“If you want to understand how trends work, a good place to start is with what’s known as diffusion research, which is the study of how ideas and innovations spread. Diffusion researchers do things like spending five years studying the adoption of irrigation techniques in a Colombian mountain village, or developing complex matrices to map the spread of new math in the Pittsburgh school system. What they do may seem like a far cry from, say, how the Tommy Hilfiger thing spread from Harlem to every suburban mall in the country, but it really isn’t: both are about how new ideas spread from one person to the next.

One the most famous diffusion studies is Bruce Ryan and Neal Gross’s analysis of the spread of hybrid seed corn in Greene County, Iowa, in the 1930’s. The new seed corn was introduced there in about 1928, and it was superior in every respect to the seed that had been used by farmers for decades.

But it wasn’t adopted all at once. Of 259 farmers studied by Ryan and Gross, only a handful had started planting the new seed by 1933. In 1934, 16 more took the plunge. In 1935, 21 more followed, the next year there were 36, and the year after that a whopping 61. By 1941, all but two of the 259 farmers studied were using the new seed. In the language of diffusion research, the handful of farmers who started trying hybrid seed corn at the very beginning of the thirties were the “innovators”, the adventurous ones.

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The slightly larger group that followed them was the “early adopters.” They were the opinion leaders in the community, the respected, thoughtful people who watched and analyzed what those wild innovators were doing and then did it themselves.

Then came the big bulge of farmers in 1936, 1937, and 1938—the “early majority” and the “late majority,” which is to say the deliberate and the skeptical masses, who would never try anything
until the most respected farmers had tried it. Only after they had been converted did the “laggards,” *the most traditional of all*, follow suit.

The critical thing about this sequence is that is almost entirely interpersonal. According to Ryan and Gross, only the innovators relied to any great extent on radio advertising and farm journals and seed salesmen in making their decision to switch to the hybrid. *Everyone else made his decision overwhelmingly because of the example and the opinions of his neighbors and peers.*

This is exactly the process by which *your* redesigns will be accepted by staff. *Your* redesigns are simply *new ideas*, just like the hybrid seeds. Your staff are Iowa farmers. So, a few “innovators,” a few adventurous staff, that is, will be excited by your team’s redesigns. All other staff will greet them with much skepticism. Bottom line: this is natural, so get comfortable with it.

Seek out innovators and work closely with them. They are great partners during testing. Let others bide their time and observe the results of testing. Early adopters will want to join you by the time rapid redesign testing has concluded. Then there will be a time gap. You will have to do a good job of presenting your redesign, your test results, and your vision of a new patient experience at this juncture, but should you accomplish this, you will see “early adopters” join you. These people will be your allies in your initial “trial runs”.

Early majority and late majority folks will not be converted into supporters—most likely, until you have an extensive trial run. Only after they are comfortable with the model will they begin to dwell on its advantages. And then they will become full-fledged supporters.

And, forget the laggards. You will lose too much precious time trying to convert them.