Leading Effective Change:
Three Keys for Transforming Your Organization

Bill Manduca

Abstract
While some leaders view change as an occupational hazard, being able to introduce and carry out change effectively is an essential leadership skill. Today’s economic, sociological, and political environments put pressure on organizations to adapt rapidly or cease to be competitive. This article discusses the process to create effective change. It offers insight into readiness for and resistance to change and provides recommendations to ensure a successful change implementation.

It must be considered that there is nothing more difficult to carry out, nor more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to handle, than to initiate a new order of things.¹

- Niccolo Machiavelli, The Prince

The above quote sums up the nature of change. While some leaders view change as an occupational hazard, being able to introduce and carry out change effectively is an essential leadership skill. Today’s economic, sociological, and political environments put pressure on organizations to adapt rapidly or cease to be competitive.² This article discusses the process to create effective change. It offers insight into readiness for and resistance to change and provides recommendations to ensure a successful change implementation.
One of the greatest challenges to carrying out change is recognizing there is a predictable and manageable process to follow to ensure success. Kurt Lewin (1890 – 1947), a German physicist turned psychologist, studied organizational change and developed the three-phase unfreeze/change/freeze model. While change methods have other names such as dissolution/passage/renewal, most follow the basic approach Lewin presented in 1947. He used the analogy of a block of ice to explain his theory. To change the shape of a block of ice into something round, one must first unfreeze the block into water. Next, the water can be “changed” by pouring it into a round mold. Finally, the water is frozen back into ice to make the new shape permanent. The rest of this article examines the application of this model to organizations.

**Phase One: Unfreezing**

The key to unfreezing is getting the organization receptive and ready to change. Using Lewin’s analogy, the block of ice can be changed by beating it forcefully with a hammer. Obviously the block resists this action and much damage occurs. Only after the ice thaws (changes) to water can I mold it into the shape wanted. The same is true with change in the organization. The term “change readiness” describes people who are unfrozen and ready to take the next step. Some people come ready for change while others take more time to let go of the status quo. To “melt” the organization (change readiness) is to create buy-in by addressing the concerns people have when asked to change. These concerns are predictable and provide the leader with an opportunity to lessen the resistance to change early in the process. Addressing concerns helps change the thinking towards the change.

Change experts such as John Kotter, Eric Dent, and Susan Goldberg agree that most people do not resist change in itself. People may resist loss of status, loss of pay, or loss of comfort, but these are not the same as resisting change. The phrase “resistance to change” has come to mean employees are not wholeheartedly embracing a change that management wants to carry out. The key to limiting resistance is to involve people in planning for change. These employees are most often the ones closest to the frontline, the ones directly involved in the work, and the people who understand the effect change may have on the organization. If leaders can diagnose stages of concern, then they can communicate the right information at the right time, thus reducing resistance. When resistance goes down, buy-in (change readiness) goes up. Figure 1 lists the predictable stages of concern that, if not addressed, lead to change resistance and strategies for addressing them.

Unless leaders take time to surface and resolve individual concerns, they will not be able to create and continue the momentum necessary for the change to be successful. One of the primary reasons many change efforts fail is because leaders do not step back and look at the change process and the required transitions from the perspective of the individuals involved.

A large number of individuals resisting change leads to change-resistant organizations. These organizations consistently deny the need for change despite the influence of external factors that are shifting faster than ever. They must get “unfrozen” to respond to its changing environment. Figure 2 illustrates the dynamics at work in change resistant organizations. As organizational inertia moves the company in the direction that has served it so well in the past, its external operating environment moves in a different direction. Over time, the gap between outside reality and company inertia widens, and more energy is needed to deny the need for change.
Pressure builds within the organization as markets begin to dwindle and growth slows. At some point, the pressure becomes too great and a catastrophic event occurs. This causes two possible outcomes: the organization either dies (through bankruptcy or takeover) or some radical upheaval occurs as the organization takes drastic steps to realign itself with reality. History records many examples of organizations denying the need for change, followed by a catastrophe, then radical upheaval and change. Unfortunately, the pattern of real organizational change occurring only after a catastrophic event is all too common.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Six Stages of Concern</th>
<th>Leadership Strategies to Address Concern</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Information concerns</td>
<td>• Explain the business case for change.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What is the change?</td>
<td>• Imagine the future.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Why is the change needed?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Personal concerns</td>
<td>• Imagine the future.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• How will the change affect me personally?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Will I win or lose?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Implementation concerns</td>
<td>• Experiment to ensure alignment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What do I do first?</td>
<td>• Enable and encourage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• How do I manage all the details?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Impact concerns</td>
<td>• Enable and encourage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Is the effort worth it?</td>
<td>• Execute and endorse.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Is the change making a difference?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Collaboration concerns</td>
<td>• Embed and extend.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Who else should be involved?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• How do we spread the word?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Refinement concerns</td>
<td>• Explore possibilities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• How can we make the change even better?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1 – Six Stages of Concern

Figure 2 – Change Resistant Organization
Contrast the change resistant organization with the change sensitive company in Figure 3. These organizations are rare in that they listen for the warnings that signal the impending need for change. Examples include unexpected competition, loss of sales, defeding talented employees, and meteorological events such as major hurricanes. Rather than trusting in past practices and strategies, they seek ways to stay in touch with events in a turbulent world. Figure 3 shows that change sensitive companies engage in a practice known as “organizational tacking”. They make incremental changes in response to their changing environments similar to the method used to handle a sailboat in a headwind.\(^\text{11}\)

![THE CHANGE – SENSITIVE ORGANIZATION](image)

Figure 3 – Change Sensitive Organization

Change sensitive organizations have two distinct characteristics that set them apart from their change resistant counterparts. First, the leadership style that permeates these organizations is usually collaborative. As the external environmental pressure to change increases, leaders in these organizations get more collaborative. They recognize that solutions for yesterday’s problems may not be suitable for the new challenge in from of them. Therefore, they seek help from within and outside the organization. They tap into the synergistic power of teams and welcome those who challenge the old ways of doing things.\(^\text{12}\)

Second, change sensitive companies have a knack for being consistently proactive instead of reactive, especially towards their operational environment. They are the ones the other companies are trying to keep pace with. Their ability to anticipate the future allows them to go into uncharted territory boldly and take advantage of new opportunities.\(^\text{13}\)

The following technique is one example that can be used to lead people from being resistant to change to being ready and willing to make the first step.

**Burning Platforms**

Using this technique exposes or creates a crisis that causes people to want to change. Leaders must state the status quo is not a choice, and doing nothing will result in disaster. This puts people in position where they must act to resolve the crisis. The name of this technique came from in incident on an oil rig in the North Sea. When the rig caught fire, a worker was trapped on the edge of the platform. Rather than experiencing certain death in the fire, he chose probable death by jumping 100 feet into the freezing...
sea. The term “burning platform” describes people acting after choosing between the “lesser of two evils”.

The key to unfreezing the organization, reducing resistance to change, and increasing the capacity for change readiness is to communicate often about the change and involve those affected by the change in the implementation planning.

**Phase Two: Transition**

Once the organization is prepared to change by employing unfreezing techniques, you can then move to the second phase of Lewin’s model called transition. This is where the ice block has melted into water and now can be reshaped. Lewin stressed that when transitioning from the status quo to a new performance level, it must be considered a process rather than a simple step. Leaders underestimate this process to their own detriment. A serious trap that tempts leaders is to spend months in their own process of understanding the change and then expect their followers to incorporate the change in one short, simple step. Change takes time and leaders must allow for this in their planning.

Leaders must understand the difference between change and transition. Change is situational. Examples include a workforce cut, the shift in strategy, or the switch in reporting relationships. On the other hand, transition is the internal, three-phase psychological reorientation that allows people to deal with change:

1. **There must be a definite ending** – people let go of their old reality and their old identity. There cannot be any “trapdoors” or “secret passages” back to the old way of doing work that would undermine the new beginning.

2. **People enter a neutral zone** – a time and state of being in which the old behaviors and attitudes die out, and people go dormant for awhile as they prepare to move out in a new direction. This is the “remolding” of the water from Lewin’s ice block analogy.

3. **There is a new beginning** – This infuses individuals with new energy, sense of purpose, outlook, and a new image of themselves.

Restated, not only do leaders have to understand the organization’s changes, but they must carefully consider the transitions the people will have to make to incorporate them. Corporate leaders tend to ignore the human dimension of change and immediately launch a change initiative. It is easier to give attention to the technical, quantifiable side of a change than it is to deal with the people’s emotions and all that “touchy – feely” stuff. However, enlightened leaders see change as an opportunity for renewal, development of trust, and open communication. They see the realities of change in broader terms than report and control-oriented leaders.

As with unfreezing, there are many techniques you can use to help people transition and complete the change. Once people are open and ready for change, it becomes easier for leaders to help them move through their transitions and perform the change. The following example provide a way to help people through their transitions:

**Pick the Low Hanging Fruit**

Change can be daunting. Use this technique to make the first steps of change easy. Work to get some quick and early victories. Like picking the easiest to reach fruit on a tree first, this technique helps people gain confidence and momentum. Have them do the most obvious first and then the next and so on. Keep the people focused on the next steps and before long they have scaled the daunting mountain
of change. It is like the answer to the age-old question, “How do you eat an elephant?” The answer is one bite at a time!

Many times the hardest part of change is getting started. People look at transition and change as a big, huge, monstrous event. This can cause stagnation and paralysis because of over-analysis and overwhelm the team before they even get going. Effective change leaders must take the reverse approach. They must make each succeeding step so small and easy to neutralize all reasonable objections.

### Phase 3: Refreeze

After completing the unfreeze and change phases, many organizations stop here and declare victory. Then they wonder why in six months to a year they are back to where they started as if they never incorporated the change at all. The reason is they did not take the time to complete the third phase in Lewin’s model called refreeze. In his analogy, this is where the water conforms to a container of the desired shape; then it is refrozen to ensure the new shape is permanent. Your goal in this phase is to “refreeze” the new behavior and establish a new place of stability for the organization. It is a temptation to cut this phase out, but it must be completed if the organization wants to see the change “stick”. Without this phase, change implementation is incomplete and ineffective.

The key to making the change permanent is to anchor it in the organization’s culture. You know a change is “sticking” when motivated employees perform because, “that’s the way we do things around here”. Until new behaviors are rooted in social norms and shared values, they are subject to degradation as soon as the pressure for change is removed. Use the following refreeze technique to help ensure your change is permanent:

#### Burning Bridges

The technique of Burning Bridges creates a boundary event that ensures there is no way back to previous ways of working after making a change. When creating change, it is common for people to seek ways to go back to the old way of working. This usually happens after the change agents are no longer watching to see how the change is holding out.

Burning Bridges is a deliberate way of preventing any backsliding by removing any method that allows people to go back to the old way of doing business. The famous Spanish explorer Cortez created a boundary event. After his men landed on the forbidding coast of Mexico, he burned the ships. His message: there is no turning back now! An example of this in a modern day organization is deleting the old software after installing a new software package, thus forcing people to use the new software.

### Conclusion

The goal of using Lewin’s change model is to help expand a leader’s awareness of the dynamics involved in creating effective change within the organization. If managed correctly, change is an opportunity for growth and development. The more leaders understand the change process, address employee concerns to lessen resistance, and prepare their people to be change ready, the more their organizations will be able to thrive in the rapidly changing environment it competes in.
About the Author

Bill Manduca is a business visionary and strategist, coach, futurist and thought leader. He holds an engineering degree from the Maine Maritime Academy, an MBA from the University of Southern Mississippi, and a Doctor of Strategic Leadership from Regent University. He is a retired US Navy Reserve Officer and has worked as a project leader and consultant for several Fortune 500 companies. Through his company, The Vantage Point Group, Bill helps his clients look at their organizations in a new way to achieve results beyond what they could have imagined. Bill can be contacted at BillM@thevantagepointgroupllc.com.

Endnotes

14 Lewin’s freeze phases, (2012).
15 Lewin’s freeze phases, (2012).
19 Lewin’s freeze phases, (2012).