Force Field Analysis

Force field analysis is a tool for looking at a change before we make it. It comes from the psychologist Kurt Lewin, who described social situations as a balance between forces that push toward change and forces that resist it. He presented the idea in the 1940s, and it appears in his book Field Theory in Social Science, published in 1951. In organisations, the tool turns vague opinions about a change into a clear list. We follow Basel, a clinic manager, who wants to move patient booking online.

1. Two Sets of Forces

Lewin saw any current situation as a kind of balance, or equilibrium. Driving forces push toward the change, for example new opportunities, pressure from customers or a clear benefit. Restraining forces push against it, for example fear, cost, habit or a lack of skills. The situation stays as it is while the two sets are in balance, and it moves only when the balance shifts.

Example: A person wants to exercise in the mornings. The driving forces are better health and more energy, and the restraining forces are a warm bed and a tired body. Looking at the two sets of forces, the person sees why the plan keeps failing: the restraining forces are stronger.

At work: Basel looks at online booking at his clinic as two sets of forces. The driving forces are fewer missed calls and patients who ask for online options. The restraining forces are staff worries about the new software and older patients who prefer the phone.

2. List the Forces

We start by describing the change in one clear sentence. Then we list every driving force and every restraining force we can think of, ideally with the people involved, because they know the real concerns. We write each force as a short, specific statement, such as staff need two days of training. Listing everything on one page, in two columns, makes the whole situation visible at once.

Example: A school wants children to walk to class instead of using the car. The school writes the change in one sentence and lists the forces in two columns, with parents and teachers helping. The page shows worries that nobody had spoken about, such as unsafe crossings.

At work: Basel writes the change: all bookings go online within six months. With his team, he lists the forces in two columns: on one side, fewer missed calls, patient requests and saved staff time, and on the other, fear of the software, older patients, training time and privacy concerns. The list shows worries that the team had not said aloud.

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3. Score and Compare

Next we give each force a score, for example from one to five for how strong it is. Scoring is a common practice rather than part of Lewin's own work, but it helps us see which forces matter most. We then compare the totals and look at the largest scores on each side, not only at the number of items. A short list of strong forces tells us more than a long list of weak ones.

Example: A couple decides whether to move to a new city. They use score and compare: each reason gets a score from one to five, and they compare the totals. Two strong reasons, a better job and family nearby, outweigh five weak ones.

At work: Basel's team scores the forces from one to five. Missed calls score five, fear of the software scores four and older patients score four. Basel sees that the restraining side is slightly stronger, and that two forces matter most.

4. Plan the Action

To create change, we can strengthen the driving forces or weaken the restraining forces. Lewin suggested that simply pushing harder often raises resistance and tension, so reducing the restraining forces is usually the smarter first move. Each action should have an owner and a date. After some time, we repeat the analysis, because the forces change as the situation moves.

Example: A café wants customers to bring reusable cups. Instead of adding only posters, the café plans action on the restraining forces: a small discount and a shelf for borrowing cups. More customers bring their own cups.

At work: Basel plans action for the two strongest restraining forces: training sessions for staff, and keeping a phone option for older patients. He also shares the data on missed calls to strengthen the main driving force. Three months later, half of the bookings are online, and he repeats the analysis.

Conclusion

In summary, force field analysis, based on Kurt Lewin's idea of balance, looks at the driving and restraining forces around a change. We describe the change, list the forces, score and compare them, and plan the action. Reducing the restraining forces is often the smarter first move. Repeating the analysis keeps the plan realistic as the situation moves.

Sources

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