Lewin's Change Model - Unfreeze, Change, Refreeze

Kurt Lewin was a German-American psychologist and a pioneer of social psychology. He died in nineteen forty-seven, the year his article on change in groups appeared in the journal Human Relations, and writers after him turned his ideas into three steps: unfreeze, change and refreeze. Researchers still debate how much of this popular model Lewin himself wrote, so this video uses it as a practical teaching tool, not as a law, and facts should be checked before use. We follow Manar, an operations manager at a food distributor, as she moves her order team from paper forms to a shared digital system, and her story is an invented illustration for learning.

Driving and Restraining Forces

Lewin saw every stable situation as a balance between two kinds of forces. Driving forces push towards change, such as customer demand, a better tool or pressure from a competitor. Restraining forces hold things in place, such as habits, fear of mistakes, missing skills or lack of time. When the two are equal, nothing moves, even if everyone agrees that change is needed. Pushing harder on the driving forces can make the restraining forces push back, so reducing a restraining force can work better. That is why the first practical step is to draw a map of both kinds of forces and to ask who feels each one.

Example: A family wants to eat more healthily, but cooking takes too long after work. Instead of promising to try harder, they prepare vegetables and sauces on Sunday. During the week, dinner takes ten minutes instead of an hour. The restraining force of lost time shrinks, and a healthy dinner becomes the easy choice. That is how reducing a restraining force works.

At work: The order clerks in Manar's team write orders on paper forms, and an order can wait a full day before anyone types it into the system. Customers complain about late deliveries, and a competitor promises same-day confirmation. Manar draws two columns on a whiteboard with her team leaders. Faster confirmation and fewer lost forms go in the driving column; fear of typing mistakes, two clerks who are not confident with screens, and the busy season go in the restraining column. She chooses to reduce the restraining forces first, starting with training and a protected week for practice.

Unfreeze

The first step is to unfreeze, which means helping people loosen their attachment to the old way. It begins with an honest reason: leaders show evidence that the current situation is costing something and will cost more if nothing changes. The leader also listens, because the worries people name are the restraining forces from the map. The goal is real readiness, not panic and not a polite agreement that disappears on Monday. Without this step, a change is announced but not accepted, and people wait for it to pass.

Example: A person who has ignored back pain for years finally sees the scan result and hears the doctor describe what will happen without treatment. The doctor places it beside a healthy one and explains every difference. The old habit of sitting all day no longer feels safe. Only then does the person agree to plan a change. That is unfreezing.

At work: Manar pulls the last three months of orders and shows how many forms reached the system a day late and how many deliveries needed correction. She asks each clerk to name the one worry that matters most, and they mention screen mistakes, customer calls that interrupt typing, and fear that the new system will be used to judge them. Manar promises that the first month is only for practice. Before the meeting ends, the team asks when the training will start.

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Change

The second step is the change itself, when people start to work in the new way. This stage is called transition, because the group travels from the old level to a new one. It is usually the most uncomfortable stage: speed drops, mistakes appear and the old way still looks tempting. Leaders therefore give clear direction, train in small groups, keep support close and share early successes so that people see progress. Starting with a small pilot also helps, because a problem found with a few orders is cheaper than one found with all of them.

Example: A family moves to a new city, and the children are nervous about the new school. The parents walk the children there every morning during the first week, learn the route together and answer the same questions again and again. By the third week the children go alone and arrive on time. That is the change stage: support first, independence after.

At work: Manar starts a pilot: one small team enters all new orders digitally for one week, while the paper forms stay in a drawer as a backup. She trains groups of three, sits beside each clerk for the first orders and names an experienced colleague as the person to ask. When a clerk reports that the screen hides the delivery date, she asks the software supplier for a small change and tells the team it was their idea. On Friday she shows the result: not one order was lost, and confirmations reached customers the same day.

Refreeze

The last step is to refreeze, which means making the new way stable and normal. Without it, people slowly drift back to the old habits, especially under pressure. Leaders update procedures, tools and job descriptions, link recognition to the new behaviour, and remove the old option so that going back is no longer easy. Refreezing does not mean rigidity, because the new way can still be improved, as long as people change it on purpose and not by drifting. A good check is to ask what would happen if the leader left for a month.

Example: A person who starts running fixes the same time each morning, lays out the shoes the night before, joins a running club and records every run. In the first weeks it takes effort, but after some months the habit supports itself. A missed run now feels strange. That is refreezing: the new behaviour has become normal.

At work: Manar removes the paper forms from the order desks and writes the digital process into the team handbook. She adds same-day confirmation to the monthly review and mentions it when she recognises good work. When the busy season arrives and two new clerks join, the training is already part of their first week. Six months later, nobody asks for the old forms, and the team suggests two improvements of its own.

Conclusion

In summary, Lewin's model describes change in three steps: unfreeze, change and refreeze, supported by a map of driving and restraining forces. We first map the forces, then unfreeze with evidence and listening, then guide people through the change with training and early successes, and finally refreeze by updating procedures and removing the old option. Some researchers argue that Lewin himself never developed the three-step model, and others criticise the idea of freezing as too rigid, so the new stability should stay flexible. Still, the model remains a clear starting point, and facts and examples in this video should be checked against reliable sources before use.

Sources

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• Lewin's Force Field Analysis, ValueBasedManagement.net (driving forces, restraining forces, balance of forces) – https://valuebasedmanagement.net/methods_lewin_force_field_analysis.html

• Kurt Lewin, Change Management Coach (stages: unfreeze, change or transition, refreeze; the criticism that freezing is too rigid) – https://www.change-management-coach.com/kurt_lewin.html

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