You Are Who You Meet

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Who do you talk to? Who attends that meeting with you? Who is in your cell phone directory? Although you may consider the answers to those questions to be rather unimportant, they may actually shape who you are! Understanding why and how we develop our network of contacts may[m1] help us understand the importance of "others" around us.

Our perceptions, moods, attitudes, and behaviors have been shown to be a function of those around us. Research has demonstrated that learning may take place by copying the behavior, emotions, and/or attitude of others. We find evidence of this in social network research[1] and even in neurological research on mirror neurons.[2] So, when Craig Nelson and Dave Reingold tell us that learning is improved when students study in groups, they may be on to something![3]

In fact, it has been demonstrated that students in training sessions adopt the attitudes and behaviors of those who are in their class and learn differently than others in a different section but with the same instructor and instruction material.[4] While I am not dismissing the importance of individual teaching behavior, too often classroom dynamics are ignored and instead we focus on the instructor. Everyone who teaches knows that the same class can be different from one semester to another and one section to another depending on who is in the classroom. So, while we may agonize over differences in student grades and teacher ratings, some of it may be out of our control[m2]. Blame it on the Registrar's Office!

Let's expand beyond the classroom now. Other interaction partners abound in our lives. Work relationships affect how we think about our job and the technologies that we use and they affect our behavior on the job, including whether or not we quit.[5] Specifically, some of my research found that individuals adopt similar computer attitudes and computer use as those with whom they interact.[6] A separate set of analyses found that individuals who have similar interaction partners similarly decide to stay or leave an organization.[7]

The number of contacts we have also matters in our lives. Individuals who have a greater number of contacts within an organization tend to have greater influence in that organization. At the same time, recent research reveals that following a change in technology, the greater the number of contacts an

individual has within an organization, the greater the amount of stress experienced by that individual. So, individuals who interact with a lot of others are under a great deal more stress than those who keep to themselves. That should come as no surprise. Stress following a technology change was also found to be strongly correlated with [m3]job efficacy (negative relationship), power, and Motivating Potential Score (research in progress, Burkhardt, 2007). Prior to the technology change, stress was only related to Motivating Potential Score (individuals with more complex job characteristics are the ones who are stressed). But what is interesting in additional analyses is that there may be some support for the Peter Principle (individuals in an organization rise to their level of incompetence). Specifically, it has been found that those who have been promoted have a significant decrease in job efficacy even one year following promotion. But, a corollary finding, let's call it the Paul and Mary Principle, may be more significant for those considering promotion, namely that those who are promoted experience a significant increase in stress over time. In other words, is that promotion really worth it[m4]?

Not only does the number of contacts within your organization make a difference but the number of external contacts matters as well. Research has demonstrated [m5]that the greater the number of external contacts one has, the more innovative a person tends to be.[8] If one simply focuses on internal contacts, there is greater likelihood for the "not invented here syndrome."

While most of the above research examined face to face contacts, some Juniata students and I were interested in the interrelatedness of cell phone attitudes with [m6]cell phone, text message, and instant message contacts. We collected data from sports teams here at the College. Specifically, team members were asked to complete a survey regarding their cell phone use and attitudes and then to identify which team members are listed in their cell phone directory and which team members they instant message (IM). Findings were rather surprising. It appears that individuals' use and attitudes toward cell phones are more similar to those of the persons listed in their cell phone directory than those with whom they IM.[9] This finding provides support for the belief that there are specific networks of influence that we attend to depending on the activity or problem at hand.

Do I think that we are always influenced by those around us to the point of little or no introspection when it comes to decision making? The answer is a resounding "NO!" However, there are certain types of individuals, certain times in our lives, and certain external circumstances which may make us more likely to look to those around us to help define our reality. To begin, the type of individual more likely to be influenced by others (all else being equal) is generally someone who does not hold strong convictions, is a high self-monitor, is young, and is female. My father used to say "if you don't stand for something you'll stand for anything." This saying is a great way to demonstrate that those who

hold strong conviction are less likely to be influenced by others. A variable which addresses the likelihood of modifying your attitudes or behaviors is self monitoring. Self-monitoring reflects the degree to which an individual uses cues from social interaction to adjust their attitudes and behaviors.[10] A high self-monitor is someone who is more likely to adjust their behavior in response to such social interaction cues. Thus, it is likely that this type of person will adopt attitudes similar to others because in comparison, a low self-monitor either doesn't understand the attitudes of others or, perhaps, doesn't care. Research findings support this conclusion.[11] [m7]The saying that "older people are more set in their ways" also finds some support. Younger people are generally more uncertain regarding how they feel about something or how they should react and thus are more likely to adapt to the views and behaviors of those around them. You can actually see some evidence of this if you watch young people dancing when you see them watching and copying the dance techniques of those around them. Women are also more likely to become more similar to those around them. Regardless of the reason why some may be more susceptible to social influence than others, the caveat "all else being equal" should be kept in mind. For example, we see that as a woman becomes older, she is less likely to change to become more similar to those around her. So, unless you control for the effects of age, the relationship between gender and social influence may be unnoticeable.

There are also "times in our lives" when we are more easily influenced by others. We already addressed youth. In addition, any time when there is uncertainty in our lives we tend to be more easily influenced. So, when we are "new to a job" or "new to a relationship" we are more likely to adopt the attitudes and behaviors of others. Uncertainty also explains why people adopt the behaviors and attitudes of others following a technological change.[12] On a larger scale, the effects of uncertainty can be seen when people put aside their differences and work together to create a common goal during crises such as a war, environmental disasters, or terrorist threat. All of this is related to our susceptibility to social influence and addresses the fact that in many ways, "You are who you meet."

Knowing that we are a function of those around us has helped people predict whether employees would vote in a union and whether or not new technology is likely to be adopted.[13] Looking at an organization's social network will allow us to increase the probability of diffusing new technology, practices, and culture. By selecting individuals who are more central in an organization as change advocates, we are more likely to influence the outcome of the change process. As an individual, we are more likely ourselves to influence others if we interact with many others or if we have a close friend or associate who interacts with many others. Being someone who is the link between two networks also

makes it more likely that you will influence others. So, it may be worthwhile to pay attention to your interaction patterns if you would like to influence others.

It is important to understand the values, moods, and desires of those you spend time with because we have seen that others influence our moods, attitudes, and behaviors both at work and in our personal lives. Given this fact, we can and perhaps should be proactive in managing our relationships because these in turn may affect who we are. Be careful what clubs you join, what jobs you take, who you list in your cell phone directory, and who you befriend!

NOTES

[1] N.S. Contractor and E.M. Eisenberg, "Communication Networks and New Media in Organizations," in Janet Fulk and Charles Steinfield, eds., *Organizations and Communication Technology* (Newbury Park: Sage, 1990); B.H. Erickson, "The relational basis of attitudes," in B. Wellman and S. Berkowitz, eds., *Social Structure: A Network Approach* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp.99-121.

[2] R. Sylwester, *Connecting Brain Processes to School Policies and Practices,* (2002). From http://www.brainconnection.com/content/181_1/ ; V.S. Ramachandran, "Mirror Neurons", (2000). From www.edge.org/documents/archive/edge69.html.

[3] C. Nelson, Juniata College Training Seminar, Faculty Conference, Fall 2006; and I.D. Reingold, "Chemistry as a Second Language," *Juniata Voices*, 6 (2006).

[4] Marlene Burkhardt, "The Development of Similarity in Technology-Related Perceptions and Behaviors among Training Cohorts," *Association of Pennsylvania Business and Economics Faculties*, (Fall 2005).

[5] M.E. Burkhardt and D.J. Brass, "Changing Patterns or Patterns of Change: The Effects of a Change In Technology on Social Network Structure and Power," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 35 (1990): 104-127; and M.E. Burkhardt, "Turnover Following a Technological Change," *Computer Science and Information Systems, Part IV: Computer Science Research in Relation to Information Technology and Information System,* (2005): 237-253.

[6] M.E. Burkhardt, "Social Interaction Effects Following a Technological Change: A Longitudinal Investigation," *Academy of Management Journal*, 37 (1994): 869-898.

[7] Burkhardt, "Turnover Following a Technological Change," pp. 237-253.

[8] N.S. Contractor and E.M. Eisenberg, "Communication Networks and New Media in Organizations," in Janet Fulk and Charles Steinfield, eds., *Organizations and Communication Technology* (Newbury Park: Sage, 1990).

[9] M. E. Burkhardt, G. Miceli, T. Kimmel, J. Leonard, W. Russell, "Which Networks Determine Cell Phone Attitudes?" *Association of Pennsylvania Business and Economics Faculties*, (Fall 2006).

[10] Snyder, "The Self-Monitoring of Expressive Behavior," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 30 (1974): 526-537.

[11] Burkhardt, "Social Interaction Effects Following a Technological Change: A Longitudinal Investigation," pp.869-898.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Krackhardt, personal consulting; and Burkhardt and Brass, "Changing Patterns or Patterns of Change: The Effects of a Change In Technology on Social Network Structure and Power," pp. 104-127.