

An Overview of Lewin's Change Management Model

If you've ever attempted to roll out new changes for an organization, you likely know how challenging the change management process can be — even for the smallest of alterations to the status quo.

That's because change inevitably brings about resistance, as some employees will be hesitant to adapt to new behaviors and tasks.

For this reason, you'll need a winning step change model to act as a template for successful change.

None of the change management models out there are more popular than **Kurt Lewin's three-step model**.

It likens the change process to manipulating an ice cube's shape. To reform the cube, you must **unfreeze** it, **change** it to its new state, and then **refreeze** it.

To Lewin, the organizational change process is no different. To get employees to adapt to a change, you need to unfreeze their current behaviors, change them, and then refreeze them, so the change sticks.

If you want to learn more about Lewin's change management model, you've come to the right place. Read on for a complete overview of Lewin's 3-stage model as well as how you can use it to bring about effective change at your company.

Who Was Kurt Lewin?

[Kurt Lewin](#) was a highly influential German-American psychologist who was one of the pioneers of modern social psychology. He focused on applied research, action research, and **group dynamics** during his career.

He believed that groups drastically alter the behavior of the individuals within them, which contributed to his change management philosophy.

For example, he conducted an experiment shortly after the close of World War II that attempted to influence the dietary habits of a group. In particular, his goal was to guide them toward less popular cuts of meat (heart, kidney, brains), as the US was 'protein starved' after sending most of its domestic meat abroad to feed soldiers.

In a nutshell, Lewin found that as a group, the individuals were far more likely to change their habits than if they were on their own.

The participants appreciated openly discussing the dietary options with the other group members. They were also able to hold each other accountable for the change, solidifying it into the future.

Lewin's Force Field Theory

Another critical theory of Lewin's is the **force field theory**. To Lewin, an individual's behavior is entirely

determined by 'forces' in their environment or field.

In this sense, everyone has a 'force field' that affects how they think and act.

Force field analysis also plays a significant role in the process of change. In order for a change to occur, driving forces and restraining forces must be in balance.

What are those?

Driving forces are what move the change process forward at an organization. Examples of driving forces include ambitions, goals, needs, and even fears.

After all, nothing conveys the need for change like the fear of losing your business!

For Lewin, driving forces are what initiate the need for change in an organization. Yet, there's always a yin to every yang, which is where **restraining forces** come into play.

If driving forces are what motivate change, restraining forces are what fight against it. Instead of being an independent force, a restraining force must always stand in opposition to a driving force.

For example, if the driving force is ambition, the restraining force would be laziness.

To bring about a new status quo, you'll want to strengthen your driving forces and inhibit your restraining forces.

Lewin's Three-Step Model for Change Management

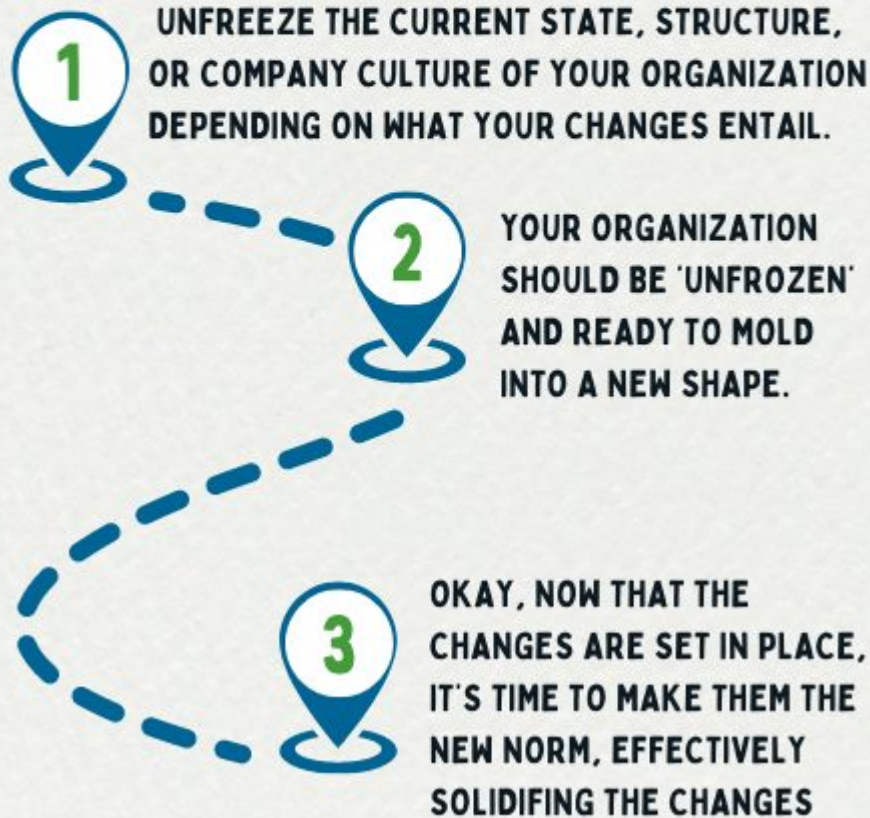
Now that you have a little bit of background on Kurt Lewin and how he viewed human psychology, let's dive into Lewin's change theory.

The three stages of the model are:

- Unfreeze
- Change
- Refreeze

LEWIN'S CHANGE MANAGEMENT MODEL

IN THE WORKPLACE



Once you have your change initiatives in place and have identified key stakeholders, you can begin to implement this model.

Lewin's change model is linked to his force field theory - in that change leaders must embrace driving forces and inhibit restraining ones.

This model aims to examine your current state and determine what it would take to change to your future desired state.

From there, you'll want to entertain all the options that can get you from point A to point B and then settle on the strongest one. That ensures that you wind up with the most effective strategy instead of taking the easiest, most straightforward route.

For change to work, it takes buy-in from all levels of the organization, not just the top. That's where the unfreeze and refreeze stages start to shine.

These two stages involve creating a compelling narrative for why the change is necessary and ensuring that the new behaviors you implement stick with your employees. That's why they're the most critical stages in the entire theory.

Sure, implementing change can be tricky, but the real challenges come with getting rid of the old ways and maintaining the new ones. Now let's take a deeper look at each stage in the model.

Step #1: Unfreeze

The first stage in Lewin's plan involves 'unfreezing' the current state of your organization. You may need to unfreeze your organizational structure or company culture depending on what your changes entail.

The unfreezing stage is about preparing your organization for future changes. That includes getting your employees to realize that the changes are necessary for your organization's survival.

For this reason, you should focus on weaving a convincing narrative on why changes are needed and spread awareness among employees.

When creating your organization's change narrative, make sure to back up your claims with data.

For example, convincing everyone to go along with the changes will be easier when you provide dwindling sales numbers and negative customer satisfaction surveys. The narrative should elicit a sense of urgency amongst staff, which will help in stage #2.

The more you can get your employees to accept the new changes, the more effective you'll be at 'unfreezing' the status quo.

Just as an ice cube won't be able to change shape without unfreezing, nor will the behavior of your employees.

Challenges of the unfreezing phase

One of the biggest challenges associated with managing change is dealing with resistance. Even if your change narrative is compelling and convincing, you'll still likely be met with some resistance.

Why is that?

It's because you throw everyone off balance when you change anything at an organization. Instead of doing their jobs as they always have, they need to get used to new systems, tasks, and changes to the organizational culture.

In a sense, you're creating a controlled crisis amongst your people, which can elicit some strong reactions from some.

The good news is that chaos will serve as motivation for seeking out a new equilibrium. In other words, chaos is a necessary evil that will aid in the implementation of change.

You can soften the blow by introducing a reward system - wherein employees earn rewards by adapting to the changes successfully. These perks can include bonuses, stocks, person-based pay, and more. It's imperative to provide ample support for your employees throughout all the stages of change, and rewards are always reliable.

Step #2: Change

By now, your organization should be 'unfrozen' and ready to mold into a new shape. That's when it's time to enter step #2 of Lewin's change management model, the actual change process. During this stage, you'll roll out all the changes you've been gearing your staff up for - so it's imperative to do it right.

During the change stage, your goal should be to combat any lingering resistance. To do so, you'll need a concise communication strategy that covers your entire organization.

That way, if employees are struggling with the changes at any level, you can quickly find out about it and provide assistance, such as additional training.

Another way to fight resistance is by pointing out **short-term wins** to your staff.

A short-term win is a positive result of your changes that occur within a couple of weeks. An example would be seeing a slight boost in sales due to your change initiatives.

It's crucial to point these out to your staff whenever they happen, as they reinforce that the changes are not only working but that they were the right decision.

Also, do your best to win over key influencers in your organization. If you do, they'll become a 'cheerleader' for change, convincing the rest of your employees that the changes are the right way to go. Key influencers include managers, executives, and department chairs.

Step #3: Refreezing

Okay, now that the changes are set in place, it's time to make them the new norm. The refreezing process effectively solidifies the changes, making them part of the new status quo. It's a crucial stage that should not get overlooked, as it's pretty easy for employees to revert to their old ways.

That's why the refreezing methodology is all about eliminating old bad habits and replacing them with new, productive ones.

Take stock of all the changes that you've made so far, and evaluate how successful they've been.

Is there any resistance left among employees? Are there still any issues left from the change process that you need to deal with?

These are vital questions to ask during the refreezing stage. You'll also want to openly celebrate any apparent successes with your employees and reward their commitment to maintaining the changes.

Criticizing Lewin's Model

That's an overview of the unfreeze-change-refreeze model for change management. In recent years, Lewin's change management model has received a fair amount of criticism for its simplicity. [Modern scholars](#) claim that the model lacks the flexibility required for our fast-moving, modern age.

Despite this, Lewin's model provides an essential view of change management theory and still has its defenders and practitioners. In particular, the model works best for rolling long-term changes at larger organizations.

Tips for Implementing Lewin's Change Management Model

If you're going to implement Lewin's model at your organization, or any change for that matter, you'll want to have these fundamentals in place:

- Identify key stakeholders. Who will your changes affect the most? Who will play the most significant role in implementing the changes? These are your stakeholders, and you'll want to identify them and form a change team.
- Use rewards to bring about new behaviors. Employees won't change by themselves, so you'll need to coax them into it through rewards and leading by example. If you want your employees to communicate more, you can reward them for successfully communicating.
- Use a clear set of metrics to measure your success. If you don't have any metrics in place, you won't be able to tell if your changes are working or not. You'll want to establish key performance indicators that align with your goals. Once you do that, there are plenty of [change management tools](#) out there that will help you measure your KPIs.
- Elicit a sense of urgency. The last thing you want is for your employees to think they can put their feet up and ignore the changes for a while. After all, the chances are high that if you're implementing a change, it's an urgent one that requires immediate action. As such, you should convey this urgency to your people during the unfreezing stage.
- Have a plan to combat resistance. Even before you mention a change to your employees, you'll want to develop some strategies for fighting resistance. Tactics include 'bridging' activities that will slowly bring hesitant employees on board. An example would be introducing a new training program that familiarizes them with the basics of a new platform.

Once you have these necessities, you'll have a much easier time introducing a planned change to your organization.

Concluding Thoughts: Lewin's Change Management Model

By now, you should have a solid understanding of Lewin's approach to change management. His three-step model remains one of the most well-known and widely adapted change management models.

Just like an ice cube or a frozen steak - you need to thaw out or unfreeze the habits of your employees if you want them to change.

Only then can you mold the ice or food into something new.

From there, it's back into the freezer to solidify the changes, making them the new normal for your company. It remains an effective way to visualize the change management process, even despite recent criticisms.