

Kurt Lewin change theory and three step model - Unfreeze-Change-Freeze

The Kurt **Lewin change theory model** is based around a 3-step process (Unfreeze-Change-Freeze) that provides a high-level approach to change. It gives a manager or other change agent a framework to implement a change effort, which is always very sensitive and must be made as seamless as possible.

The Kurt **Lewin change theory or model** can help a leader do the following three steps:

- Make a radical change
- Minimize the disruption of the structure's operations
- Make sure that the change is adopted permanently

Summary of Kurt Lewin's Change theory

This three step model gives a manager or change agent an idea of what implementing change means when dealing with people. The 3 phases of the Kurt Lewin model provide guidance on how to go about getting people to change: a manager will implement new processes and re-assign tasks, but change will only be effective if the people involved embrace it and help putting it into practice it.

Lewin change model – Unfreeze – “ready to change”

When a structure has been in place for a while, habits and routine have naturally settled in. The organization as a whole is going in the right direction, but – as shown on the illustration – people or processes may have strayed off course. For example, tasks that are not relevant or useful anymore are still being performed by force of habit, without anyone questioning their legitimacy. Similarly, people might have learned to do things one way, without considering other, more efficient methods. Unfreezing means getting people to gain perspective on their day-to-day activities, unlearn their bad habits, and open up to new ways of reaching their objectives. Basically, the current practices and processes have to be reassessed in order for the wheels of change to be set in motion.

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Lewin change model – Change – “implementation”

Once team members have opened up their minds, change can start. The change process can be a very dynamic one and, if it is to be effective, it will probably take some time and involve a transition period. In order to gain efficiency, people will have to take on new tasks and responsibilities, which entails a learning curve that will at first

slow the organization down. A change process has to be viewed as an investment, both in terms of time and the allocation of resources: after the new organization and processes have been rolled out, a certain chaos might ensue, but that is the price to pay in order to attain enhanced effectiveness within the structure.

Lewin change model – Freeze (sometimes called refreeze)- “making it stick”

Change will only reach its full effect if it's made permanent. Once the organizational changes have been made and the structure has regained its effectiveness, every effort must be made to cement them and make sure the new organization becomes the standard. Further changes will be made down the line, but once the structure has found a way to improve the way it conducts its operations, “re-freezing” will give the people the opportunity to thrive in the new organization and take full advantage of the change. Many quote the model as saying the third step of this approach is to re-freeze, when in Lewins original work it was “freeze”.

In 1947 Lewin wrote:

A change towards a higher level of group performance is frequently short-lived, after a “shot in the arm”, group life soon returns to the previous level. This indicates that it does not suffice to define the objective of planned change in group performance as the reaching of a different level. Permanency of the new level, or permanency for a desired period, should be included in the objective.

Source – “Frontiers in Group Dynamics” Lewin (1947) – Note many quote 1951, but it was published earlier in 1947

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Addendum:

The Kurt Lewin change theory is as valid today as it was when it was first developed. Many in the Organizational change space think the model or theory is outdated. This to me shows a lack of understanding of the model and its intent.

The difference is that change is now almost a constant, but for human changes in behaviour people do need to learn to change habits and behaviours. using the three steps provides PEOPLE with a framework to work towards.

Kurt Lewin change theory three step model – unfreeze, change, freeze was last modified: September 13th, 2015

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