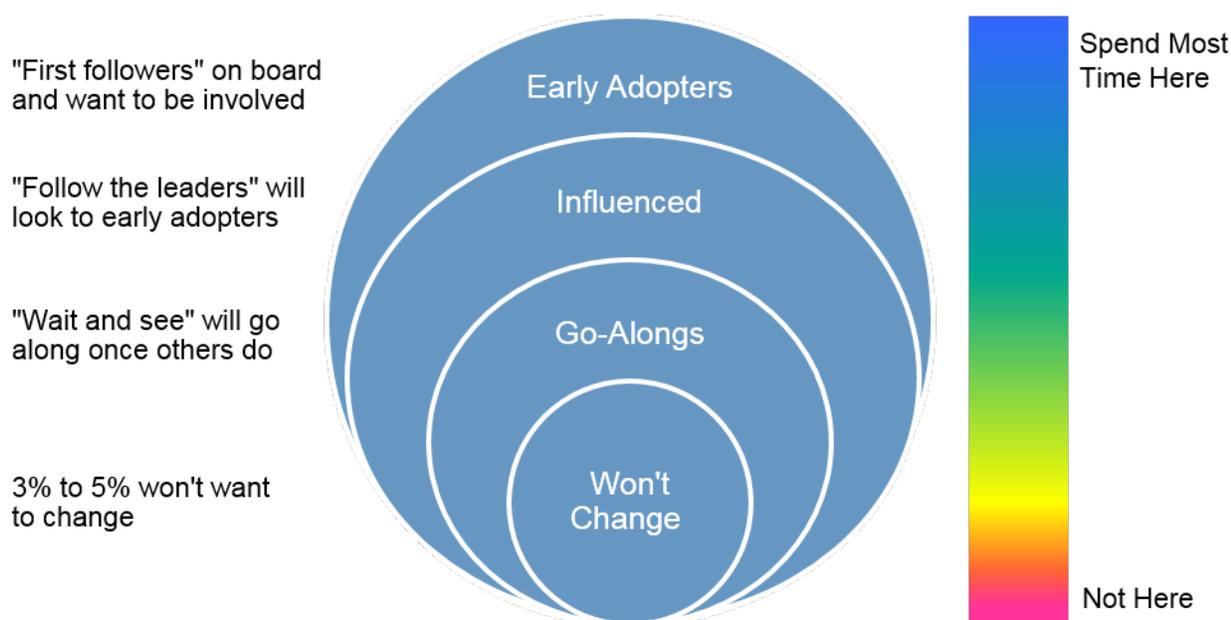
"Won't change" are highly risk-averse. They will likely feel they have too much to lose and are emotionally too attached to the status quo to want to make the effort to change. They are likely to see only the negative side of any change. As one CIO put it, "These are the employees that, if I give them a Porsche, they would tell me it was the wrong color!" With help and attention, some of them may change, but 3% to 5% of them won't.

Individuals are mostly aligned with a particular style. Their style can vary, however, depending on the type of change they are in and their personal circumstances. As a leader, you must challenge yourself and the assumptions you make about employees. Your perception of them, based on prior interactions, may not accurately reflect their current adoption style. Always test your perceptions with the employees to make sure you assess and approach them correctly.

Find and Support Early Adopters, Instead of Focusing too Much on Resistors

It is a natural and almost automatic response for leaders to gravitate to those who are complaining and try to convince them to change. The CIOs we have queried admit that they spend most of their time during a change effort dealing with the complainers, those with "loud voices of resistance," and those who don't want to change and won't change. This leaves these CIOs frustrated and disillusioned. Our advice: Flip your focus (see Figure 2). Find and leverage early adopters.⁴ Use their energy, willingness to try new things and insights to help you. They will provide the needed environment for the Influenced group to become engaged. Then use the combined stories and experiences of the early adopters and influenced groups to nudge the go-alongs. This model engages the organization in the change and helps take the load off you as leader.

Figure 2. Leverage Early Adopters to Influence Change



Source: Gartner (November 2015)

Don't let the won't change ones prevent you from paying attention and supporting your brave early adopters. Work closely with HR to determine a strategy for the won't change people. They need attention and careful management, but you should not end up spending most of your precious time and energy on them. Some of them may simply refuse to change: They may be close to retirement, have strong opinions or be politically aligned with different outcomes. For those people, in

cooperation with HR, outline the alternatives, and be clear about how and when the consequences will play out. During the course of the change, some might change their minds and come along. The key here is to clearly present the alternatives, enabling the employee to make a choice.

While certainly encouraging the early adopters to keep up the pace, don't be tempted to completely take over their optimism and risk appetite. Stay mindful of the real challenges and risks attached to the change process. While mostly ignored or downplayed by the early adopters, the influenced and go-alongs will bring these challenges and risks to your attention. Share these observations with the early adopters, use the full spectrum of perspectives and experiences to either get deeper insights into how things will actually work out, and adjust your course when necessary.

Action Items:

- Have empathy for those going through the change. Remember how you yourself may have felt early on. Leaders are often months ahead of employees in their understanding of what the change will entail. Realize others need to catch up to you and constantly check that they are with you, not lost in the forest.
- Realize that others may not have the sense of direction, control and understanding you have from your position as leader, but feel directionless, powerless and confused — emotions that generate fear and resistance, and cause people to take on a more cautious change adoption style. You, as leader, can help them by showing a clear direction, empower them and help them understand both the reasons for and the ramifications of the change.
- Early adopters can be frustrated with those who are less tolerant of risk. Be mindful of this and get to the core of the concerns raised. Use "The Language of Change: How to Tap Into the Positive Side of Change Resistance" as a guide to effectively deal with resistance.
- Making progress is the goal that is often difficult to qualify when you are in the midst of a change. Every enterprise will have an overall change cadence you need to understand and work with. Most important is to understand the adoption style of each group, and use leadership appropriate to each style to continue to improve the cadence of change and increase the overall speed of change over time.⁵

Use Individual Adoption Styles to Increase Teamwork and Collaboration

Each individual has a preferred individual adoption style when it comes to change. None of the four styles — early adopter, influenced, go-along or won't change — is a judgment about whether they are better or right. They are a way to identify where an individual stands with regard to change in general or a specific change process. The adoption styles provide a method to communicate the starting position of employees and set expectations accordingly. Identifying the different styles and providing a language to deal with these differences help ease tensions within groups that are confronted with change. Armed with this understanding, leaders and employees can learn to respect the different starting positions and more appropriately interact with each other.

Imagine the long-distance race again: If the goal is for everyone to either finish the race or — in the case of the won't change, to decide not to run — then being a runner, jogger or walker isn't an issue. But the information about the team's fitness capabilities and their preferred speeds will set

expectations about when to expect everyone to finish. As more such races are run, the runners can coach the joggers and teach them some techniques to speed up, while the joggers can help the walkers walk faster. Over time, as the group tackles more events, they will get fitter and faster.⁵

As a CIO or business transformation leader, you can coach your team to build their change fitness and enable faster adoption over time. Progress is the goal. Identifying adoption styles and using this as a tool for change can arm your enterprise to deal with the swift and uncertain changes digital business will bring.

Action Items:

- Identify your style, and use it to assess your interactions with peers and employees. Be mindful of situations where there are adoption style differences, and examine whether this awareness assists in more meaningful discussions and understanding.
- Use the model across your organization. Start with your leadership team. Have them self-identify where they are in relation to your vision or changes.
- As a leader, it is critical that, as a leader, you are very aware of remaining fair when introducing this model. Stress to employees that one style is not necessarily better than another, and that they are all needed to work together. Keep the end goal in mind, which is to increase the ability of your organization to change, rather than to change the individual adoption styles of your employees. As employees work together with this model, the friction within the organization will decrease. This often takes time.
- Use the adoption styles across the IT organization to open up conversations, build trust, identify risks, and appreciate diversity and differences. Having a language to identify style differences will help alleviate tensions and facilitate healthier employee interactions.
- Find work situations to try this out. Allow employees to practice in safe situations where stakes are not high. This is a shift in how the organization works and will take time to become a norm.
- As the adoption styles are embraced in more situations, encourage employees to respect a diversity of styles and value input from other viewpoints. Note whether there is a change in collaboration and respect.

Use Individual Adoption Styles to Break Down Your Organization's Barriers to Change

The individual adoption style framework is a great way to harness and honor the differences in pace of change within your enterprise. It provides a way to identify and talk about differences in a nonpersonal and nonjudgmental manner. By respecting employees' individual styles and using them in a positive way, CIOs can, over time, increase the ability of an organization to change.

Gartner Recommended Reading

Some documents may not be available as part of your current Gartner subscription.

"Driving Business Transformation by Changing the Culture"

"Trust and Resilience: The Future of Digital Business Risk"

"Give it a Try! Experiment Your Way to Digital Business"

"Three Essential First Steps for Leading Transformational Change"

Evidence

¹ D.R. Conner, "Managing at the Speed of Change: How Resilient Managers Succeed and Prosper Where Others Fail," Random House, 2006.

² Gartner interactions with CIOs from October 2014 to September 2015 at Gartner events, face-to-face meetings and client inquiries.

³ P-15031 State of the Digital Workplace. The research was conducted online from July through August 2015 among 2,000 respondents in the U.S., the U.K., France and Germany. Question 4 revealed that 20% of respondents consider themselves experts in using digital technology at work. These are likely to be early adopters.

⁴ See the "Speed of adoption" section on Prosci's [website](#).

⁵ [Team in Training](#) is a fundraising and endurance sports training program that raises money for blood cancer research. "It doesn't matter if you're an athlete or in perfect shape. Our coaches will train you to cross the finish line."

More on This Topic

This is part of an in-depth collection of research. See the collection:

- [Leading Into the Learning Curve as Your Digital Business Matures](#)

GARTNER HEADQUARTERS**Corporate Headquarters**

56 Top Gallant Road
Stamford, CT 06902-7700
USA
+1 203 964 0096

Regional Headquarters

AUSTRALIA
BRAZIL
JAPAN
UNITED KINGDOM

For a complete list of worldwide locations,
visit <http://www.gartner.com/technology/about.jsp>

© 2015 Gartner, Inc. and/or its affiliates. All rights reserved. Gartner is a registered trademark of Gartner, Inc. or its affiliates. This publication may not be reproduced or distributed in any form without Gartner's prior written permission. If you are authorized to access this publication, your use of it is subject to the [Usage Guidelines for Gartner Services](#) posted on gartner.com. The information contained in this publication has been obtained from sources believed to be reliable. Gartner disclaims all warranties as to the accuracy, completeness or adequacy of such information and shall have no liability for errors, omissions or inadequacies in such information. This publication consists of the opinions of Gartner's research organization and should not be construed as statements of fact. The opinions expressed herein are subject to change without notice. Although Gartner research may include a discussion of related legal issues, Gartner does not provide legal advice or services and its research should not be construed or used as such. Gartner is a public company, and its shareholders may include firms and funds that have financial interests in entities covered in Gartner research. Gartner's Board of Directors may include senior managers of these firms or funds. Gartner research is produced independently by its research organization without input or influence from these firms, funds or their managers. For further information on the independence and integrity of Gartner research, see "[Guiding Principles on Independence and Objectivity](#)."