Change Starts with the Heart: 
The Emotional Impact of Lewin’s Change Model

Paul R. Dannar

Abstract
Change initiatives fail more often than succeed and poor planning or even poor visions are often blamed for the breakdown. However, what dooms most change initiatives is a lack of follower involvement throughout the process. Leaders must include followers in every step of the plan so they can see themselves in it. The change message must capture the followers’ hearts and show how the new future is better than status-quo and how it will personally improve their lives as well as the state of the organization. If the heart of the follower is not captured the result will be another failed initiative. This article weaves Lewin’s three-step change model into a discussion of the emotional impact of change on followers, and proposes that successful change efforts must acknowledge and account for heart issues in both leaders and followers.

This article demonstrates that organizational change efforts fail not from bad planning, boring visions or even down turns in the economy. They fail because we neglect the human side of the equation, we take our followers for granted by not including them in the change initiative process and we ignore the emotional impact of change on each individual.

Having a solid strategic plan, goals, and a strong change message are certainly vital to any change initiative, however, they are not enough. We have all seen great change plans collecting dust in the basement of our organizations. What differentiates the successful change initiative from the failed one? The answer can be found in one word: followers. Any change effort must include willing followers, those who ensure the newly crafted grand vision reaches fruition. As leaders we must ensure that the people within the organization are able to change. This takes a legitimate change agent; one who understands both the organization and the world of human relationships.1 Successful change agents help
make the connections between what needs to happen and how people make it happen.\textsuperscript{2} Kurt Lewin recognized this fact when studying teams which led to his research on what influences people to change, and the three stages to make change successful.\textsuperscript{3} Lewin’s “Unfreeze, Change, Freeze” process prepares organizations for change efforts. Figure 1 provides a graphical representation of the model below.\textsuperscript{4}

![Figure 1: Lewin’s Three-Step Change Model](image)

Lewin’s model and research may seem simplistic, but it has been tested over many decades. Organizations in Lewin’s time were more bureaucratic and stable, with a slower pace of change. Today, by the time a change effort makes it to the transition stage another change effort is already happening. Nevertheless, Lewin provides us with a solid foundation in our understanding of the change process and how it impacts our very being. The process is not organizational, technological, nor even logic oriented. It involves human behavior and the ability to adapt and work through various emotional states. Successful and sustainable change is achieved by focusing on and addressing people’s behaviors, and underlying values and beliefs.\textsuperscript{5} A brief synopsis of Lewin’s three-step change model is presented below.\textsuperscript{6}

**Lewin’s Three Step Change Model**

**Step 1: Unfreezing**

Lewin believed equilibrium had to be destabilized (unfrozen) before old behaviors could be discarded in favor of new behaviors. This may seem simple enough – however, discarding old behaviors is a psychologically demanding event. Schein noted that the disconfirmation of the status-quo was necessary to achieve unfreezing.\textsuperscript{7} This disconfirmation helps recognize blind spots and then allowing oneself to change. More importantly he argued that those concerned need to feel safe from loss and humiliation before they can accept the new information and reject old behaviors. Leaders are the only people in the organization capable of providing psychological safety. They do this by allowing mistakes, treating everyone with dignity and admitting change is difficult, even for themselves. Leaders who allow themselves to be vulnerable provide a model of authenticity that allows the follower to do the same. Soon an authentic and transparent relationship develops where the viewpoints of others are not only accepted but desired. As this progresses, the “unfreezing” begins to open the eyes of each participant. Now deeper communication can begin to take place. This includes the understanding and appreciation of
other viewpoints and real discussions about issues within the organization. Once this begins to happen the overall atmosphere of the organization will most likely improve.

**Step 2: Transition or Change**

The unfreezing effort leads to the transition stage by creating motivation for individuals to learn and change. A compelling vision is necessary to focus the individual’s motivation toward the direction of the leader’s vision. This stage also begins the cultivation of a long-term relationship between the leader and the follower. Now working together, in the same direction, the leader and the follower can move from one set of behaviors to another. Change then occurs. This stage is a temporary position in which the leader creates conditions for diverse groups to come together and discuss the challenges ahead, to frame the debate and to clarify any assumptions behind competing values or behaviors. Transitions can be very difficult as old behaviors creep back into our day-to-day activities. The leader must consistently communicate the expected behaviors throughout the organization and must also model these desired behaviors. The leader must cultivate and coordinate the actions of others. Leaders must also rely on followers to assimilate the newly established behaviors in a manner and pace that is comfortable and will not be a shock to their system. Everyone wants to get back to a stable state as soon as possible; however, the new stable state must match the new vision.

**Step 3: Refreezing**

Refreezing seeks to re-stabilize the group in a new quasi-equilibrium state so as time passes the newly learned behaviors do not have an opportunity to regress. This often means the leader must understand and manage the mood of the followers so that their emotional state supports implementation and follow-through. Lewin perceived the change process as a group activity and unless group norms and behaviors were also transformed, changes to individual behaviors could not be sustained. It does take a village to produce change, but the primary leadership lesson is that leaders must ensure any change initiative speaks as closely as possible to the entirety of the organization.

The model above describes not just small incremental change but also what transpires during every change initiative; a transformation. If change is perceived as transformation, then the enormity of the change can be understood, not just for the organization but on the psyche of every person within the organization, and perhaps many more stakeholders outside the organization as well. It is the human side—the heart of transformation—if that will be the focus of the remainder of this article.

**Change Equals Transformation**

Any change effort is a call for transformation where leaders and followers move from an inadequate state to a preferred future state. This type of activity is a leadership issue and must come from the top through a solid vision that will inspire action. It is also a shared responsibility where everyone in the organization must pull in the same direction. If the entirety of the organization is not aligned with the change effort, the effort will fail. More importantly the more profound the change, the more important it is to create opportunities for people to re-examine and adjust their own values and beliefs. Some transitions take months while others take years. Through this time, moods, feelings and emotions are highly relevant for any kind of transformation. This is not limited to just follower emotions; the feelings of leaders are also critical. Many change efforts fail because leaders do not fully understand the impact of their own feelings on others. Any ambivalence toward the change effort allows the follower to revert back to old behaviors thus stalling any progress.
Effective transformational leaders use new and exciting visions as the screen for every important decision they make and they embolden themselves with it on a daily basis. Communicating the vision effectively aligns followers while also ensuring the leader stays on track and remains focused. This focus then helps the leader keep each follower focused. Followers must know that the leader values the new vision, will stand for it, and will take risks to support it. In other words, followers need to know and feel that they are not the only ones assuming the risk. They need to know everyone is in this together.

Transformation also means followers move between old and new forms of thinking, feeling, and doing. All of these radically alter the individual’s world. The leader’s responsibility is to ensure these shifting values and beliefs bring about the desired outcomes of the individual and the organization. In other words, it is the leader’s responsibility to deal with resistance to change. This is traditionally done through coaxing, cajoling or performance management, but that will not always work long-term. It is not just about identifying unproductive behavior and systematically making plans to correct it. Kegan & Lehay point out that dealing with resistance is the goal in the change process. They state that “it’s about understanding the complexities of human behavior” and guiding followers “through a productive process that helps them cope with the inner conflict preventing them from achieving goals.”

So what is meant exactly by “inner conflict?” Any change effort incites people to call into question the beliefs they have long held close. Perhaps it is the employee who for 25 years has believed the organization would remain committed to him for life or at least as long as he was committed to the organization by putting in a good day’s work. This innate belief in stability is threatened through global economies of scale, outsourcing, and mega mergers. These all drastically alter the way an organization commits to employees. While the follower’s viewpoint may have remained constant, the changed organization now asks this follower to do things differently, without preparing him or her to do so and often without offering the benefit of an explanation for the change. Resistance of course is the result of fear and anxiety at the loss of 25 years of truth – in essence this individual just found out the earth is flat and he or she needs time to re-learn the landscape.

Does this mean as leaders we must be psychologists? In short the answer is yes. Leaders stand no chance of guiding followers through the murky waters of change, unless they have a deep understanding of the followers. This understanding is developed through the development of authentic relationships between the leader and followers. These relationships leaders help followers change internally so they can then learn to accept externally generated change.

The Message must Inspire so it can Motivate.

What does motivation have to do with change? Where does motivation come from? One thing is clear a grand vision alone does not motivate. Motivation is an internal phenomenon and is derived from one’s sense of meaning that has developed throughout their life. A compelling vision can inspire, and once inspired followers will create their own motivation because they now have an attachment to that vision. This attachment will invoke a sense of control and associated sense of responsibility for the success of the vision. Leaders must then enhance this motivation through continuous feedback on progress and positive reinforcement. Leaders must also work through problems and issues with their followers so both can reap the benefits of small and large victories.

The same things that lead to motivation in the individual are the same things that lead to resistance to any change effort. Resistance to change is a form of organizational dissent that individuals engage in when they find change personally unpleasant. Resistance is also a manifestation of incongruent psychological effects of the change effort against the backdrop of the followers’ perceived view of how
things have always been and should be done. This barrier to acceptance and motivation for change can only be broken when the leader realizes the whole person must be considered. Leaders must integrate cognition, personal satisfaction, motivation, and feelings of security, if they are to achieve the level of behavioral change required for true transformation.26 Motivation is about desires, goals, interests, incentives, and needs. What may motivate one person may not motivate another. Leaders boost people to higher levels of motivation by showing them how their individual contributions are linked to the major purposes of the organization.27 Leaders should not push motivation, nor should they ‘do’ anything to anyone. Instead, leaders should show followers what they are doing for themselves, the leader, and the organization.

Leader involvement only goes so far as long lasting motivation is primarily intrinsic. An individual’s motivation to work hard, feel conscientious, and be creative on the job is dependent primarily on factors such as how challenging and interesting their work is, how much control and autonomy they have on the job, and how much opportunity they believe they have to learn and develop new skills.28 In terms of change initiatives, this means all of us are looking for inspiration. We want our time, talents, and heart to mean something. If we have to change our overall thought patterns and behaviors for work to mean something then we will change. However, people do not transform easily; it takes time and effort.

The End State

A universal demand on leaders is to prepare their organizations for the future.29 Much of that preparation has to do with helping everyone deal with ambiguity and change. For some leaders and followers, the idea of ambiguity and change is exhilarating and full of endless opportunity. For the vast majority of people, change is a significant cause of stress and anxiety as their stable environment is threatened. As Lewin indicated, their equilibrium is being disturbed30 and they will eagerly do all they can, sometimes quite irrationally31, to return to that state.

An effective change leader understands this desire for equilibrium and seeks to assist followers to attain this state at the right time and in the right frame of mind and heart. The leader must ensure followers are ready for transformative real change. Transformations are emotional events and impact both the follower and leader. When the leader provides a vision they are in essence giving a piece of themselves to the follower. The follower reciprocates by adapting this vision into their daily lives and actions. This is how and when the transformation takes place. To use a physiological analogy for a moment; it is said the body cannot move unless the brain tells it to move. While this is certainly accurate, it is the heart that rules the brain. Logic alone cannot sustain a change effort, there must be an inner desire to move from the comfortable status quo to the unknown that change brings; only the heart allows change to begin and be sustained, logic comes in the form of planning and executing what the heart created.

Change and the resulting transformation are not entirely logical phenomena. It takes emotion and desire to see it through to the end. Moving from a state of equilibrium through a transition stage and then back to a separate form of equilibrium is not a logical undertaking. Something compels the leader and follower to make such a decision, to tolerate uncertainty, endure frustration and suffer through pain.32 What is that something you may ask? It is the realization that the human side of transformation is the true answer to any change initiative. You get the human aspect of change right by respecting others, building trust, showing commitment to one another and their success, and generally following the golden rule.
Conclusion

Leaders must ask themselves a number of questions while embarking on a change effort. What or who is transforming whom, towards which end state, in which ways, and perhaps most importantly why? Part of the answer is both the leader and the follower are transforming the other to be otherwise indicates no transformation has actually taken place. Leaders must also ask if they are providing followers a compelling reason to change. Can followers trust the leader to do what is in their best interests and to provide them with critical feedback? Will leaders allow followers to learn and grow and lead with them? And most importantly, are leaders leading with heart?

About the Author

Paul Dannar has over 29 years of experience as an internal consultant concentrating on organization development for various military organizations at the operational and strategic level. He currently serves as a Special Assistant to the Supreme Allied Commander of Europe and NATO. He is pursuing his Doctorate in Strategic Leadership at Regent University and can be reached at paul.dannar@shape.eucom.mil.

References

5 Court (2011).
18 Kuepers (2009).
19 Kuepers (2009).
31 Garvin & Roberto (2005).
33 Kuepers (2009).