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## **Change Management by Metaphor: Life in the 100 Acre Wood**

*By John A. Lanier*

### **Introduction**

That which got us “here” may not get us “there.” This is a common conundrum for the middle market. Indeed, it is also an issue for behemoths. Each “excellent” company featured in Tom Peters and Richard Waterman’s 1982 bestseller subsequently stubbed their toes. That should come as no surprise. The operating environment is in continual flux. The point is not so much that change happens as how leaders prepare for inevitable change and react to it. Even better, how do leaders anticipate change and transform its inevitability into a competitive differentiator?

After entrepreneurs traverse through Tom Davenport’s forming, storming, and norming to get to performing, leaders may grow complacent with their success. Eventually, inertia peters out and the injection of fresh initiative is required. These initiatives constitute change. However, change is the enemy of status quo and is de facto evil to coddlers of complacency. Moreover, such change agency may require the leader to invest already overtaxed bandwidth. The velocity and quantity of change both accelerates the rendezvous with the brick wall and exacerbates the collision. Consequently, the performance curve may become asymptotic, i.e., experience diminishing returns. Oh, my! What is a leader to do? In order to reinvigorate positive slope on the performance curve for the firm, leadership needs to critique its change management strategy. Accordingly, this article endeavors to reconcile the Diffusion of Innovations model with Winnie-the-Pooh characters for change management insights. Indeed, the 100 Acre Wood may hold some useful surprises for intrepid change agents.

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*Change management profiles fit predictably along the Diffusion of Innovations curve*

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## Diffusion of Innovation

Everett Rogers introduced the diffusion of innovations in his 1962 landmark work. Rogers used the bell curve to impart the distribution of the population relative to the introduction of change into the subjects' environment. Innovators constitute 2.5 percent of the population. These may resemble your colleagues who absolutely must be the first to try new technology, restaurants, books, vacation spots, or exercises. Marketing executives love innovators' ability to catalyze viral reactions.

Next come the early adopters. These people comprise 13.5 percent of the population. While early adopters are not necessarily the first to buy a Prius, they quickly embrace the idea after sufficient guinea pigs (innovators) prove the viability of the idea. If innovators are the marines, then the early adopters are the Seabees who spawn standards and infrastructure.

The early majority is one of Rogers' two major population groups. The late majority is

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*Storytelling is an  
effective change  
management tool.*

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the other. Each represents 34% of the population.

Combined, they represent two thirds of the population.

Whereas innovators and early adopters establish markets, the early and late majorities make markets through economies of scale. Suburbanites are good examples. The

early majority is the first to buy houses in the new subdivision and the late majority completes the developments.

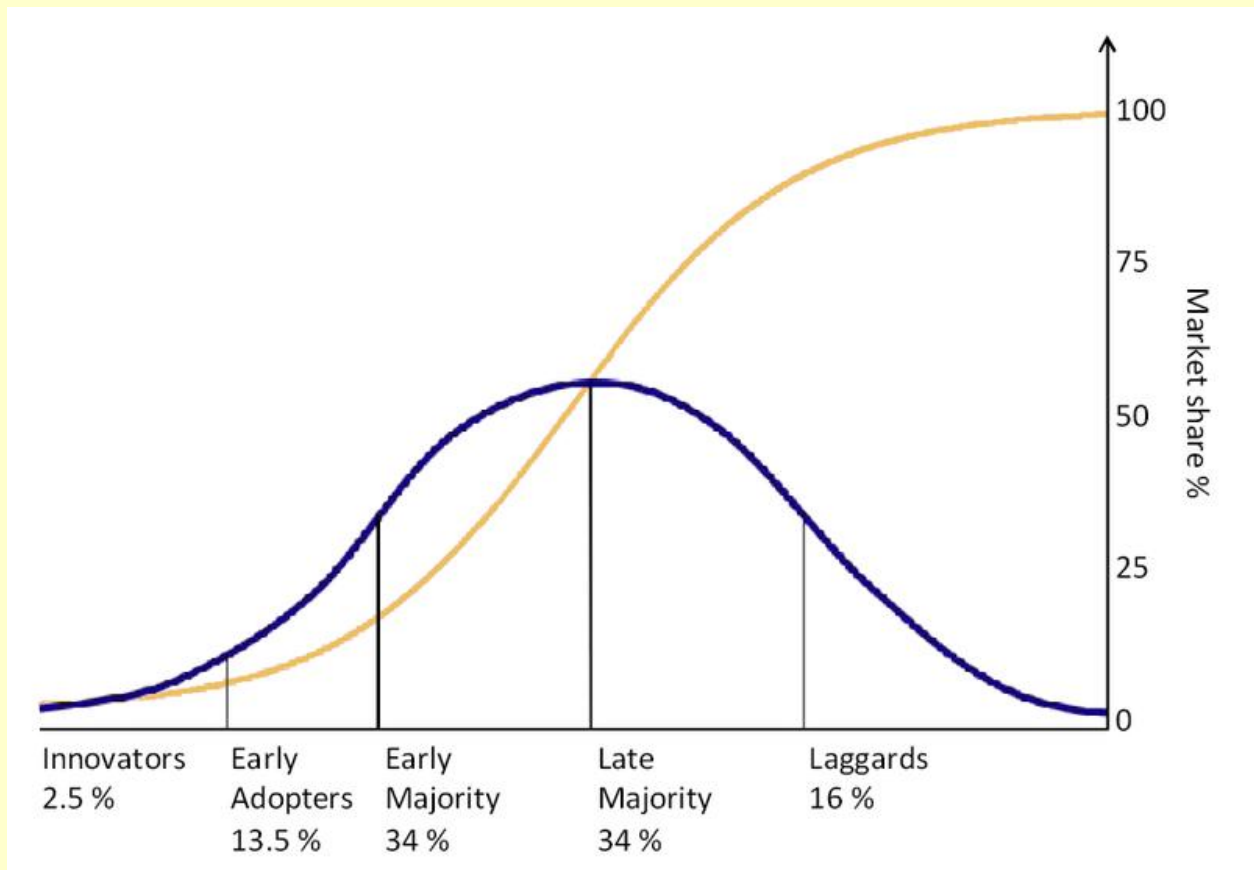
Laggards bring up the rear, if they react at all. Laggards account for 16% of the population. Laggards are the reason banks still have tellers and insurance companies still have paper forms. Markets can still make money on them, but not as much as is the case on lower overhead customers. Ironically, everyone could enjoy lower prices if laggards migrated at least toward the late majority.

## The Pivot

At this point the categories are clarified. However, the examples have been externally applied. What happens if we look inward to the dynamics of a typical organization? It does not take Freud to realize that the same bell curve applies to the followers who the leader needs to influence in a certain direction. But how might leaders communicate the need for change? Storytelling is a great leadership tool. Storytelling indulges humor and accommodates allegory. Storytelling may benefit by the application of metaphor. If we visit the 100 Acre Wood for a scenario, we benefit from the anthropomorphic characters to which many of us have been acculturated. Let's venture to the land of Christopher Robin and Winnie-the-Pooh.

### Christopher Robin's Friends

A.A. Milne introduced us the 100 Acre Wood in 1926. Disney augmented the phenomenon in 1966. Winnie-the-Pooh is a childhood staple. Grown-ups also enjoy the loveable honey addict. Pooh's friends plot nicely along Rogers' diffusion curve. Accordingly, they provide allegorical potential and metaphorical utility for change agents.



Rogers, E. M. (2003). *Diffusion of innovations* (5th ed.). New York, NY: Free Press.

All organizations need Tiggers. Is there any doubt that this bouncing bundle of energy is Rogers' innovator? Tigger is so enthusiastic that he borders on annoying. Can't you just see Tigger cross-examining you in front of your friends for not seeing the wisdom buying Facebook IPO stock?

At the opposite tail of Rogers' curve, could the laggard be anyone but Eeyore? "Turn back, it'll never work!" Do we have any of these in our organizations? While it may be tempting—and indeed necessary in some instances—to send Eeyore to the dog food factory, Eeyore-type personalities may fill some valuable functions in the organization. I nicknamed one of my dearest colleagues Eeyore. He even sounds like Eeyore. It stuck.

His “gift” is finding the weaknesses in initiatives. Sometimes Eeyores are ideally suited for governance mechanisms like internal audits. Obviously, Eeyores should never run sales.

The other residents of Christopher Robin’s 100 Acre Wood may be a bit more challenging to plot along Rogers’ curve. However, this could also be fun. Let’s start on Eeyore’s end of the curve and move toward Tigger. Four characters are gradients of late majority: Kanga, Roo, Owl, and Rabbit.

Kanga and Roo are a package deal. Much like Freud’s id and ibid, the characters tug at each other with the risk-averse Kanga winning out over her impulsive son, Roo. Unlike Eeyore, Kanga is not a pessimist, but rather cautious. Kanga is pleasant, but exacts fulfillment by eschewing adventure. Roo represents the part of her that dreams about adventure but does not have the resolve to follow through.

Owl and Rabbit are kindred spirits. Both are bright and are wont to advertise their intelligence. Owl is a pontificator. He is more of a talker than a doer. Owl would make a good pundit on a talk show. Rabbit is a turf-conscious, task-oriented planner. Whenever Rabbit is motivated to action, his neighbors are assured of Frederick Taylor-like scientific management efficiency.

Three characters are gradients of early majority. Christopher Robin is the only human in the 100 Acre Wood. He is affable and stoic. He is not excitable. Robin is more of a mentor and mensch for a mistake-prone cast who needs a calm sensei to coach them through solutions. Interestingly, Robin is near the middle of the bell curve and symbolizes leadership balance.

Piglet is excitable and worrisome. Were it not for Pooh’s encouragement, Piglet would likely remain on the sidelines of activities. However, Piglet is easily catalyzed to action by Pooh. Pooh is on the early adopter boundary with early majority, more by accident than purpose. Pooh ventures forth in pursuit of the honey jar, but without cogent plans and devoid of cognition about unintended consequences.

Gopher is the only early adopter. He is a trained engineer after all, and his passion is to figure things out. Sometimes his endeavors lead to setback, but he is never discouraged by failure. He just resolves to dig his way through adversity until the end result is satisfactory.

Reflect on the math for a moment. There are nine characters in the 100 Acre Wood (if we package Kanga and Roo as one). Each represents approximately 11 percent of the population. The table below shows how the distribution of characters fits Rogers’ curve. The distribution of Pooh and his friends is eerily similar to Rogers’ model. Go figure.

Diffusion Category	Category Percentage Approximations	Character	Percentage of Population Approximations
Innovator	2.5%	Tigger	11%
Early adopter	13.5%	Gopher	11%
Early Majority	34%	Pooh Piglet Christopher Robin	33%
Late Majority	34%	Rabbit Owl Kanga/Roo	33%
Laggard	16%	Eeyore	11%

### Change Management Application

Leaders might consider metaphorical allegories like our friends in the 100 Acre Wood when strategizing change management in support of major initiatives. Especially for intellectual leaders, the eclectic may sound elusive. However, it just might work.

Consider one of my recent experiences. I was engaged to coach a group of executives through assimilating a new CEO in a most contentious situation. As a benchmark, I posited a “Pooh scale.” Double entendre was not the intent. I asked the stakeholders to consider a temperament spectrum bounded by Tigger on one end and Eeyore on the other. I first asked each C-level participant to plot themselves along the spectrum. Then, I asked them to plot each other along the spectrum. The variation was illuminating and beneficial. Perspective is enlightening. The exercise was a version of a 360 assessment and broke the ice for valuable discussion around leadership team cohesion. No one was advocating faux harmony. The group needed to know whether it could trust each other before deciding how to disagree without being disagreeable. The most volatile member of the team decided to opt out of his own volition. The team quickly congealed into a cohesive unit. Thanks Pooh! The trailing question is how your style might take advantage of such mechanisms to plot your stakeholders along Rogers’ curve as part of a mechanism to create a change management strategy.

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