A Scientific Method of Change

Lewin in a Nutshell for Business Leaders and Organization Development (OD) Practitioners

By Gilmore Crosby

Abstract

The thesis of this paper is that none of what has been written about change stands up to the test of time like Kurt Lewin's social science, and far too many who lead and facilitate change do not know his basic theories and methods. The following is an attempt to simplify his systemic approach to change, based on a careful study of his materials, on the author's work as an OD practitioner since 1984, and on the author's father's OD career which traces back to Lewin's inner circle starting in 1953.

Keywords: Lewin, Change, Group Dynamics, Dialogue, Action Research, Field Theory

Much like the physicists of his time, Kurt Lewin (1890–1947) sought a social science that could explain and be applied to both "universal concept and individual event (Lewin, 1936, p. 21)." Lewin is not simply a historical figure. His theory and methods are applicable to understanding and addressing any contemporary social phenomenon, whether new, such as the COVID pandemic, or persistent, such as racism. His social science applies both within and outside of organizations. Lewin addressed conflict and productivity in manufacturing, racial tension in various shapes and forms, individual psychology, and cultural change on a national level (the reconstruction of Germany). The following is a barebones description of his approach, divided into five sections, which really need to be understood as a whole. Which element should come first is as ambiguous as the chicken and the egg.

1. The Three Ds of Lewinian Change: Group Dynamics, Dialogue, and Group Decision
2. Training-Action-Research
3. The Social Construction of Reality
4. Field Theory and Change as Three Steps
5. Democratic Style of Leadership

1. The Three Ds of Lewinian Change: Group Dynamics, Dialogue, and Group Decision

The group's the thing... at the heart of Lewinian change. As Lewin put it, "... it is easier to change ideology or cultural habits by dealing with groups than with individuals (Lewin, 1999, p. 289)." Lewin demonstrated (with statistical research methods conveyed through visual graphics) time and again that attempts to change individuals through lecture and other means, even if the individual was listening in a group setting, was far less likely to lead to sustained change than attempts based on group interaction. Using control groups in his research, if a group was lectured at even by an effective instructor, the individuals in the group were very unlikely to change behaviors or to sustain what changes they did attempt. If on the other hand a group was given the same information but then

allowed to talk amongst themselves the rate of change and the length of sustaining change rose dramatically. Lewin concluded that peer influence through dialogue generates unique and sensible solutions as well as positive peer pressure to take action and stick with it. Commitment rises because of increased attachment to what one has been able to influence, because of increased quality if the people actually facing the challenge are able to come up with or alter the solutions, and perhaps most importantly, because of the emotional ties of group membership.

This is what Lewin referred to as "group decision." The term does not mean a vote or a formal decision-making process (although either might occur) but rather the influence on the individual if the group they belong to changes direction. "… experience in leadership training, in changing of food habits, work production, criminality, alcoholism, prejudices—all seem to indicate that it is usually easier to change individuals formed into a group than to change any one of them separately. As long as group values are unchanged the individual will resist changes more strongly the further he is to depart from group standards. If the group standard itself is changed, the resistance which is due to the relation between individual and group standard is eliminated (Lewin, 1997, p. 329)." Furthermore, "… group decision provides a background of motivation where the individual is ready to cooperate as a member of the group more or less independent of his personal inclinations (Lewin, 1999, p. 289)." In other words, allow a group, such as an intact work group (supervisor and direct reports) or any group facing any challenge, to have open dialogue about the challenge, come up with their own solutions, implement and assess their own progress, and you will have a strong chance of successful and sustainable change. Add some of the other elements of Lewinian methodology and it is unlikely you will fail.

2. Training-Action-Research

Although shortened by many into "action research" Lewin described his approach as: "… action, research, and training as

a triangle (Lewin, 1997, p. 149)." Lewin and/or his associates began the "training" as soon as they walked in the door. He trained everyone involved, from gang members to CEOs, in how to think like a social scientist. Interviews were not so much to gather data, but rather to establish rapport and begin to influence thinking. As a Lewin associate put it: "This attempt to change perception by an 'action interview' (as distinguished from a mere 'fact-finding interview')

As Lewin put it, the change agent could bring and transfer social science expertise, but for successful change, "The laws (of social science) don't do the job of diagnosis which has to be done locally. Neither do laws prescribe the strategy for change (Lewin, 1997, p. 150)." An expert can teach and facilitate methods such as group dialogue and decision, but the people facing the challenges must still be the ones who have the dialogue and come up with the solutions. "It can be surmised

> He trained everyone involved, from gang members to CEOs, in how to think like a social scientist. Interviews were not so much to gather data, but rather to establish rapport and begin to influence thinking. As a Lewin associate put it: "This attempt to change perception by an 'action interview' (as distinguished from a mere 'fact-finding interview') is one of the basic elements of treatment. By reorienting… perception from the field of personal emotional relationship to the same field of 'objective' facts, the life-spaces which guide the action of these persons have become more similar although the persons themselves are not yet aware of this similarity."

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In Lewin's mind the first task of the change agent is to join. "… in spite of whatever status differences there might be between them, the teacher and the student have to feel as members of one group in matters involving their sense of values. The chances for re-education seem to increase whenever a strong we-feeling is created (Lewin, 1997, p. 55)." For Lewin the "we-feeling" was created through genuine humility and recognition of our common humanity, as well as through the collaborative application of social science to address whatever challenges the particular group faced.

that the extent to which social research is translated into social action depends on the degree to which those who carry out this action are made a part of the fact-finding on which the action is to be based (Lewin, 1997, p. 55)." This doesn't mean that they get interviewed or do a long study… this means that the people, whether a group of janitors or a group of scientists, actually do the thinking, come up with the solutions, implement the change, monitor their own progress, and know how to repeat the cycle into the future.

The author's father's OD practice was built on this model.[1] When the author joined him in 1984, one of his first assignments was facilitating every intact team in two tomato processing factories in group dialogue, solution generation, and

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1. The author's father is Lifetime Achievement ODN Award recipient Robert P. Crosby, who was mentored by Lewin's colleague Ronald Lippitt for decades, starting in the 1950s.

implementation. With a facilitator who had no experience and nothing but a sound process and a clear mentor, every group in both plants were soon doing their own training-action-research, and the plant metrics quickly and dramatically improved. These were hourly workers and supervisors, with high school educations at the most, seizing the opportunity to influence their work. The same basic methods have been effective for the author ever since.

3. The Social Construction of Reality

Social or work culture change almost certainly requires changing beliefs and values. Lewin asserted that reality in terms of beliefs, values, and behaviors is socially constructed. In my own OD interventions, a key element of any change effort is shifting from patterns such as blame and defensiveness (which fuel each other) towards owning misunderstandings and taking responsibility for one's own reactions and emotions. In other words, shifting each group towards a different way of thinking and interacting. That is possible, but it is only possible because thinking is socially constructed rather than determined in some other way that is fixed and unalterable. As Lewin put it, the "Social Construction of Reality... what exists as reality for the individual is, to a high degree, determined by what is socially accepted as reality... Reality therefore is not an absolute. It differs with the group to which the individual belongs... the general acceptance of a fact or a belief might be the very cause preventing this belief or fact from ever being questioned (Lewin, 1997, p. 49)."

Shifting the social reality in a way that will last (a change he called "re-education") comes most reliably through a group dialogue that allows freedom of thought rather than an over-controlled process. "When re-education involves the relinquishment of standards which are contrary to the standards of society at large (as in the case of delinquency, minority prejudices, alcoholism), the feeling of group belongingness seems to be greatly heightened if the members feel free to express openly the very sentiments which are to be dislodged through re-education. This might

be viewed as another example of the seeming contradictions inherent in the process of re-education: Expression of prejudices against minorities or the breaking of rules of parliamentary procedures may in themselves be contrary to the desired goal. Yet a feeling of complete freedom and a heightened group identification are frequently more important at a particular stage of reeducation than learning not to break specific rules (Lewin, 1997, p. 55)."

In other words, if all a person does is learn to hide their thoughts, to only say what is permitted by the leader or the facilitator, then they have not really changed. This is especially important when confronting a false hypothesis such as "you can't trust management/labor" or racism, sexism, etc. "Re-education is frequently in danger of only reaching the official system of values, the level of verbal expression and not of conduct; it may result in merely heightening the discrepancy between the super-ego (the way I ought to feel) and the ego (the way I really feel), and thus give the individual a bad conscience. Such a discrepancy leads to a state of high emotional tension, but seldom to correct conduct. It may postpone transgressions, but it is likely to make the transgressions more violent when they occur. A factor of great importance in bringing about a change in sentiment is the degree to which the individual becomes actively involved in the problem. Lacking this involvement, no objective fact is likely to reach the status of a fact for the individual concerned and therefore influence his social conduct (Lewin, 1997, p. 52)." If all you get is forced compliance, the tension will lead to trouble. The individual must ultimately come to the new way of thinking on their own, and that is unlikely unless their peers are also moving in a new direction. Such change can be intended, planned, and even required, but the individual must still arrive of their own free will.

4. Field Theory and Change as Three Steps

To understand Lewin's approach to change, one could just as easily start with field theory. Lewin's theory is that every system is in

a state of homeostasis, or "semi-quasi equilibrium" (to acknowledge that no system is 100% stable or unchanging), held in place by driving and restraining forces. "Change and constancy are relative concepts; group life is never without change, merely differences in the amount and type of change exist (Lewin, 1997, p. 308)." Most attempts at change involve implementing solutions (a new driving force). If a solution is imposed on a system that has restraining forces such as high mistrust and/or a history of failed "solutions," then the attempt to drive the new solution increases tension in the system. The restraining forces may actually gain strength and eventually erode any gains made.

The Lewinian change agent focuses on unfreezing the quasi-equilibrium of mistrust, and shifting the social construction of reality. They know that a new and healthier homeostasis (as measured by variables such as high performance and morale) must be built on "a change in the level of functioning" of groups through dialogue and group decision (influence on one another and commitment to actions). Unfrozen by an effective change agent working in alignment with formal and informal leaders, the group can begin their own analysis of the field of forces within which their own performance and morale are held in stasis. The laws of physical science will guide the change. Pushing harder on the field, as many organizations do, only increases tension, and strengthens the restraining forces. Sustainable change happens through group dynamics, with the restraining force of overfunctioning by management and experts (a petri-dish for underfunctioning by everyone else) instantly replaced by local analysis and solution generation. Groups take action and do research on the effectiveness of their actions. As groups identify and address their own restraining forces, change happens in the moment, and a transformational ability to adapt to new challenges and opportunities spreads through the system like electricity. In a flash, agility and resilience are no longer catchwords but rather a behavior-based reality. A new homeostasis freezes the fields and replaces the old. That is Lewin's

change as three steps, a rich systemic approach that can be applied with confidence to any situation.

Don't just take the author's word for it. Read Lewin yourself, of which this is just a sample:

Changing as Three Steps: Unfreezing, Moving, and Freezing of Group Standards
A change toward a higher level of group performance is frequently short lived; after a "shot in the arm," group life soon returns to the previous level. This indicates that it does not suffice to define the objective of a planned change in group performance as the reaching of a different level. Permanency of the new level, or permanency for a desired period, should be included in the objective. A successful change includes therefore three aspects: unfreezing (if necessary) the present level L1, moving to the new level L2, and freezing group life on the new level. Since any level is determined by a force field, permanency implies that the new force field is made relatively secure against change.

The "unfreezing" of the present level may involve quite different problems in different cases. Allport has described the "catharsis" which seems to be necessary before prejudices can be removed. To break open the shell of complacency and self-righteousness it is sometimes necessary to bring about deliberately an emotional stir-up.

The same holds for the problem of freezing the new level. Sometimes it is possible to establish an organizational setup which is equivalent to a stable circular causal process (Lewin, 1997, p. 330).

Critics of Lewin have said this model of change as three steps (dubbed CATS by some) is too simple. It is easy to counter such criticism at a number of levels, the first and foremost being that the same could be said of the simplification of any phenomenon. Simplification, in the right dose, is very helpful. What is a model after

all except simplification? As Lewin himself put it, "There is nothing so practical as a good theory (Lewin, 1999, p. 336)."

Simplifying the process does not mean change itself is simple. Lewin was well aware that change is complicated and full of setbacks and surprises, many of which emerge along the way. "... somewhere along the road... I am sure we will have to face major crisis. I have observed this type of development in many research undertakings, and we will have to be unusually lucky if this time we avoid it. To my mind the difference between success and defeat in such undertakings depends mainly upon the willingness and the guts to pull through such periods. It seems to me decisive that one knows that such developments are the rule, that one is not afraid of this period, and that one holds up a team that is able to pull through (Marrow, 1969, p. 176)."

Despite such complications, when Lewin's field theory is applied by groups, it leads to rapid culture change, problem solving, and implementation of solutions. In the author's own practice, the significant portion of all of that happens in the first day with a group. There is minimal diagnosis or gathering of data, maximum integration of thinking and doing, with deeper dives as needed. Once the basic process is transferred, groups can apply dialogue and field theory to any challenges which arise, making them truly nimble and resilient. As per Lewin's intentions, to a large extent outside expertise becomes no longer required.

5. Democratic Style of Leadership

Last but not least, Lewin held a clear-eyed vision of the influence of leadership on groups and on the change process, forged by his experience as a Jewish male growing up in Germany during the pre-Nazi years and during Hitler's rise to power. His social science addresses the impact of the environment on the individual when there is a power imbalance, such as racism or sexism. Both the powerful and the powerless are caught in the web (or field of forces), with fear and anxiety heightened by the inherently unjust nature of

social inequality. Lewin's well known formula, B=f(P,E) speaks to the influence the environment has on us all, with the behavior (B) of "minority" or powerless individuals likely to include hyper-vigilance for real and perceived slights and threats, and hyper-defensiveness by those in power. Each personality (P) adds variation of response, but an environment (E) of systemic inequality has a predictable, pervasive, and damaging influence on behavior. Imagine how much more harmonious relations would be in a world of social and economic equality. As Lewin put it, "The solution, I think, can be found only through a development which would bring the general level of group esteem and group loyalty which in themselves are perfectly natural and necessary phenomena to the same level for all groups of society. That means every effort should be made to lower the inflated self-esteem of the 100 percenters. They should learn the prayer from the musical play, *Oklahoma*. 'Dear God, make me see that I am not better than my fellow men.' However it is essential to learn the second half of this prayer that goes something like 'but that I am every darn bit as good as he.' (Lewin, 1997, p. 151).

The dilemmas of power did not lead Lewin, however, to believe that power must be eliminated from human affairs (as some OD voices advocate). Instead he studied what style of power fosters performance and morale, and what diminishes it. "One point should be seen clearly and strongly. There is no individual who does not, consciously or unconsciously, try to influence his family, his group friends, his occupational group, and so on. Management is, after all, a legitimate and one of the most important functions in every aspect of social life. Few aspects are as much befogged in the minds of many as the problems of leadership and of power... We have to realize that power itself is an essential aspect of any and every group... Not the least service which social research can do for society is to attain better insight into the legitimate and non-legitimate aspects of power (Marrow, 1969, p. 172)." Every OD person is trying to influence, even if they are advocating for an "emergent" or "self-organizing system." The

Lewin Leadership Style Triangle

Democratic Style Combination of Structure & Freedom = High Performance and Morale

AUTHORITARIAN STYLE

"TOO CONTROLLING"
REACTIVE (FIGHT)
UNRELIABLE PERFORMANCE
HIGH TENSION
LOW MORALE

◄— **LEADERSHIP & STRUCTURE AXIS** —►

DEMOCRATIC STYLE

"BALANCED/SITUATIONAL"
SELF-DIFFERENTIATION
HIGH PERFORMANCE
LOW TENSION
HIGH MORALE

FREEDOM AXIS

LAISSEZ-FAIRE STYLE

"TOO PASSIVE"
REACTIVE (FLIGHT)
LOW PERFORMANCE
HIGH TENSION
LOW MORALE

Figure 1. Lewin Leadership Style Triangle

question is not whether influencing is legitimate, but rather how to effectively influence whether in a formal position of authority or as a change agent.

True to form Lewin researched his hypothesis about power. For several consecutive years at the University of Iowa he studied groups of kids led by adults using three different styles of leadership, and then he repeatedly tested the effective style of leadership on groups of adults in industrial settings. He concluded that a blend of leadership and freedom, which had to be adjusted depending on group and individual needs (such as new versus experienced workers), brought about consistently high productivity and morale. Because it is based on clarity about who is in charge mixed with respect and engagement of all, he called the target style "democratic." According to Lewin, "These groups... showed very striking differences during periods when the leader left. Whereas the work morale of the democratic group was sustained at a high level, that of the autocratic group fell rapidly. In a short time, the latter group ceased entirely to produce...

The organization of work, like any other aspect of the organization of the autocratic group, is based on the leader. It is he who determines the policy of the group; it

is he who sets the specific goals of action for the members within the group. That means that the goals of the individual as well as his action as a group member are 'induced' by the leader. It is the leader's power-field which keeps the individual going, which determines his work morale, and which makes the group an organized unit. In the democratic group, on the contrary, every member has had a hand in determining the policy of the group; every member has helped to lay out the plans. As a result, each is more 'we-centered' and less 'ego-centered' than the member of the autocratic group. Because the group goes ahead under its own steam, its work morale does not flag as soon as the power-field of the leader is eliminated...

In the democratic group, 'acceptance' of the group goal by the member means taking it over and making it one's own goal. The readiness to do so, in the latter case, is partly based on the time perspective of the individual in the past, that is, he himself has participated in setting up that goal and now he feels his individual responsibility in carrying it through (Lewin, 1997, p. 88)."

The democratic leader allows group members as much influence and freedom as possible, within a structure of role and

goal clarity. The democratic leader does not overfunction by taking on all decision-making power nor do they underfunction by being too passive (or "laissez-faire" as Lewin put it). He described these three styles (one functional, the other two dysfunctional) this way: "Autocracy, democracy, and laissez-faire should be perceived as a triangle. In many respects, autocracy and democracy are similar: They both mean leadership as against the lack of leadership of laissez-faire; they both mean discipline and organization as against chaos. Along other lines of comparison, democracy and laissez-faire are similar. They both give freedom to the group members in so far as they create a situation where the members are acting on their own motivation rather than being moved by forces induced by an authority in which they have no part (Lewin, 1999, p. 286)." The democratic style, then, is the only corner of the triangle that combines leadership and freedom, creating group dynamics that freeze high performance and morale into place. *Figure 1* depicts the author's own illustration of the aforementioned triangle:

The Lewinian leader applies democratic principles to intentionally influence the culture they are creating, leveraging group dynamics that balance freedom

and structure in an ever-shifting quasi-equilibrium. The change agent uses the same approach. Leaders lead and followers follow, and everyone knows how to do both as situations demand. Dialogue becomes rich and real, with no need to restrain people from exploring what they really think. Appreciation, pessimism, fear, and the full range of relevant thoughts and feelings are explored. Lewin's methods result in fast and sustainable change, yet paradoxically require patience when addressing false hypotheses such as racism, sexism, and any other "us and them" (such as management and labor, maintenance and production, headquarters and locations, etc.). Such mentalities only shift in the face of real dialogue. The leader using Lewin's democratic style leads towards more constructive thinking, but each must freely arrive. Once peers begin to shift from blame to respect and from fear to openness a wave of freely chosen re-education takes place.

Lewin's leadership model and change methods aren't rocket science. Wielding a triangle of training-action-research, it can be transferred to anyone who cares. It is designed in its very essence to be shared. With a little effort you can learn it and transfer it to others.

Conclusion

So there it is... Lewinian leadership and change in a nutshell. Provide structure so that the people facing the challenge have the freedom to think for themselves in a dialogue that generates and supports implementation of their own solutions. The author's quest is to help the majority of organization development professionals, as many business leaders as possible, and concerned citizens (much of Lewin's training-action-research was focused on social justice) to at least understand the methods and potential of Lewin's planned change. We are all deluged with hype

about new methods ("new" sells), new challenges, and the need to improve OD. While Lewin himself was highly experimental and would welcome the same, the idea that our foundation is outdated is flawed. The author will gladly accept any invitation to compare and debate Lewin's scientific method of change against any other model.

As the song says, "I know if I'll only be true to this glorious quest, that my heart will lie peaceful and calm when I'm laid to my rest. And the world will be better for this." As Lewin himself believed, if sound social science is adapted widely, humanity can move away from sociological black holes such as totalitarianism and laissez-faire leadership, and no longer tolerate power inequality such as racism and sexism. A golden age of democratic values and leadership taking many forms but always rooted in equality can dawn, in workplaces and everywhere.

Gilmore Crosby's mission is to apply Lewin's methods to social change, and to spread Lewin's methods to the world, including the OD profession. While many laud or critique Lewin, most have never read him. Mr. Crosby's hypothesis is asserted in the title of his most recent book: *Planned Change: Why Kurt Lewin's Social Science is Still Best Practice for Business Performance, Change Management & Human Progress.* At risk of being labeled a dinosaur, Mr. Crosby asserts that the OD profession doesn't need new theories (and regards most "new" theory as more marketing hype than true substance). OD needs to understand and apply Lewin's universal theory of social science, including concepts such as democratic style of leadership, group dynamics, group decision, the social construction of reality, re-education, field theory, and change as three steps. When integrated these concepts form a systemic approach that can be applied by hourly workers, community organizers, and PhDs alike. Mr. Crosby's recent book (above) draws on the writings of Lewin to paint an organized picture of his theories and methods. He is eager to share the same with you. Mr. Crosby's career dates back to 1984, follows the footsteps of his father's OD career which began in 1953, and yet he delivers cutting edge content on-line, including virtual T-groups. Mr. Crosby's next book, *Diversity without Dogma*, applies Lewinian theory to addressing racism and other forms of prejudice, and is due out in late 2022. He can be reached at *gilmorecrosby@comcast.net*.

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