

**Toward a Strategy for  
Innovation in Community Sport**

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### **Executive Summary**

The ultimate success of any new program or product depends on changing attitudes and inducing uptake among its intended users. Canada's national and provincial/territorial sport organizations struggle to achieve this success among Canada's 33,000+ community sport organizations (CSOs). Simple communication about new program offerings frequently proves inadequate in triggering adoption at the CSO level. A carefully designed and implemented strategy for identifying and engaging receptive CSOs is needed; otherwise effort is likely to be dissipated and momentum lost. This paper reviews relevant findings from organization studies research in the areas of networks, organizational learning, and diffusion of innovation theories, and applies them to the community sport context. The contemporary Canadian Sport for Life (CS4L) movement is used as a case study. Implications for the diffusion of the CS4L innovation are discussed, and a strategy based on the research is proposed. The strategy identifies factors associated with CSO receptivity and successful progress through the knowledge, persuasion and decision stages of Rogers' (2003) decision model and outlines steps required to identify the most receptive CSOs and create conditions to support and facilitate moving those CSOs to a decision to adopt CS4L. Following this strategy should result in improved efficiency and effectiveness in engaging CSOs and diffusing innovation to the community level of sport.

### **Introduction**

Canadian sport is organized hierarchically, with a division of responsibility following familiar political jurisdictions: national, provincial/territorial, and municipal or "community". National Sport Organizations (NSOs) are typically constituted of Provincial/Territorial Sport Organizations (PTSOs) and these in turn are usually constituted of Community Sport Organizations (CSOs) or "clubs". In the Canadian system NSOs are responsible for the organization of national championships, the fielding of national teams, and in many cases for the creation of national development programs such as coach education (i.e. National Coaching Certification Program – NCCP). The regional delivery of such development programs is in the hands of the PTSOs and the main market is coaches, officials and leaders working at the CSO level. This creates a marketing dilemma in which NSOs develop programs they themselves will not deliver, yet upon the success of which they rely, to the extent that they require a steady supply of trained leaders for the advancement of their sport as a whole. When new or revised programs are created, NSOs and PTSOs frequently depend on simple communication (e.g. announcements, publications, presentations) to promote them, a marked difference from the world of commerce in which any innovation down to a simple re-packaging of an existing product is accompanied by a relatively comprehensive and sophisticated promotional campaign. This limited approach meets with commensurately limited results. Moving new programs to the point of delivery and adoption is a significant challenge in Canadian sport, and a concern not

only to NSOs and PTSOs, but also to the agencies that fund program creation including government, private foundations, and sponsors.

A case in point is Canadian Sport for Life (CS4L), a movement to improve the quality of sport and physical activity in Canada. CS4L is arguably the most significant evolution of Canadian sport since the “kitchen table to boardroom table” professionalization of sport organizations in the early 1970’s. Since 2004-05, CS4L has made significant progress toward entrenching its Long-Term Athlete Development (LTAD) model among National Sport Organizations, is actively working toward entrenchment at the Provincial/Territorial Sport Organization level, and is beginning to engage community level sport organizations. The CS4L movement has also branched laterally to engage school-based sport and activity, municipal recreation, and public health sectors as well as a number of other organizations. This rapid advance has been strongly abetted by Sport Canada and Provincial/Territorial (P/T) government support and by the centralized, professionally led nature of NSOs and PTSOs. However, a much greater challenge looms: reaching tens of thousands of CSOs. The CS4L vision is one of radical change of sport values, structures, and processes, resulting in a nation-wide reformation of sport delivery: since the mass of sport participation occurs in communities, success cannot be claimed if NSOs and PTSOs alone adopt CS4L.

The cornerstone of CS4L is the LTAD model, which proposes that athletes pass through a series of defined stages on their way to high performance. Between 2005 and 2008 the foundational LTAD model, primarily of interest to sport organizations and coaches, was extended using related theories of Physical Literacy (fundamental movement and sport skill competence by youth) and Active for Life (life-long activity for all, independent of participation in organized sport). This approach increased the appeal of the original sport-focused “playground to podium” LTAD to recreation, education and health organizations. In addition there has been a shift in emphasis toward ethical and policy considerations including holistic human development, partnership building and sport “system alignment”. As the scope of activity expanded beyond LTAD model building to promoting a broader CS4L movement, and as issues of fund raising, communication, and marketing have become more prominent, the Leadership Team expanded from an initial six individuals to a group of 18 with a diversity of expertise. While the expansion reflects the broadened *scope* of CS4L activity, it is beyond any reasonable expectation that a group of 18 can manage the envisioned *scale* of CS4L, particularly as it engages the community level.

The purpose of this paper is to briefly review some elements of organization studies research as they apply to the diffusion of innovation, using CS4L as a case study, and on that basis to propose a strategic approach to engaging community sport. I suggest here that given the magnitude of the challenge of reaching CSOs with the limited human and financial resources available, it is essential to take a highly strategic, targeted approach. In designing that strategy, it is useful to rely on a body of technical expertise not usually tapped by sport: the canon of organization studies research, in which the process by which innovation diffuses through groups

has been extensively studied. The extent to which CS4L leaders harness this knowledge and move beyond the simple “telling” that typifies promotion of new sport programs may determine the success of the movement as it faces its greatest challenge, the spread of CS4L into thousands of communities across Canada. By extension, understanding how innovations diffuse into community sport should be of interest to anyone in the sport system charged with funding, creating or implementing new programs.

### **Community Sport Organizations in Canada**

Canada’s not-for-profit sector comprises over 161,000 organizations of which 33,649 are in sport and recreation- the largest single sub-group (Statistics Canada, 2004). Compared to other not-for-profits, Canada’s sport organizations are among the least reliant on government-sourced revenue, with 65% of revenue from non-governmental sources (Statistics Canada, 2004). Sport makes up 21% of all not-for-profit and voluntary organizations but has only 6% of employees (Statistics Canada, 2004). NSOs and PTSOs receive government funding, but make up a tiny minority of the total number of sport organizations while in contrast community sport organizations (CSOs) typically receive no government funds. In consequence, 73% of sport organizations have no paid staff, the second-highest percentage among all not-for-profits. Of those sport organizations with staff, 57% had 4 or fewer paid employees (Statistics Canada, 2004). Sport is therefore a divided sub-sector: a small group of funded and professionally managed NSOs and PTSOs amid a comparatively vast number of self-funded, volunteer-managed CSOs. Yet, large organizations with professional management can be found within the ranks of CSOs as well: just over 100 clubs account for approximately 70% of the Ontario Soccer Association’s 519,000 participants, an average of over 3,600 participants per club within that cohort (G. Bradbury, personal communication, March 27, 2011).

This suggests that Canadian CSOs have a diverse range of structures and capacities and therefore may evince a range of responses to innovation opportunities. In the smallest CSOs, unilateral decisions made by individual volunteers may prevail, while in the largest, decisions may be based on complex interactions between volunteer directors and employees jointly weighing strategic imperatives against available opportunities. In the smallest, Rogers’ model of adoption by a single individual may be appropriate; in the largest the model of organizational adoption may be more relevant. Similarly the capacities to search for and assimilate information, to solicit opinions from a peer network, to weigh multiple options and to recruit resources to actualize implementation may vary widely within the CSO cohort. The following discussion will therefore consider possibilities in both larger, more complex and smaller, simpler CSOs.

### **What is the CS4L Innovation?**

The fact that organizations change is beyond dispute, and change is a central topic in organization studies. Change requires energy; it implies the de-structuring and re-structuring of

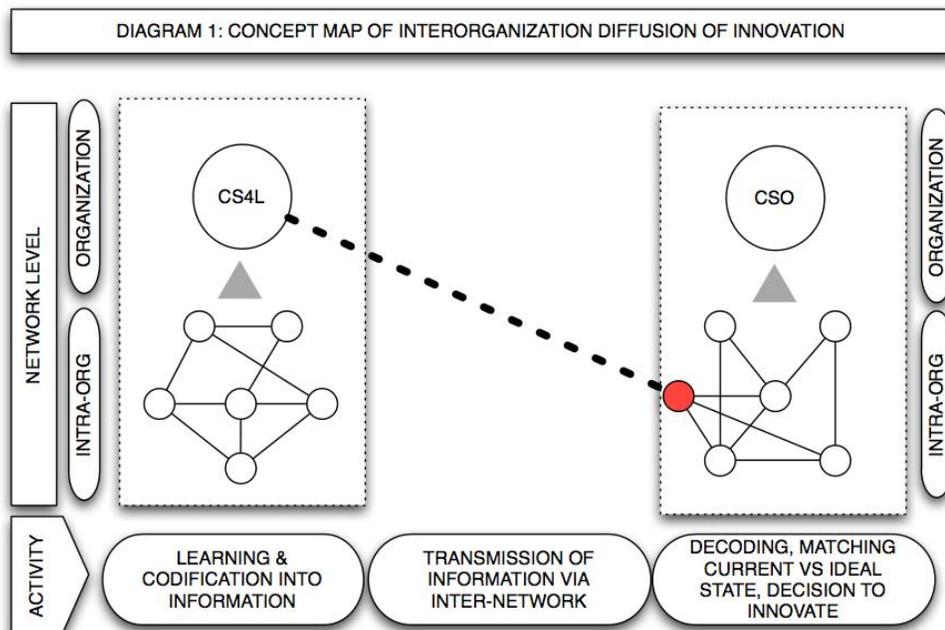
processes and, potentially, of institutions and values (Dooley & Van de Ven, 1999). Unsurprisingly organizations, like individuals, are often viewed as resistant to or wary of change.

How is the CS4L movement proposing to change sport? The content of CS4L is a set of ideas. These ideas are drawn from a broad base of scientific research and empirically derived sport coaching practices, and constructed into a theoretical framework of optimal human development as expressed through participation in physical activity and sport (Balyi et al, 2006). Underlying the CS4L theory is a set of values that has been made explicit as the movement advanced (Way, 2010). Adoption of CS4L implies a fundamental re-evaluation and re-conceptualization of how to do sport in a way consistent with the framework and values. The vision of “full integration” of CS4L will primarily be realized by changed thought-processes that will result, CS4L leaders hope, in different behaviours by sport, recreation and physical activity leaders and deliverers. These changed ways of thinking and acting are neither prescribed nor clearly defined but rather must be constructed for and within each target organization based on its understanding of the meaning of “good CS4L practice” and a comparison of that understanding to its existing practices. Thus the first stage of CS4L adoption is not in itself change, but the setting up of a dissonance that may, depending on the adopting (target) organization, manifest as a perceived need for structural, political, or process change to bring existing practice into conformity with CS4L principles. There appears to be an implicit assumption by CS4L leaders that there will be some degree of gap between ideal CS4L practice and current target organization practice to be resolved (Balyi et al, 2006; Way, 2010).

Mintzberg (1999) proposed a typology of organization forms and functions. Functionally, firms may *find* (e.g. mining companies), *keep* (e.g. libraries), *distribute* (e.g. courier companies) or *transform* (e.g. manufacturers), or perform some combination of functions. According to this typology, the primary function of many national, provincial/territorial and community sport organizations is the *transformation* of participants or athletes from lower performance states to higher performance states. A “performance state” is some combination of physical, motor, cognitive and emotional aptitudes that together contribute to success in the chosen sport. “Success” need not imply improved competitive performance; it may also include improved competence, personal satisfaction, and retention of the participant in sport activities (Balyi et al, 2006). The sport organization both sets up and manages structures to effect this transformation, for example, programs of competition, training and development, and deploys other resources to support it, such as coaches, equipment, and facilities. Coaches are seen as a central component of athlete development, or athlete transformation (Balyi et al, 2006). Coaching practice itself is knowledge based; the coach learns through a combination of formal and informal training and personal experience, and applies that knowledge to athlete development by designing training regimens, selecting competitions, and recommending a variety of other actions in areas such as sport equipment, nutrition, rest and recovery, injury prevention and management, and so on. It is therefore likely that full adoption of CS4L by a sport organization will result in some degree of transformation of organizational structures and routines to bring them into conformity with CS4L

principles, and that a key transformation will be knowledge transfer to and learning by sport coaches.

In this light, the CS4L innovation and the process of diffusing it may be defined as *a set of ideas and values constituting a coherent framework for optimal sport participant development, which is transmitted from a central CS4L organization through inter-personal and inter-organizational networks to target individuals and organizations. The result of this knowledge transfer is a sequential process of understanding, perception of need, and restructuring to effect a harmonization with CS4L principles, with a consequent expectation of an improvement in sport participant performance states.*



The conceptual model (Diagram 1) presents a process in which learning and knowledge are coded into information by the CS4L internal (“intra”) network, transmitted to a “champion” in the target community sport organization (CSO) across an inter-organization network, then decoded and shared within the target intra-network as knowledge. This knowledge of the “CS4L ideal” is then matched against the current state and depending on degree of dissonance and a weighing of perceived endogenous and exogenous factors, a decision to innovate is made.

### Diffusion of Innovations: Conceptual Framework

The radical systemic change of CS4L is intended by its leaders to be transmitted across an expanding network in which they are central. In essence the concept is to capture early leaders and champions in a broad range of organizations, and add them to the ever-expanding “CS4L Team” (Way, 2010). This diffusion may be conceptualized as a social contagion (Raider & Krackhardt, 2005) in which the newly recruited infect succeeding waves of target individuals and

organizations. Valente (1996) defines the diffusion of innovations as “...the process by which a few members of a social system initially adopt an innovation, then over time more individuals adopt until all (or most) members adopt the new idea.” Diffusion of innovations has been extensively studied (Strang & Soule, 1998) with emphasis on factors contributing to the decision to adopt. Rate of diffusion studies examine the individual characteristics of adopters and the contingencies affecting them, typically resulting in a temporal distribution of Early Adopter, Early Majority, Late Majority and Laggard sub-groups (Rogers, 2003).

Rogers (2003) draws on an extensive body of accumulated research to construct a five-step innovation-decision model, including Knowledge, Persuasion, Decision, Implementation and Confirmation stages. Other scholars examining processes of innovation adoption have created similar models. Meyer and Goes (1988) propose a three-stage, nine step process in which the stages are knowledge-awareness, evaluation-choice, and adoption-implementation. Examining transfer of best practice knowledge within firms, Szulanski (1996) identifies four stages: initiation, implementation, ramp-up and integration. The prevalence and similarity of these models suggests a common conceptualization of decision-making. The models are linear, sequential and path-dependent. Progress to each successive stage is contingent on meeting a set of conditions at the prior stage. Models of diffusion of innovation also share a common set of underlying assumptions. Rogers (2003) summarizes the model as “...essentially an information-seeking and information-processing activity in which an individual is motivated to reduce uncertainty about the advantages and disadvantages of an innovation.” Information on which to base a decision is limited, resulting in uncertainty; the key activity in the early stages of the process is information gathering and weighing. The innovation-decision model has been derived from and tested in a wide variety of settings, from corporate adoption of technologies, to the adoption of hybrid seed varieties by small farm owners, to the introduction of needle-exchange programs to reduce the incidence of HIV/AIDS (Rogers, 2003).

### **Application of Network and Learning Research to Diffusion of Innovations**

Network research attempts to analyze the effect of relationships on organizational structure and function. Network studies are concerned with the nature of relationships or “ties”, their strength, structure, and the content of information passing across them. Network ties are analyzed between individuals, departments or business units, and firms. Central questions in network research are: What kinds of people (groups, organizations) do we link with? What purposes drive us to form ties? Under what circumstances will we access one actor over another in our network? How are some ties different than others, and what different functions do ties serve? (Raider & Krackhardt 2005; Gulati, Dialdin & Wang, 2005)

Learning research investigates the means by which organizations acquire and internalize knowledge in order to improve performance. Studies on organizational learning focus on motivations and means for knowledge search, the differences between acquired knowledge and earned or experiential knowledge, structures and institutions that enhance or inhibit learning, and

ways in which knowledge is encoded or routinized within organizations. Central questions include: What conditions open organizations to knowledge search and learning? What conditions and structures facilitate or inhibit knowledge transfer? How is learning internalized, and how and to what extent is learning reflected in organizational performance? (Argote & Ophir, 2005; Schulz, 2005; Ingram, 2005)

Given the central importance of communication and knowledge transfer in diffusion of innovation models, results from network and learning research are foundational (Rogers, 2003). In this section, the application of findings from network and learning research to the initial stages of the diffusion model will be considered, with reference to the CSO context.

### ***I – Prior Conditions and the Knowledge/Initiation Stage***

*Prior Conditions:* What predisposes an actor to be receptive to, or seek out, an innovation? Rogers (2003) proposes the consideration and adoption of an innovation is triggered by perceived need, defined as "...a state of dissatisfaction or frustration that occurs when an individual's desires outweigh the individual's actualities. An individual may develop a need when he or she learns that an innovation exists. Therefore innovations can lead to needs, as well as vice versa." However perceived need is only one element of a "receptive context" that predisposes to innovation (Pettigrew 1987). Caza (2000), examining innovation in a Canadian sport organization, found that long term external pressures (e.g. from government funders), the support of champions, and the existence of supporting inter-organizational links were among key factors in establishing a receptive context. Similarly in their review of diffusion of innovation in sport, Newell and Swan (1995) point to "boundary spanners" or leadership volunteers "...who also have contacts with other organizations through which they may learn about new developments that may be appropriated within their own organization or within their sport." (Newell & Swan, 1995, p.323) However, while scholars have stressed the role of context and network in shaping strategic intent to innovate, the extent to which CSOs are pro-active or reactive in the face of pressures has not been widely investigated. In very small organizations the values, capacities and predilections of individual actors such as coaches may determine openness to innovation in lieu of formal search strategies such as network building.

*Knowledge/Initiation:* In the knowledge stage, individuals first come into contact with information about innovations. Rogers (2003) distinguishes between *awareness-knowledge*, the awareness that an innovation exists; *how-to knowledge*, the knowledge of how to use an innovation; and *principles-knowledge*, knowledge of principles underlying an innovation that permits a user to generalize or adapt its use to varied circumstances. Awareness-knowledge may be transmitted by mass media, but how-to knowledge is more effectively transmitted by change-agents or peers (Rogers, 2003). In organizations Rogers proposes an Initiation Phase in which organizations identify and define a performance gap that triggers search for solutions including innovation (Rogers, 2003). Various findings from network and learning research bear on the knowledge stage:

*Weak ties:* Individuals or networks are more likely to receive novel information across weak ties, that is, less intimate, less frequently-used ties with more distant partners (Granovetter, 1973). Thus having a broader range of weak ties may enhance the intake of novel information.

*Structural Equivalence:* When equivalent (i.e. interchangeable from a consumer's perspective) actors compete, they are more likely to be highly aware of and emulate each other (Burt, 1987). For example, CSOs in the same community may watch each other's actions if they fear loss of participants to each other. The process of obtaining reports from shared network partners (e.g. parents of participants who are familiar with each CSO) thus represents a form of weak network tie.

*Absorptive Capacity:* Cohen and Levinthal (1990) observe that prior knowledge facilitates the generation and assimilation of new knowledge, and consequently, firms engaged in their own research and development activity can more easily find and exploit exogenous "spillover" knowledge originating with other firms. They term the ability to leverage existing knowledge and knowledge-search "absorptive capacity". Both breadth and depth of prior knowledge underlie absorptive capacity (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990) suggesting that a greater number of weak tie network connections, resulting in broader intake of information, will compliment internal knowledge generating activities to build absorptive capacity.

*Weak Ties and Codified Knowledge:* In their review of intraorganizational learning, Argote and Ophir (2005) cite findings indicating that when knowledge was codified (i.e. written as policies and procedures), having a large number of weak ties promoted knowledge transfer across units while, in the case of tacit, un-codified knowledge, strong ties were more effective. This may suggest that initial awareness and basic understanding of CS4L as codified knowledge may spread through weak ties, while the ability to implement CS4L-based programming through adapting content to the CSO situation, the "how-to" knowledge, may be reliant on strong ties.

*Aspiration, Exploitation, Myopia:* In organizations in which aspiration levels are set with reference to competitor performance, attaining aspiration levels is associated with a decrease in innovation (Greve, 1998, cited in Schulz, 2005). This is similar in concept to findings of "competency trap" and "myopia" in which well-developed competencies result in a diminishing-returns exploitation of existing routines, with concomitant reduction or exclusion of exploration and innovation (Levitt & March, 1988; March, 1991; cited in Schulz, 2005). Thus CSOs that perceive themselves as being highly competent, or equal or superior in performance to peers, may be less disposed to explore and innovate.

*Summary - Knowledge/Initiation:* The application of these findings to the precursor conditions and first stage of the innovation-decision model suggests a variety of effects which may influence the receptivity of CSOs to knowledge about innovation. CSOs form network ties for a number of reasons, and an increased number of weak ties may facilitate both context

receptivity and information flow and awareness about the existence of innovations, including CS4L. CSOs that perceive themselves to competing for members or resources may be more sensitized to context, more predisposed to forming network ties, and more open to innovation. Similarly CSOs which are already engaged in search for knowledge and innovation, or which have recently invented or adopted new routines, may have increased absorptive capacity. Conversely, CSOs that do not perceive local competition for resources and are not under external pressure to change, or have well-established and apparently successful structures and routines may be less open to forming network ties and to innovation.

## ***II – The Persuasion/Initiation Stage***

“At the persuasion stage of the innovation-decision process, the individual forms a favorable or unfavorable attitude toward the innovation... Whereas the mental activity at the knowledge stage was mainly cognitive (or knowing), the main type of thinking at the persuasion stage is affective (or feeling)” (Rogers, 2003 p.162). Rogers emphasizes the struggle to minimize uncertainty and the thought-experiment aspect of the persuasion stage as the individual considers whether and how the innovation might work in personal context. Noting that innovations often diffuse across weak “bridging” ties from opinion-leaders of higher social status, Rogers states: “New ideas usually enter a system through higher status and more innovative members” as part of a “...general tendency for followers to seek information and advice about innovations from opinion leaders perceived as more technically competent” (Rogers, 2003, p.269). Hence transmission across weak ties from credible CS4L Leadership Team members, or from a credible CSO senior coach, could enhance uptake. However, where weak ties to diverse networks including opinion-leaders may inform an individual of an innovation, strong ties are more useful in inducing the individual to consider the innovation as potentially desirable (Rogers, 2003, p.292). In this regard Rogers emphasizes the role of change agents in supporting decision making at the persuasion and subsequent decision stages, by articulating the initial need to change, establishing an information-exchange relationship, diagnosing problems, and helping to create an intent to change in the target individual or group (Rogers, 2003, p.316). The role of change agent was played by members of the CS4L Expert Team supporting NSOs through the initial wave of the CS4L adoption process.

In addition to those described by Rogers, several findings from network and learning research apply to the persuasion stage:

*Social capital and trust:* In his review of research on interorganizational learning, Ingram (2005) cites studies indicating learning is facilitated by relatively close relationships; social relationships that engender trust favour the transfer of complex or tacit information. Similarly, Raider and Krackhardt (2005) summarize network research demonstrating that strong cohesive ties (i.e. ties tending to reinforce normative behaviours) and sharing of information create “social capital” or reciprocal sharing supportive of group processes.

*Champions:* Rogers characterizes a champion as “a charismatic individual who throws his or her weight behind an innovation, thus overcoming indifference or resistance that the new idea may provoke in an organization” (Rogers, 2003 p.352). Literature cited by Rogers suggests that in costly or radical innovations a powerful or senior champion is needed, while for less radical innovations managers who occupied key linking positions and had strong interpersonal skills could successfully play a brokering role. He notes, “Champions in an organization play a role something like that of an opinion leader in a community” (Rogers, 2003, p.352). Vail (2007) in her study of community building as a means of leading change in community tennis also noted the importance of a champion, defined as “an individual or group who believes change is possible and is willing to take the first steps needed to create interest and support” (Vail, 2007, p.575). In operationalizing the community-building approach, Tennis Canada relies on finding and supporting community champions as catalysts for change (Vail, 2007, p.581) much as CS4L does in its approach (Way, 2010).

*Structural equivalence:* As described above, in competitive situations, similar (i.e. equivalent) actors are more likely emulate each other (Burt, 1987). CSOs may be more likely to be persuaded to adopt innovation if it originates with a trusted, non-competing expert opinion-leader, yet has been or is being adopted by a rival “like themselves”.

*Summary – Persuasion/Initiation Stage:* In the persuasion stage, an affect is created that supports the initial attractiveness of the innovation as understood in the previous knowledge stage. This affect depends on a synthesis of perceived factors: the presence of support in the form of ties to trusted others, strong ties to others of higher status or perceived expertise who have an affinity for the innovation, the availability of support from change agents and the existence of champions within or proximal to the CSO. When external pressures to change are added, including the existence of structurally equivalent rival CSOs who may be considering the same innovation, the persuasion effect may be heightened. Conversely, absent the comfort of supportive network ties, change agents, champions, and rivals, the uncertainty inherent in considering innovation may prevent movement to the following, critical, decision stage.

### ***III – The Decision/Initiation Stage***

In the decision stage, individuals move to a firm decision to adopt an innovation as the best option available, or else reject the innovation (Rogers, 2003, p.164). It is in part a consequence of the favorable or unfavorable feeling about the innovation formed during the persuasion stage. However Rogers also describes the decision stage as a rational weighing of the five perceived attributes of the innovation: *relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability, and observability* (Rogers, 2003, p.198). At this critical point, feelings based on environmental pressures, the status and expertise of opinion-leaders who introduced the idea of the innovation, and possibly fear of competing rivals, is merged with rational analysis of the attributes of the innovation to yield a final decision. When the decision is made in an organizational setting, existing strategy, debate, inter-personal relationships including status and

power, group norms, and expectations that intra-group conflicts can be resolved are among the factors that influence the decision making process (Jehn et al., 2008).

The emphasis on the need to reduce uncertainty in the decision stage underlines the significance of the analysis of attributes of innovation by the decision-maker. The five attributes, which Rogers claims together explain about half the variance in innovations' rates of adoption (Rogers, 2003, p.198), can be summarized:

*Relative advantage* is “the degree to which an innovation is perceived as being better than the idea it supersedes” (Rogers, 2003, p.204). Higher relative advantage is associated with faster rates of adoption (Rogers, 2003). In the case of CSOs, CS4L may be taken as “better” in the sense of a superior set of values, or a superior methodology for athlete training, or both compared to the model in use.

*Compatibility* is “the degree to which an innovation is perceived as consistent with the existing values, part experiences and needs of potential adopters” and higher compatibility is associated with faster rates of adoption (Rogers, 2003, p.214). The apparent paradox is that higher relative advantage infers a high degree of beneficial change, while higher compatibility is consistent with similarity, or reduced degree of change. Individuals appear to be seeking incremental, yet comfortable degrees of change. CS4L is positioned as compatible with the “athlete centered” values of Canadian sport organizations (Way, 2010) yet the degree of change in program delivery and thus program compatibility and comfort is likely to vary across CSOs.

*Complexity* is “the degree to which an innovation is perceived as relatively difficult to understand and use” (Rogers, 2003 p.229). Higher complexity is associated with slower rates of adoption (Rogers, 2003). CS4L is based on a multi-stage model of athlete development with numerous “key principles” and new constructs such as “physical literacy” (Balyi et al., 2006) and is likely to be perceived as complex by CSOs.

*Trialability* is “the degree to which an innovation may be experimented with on a limited basis” with higher trialability associated with faster rates of adoption (Rogers, 2003, p.229). As Rogers notes, “Trying a new idea may involve re-inventing it so as to customize it more closely to the individual's conditions” (Rogers, 2003, p.229). CS4L is inherently difficult to trial, depending as it does on programming changes, changes to the training of athletes, and changes to competition structures such as rules and schedules (Balyi et al., 2006).

*Observability* is “the degree to which the results of an innovation are visible to others. The observability of an innovation, as perceived by members of a social system, is positively related to its rate of adoption” (Rogers, 2003, p.236). Here, as for trialability, the long-term nature of CS4L's effect on athlete development defeats the possibility of immediate observability in the decision stage. CSO decision-makers must therefore depend on accounts of CS4L success in other organizations rather than first-hand observability within their own CSO.

Across the five attributes, CS4L is sometimes positive (i.e. relative advantage), sometimes neutral or unknown (i.e. compatibility) and frequently negative (i.e. complexity, trialability, and observability). To the extent that weighing the attributes is important in the decision to adopt CS4L, it appears that change agents will face challenges in persuading and supporting adoption. The following observations from literature on network and learning research offer some additional factors bearing on the decision stage.

*Strong ties facilitate imitation:* Strong ties to organizations perceived as similar increase the probability of adoption of an innovation. In deciding on innovation, organizations were more likely to imitate similar others perceived as doing well, rather than higher-status, more distant organizations (Kraatz, 1998). In addition, managers tend to imitate the activities of other organizations to which they are tied through Director appointments to multiple Boards (Haunschild, 1993). These findings reinforce the view that CSO Directors with multiple network ties, and especially a proportion of strong ties, may act as “boundary spanners” and sources of pressure for normative or mimetic imitation of change activities in other organizations (Newell & Swan, 1995).

*Learning networks, change agents and tipping points:* Powell, Koput and Smith-Doerr (1996) found “learning networks” or multi-firm network relationships promoted knowledge transfer and utilization among biotech firms and argued that in periods of rapid development, the locus of innovation is found in these networks, not individual firms. While CSOs can hardly be likened to biotech firms, the current period in which CS4L is diffusing widely from provincial to community levels may be a time in which learning networks are likely to form. This may reflect a “critical mass” or “tipping point” phenomenon in which the mass of organizations, influenced by proximal early adopters, begins to consider an innovation (Rogers, 2003, p.295). The actions of a growing number of networked change agents operating at the provincial level to support CS4L adoption may become central in these dispersed learning networks.

*Reducing “stickiness” factors:* Szulanski (2000) noted a variety of causes for “stickiness” or difficulty in knowledge transfer at successive stages in the transfer process. In all stages, causal ambiguity (i.e. difficulty in discriminating the causes of current problems), and lack of absorptive capacity in the receiver were key elements of stickiness. In the initiation phase, perceptions that the source will not offer sufficient support (“low source motivation”) or that the source is not perceived as reliable are also sources of stickiness. These findings support the view that external change agents, embedded in an expanding number of learning networks, may be decisive in reducing causal ambiguity as well as negative attributes such as complexity, trialability and observability in the case of the CS4L innovation at the CSO level.

*Summary – Decision Stage:* In the decision stage individuals and groups within CSOs make a critical decision to adopt and attempt to implement CS4L, or to abandon it. The positive affect carried forward from the persuasion stage is weighed against rational evaluation of the five

attributes of innovation, which in the case of CS4L may be perceived as neutral or negative. Consequently, the attitudes, degree and nature of network ties, traditions and inter-personal relationships among decision-makers are likely to be extremely important. As in the previous stage, the presence of supports including strong ties to other adopters, change agents, models of success to evaluate, and the existence of champions may be decisive. Otherwise a combination of causal ambiguity about challenges in the CSOs current situation, combined with the high degree of uncertainty inherent in the complex, difficult to test and observe CS4L may result in rejection of the CS4L innovation.

### **Implications for Diffusion of the CS4L Innovation in Community Sport**

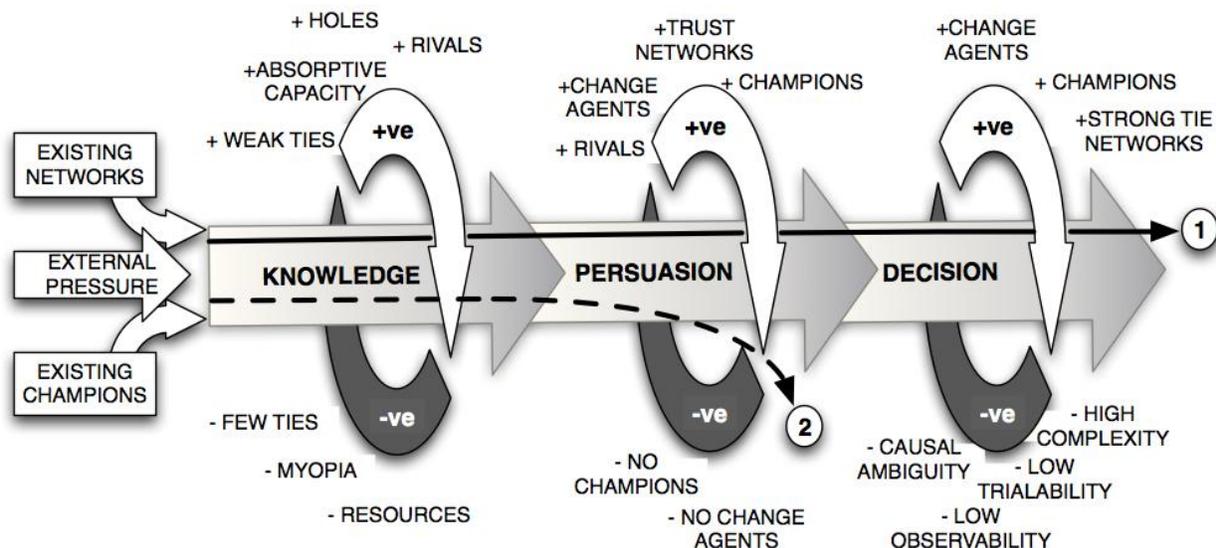
The foregoing analysis of some findings from network and learning research on organizations, applied to the innovation-decision model in context of Canadian community sport organizations, yields a number of implications for the diffusion of Canadian Sport for Life and by extension, the diffusion of any innovation to CSOs. Of central importance is the need to reduce ambiguity and uncertainty on the part of CSO decision-makers. A strategy for effective diffusion must consider how to provide support to over 33,000 organizations to reduce uncertainty and facilitate adoption in each.

*Targeting CSOs:* Given the large number of Canadian CSOs and the modest resources of the CS4L Leadership Team, it is impracticable to reach all CSOs simultaneously. Based on the categorization of adopters and the temporal pattern adoption described previously a rational strategy would be to target “early adopters” and count on creating a critical mass or “tipping point” (Rogers, 2003, p.295). How to identify these potential early adopters?

The mapping of relevant network and learning effects on to the innovation-decision model suggests an approach. The model is linear, sequential and path-dependent with progress to each successive stage contingent on meeting a set of conditions at the prior stage. The conditions at each stage are related to the relative presence or absence of environmental factors, the extent, strength and content of network ties, and the extent of various factors conducive to learning. Thus within the cohort of CSOs a sub-set will have conditions pre-disposing them to consider the CS4L innovation at the initial knowledge stage. The factors discussed previously that may predispose CSOs to consider CS4L include existence of external pressure to change, existing networks especially weak ties, champions promoting change and boundary spanners among the CSO leadership. Use of survey techniques may enable suitable CSOs to be identified and targeted for preferential support.

*Decision trajectories:* The path-dependent nature of the innovation-decision model suggests that each decision-maker, upon entering the pathway, will follow a trajectory dependent on the relative weight and influence of relevant factors at each stage (see Diagram 2). While the analysis in this paper has suggested a number of possible factors, it is likely that the factors and their weight will be unique to each individual and CSO. Survey techniques applied to the sub-set

of potential early-adopter CSOs may help discriminate these factors and indicate which forms of support will be most useful in facilitating adoption. At the persuasion and later stages the



**Diagram 2: Decision Trajectories in the Innovation-Decision Model**

Path 1: Balanced positive and negative factors result in continuation through decision stage  
 Path 2: Dominant negative factors result in discontinuation at persuasion stage

presence or absence of these supports are decision factors influencing trajectory, so targeting CSOs by means of survey results implies an *ex ante* strategy on the part of CS4L to prescribe specific, tailored support to identified CSOs.

*Change agents and champions:* The key roles of change agents and champions have been emphasized. In CS4L context change agents are consultants, members of the CS4L Leadership team or allied provincial networks, who provide specific leadership and support to sport organizations. Champions are leaders within or proximal to PTSOs and CSOs who lead opinion, cheerlead and work to support CS4L adoption and implementation. The identification and resourcing of enough change agents, the means of identifying, recognizing and supporting champions, and the development of change-agent centered networks of champions remain as open questions at this time. Currently champions self-select and are identified by change agents only by chance. Use of surveys to identify and target promising early-adopter CSOs may yield a number of champions within these organizations, but the means of supporting them remains unresolved. Given the challenges related to CS4L attributes such as high complexity, low trialability and low observability and the key importance of change agents and champions in overcoming these challenges, development of a strategy to identify and support change agents and champions appears to be essential.

*Questions and future directions:* This analysis also raises a number of questions that merit investigation. Who are the most promising candidates within CSOs to introduce and lead

innovation? Do coaches, volunteer directors, or others in CSOs have the greatest propensity to discover innovation? Studies of CSO coaches reveal both attentiveness to networks and challenges to cooperative activity. In a study of how youth coaches learn Lemyre, Trudel and Durand-Bush (2007) found that formal training was only one way coaches gather information, and prior experience, communication with athletes and parents, communication with club volunteers, and observation of rival coaches are other important sources of information. Subsequently Culver and Trudel (2008) found it difficult to create self-sustaining communities of practice among CSO coaches in the same club; communities of practice tended to disintegrate due to coach time constraints. Newell and Swan (1995) point to volunteer directors as key “boundary spanners”. Which of these are the most likely candidates to become innovation champions? Further, the time investment needed to advance basic awareness of an innovation to a more detailed understanding of how it works, and how it could work in one’s own context, raises the question of capacity. How much slack capacity in the form of time or human resource must CSOs have to understand, adopt and implement an innovation? How might this be related to the structure, governance, size and available resources in CSOs?

### **Toward an Engagement Strategy for Community Sport**

One practical use of research on diffusion of innovations is as a basis for a strategy for community engagement. Given the resources available it is difficult to contemplate engaging over 33,000 CSOs within a reasonable timeframe. Current CS4L progress suggests that the PTSOs will likely take several years to implement CS4L/LTAD in their plans and operations, so relying on large-scale adoption by PTSOs to drive community-level adoption will probably be unrewarding. As the foregoing analysis has made clear, even with significant PTSO-level adoption, CSOs are likely to vary widely in their predisposition and capacity to adopt CS4L. Simple reliance on broadband dissemination of information (e.g. print resources) to trigger self-identification of champions and leaders at the community level is likely to have a poor return, while a more intensive effort to engage, say by trying to “convert” most or all CSOs in several targeted communities, will result in dissipation of effort on un-responsive CSOs. Worse, “failures” in the form of rejection by un-interested CSOs may result in localized perception that “most CSOs don’t want CS4L”.

A more progressive approach would be to create a strategy in which the sub-set of CSOs most pre-disposed to adopt, based on the factors reviewed in this paper, are identified and targeted for engagement. Of those choosing to engage, a further reduced number operating in target communities where resources can be concentrated will be selected as “wave one” organizations. These will be included in tailored networks and receive change-agent support to move them to a positive decision to adopt. This stepwise approach should stimulate demand by ensuring a high success rate, maximizing “success factor” effects, and building toward a “tipping point”. The table on the following page outlines the proposed strategy.

	<b>Prior Receptivity</b>	<b>Knowledge</b>	<b>Persuasion</b>	<b>Decision</b>
<b>Strategy concept:</b>	Identify receptive CSOs.	Recruit to network and build knowledge and connections.	Build strong network-based support around targeted "first wave" potential adopters.	Reduce uncertainty, provide "hands-on" support, and close the deal.
<b>Success Factors: presence of...</b>	Networks; External pressures; Potential champions; Perceived need.	Networks (weak ties); Rivals (structural equivalence); Absorptive capacity; Access to codified knowledge; Bias toward exploration/ absence of complacency.	Supportive high status network members (weak ties); Reinforcing peer network members (stronger ties); Trusted partners; Local champions; Rivals.	Evidence of high relative advantage, compatibility, and observability, low complexity, and opportunities for trial; Leadership by champion(s); Direct support by change agent to reduce "stickiness" factors; Strong ties to earlier adopters with success stories and tacit "how-to" knowledge; Evidence of support in implementation phase.
<b>Strategy - actions:</b>	Broadband survey (e.g. online) of CSOs to identify candidates (i.e. presence of success factors); Parallel identification of candidates by PTSO; Identification of target communities based on support, clusters of candidate CSOs; Setup of network channels in target communities.	Direct survey of candidate CSOs in target communities to identify presence of success factors; Inform CSOs they have been targeted; Invitation into network(s); "Knowledge blitz" - access to multiple channels of codified information (e.g. publication, on-line, seminars, etc.).	Background coordination by change agent; Identify top candidate CSOs within target community as "first wave" and reinforce prestige of this selection; Visits/communication by high status individuals (CS4L, NSO); Provide multiple examples of CS4L benefits in peer organizations; Position an easily fulfilled next-stage "contract" for CSO to consider.	Direct support by change agent; Walk through and reduce challenges/objections; Provide tacit "inside" how-to knowledge; Identify limited objectives with low complexity, high compatibility & observability; Outline incentives (e.g. next-stage support, celebration of CSO and champion as leader, etc.); "Close" a basic one-year agreement with CSO.

## Conclusion

The diffusion of innovation, often in the form of a new development program, to the community level is a perennial challenge in Canada's sport organizations. The work currently underway to establish the Canadian Sport for Life movement is a case in point. Since 2005 CS4L has become a new paradigm for Canadian sport development, consistent with the direction of the Canadian Sport Policy and entrenched in Federal and Provincial-Territorial sport funding programs. Efforts are underway by the CS4L Leadership Team and sport leaders across Canada to diffuse the CS4L innovation to the community level of sport delivery, requiring organizations to adopt the new paradigm and reorganize sport delivery in light of it. This is a daunting challenge involving a re-evaluation and re-alignment of the way over 33,000 community sport organizations do their daily business of participant development, requiring corresponding changes to modify and align hierarchical competition structures, rules and athlete selection policies and procedures.

An analysis of the diffusion of innovation from learning and network perspectives helps inform understanding of both the CS4L challenge and of community sport organization capacity to innovate. The CS4L Leadership Team- itself, a network- codifies knowledge into information. Information is transferred to a "champion" within a target community sport organization via an inter-organizational network. At the target community organization, innovation uptake requires network-mediated knowledge transfer from the champion to others within the organization, resulting in a collective perception of need to evolve from the current state to an ideal, CS4L-congruent state. Progress through the stages of the innovation-decision model to a point of deciding whether to proceed to CS4L implementation depends on a complex interplay of endogenous and exogenous factors as well as intra-organizational dynamics. Analyzing and understanding these factors suggests a strategy for CS4L diffusion. In this paper I have proposed a strategy based on an analysis of these decision factors, which may result in an improved success rate. Failure to take a highly strategic, selective, targeted approach to engaging community sport is likely to result in dissipation of scarce resources, "negative momentum" and an unacceptably long timeframe for adoption by the mass of CSOs.

The appeal of CS4L and its success to date rests on a clear-headed analysis of Canada's sport and recreation system and in response a rational framework for sport participant development, built on a foundation of contemporary research and good coaching practice. The future success of CS4L may depend on integrating a different stream of research and good practice drawn from organization studies, a science less familiar to sport leaders. Traditionally sport has been good at planning, less so at implementation; good at creating innovative programs, less so at marketing them. This pattern should not be repeated. As justification for CS4L, its leaders often quote: "The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results." Surely this applies not just to the way sport is delivered to participants, but to the way new ideas are delivered to sport leaders.

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