



PEAK EXPERIENCES

Change and Transition - Lewin's Change Management Model

Change is a common thread that runs through all businesses regardless of size, industry and age. Our world is changing fast and, as such, organizations must change quickly too. Organizations that handle change well thrive, whilst those that do not may struggle to survive. The concept of "change management" is a familiar one in most businesses today. But, how businesses manage change (and how successful they are at it) varies enormously depending on the nature of the business, the change and the people involved. And a key part of this depends on how far people within it understand the change process. One of the cornerstone models for understanding organizational change was developed by Kurt Lewin back in the 1950s, and still holds true today. His model is known as Unfreeze – Change – Refreeze, refers to the three-stage process of change he describes. Lewin, a physicist as well as social scientist, explained organizational change using the analogy of changing the shape of a block of ice.

If you have a large cube of ice, but realize that what you want is a cone of ice, what do you do? First you must melt the ice to make it amenable to change (unfreeze). Then you must mold the iced water into the shape you want (change). Finally, you must solidify the new shape (refreeze).

By looking at change as process with distinct stages, you can prepare yourself for what is coming and make a plan to manage the transition – looking before you leap, so to speak. All too often, people go into change blindly, causing much unnecessary turmoil and chaos. To begin any successful change process, you must first start by understanding why the change must take place. As Lewin put it, "Motivation for change must be generated before change can occur. One must be helped to re-examine many cherished assumptions about oneself and one's relations to others." This is the unfreezing stage from which change begins.

Unfreeze

This first stage of change involves preparing the organization to accept that change is necessary, which involves break down the existing status quo before you can build up a new way of operating. Key to this is developing a compelling message showing why the existing way of doing things cannot continue. This is easiest to frame when you can point to declining sales figures, poor financial results, worrying customer satisfaction surveys, or suchlike: These show that things have to change in a way that everyone can understand. To prepare the organization successfully, you need to start at its core – you need to challenge the beliefs, values, attitudes, and behaviors that currently define it. Using the analogy of a building, you must examine and be prepared to change the existing foundations as they might not support add-on storeys; unless this is done, the whole building may risk collapse. This first part of the change process is usually the most difficult and stressful. When you start cutting down the "way things are done", you put everyone and everything off balance. You may evoke strong reactions in people, and that's exactly what needs to be done. By forcing the organization to re-examine its core, you effectively create a (controlled) crisis, which in turn can build a strong motivation to seek out a new equilibrium. Without this motivation, you won't get the buy-in and participation necessary to effect any meaningful change.

Change

After the uncertainty created in the unfreeze stage, the change stage is where people begin to resolve their uncertainty and look for new ways to do things. People start to believe and act in ways that support the new direction. The transition from unfreeze to change does not happen overnight: People take time to embrace the new direction and participate proactively in the change. A related change model, the Change Curve, focuses on the specific issue of personal transitions in a changing environment and is useful for understanding this specific aspect in more detail. In order to accept the change and contribute to making the change successful, people need to understand how the changes will benefit them. Not everyone will fall in line just because the change is necessary and will benefit the company. This is a common assumption and pitfall that should be avoided.

Tip:

Unfortunately, some people will genuinely be harmed by change, particularly those who benefit strongly from the status quo. Others may take a long time to recognize the benefits that change brings. You need to foresee and manage these situations.

Time and communication are the two keys to success for the changes to occur. People need time to understand the changes and they also need to feel highly connected to the organization throughout the transition period. When you are managing change, this can require a great deal of time and effort and hands-on management is usually the best approach.

Refreeze

When the changes are taking shape and people have embraced the new ways of working, the organization is ready to refreeze. The outward signs of the refreeze are a stable organization chart, consistent job descriptions, and so on. The refreeze stage also needs to help people and the organization internalize or institutionalize the changes. This means making sure that the changes are used all the time; and that they are incorporated into everyday business. With a new sense of stability, employees feel confident and comfortable with the new ways of working. The rationale for creating a new sense of stability in our every changing world is often questioned. Even though change is a constant in many organizations, this refreezing stage is still important. Without it, employees get caught in a transition trap where they aren't sure how things should be done, so nothing ever gets done to full capacity. In the absence of a new frozen state, it is very difficult to tackle the next change initiative effectively. How do you go about convincing people that something needs changing if you haven't allowed the most recent changes to sink in? Change will be perceived as change for change's sake, and the motivation required to implement new changes simply won't be there. As part of the Refreezing process, make sure that you celebrate the success of the change – this helps people to find closure, thanks them for enduring a painful time, and helps them believe that future change will be successful.

Key Points

Lewin's change model is a simple and easy-to-understand framework for managing change. By recognizing these three distinct stages of change, you can plan to implement the change required. You start by creating the motivation to change (unfreeze). You move through the change process by promoting effective communications and empowering people to embrace new ways of working (change). And the process ends when you return the organization to a sense of stability (refreeze), which is so necessary for creating the confidence from which to embark on the next, inevitable change.

Unfreeze

1. Determine what needs to change.
 - Survey the organization to understand the current state.
 - Understand why change has to take place.
2. Ensure there is strong support from upper management.
 - Use Stakeholder Analysis and Stakeholder Management to identify and win the support of key people within the organization.
 - Frame the issue as one of organization-wide importance.
3. Create the need for change.
 - Create a compelling message as to why change has to occur.
 - Use your vision and strategy as supporting evidence.
 - Communicate the vision in terms of the change required.
 - Emphasize the "why".
4. Manage and understand the doubts and concerns.
 - Remain open to employee concerns and address in terms of the need to change.

Change

1. Communicate often.
 - Do so throughout the planning and implementation of the changes.
 - Describe the benefits.
 - Explain exactly the how the changes will effect everyone.
 - Prepare everyone for what is coming.
2. Dispel rumors.
 - Answer questions openly and honestly.
 - Deal with problems immediately.
 - Relate the need for change back to operational necessities.
3. Empower action.
 - Provide lots of opportunity for employee involvement.
 - Have line managers provide day-to-day direction.
4. Involve people in the process.
 - Generate short-term wins to reinforce the change.
 - Negotiate with external stakeholders as necessary (such as employee organizations).

Refreeze

1. Anchor the changes into the culture.
 - Identity what supports the change.
 - Identify barriers to sustaining change.
2. Develop ways to sustain the change.
 - Ensure leadership support.
 - Create a reward system.
 - Establish feedback systems.
 - Adapt the organizational structure as necessary.
3. Provide support and training.
 - Keep everyone informed and supported.
4. Celebrate success!