

The Lewin Change Model

(From Organization Development and Change by Huse and Cummings, c. 1985)

Organizational development efforts are directed at bringing about *planned change to increase an organization's effectiveness*. They are generally initiated and implemented by managers, often with the help of a change agent or organizational development consultant. Organizations can use planned change to more readily solve problems, to learn from experience, to adapt to changes and to influence future changes.

One of the early, fundamental models of planned change was provided by Kurt Lewin. He conceived of change as *modification of those forces keeping a system's behavior stable*. Specifically, the level of behavior at any moment in time is the result of two sets of forces – *those striving to maintain the status quo and those pushing for change*. When both sets of forces are about equal, current levels of behavior are maintained in what Lewin termed a state of “quasi-stationary equilibrium.” In order to change that state, one can *either increase those forces pushing for change or decrease those forces maintaining the current state, or some combinations of both*. For example, the level of performance of a work group might be stable because group norms maintaining that level are equivalent to the supervisor's pressures for change to higher levels. This level can be increased by either by *changing the group norms to support higher levels of performance or by increasing supervisor pressures to produce at higher levels*. Lewin suggested that *modifying those forces maintaining the status quo produces less tension and resistance* than increasing forces for change and consequently is a more effective strategy for change.

Lewin viewed this change process as consisting of three steps.

- 1. Unfreezing.** This step usually *involves reducing those forces maintaining the organization's behavior at its present level*. Unfreezing is sometimes accomplished by *introducing information that shows discrepancies between behaviors desired by organizational members and those behaviors desired by organizational members and those behaviors they currently exhibit*.

2. **Moving.** This step shifts the behavior of the organization or department to a new level. *It involves developing new behaviors, values, and attitudes through changes in organizational structures and processes.*
3. **Refreezing.** This step *stabilizes the organization at a new state of equilibrium.* It is frequently accomplished through the use of *supporting mechanisms that reinforce the new organizational state, such as organizational culture, norms, policies and structures.*