

The Kurt Lewin: Change Management Model

Kurt Lewin emigrated from Germany to America during the 1930's. Lewin is recognised as the "founder of social psychology" which immediately points to his interest in the human aspect of change.

His interest in groups led to research focusing on factors that influence people to change, and three stages needed to make change successful.

Unfreeze, Change, Freeze

Kurt Lewin proposed a three stage theory of change commonly referred to as **Unfreeze, Change, Freeze** (or Refreeze). It is possible to take these stages to quite complicated levels but I don't believe this is necessary to be able to work with the theory. But be aware that the theory has been criticised for being too simplistic.

A lot has changed since the theory was originally presented in 1947, but the Kurt Lewin model is still extremely relevant. Many other more modern change models are actually based on the Kurt Lewin model. I'm going to head down a middle road and give you just enough information to make you dangerous...and perhaps a little more to whet your appetite!

So, three stages. Unfreezing, Change, Freezing. Let's look at each of these.

Stage 1: Unfreezing

The Unfreezing stage is probably one of the more important stages to understand in the world of change we live in today. This stage is about getting ready to change. It involves getting to a point of understanding that change is necessary, and getting ready to move away from our current comfort zone.

This first stage is about preparing ourselves, or others, before the change (and ideally creating a situation in which we want the change).

The more we feel that change is necessary, the more urgent it is, the more motivated we are to make the change. Right? Yes, of course! If you understand procrastination (like I do!) then you'd recognise that the closer the deadline, the more likely you are to snap into action and actually get the job started!

With the deadline comes some sort of reward or punishment linked to the job. If there's no deadline, then the urge to change is lower than the need to change. There's much lower motivation to make a change and get on with it.

Unfreezing and getting motivated for the change is all about weighing up the 'pro's' and 'con's' and deciding if the 'pro's' outnumber the 'con's' before you take any action. This is the basis of what Kurt Lewin called the Force Field Analysis.

Force Field Analysis is a fancy way of saying that there are lots of different factors (forces) for and against making change that we need to be aware of (analysis). If the factors **for** change outweigh the factors **against** change we'll make the change. If not, then there's low motivation to change - and if we feel pushed to change we're likely to get grumpy and dig in our heels.

This first 'Unfreezing' stage involves moving ourselves, or a department, or an entire business towards motivation for change. The Kurt Lewin Force Field Analysis is a useful way to understand this process and there are plenty of ideas of how this can be done.

Stage 2: Change - or Transition

Kurt Lewin was aware that change is not an event, but rather a process. He called that process a transition. Transition is the inner movement or journey we make in reaction to a change. This second stage occurs as we make the changes that are needed.

People are 'unfrozen' and moving towards a new way of being.

That said this stage is often the hardest as people are unsure or even fearful. Imagine bungee jumping or parachuting. You may have convinced yourself that there is a great benefit for you to make the jump, but now you find yourself on the edge looking down. Scary stuff! But when you do it you may learn a lot about yourself.

This is not an easy time as people are learning about the changes and need to be given time to understand and work with them. Support is really important here and can be in the form of training, coaching, and expecting mistakes as part of the process.

Using role models and allowing people to develop their own solutions also help to make the changes. It's also really useful to keep communicating a clear picture of the desired change and the benefits to people so they don't lose sight of where they are heading.

Stage 3: Freezing (or Refreezing)

Kurt Lewin refers to this stage as freezing although a lot of people refer to it as 'refreezing'. As the name suggests this stage is about establishing stability once the changes have been made. The changes are accepted and become the new norm. People form new relationships and become comfortable with their routines. This can take time.

It's often at this point that people laugh and tell me that practically there is never time for this 'freezing' stage. And it's just this that's drawn criticism to the Kurt Lewin model.

In today's world of change the next new change could happen in weeks or less. There is just no time to settle into comfortable routines. This rigidity of freezing does not fit with modern thinking about change being a continuous, sometimes chaotic process in which great flexibility is demanded.

So popular thought has moved away from the concept of freezing. Instead, we should think about this final stage as being more flexible, something like a milkshake or soft serv icecream, in the current favourite flavour, rather than a rigid frozen block. This way 'Unfreezing' for the next change might be easier.

Given today's pace of change this is a reasonable criticism. But it might help to get in touch with what Kurt Lewin was actually saying. In 1947 he 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.

Kurt Lewin, "Frontiers of Group Dynamics", Human Relations, Volume 1, pp. 5-41 (I added the emphasis)

Lewin's concern is about reinforcing the change and ensuring that the desired change is accepted and maintained into the future. Without this people tend to go back to doing what they are used to doing. This is probably what Kurt Lewin meant by freezing - supporting the desired change to make sure it continues and is not lost.

More modern models of change, such as the ADKAR model, are more explicit about this step and include *Reinforcement* as one of their phases. I've also read this final step of freezing referred to as the *lock-in effect*. Establishing stability only happens when the new changes are locked-in.

Thinking about change as a journey might make you think that a journey has a beginning, middle, and an end. While this is useful when thinking about the process of change the reality is that this journey doesn't have an end. Lots of rest stops maybe! Some opportunities for settling down for a while. But no end. So be careful about thinking that a change process has a definite end, as the Lewin change management model might seem to suggest.

In what ways do you think this model might be useful for you?

I've found the Kurt Lewin model useful to frame a process of change for people that is quite easy to understand. Of course each stage can be expanded to aid better understanding of the process. Applying the concepts of Unfreezing, and especially the Force Field Analysis, at a personal level can give us insight and help us better understand how we deal with change.