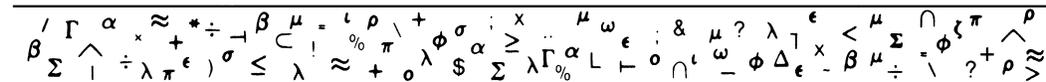


People Skills: Change Management Tools— Lewin's Change Model

ROBERT E. LEVASSEUR

*FOX Consulting Group, Inc.
P.O. Box 3322
Annapolis, Maryland 21403*



This is the first in a series of articles about some of the most effective models, methods, and processes of the OD trade. OD stands for organization development, a discipline that offers much to the MS/OR practitioner determined to help clients solve real-world problems. Because it is based on a systemic view of organizations, OD includes the whole universe of fuzzy people issues that increasingly determine the success or failure of efforts to implement otherwise flawless technical solutions.

Successful change enablers rely on a handful of tools that work. The most powerful tool in my toolbox is Kurt Lewin's simple three-step change model. According to Lewin [1958], the first step in the process of changing behavior is to unfreeze the existing situation. Only then can change, or movement, occur. Finally, to

make the new behaviors stick, a third, re-freezing step is necessary.

Don't let the apparent simplicity of Lewin's model fool you. It is a truly elegant and infinitely practical guide to the host of complex and sometimes baffling issues inherent in the change process. To understand the model and what makes it so powerful, examine its application in real-world situations. Using Lewin's model as a diagnostic tool, I will first analyze what goes awry in unsuccessful efforts to introduce new technology into organizations. Then, using the model as a guide to action, I will deduce the role of the leader in enabling major change to occur.

Introducing New Technology (How Not to Make Changes)

Have you ever wondered why so many attempts to get people to use promising

LEVASSEUR

new technology, such as computers, re-engineered processes, or new decision-making models, encounter massive resistance to change? If you have been the victim of such behavior on the part of naive users, have you wondered what went wrong and why?

The first step in Lewin's change model provides a vital clue to unraveling this mystery. Ask what significant unfreezing event(s) occurred to make the people most affected by the change want to change? If some form of crisis motivated the change, did the managers who authorized the change effort go out of their way to inform the affected employees of the nature and urgency of the crisis? If the managers' desire to improve the productivity of an already effective operation motivated the change, did they make the reasons for the change clear to all concerned? In other words, did management make a serious attempt to communicate the nature and likely impact of the proposed change (s) before introducing the new technology?

Although it is necessary to tell people about the proposed change for them to understand and support it, active, top-down communication alone is not sufficient to ensure success. A fundamental principle of effective change management is that people support what they help to create. Active participation by the affected parties in the change process is the most important element of effective change. In fact, most failures in the introduction of new technology occur because lack of effective communication at the beginning coupled with the failure to involve affected individuals in the change process creates barriers too great to scale later in

the implementation phase of the project.

If you are wondering why change agents have to go to so much trouble to ensure that people use new and improved technology, put yourself in their places. How receptive would you be if you heard through the grapevine that someone you didn't know was going to redesign your job and possibly do away with it without asking for your input? Conversely, how much more receptive would you be if your manager asked you to participate with other people in your organization in a critical effort to improve productivity and make your enterprise more viable by applying the latest technology to your jobs? Furthermore, how much more open to change would you be if management guaranteed you the choice of a comparable position in the new organization or a generous severance package if the process resulted in the elimination of your job?

If you are like most people, your receptiveness to a proposed change effort would be inversely proportional to the degree to which you were involved in it. Namely, no communication and no participation, as described in the first scenario, induce the highest barriers to change. Active communication and participation, as in the second scenario, result in much lower barriers. As you might expect, the enterprise's additional promise to take care of you no matter what, as in the last scenario, results in the lowest barriers to change.

If you understand Lewin's model, the next time you are involved in the development and introduction of something new into an existing system, you will appreciate the vital importance of involving peo-

PEOPLE SKILLS

ple in the process up front to unfreeze their behavior and minimize their resistance to change.

Providing Leadership (How to Enable Change)

The first step of Lewin's model tells us how to minimize barriers to change and increase the odds of a successful change effort. As important as this step is, it is not enough by itself to ensure success. Steps two and three of the model tell us what else we need to do.

Movement takes place after people have bought into the need for change. This is the point at which the work of examining the existing system and developing the new system gets underway. I will discuss participative processes and tools used to actively engage the people in the organization during this stage in future columns. The dictum introduced earlier about people supporting what they help to create is of paramount importance in this and the final step and should guide the work of all the participants in the change process. Success depends on continuing to develop a sense of teamwork and active communication among those people in the enterprise engaged directly in the change effort and the other members of the organization who have a stake in the outcome. It is essential that the change agents—especially managers, project team members, and consultants—provide visionary leadership that enables the process, rather than top-down, command-and-control micromanagement that inhibits it. By so doing, the leaders of the change effort can create and maintain the momentum crucial to the success of this phase.

The final or refreezing step of Lewin's

model calls for the change agents to work actively with the people in the organization to install, test, debug, use, measure, and enhance the new system. It is not acceptable for them to deliver a report to senior management and leave the implementation of the new technology to the people affected by it. This would be akin to performing open-heart surgery and asking the patient to take responsibility for his or her care from that point on. Successful refreezing requires a commitment to remain actively involved until required new behaviors have replaced those that existed prior to the change. This does not happen overnight or without ongoing support to the organization attempting to institutionalize the change.

Conclusion

While Lewin's change model does not spell out in detail what change agents need to do to effect change, it does illuminate with remarkable clarity the major steps that each such effort must follow to be successful. As such, it is a powerful tool that deserves a place in the toolbox of every would-be change enabler. Lewin's three-step change model is the most powerful and fundamental of the tools in my box, but it is not the only one. In future columns, I will discuss some of the other important and practical change-management tools that every professional should know how to use.

Reference

Lewin, K. 1958, "Group decision and social change," in *Readings in Social Psychology*, eds. E. E. Maccoby, T. M. Newcomb, and E. L. Hartley, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, pp. 197–211.