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A Response to Critique of the Refreeze Step in Lewin's Model of Organizational Change from the Viewpoint of Organizational Behavior

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Abstract

Problem Statement: *This paper responds to criticism of Kurt Lewin's three step model of organizational change in increasingly turbulent environments. It explores whether the refreeze step of Kurt Lewin's notable three step model is still applicable to organizational change processes in the age of globalisation and digitalisation.* ***Method:*** *Literature review and critical analysis of applied examples are used to provide an overview of Kurt Lewin's three-step change model. Authors' observations and reflections are integrated in the discussion. The changing contemporary environment and the implications for the refreeze step of Lewin's model are accordingly discussed.* ***Conclusions:*** *The paper concludes that a balance of stability and movement; of discrete and emergent change; is the reality for today's organizations, and forms the touchstone for Lewin's formulation of change theories. Alignment is observed between notions of desired equilibrium in Lewin's model and the contemporary underpinnings of sustainability. Technology and the modern pace of organizational change are also factors to consider. There has hence been an adaptation of his theoretical heritage that is current and sufficiently robust to withstand the criticisms of the refreeze stage.*

Key words:

Lewin , change, refreeze ,sustainability, system, management, organizational behavior

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Introduction: Overview of Kurt Lewin's three steps of change

Few theorists in the fields of organizational behavior, development and change make it into the ranks of the revered.It takes a particular kind of mind to move authoritatively through the frequently undulating, amorphous concepts from the change management field. Organizational change is complex and multi-faceted as there are many variables and problems involved in the change process (Graetz, Rimmer, Smith & Lawson, 2011; Waddell, Creed, Cummings & Worley, 2013).Consequently,change is viewed from a number of different perspectives through a range of change models (Burnes & Cooke, 2012). One well known and influential model is Kurt Lewin's classical model of change, developed in the first half of the Twentieth Century. The model reflects the planned, linear approach to change and uses a metaphor of water and ice to describe a change process in three steps – unfreezing, moving (changing) and refreezing (Argyris, 1997; Burnes, 2007).

The simplicity of the metaphor has enabled generations of change consultants and organizational managers to imaginatively explain why some changes have been needed and,subsequently, toplan staged transitions. Swanson and Creed (2013) suggest the three step model is, in fact, a summarised, reduced adaptation of a much more complicated organizational environment perceived by Lewin in his original work. Nonetheless, the simplified three step model attributed to Lewin has been applied in change management and consultancy for decades (Argyris, 1997). While the metaphor has been widely adopted (Kickert, 2013), Graetz et al (2011) rightly point out that the third stage (refreeze) of the model has incurred some criticism for the notion of locking in or freezing the change. Given the increasingly dynamic environment and the contemporary view of change as being emergent, the challenge for managers is to ensure creative, adaptive, flexible and continuously improving processes (Creed & Zutshi, 2012a)rather thansimply following processes which, after initial change transformation, had been frozen. It is potentially dangerous to undermine organizational stability thinking that a competitive advantage might be lostby not continuously changing.Among the opposing forces in that situation are stakeholder expectations which place value on security and control (and sustainability) oforganizational systems. This natural tensionof opposing forces is highlighted in Lewin's work (Lewin, 1943), and it ensures change managers should

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pay close attention to situational differences when recommending courses of action.The complexity of possible outcomes in adopting strategies of stability versus courses of change requires careful moderation.

When approaching Lewin's theories it is useful to picture the context in which they were developed. Lewin was a social psychologistwho immigratedinto the United States in 1933to escapethe rise of fascismacross Europe (Burnes, 2004). He believed that it was only by resolving social conflict; whether religious, racial, marital, or industrial;that the human condition could be improved (Burnes & Cooke, 2012). Therefore, Lewin's underlying purpose was often to suggest approaches to resolving group conflict (Graetz, 2011). He also believed thatthe key to conflict resolution was to facilitate group learning through democratic participation and to enable individuals to understand and restructure their perceptions of the world around them (Burnes, 2004).

Lewin created a body of work over many years, and while Lewin's three step model is often treated as a separate body of work, it is important to recognize that Lewin saw it as part of a unified piece of work which also included Field Theory, Group Dynamics and Action Research (Lewin, 1951; Kippenberger, 1998). Each element of his work was intended to support and reinforce the others and all of them were necessary to understand and bring about planned change, whether at the level of the individual, group, organization or even society (Burnes, 2004; Burnes & Cooke 2012; Swanson & Creed, 2013). A fundamental concept underpinning his work isfield forces, which are the group dynamics that incline a group towards movement or stability (Lewin, 1943, 1951). Lewin proposes that the normal state for most organizationsis one of equilibrium in which the forces for stability are dominant. Without using the term 'sustainability' in the context we think of it today, Lewin still imbued his change theory with its moderating tenets.In other words, to achieve change, an organization would either need to reduce the forces for stability or increase the forces for change (Graetz, 2011; Waddell, Creed, Cummings & Worley, 2013) all the while seeking a preferred state of equilibrium.

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The three steps of change begin with unfreezing. This step is aimed at de-stabilising the equilibrium through a reduction in the field forces that maintain an existing organizational culture and method of operation. Unfreezing often involves breaking psychological attachment to the past by using information that demonstrates the existence of problems (Graetz, 2011). The second step of Lewin's model is moving (or changing). This step entails the creation of recognition in the workforce of the need for change (Graetz, 2011),accounting for all the forces at work, and identifying and evaluating, iteratively, the available options (Lewin, 1947; Burnes, 2004). This action research-based learning approach enables groups and individuals to move to a more acceptable set of behaviors (Burnes, 2004) around a particular set of new structures and processes (Graetz, 2011).The third is refreezing, which occurs as soon as new values, structures and processes have been installed, and is required in order to lock in the change (Burnes, 2004).

Lewin(1951) underlines the importance of group decision making in encouraging and sustaining change as part of the refreezing process. He argues that, although discussion during the process could lead people to question and change their behavior (unfreezing and moving), making decisions as part of a democratic group has a refreezing effect that sustains the decision (Burnes, 2004).Group decision-making provides the cultural reinforcement necessary to stabilise the system to restore equilibrium (Graetz, 2011). It is on this basis that refreezing seems to fall into the category of common sense. Most individuals and practising managers tend to agree that predictable work patterns, stable expectations, and foreseeable outcomes are to be preferred. However, the rise of hyper competitiveness in a globally interconnected series of markets and supply chains does appear to challenge the ideal of stability for many organizations (Wright, Paroutis&Blettner, 2013).

1. Criticisms of the third step of Lewin's change model

The planned model of change, the basis of the three step model, reflects the rational strategic planning approach. This approach is linear and sees change as moving from one fixed state to another through a series of pre-planned steps (Bamford& Forrester, 2003). At the time of Lewin's writing, less complex supply chains, fewer and slower

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technologies and more linear communication systems combined for a more stable operating environment than today (Huczynski& Buchanan, 2007). Hence, the planned approach to change, as reflected in Lewin's model was, perhaps, value adding. However, organizations are now operating in a very different external environment.In an era of global competitive markets, exponential technological escalation, environmental deterioration, and uncertain consumer confidence, most commentators argue organizational change is more difficult than ever before (Graetz, 2011), and the pace of change has never been faster (By, 2005; Miles, 2013).

As early as the 1960's, Bennis (1969) argued that the pace of change makes traditional forms of organization obsolete (Huczynski& Buchanan, 2007). Other writers began to question the fundamental assumption of equilibrium that underlies planned change (Marrow, 1969; Graetz, 2011) as well as the assumption of linear change, whereby organizations can move in a pre-planned manner from one stable state to another (Bamford and Forrester, 2003). The assumptions were questioned on the basis that they were no longer relevant in a fast-changing environment (Bamford& Forrester, 2003). In the 1980's the culture-excellence school heavily criticised planned change, suggesting that organizational success required a strong, appropriate organizational culture. Proponents such as Peters and Waterman (1982) argued that Western organizations were losing their competitive edge because they were too bureaucratic, inflexible, and slow to change. In response to the critique of planned change, the emergent approach to change began to gain ground. The emergent approach emphasizes that change should not be perceived as a series of linear events within a given period of time, but as a continuous open-ended process of adaptation to changing circumstances and conditions (Burnes, 1996, 2004; as cited by By, 2005). The interesting twist in the culture-excellence view is that one strong, stable force; the traditional organization; could only be changed by an equally strong opposing force; the emergent strategy with a strong champion leader who would be instrumental in unfreezing the old systems.

In order to create the appropriate organizational culture for emergent strategy, the concept of strategic thinking also emerged (Hamel & Prahalad, 2010). Strategic thinking depends on individuals acting autonomously and being collectively

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committed to a clear, shared vision and sense of purpose (Graetz, 2011). To achieve this, a high-trust, questioning environment is required in which co-operation and knowledgetransfer occurs freely at multiple levels of the organization. This allows the organization tobuild a unique set of core capabilities that enhance organizational learning (Senge, 1990). Organizational learning is useful because it provides strategic capabilities that allow an organization to respond to its environment at speed (Senge, 1990; Creed & Zutshi, 2012a).

In the context of these criticisms, the third step of the model, refreezing,increasingly came to be viewed as out-of-date (Graetz, 2011). The metaphor of rigidifyingchange seemed inappropriate to many managers who felt that they should not aim to refreeze but, instead,to create a permanent state of thaw (Huczynski& Buchanan, 2007) or in some cases,permanent white water (Vaill, 1989; Marshak, 1993) in their organizations.How else should innovation occur in the quest to continuously seek competitive advantages over peerorganizations intent on imitating your approach?Therefore, the key criticism of the third stage is that it is not appropriate to freeze change into place when the goal should be to create continuous open learning systems in the new environment. Broader criticisms of the planned model (By, 2005) include that it:

- is only relevant to small scale incremental change, rather than large transformational organizational change (Senior, 2002),
- assumes that organizations are operating in stable conditions and can be responsive to pre-planned shifts from one stable environment to another (Bamford& Forrester, 2003),
- overlooks events that need more directive approaches, such as a situation of crisis (Kanter, Stein &Jick, 1992), and
- assumesall stakeholders in a change process will embrace and implement it through common agreement(Burnes, 2004).

Next, we explore the intentions of Lewin's original ideas about the steps of change in order to assess the criticisms outlined.

2. A response to criticism of the third step of the model

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In response to the Lewin's third step (refreezing) criticisms, one could arguethat the three step change model has sometimes been applied more rigidly than originally intended by Lewin. The model was not to be applied simplyas three steps - discarding an old structure, setting up a new one, and then fixing this new structure into place (Cooke, 1999). It is helpful for the model to be viewed in the context of Lewin's preference for democratic, participative change. It is advisable to take into account the other theories that support the model, namely,Action Research, Group Dynamics and Force Fields in order to gain insight into the interrelated aspects of Lewin's change theories (Burnes, 2004). It is also relevant to consider the benefits of invoking a natural environment metaphor such as water and ice. As contemporary organizations build new awareness about their impacts on the environment, such metaphors have both symbolic and practical value for managers.

By exploring the metaphor, Burnes (2007) clarifies that the refreezing stage does not imply that a changed behavior is permanently set in stone. Therefore, once a change is refrozen it would still, indeed, be possible for it to change again, but the group would have to become dissatisfied with the outcomes of the initial change process. By questioning the appropriateness of newly learned behavior,one can build a motivation to unfreeze it and return to original behaviors (Burnes, 2007). Thus, Lewin believed the focus of change must be at the group level and should concentrate on factors such as group norms, roles, interactions and socialization processes to create disequilibrium, change and, subsequently, refreezing (Schein, 1988). Therefore, following Lewin's theory, managers would not seek to change the behavior of individuals in isolation because of the group pressures to conform (Burnes, 2004).

Lewin's model is process-oriented and Lewin himself believed that the field forces that affect group structures and individual behavior are in a continuous state of adaptation or quasi-stationary equilibrium (Lewin, 1943). As Buchanan etal (2005) point out, quasi-stationary processes are not perfectly constant, but show fluctuations around an average level, which is an indicator of inherent, underlying tendency toward equilibrium.Therefore,while the step of refreezing aims to stabilize the group at a new quasi-stationary equilibrium in order to ensure that the new behaviors are

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relatively safe from regression (Buchanan, et al., 2005), it does not necessarily imply that the stage would stay frozen, instead, there would be a preparedness to refreeze as required.

The criticism aboutorganizational changes being frozen into place (Senior, 2002; Bamford & Forrester, 2003; By, 2005), especially at this time whenorganizationsseem to require continuous change in order to grow, comes from conventional economic theory (Nedelko & Potocan, 2013) which says that competitive advantage requires change, thus, beware of locking operations too strongly into the wrong configuration. But there is also a growing literature around sustainable development and the sustainability of change which provide a different perspective (Zutshi & Sohal, 2003; Sen, 2013). The intersection of businesses operating sustainably whilst keeping economic and, more importantly, environmentally sustainable development as part of the decision making and implementation, adds another dimension to the considerations during the change process. It raises the question of whether sustainability, as a means of stabilizing the consumption of resources, either globally or locally,is an equilibrium concept that is akin torefreezing?

Sustainability at the business or corporate levelrefers to strategy and activity that'meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (WCED 1987, p.43).Organizations are increasingly recognizing (or being forced to recognize) that the need for sustaining their operations aligns with the systems theory view (Checkland, 1981; Odum, 1994), which includes the need to ensure natural resource consumption is also sustainable. There is a broader global development debate in which a continuous satisfaction of human needs is argued to be equally as important as conserving planetary resources (WCED, 1987).

Whether thinking globally or locally, the argument for constant economic or individual organizational growth is diminished in an environment where sustainability of resource consumption is paramount.For instance, consider that refreezing, as an equilibrium concept, fits appropriately within the sustainability debate and contributes to the associated benefits and challenges. Hence,if an economicallysustainable

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operation is equivalent toa frozen state, then therefrozen stage implies a state wherethe benefits of innovation can berepressedwhile the organization effectively resists pressures from internal and external stakeholders. In such a scenario, instead of being proactive in creating transformation for genuine growth, the organization would be faced with lack of competitive response and, hence, its eventual decline.This once again raises the question of whether this resistance is, perhaps, one of the Lewinian forces against change which today leads to some of the challenges of implementing the third step? For instance, a senior manager may mandate development and marketing of a new good or service. After the launch, some managers and staff may counter with genuine logistical concerns about the new product. Among the contemporary concerns may be how big the carbon footprint is (and possibly carbon tax implications, depending upon the jurisdiction of production), which would not necessarily have featured a few decades ago. Business sustainability and natural resource sustainability become linked in such an example. In other words, it is common for new procedures and practices to be uncomfortable for those implementing them; internal and external resistances are to be expected; but the types of reasons given for resisting the change (and trying to unfreeze it) can vary with the context and timing. In addition, the fact of resistance may represent an inbuilt moderation or pull toward the kind of equilibrium that Lewin always said was natural for organizations.

An example of the effects of conflicting forces in a change process emerged in the British National Health Service Modernization Agency (2002, p.9) when it identified an ‘improvement evaporation effect’, where new processes and increased performance were not maintained, a situation much akin to unfreezing or reverting to the original state. Similarly, Reisner (2002) examines why the United States Postal Service, radically transformed and successful during the 1990’s, was again making a loss by 2001.

Portending in part the recognition of sustainable systems in organizations, Lewin was concerned about the short lived nature of change, noticing that, after initial enthusiasm, group life soon returns to the previous level. By promoting the concept of permanency at a new level or, as he put it, ‘permanency for a desired period’, Lewin

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(1947, p.228) indicated that it does not suffice to define the objective of a planned change in group performance as the attainment of a different level. Permanency at the new level, or permanency for a desired period, should be included as part of the change objectives. It was in the spirit of this understanding that he developed his three step model of change.

Consider also the critique that refreezing does not suit fast-paced environments. This runs counter to the experience of Suc, Prokosch & Ganslandt (2009),who successfully applied Lewin's change process in a health informatics-related project at a German university hospital. They found that the integration of this model into the project did not require significant additional resources and that the number of meetings would have been equal to a traditionally managed project. Indeed, the fact that they were able to achieve significantrefreezing of processes within a week, while the situation was still in a partial thaw, meant there was still enough flexibility to accommodate the changing materials and procedures. The authorsof the study claim that by investing time on the project in the earlier stages of the model, they were able to discover the underlying forces, address individual concerns and design flexible solutions which contributed to the success of the project.

Lewin saw his model to be applicable at all levels of change – individual, group and organizational (Burnes, 2004). Addressing the criticism that the three stages could not be applied to transformational change was counter to the experience of British Airways. In the case example presented by Goodstein and Burke (1991), Lewin's change model was applied over a five year period (1982 – 1987) during the privatization of British Airways (BA). Goodstein and Burke (1991) highlightedhow the steps through which the transformation was accomplished clearly fit Lewin's model of the change process. The pressures for change exerted on BA by the external environment were broad and intense. In addition, the internal organizational changes, driven by the external pressures were massive and widespread. They transformed the BA culture from what BA managers once described as bureaucratic and militaristic to one that is more service-orientated and market-driven. In the case of BA, the actions taken to refreeze were applied at the levels of individual, structures and systems, and also incorporated cultural climate and interpersonal style changes.In a recent example,

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generally supportive of Lewin's model, the Central Statistics Office of Botswana experienced a transformation into partial privatization whichexhibited a range of enabling and constraining forces each significantlyaligned with the three Lewinian stages (Molebatsi & Boy, 2012).

From these examples we can draw the inference that resistance to change need not always be negative, especially if that resistance allows an organization to retain a healthy level of sustainability. From another view, when an organization simply has to change in order to compete and survive, there is an imperative to overcome resisting forces. Through this angle, the third step is the watershed stage where training and retraining, ongoing communication about the benefits of change, and organization-wide modeling and rewarding of the new ways that things are to be done become crucial for ensuring success in the consequent period of time.

3. Contemporaneous issues

To reiterate, the emergent approach supports the view that knowledge and learning are important for developing an organization's key strategic capabilities.Organizations need to become open learning systems where strategy development and change emerges from the way a company as a whole acquires, interprets and processes information about the environment(Stace&Dunphy, 2001). In this sense, change can be perceived as a process of learning (Stace&Dunphy, 2001; By, 2005).

Referring back to the notion of the learning organization(Senge, 1990; Garvin, 2003), there are two types of organizational learning:single-loop learning and double-loop learning. Double-loop learningrecognises that, ina dynamic environment, messages conveyed by goal-based learning swiftly become out of date and people in the workplace can challenge old goals through a process of critical questioning. Waddell, Creed, Cummings and Worley (2013) remind that single-loop learning reinforces the status quo, whereas double-loop learning challenges it. Argyris & Schon (1974) and Argyris (1985)extend Lewin's foundational concepts and indicatehowdouble-loop learning is a more effective contributor to organizational change.

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Lewin originally recognized the need to provide a process wherebyorganizational members can change their behavior through learning, and developed Action Research to achieve change (Burnes, 2004a). Action Research is as an iterative, two-pronged process whereby research leads to action, and action leads to evaluation and further action (Lewin, 1946; Burnes, 2004). It emphasizes that, for change to be effective, it must be a participative and collaborative process involving everybody. Action research draws fromGestalt psychology, which stresses that change can only successfully be achieved by helping individuals to reflect upon and gain new insights into the totality of their situation (Köhler, 1967). Therefore it can be seen that the concept of organizational learning, especially through double-loop processes, draws on much of Lewin's work, such as, Action Research and its participative approach, in particular his theories of a cyclical process of learning and re-learning. Lewin, in turn, builds on earlier developments in psychology and philosophical theories of interpretation and understanding, such as, hermeneutics (Heidegger, 1962; Creed, 2006), and his ideas lay down significant foundations for contemporary concepts of emergent change.

Complexity theory today offers its own interpretation of change, which is reminiscent of Lewinian concepts of action research, that is, a methodology of reflective practice and lived experience in which complexity, change and reflection converge (Creed, 2009). In the field of contemporary business sustainability, there is ongoing dialogue about the imperatives for unfettered innovation versus the need for control and accountability (Adams & Whelan, 2009). Reminiscent of Lewin's efforts to reconcile linearity with emergence, so the current organizational environment expresses those same competing forces. Change itself is a manifestation of the need to survive by moving and the need to sustain by resting (Klarner & Raisch, 2013). On this basis, any criticism of just one part of a model, which was intended to be part of the combination of theories,can hardly be justified in the longer term.

4. Conclusion

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This paper considered Lewin's three step model, in particular, the recent criticisms of the third step of the model. We argued that Lewins' model was developed during a time of relative stability, where organizations were not faced with and, hence, were not forced to undertake, the pace of change required today following intensive globalization and digitalization. Additional pressures today come in the movement toward corporate sustainability, along with the wider environmental sustainable development debate. Some alignment is observed between notions of desired equilibrium in Lewin's model and the principles of sustainability, which may become a fruitful avenue of research in future.

Something fundamental about organizational environments has been altered with new technology. Nonetheless, change in some form has always been present and Lewin did not appear to disregard the timeless nature of the phenomenon. The external uncertainties of today have encouraged organizations to move from a planned approach to strategy formulation and change management, towards an emergent strategy development process. This process requires an organizational culture of openness and flexibility to be able to support emergent strategy development. While Lewin's refreezing step is critiqued for no longer being relevant, it has been suggestedthe model may have been interpreted too narrowly on some occasions. For Lewin, the idea was that when freezing you are not locking necessarily into place for perpetuity. Just as with water and ice, frozen and unfrozen operational situations can be achievedin a short span of time. Somewhat paradoxically, the metaphor of refreezing seems to deny the possibility of future learning, yet, we countered by reminding that Lewin's own theoretical foundations are about continuously learning and being prepared to unfreeze (Creed & Zutshi, 2012b). As mentioned by Schein (1995), the power of Lewin's theorizing lay not in a formal propositional kind of theory but in his ability to build modelsof processes that draw attention to the right kinds of variables that need to be conceptualized and observed. There may, indeed, be sophistication to his metaphor with its theoretical heritage that ought to be robust enough to withstand the criticisms that have been aimed in its direction.

Our postulations about the refreezing stage of the model will next need to be authenticated by practitioner's views. This will be achieved by undertaking semi-

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structured interviews with practitioners in a cross-section of organizational sectors and sizes to get a snapshot of their change experience. It is anticipated that the interview findings would assist in addressing criticisms of Lewin's three stages and promote applicability of the model in the current age of change.

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