

SUPER MODELS

In a series of articles examining learning models, **Dr Mike Clayton** looks at Kurt Lewin's *freeze phases* – three steps on the journey of change



Change is never-ending. Yet managing it effectively is one of the principal challenges for organisations and their managers. So what is the process to support effective change in the people who make up our organisations?

This was a question addressed by one of the 20th century's leading thinkers in workplace psychology, Kurt Lewin. Among his many contributions to our understanding of organisational life is a three-part model of change.

Lewin regarded us as subject to a range of forces within our environment. He divided these into *driving forces*, which promote change, and *restraining forces*, which hinder it. The constraining forces consist of our inner resistance to change on the one hand, and, on the other, our desire to conform to what we perceive to be the established social norms.

Lewin therefore identified the first phase of change as *unfreezing* established patterns and structures. We do this by challenging current attitudes and beliefs – even values – and offering alternatives. This allows people to start to relax from their *restraining forces*, ready for change.

The second phase is *changing*. In this phase, we lead people through the transition. It is a time of uncertainty and even confusion,

as they struggle to create a clear idea of the new thinking that will replace the old. The plasticity of response means that good leadership is essential; the alternative is that people will follow whatever weak leadership they can find; hence susceptibility to gossip and rumour in times of change.

Eventually, a new understanding will emerge. Lewin's third phase is *freezing* (some-

times *refreezing*) the new ways of being into place, to establish a new mindset. During this phase, people adapt to the changed reality and start to find ways to capitalise on the opportunities it offers. Alternatively, they decide to opt out of the change and move on.

When Lewin first described this model, he was clear that the phases represent parts of a journey: a continuous process. The model has suffered a degree of neglect, largely because his use of the term 'phases' has led to some false interpretations that he was referring to three static stages.

However, we might equally argue that his thinking is in rude health. In his 1980 book *Transitions*, William Bridges articulated a similar three-stage model of transitions: *letting go, neutral zone, new beginning*. Bridges' books have been influential and give readers practical advice on how to support people through each stage of their transition.

The *freeze phases* model is immensely valuable. It focuses us on how to move people through change and, thereby, complements nicely Scott and Jaffe's model (Super Models, February 2007) of how people respond to imposed change.

As both the first systematic work on organisational change and as a starting point for designing a change process, an understanding of this model is vital for any trainer or coach who is working with people in the area of change. ■

References:

1. *Frontiers in group dynamics: Concept, method and reality in social science; social equilibria and social change*, Kurt Lewin, in *Human Relations* (1947)
2. *Managing Transitions*, William Bridges, Nicholas Brealey Publishing, Rev Ed 2003

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