Organization Development Primer:
Change Management, Kurt Lewin and Beyond

Brenda Barker Scott
Queen's University IRC

ORGANIZATION DEVELOPMENT PRIMER: CHANGE MANAGEMENT, KURT LEWIN AND BEYOND

By Brenda Barker Scott, Queen's University IRC

While change theorists explore the process of planned change from various perspectives, most would acknowledge the intellectual roots of their work stem from Kurt Lewin's laboratory. Scratch the surface of planned change theories and Lewin's spirit and conceptual framework will not be far below. A German-born psychologist, Lewin was considered the "founder of social psychology." What follows is an exploration of how Lewin's work provided the deep root structure from which planned change theory has evolved.

THERE IS NOTHING SO PRACTICAL AS A GOOD THEORY

Lewin pioneered the study of social systems. He was the first to borrow ideas and theories from the physical and biological sciences to provide a conceptual lens for viewing and diagnosing human systems. Lewin suggested that "nothing is as useful as a good theory" to help develop and guide "better concepts and higher levels of theory." Today, theorists continue to follow his lead by borrowing concepts and theories from complexity science, anthropology, and Confucian philosophy, to name a few.

IF YOU WANT TO UNDERSTAND A SYSTEM, YOU MUST SEEK TO CHANGE IT

Lewin developed the idea that if you want to understand a system, you must seek to change it. His methodology (later referred to as action research) suggested that one cannot be separate from the system that one seeks to change. This simple yet profound notion took Lewin out of the laboratory and into the world to partner with clients (housewives, farmers, factory workers) to help solve real-world challenges and develop insights into change theory. Lewin recognized that every action research initiative is different, and that diagnosis and solutions are unique to the players, dimensions of the challenge, historical climate, and culture of the system. His real-time experimentation

helped to define the role of OD practitioners as process guides and of OD scholars as practical theorists.

In an attempt to gain scholarly legitimacy, OD scholars over time adopted more qualitative approaches to studying organizations, creating a tension between theory and practice. Today some OD scholars are once again calling for more practice-based, interpretive approaches. For example, Cooperrider and Srivasta claim that appreciative inquiry, relying on subjective interpretation rather than cause-and-effect problem solving, provides a more robust foundation for developing socially relevant theories.

BEHAVIOUR IS A FUNCTION OF THE PERSON AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Lewin was the first to understand that challenges cannot be removed from context, dissected into chunks, and isolated to decipher a single cause. In order to understand human behaviour and promote change, he concluded, one needs to understand the rich interplay between environmental forces (rules, protocols, systems, structures) and personal psychological forces (thoughts, aspirations, needs, desires, fears). In open systems, everything counts.

The discovery that motivation is not simply a function of how well one is trained and rewarded, as hypothesized by Frederick Taylor, but of the complex interaction between psychological, social, and physical forces led to major advances. For example, working alongside colleagues Ralph White and Ronald Lippitt, Lewin showed that leadership style had a profound impact on the behaviour of followers. Studying groups of boys who belonged to volunteer arts and crafts clubs, the researchers found a striking difference in the boys' behaviour as they varied their leadership style from autocratic to democratic to laissez-faire. With autocratic or laissez-faire leadership the boys were much more likely to be aggressive or apathetic, while with democratic leadership the boys were much more likely to play nice and stick to task. Other innovations included developments in group dynamics, participatory decision-making, survey feedback, job design and enlargement, and culture development.

Systems thinking has since evolved from its initial focus on changing individuals or groups via action research and survey feedback. Theorists and practitioners turned their attention to transforming organizations using large-scale interventions and

eventually to whole systems using techniques such as learning organizations and appreciative inquiry.

THE POLITICS OF CHANGE: INVOLVING THE GATEKEEPERS

Lewin believed that if you want a change to succeed, you must involve the gatekeepers of the system. Once gatekeepers are involved in defining the change challenge and designing the solution, he reasoned, restraining forces are reduced, enabling change to occur. Moreover, because solutions fit within the context of the gatekeepers' revised life-space, they are more likely to succeed.

While working with the anthropologist Margaret Mead during World War II, Lewin was asked to help reduce civilian consumption of rationed foods, mainly meat. Even though traditional meats were scarce, families resisted trying non-scarce meats such as beef hearts, sweetbreads, and kidneys. Knowing that housewives were the shoppers and preparers of food, Lewin reasoned that they were the gatekeepers who controlled the situation. He believed that if they were given new information and allowed to participate in deciding what to do, they would be more likely to change their shopping habits and prepare meals with non-scarce meats.

To test his hypothesis, Lewin set up a controlled experiment with several groups of housewives. In one group, a nutrition expert lectured the group on the facts as well as the benefits of cooking and consuming the non-scarce meats. In other groups, women were given the facts and asked to discuss and create their own meal plans. While 3 percent of the lecture group served non-scarce meats, 32 percent of the "discuss and decide ourselves" group prepared the meats for their families.

Lewin's insight that involvement and commitment are inextricably linked is the foundation for technologies known as whole scale interventions. These technologies, such as future search and open space, enable OD practitioners to bring together diverse groups of stakeholders to have meaningful conversations that move from a diagnosis of the challenge to creating a vision of the desired future and planning future actions.

CHANGE IS LEARNING

Lewin's change model can also be understood from the perspective of unlearning and relearning. From this cognitive perspective, when learners are exposed to and accept disconfirming data, they are opened to the possibility for learning. Change occurs as new insights are formed via experiences, experimentation, and feedback, and are anchored when they are supported by new norms and organizational features.

The unlearning-relearning process can produce anxiety and defensiveness that often surfaces in the form of personal or group resistance. Core to Lewin's approach to action research is the idea that the learners must experience a sense of psychological safety to overcome defensive reactions and support the development of new ways of thinking.

Recently scholars have used cognitive cause-mapping techniques to show that individuals exposed to new information and experiences do indeed learn to see anew throughout a change process.

SUMMARY

Viewing organizations as systems of countervailing force fields that serve to support or resist change, identifying the change agent's role as helping to "unfreeze" stabilizing forces, and identifying gatekeepers as high leverage players who exert influence to move the system, are but three concepts that have been pivotal to planned change theory. Despite the passage of time, Lewin's theoretical and practical concepts are remarkably contemporary. From these ideas, change theory has evolved considerably, a pattern that Lewin, ever the practical theorist, would most definitely appreciate.

REFERENCES

Argyris, C. (1980). *Overcoming organizational defences*. Allyn & Bacon, Boston.

Bartunek, J. M., Moch, M. K. 1987. First-order, second-order, and third-order change and organization development interventions: a cognitive approach. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*. 23:483-500.

Burgelman, R. A. 1991. "Intraorganizational ecology of strategy making and adaptation: Theory and field research". *Organization Science*, 2: 239-262.

Brown, J. S. and Duguid, P. (1991). "Organizational learning and Communities-of-Practice: Toward a unified view of working, learning and innovation". *Organization Science*, 2(1), 40-57.

Cooperrider, D. L., Srivastva, S. (1987). Appreciative inquiry in organizational life. In Pasmore, W., Woodman, R. (Eds.), Research in organization change and development (Vol. 1). Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.

Dooley, K. 2004. "Complexity science models of organizational change and innovation." In Poole, M and S Van de Ven (eds). *Handbook of Organizational Change and Innovation*. Oxford University Press.

Kimberly, J. R. & Bouchiki, H. (1995). "The dynamics of organization development and change". *Organization Science*, 6(1), 9-18.

Lawrence, P., and Lorsch J. (1967). "Differentiation and integration in complex organizations". *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 12:1-47.

Lewin, K. (1953). Studies in group decision. In D. Cartwright & A. Zander (Eds.), *Group Dynamics, Research and Theory*. Evanston, IL: Row, Peterson and Company.

Lewin, K. (1947). "Frontiers in group dynamics: II. channels of group life; social planning and action research". *Human Relations* 1; 143.

Lewin, K., Lippitt, R., & White, R. (1939) "Patterns of aggressive behavious in experimentally crearted "social climates." *Journal of Social Psychology*, 10 (2) 271-293.

Marshak RJ. 1993. "Lewin meets Confucius: a review of the OD model of change". *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science.* 29:393-415

Schein, E. (1996). "Kurt Lewin's change theory in the field and in the classroom: notes toward a model of managed learning." *Systems Practice,* 9 (1) 27-47.

Seo, M; Putnam, L. and Bartunek, J. 2004. "Dualities and tensions of planned organizational change." In Poole, M and S Van de Ven (eds). *Handbook of Organizational Change and Innovation.* Oxford University Press.

Weick, K and Quinn, R. 1999. "Organizational change and development." *Annual Review of Psychology*, 50, 361-386.

Weisbord, M. (2004). *Productive Workplaces Revisited.* Jossey-Bass.