YOU CANNOT UNDERSTAND A SYSTEM UNTIL YOU TRY TO CHANGE IT

KURT LEWIN (1890–1947)

IN CONTEXT

APPROACH
Field theory

BEFORE
Early 1900s Sigmund Freud and other psychotherapists argue that human behavior is a result of past experience.

1910s Wolfgang Köhler, among other Gestalt psychologists, argues that people must be understood holistically, according to all of their elements and their interactions with the surrounding environment.

AFTER
1958 In *The Dynamics of Planned Change*, Ronald Lippitt, Jeanne Watson, and Bruce Westley create a seven-step change theory that focuses on the role of the change agent rather than on the evolution of change itself.

The behaviorists believed that behavior is dictated by the environment alone, but in the 1920s Kurt Lewin made the claim that behavior is a result of both the individual and the environment. His revolutionary ideas developed and evolved into the study of group dynamics that is invaluable to organizations today.

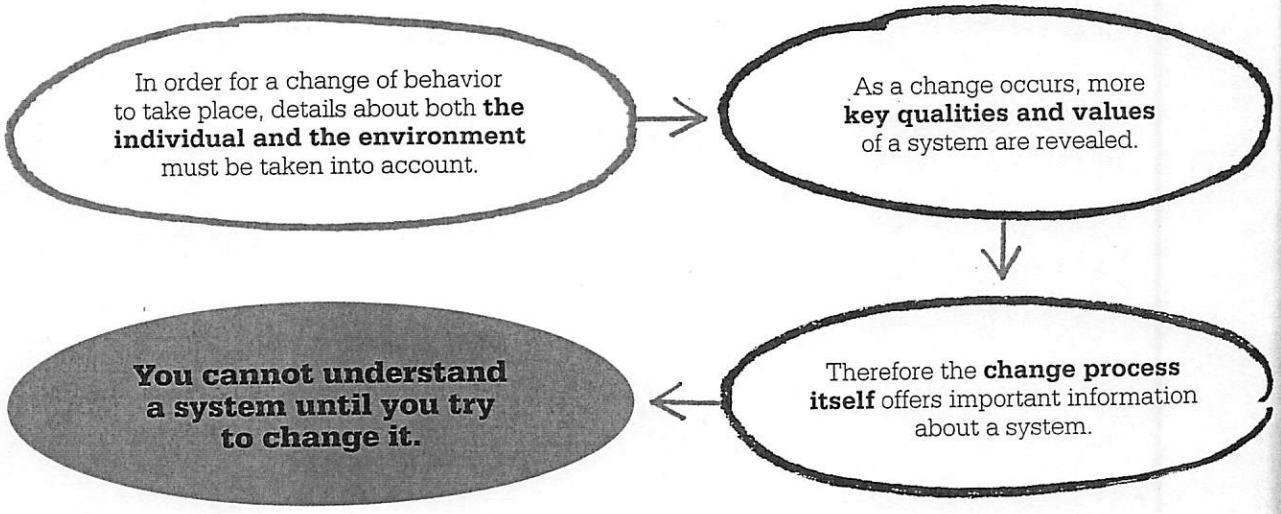
In his investigation of human behavior, Lewin developed field theory, which explores the forces and factors that influence any given situation. Lewin's "field" refers to the psychological environment of the individual or the collective group at a particular point in time, and he identified two opposing forces present in any given field: helpful forces, which drive people toward achieving their goals, and hindering forces, which inhibit movement toward these goals.

Lewin's change model

Field theory provided the basis for Lewin's model of change, which offers an invaluable guide for successful transformation, both for individuals and organizations. The model shows that in order to carry out the process of change successfully, a person or organization leader must take into account the various influences at play both within the minds of individuals and within their environment.

> A person who has learned to see how much his own fate depends upon the fate of his entire group will be eager to take over a fair share of responsibility for its welfare.
> **Kurt Lewin**

In explaining his change model, Lewin emphasizes that the entire situation, including all the relevant personal and environmental details, must be taken into account, as focusing on isolated facts can lead to a skewed perception of the circumstances. Not only must you have a thorough and holistic



See also: Sigmund Freud 92–99 ▪ Wolfgang Köhler 160–61 ▪ Leon Festinger 166–67 ▪ Max Wertheimer 335 ▪ Elton Mayo 335

Successful organizational change is engendered by making a unique diagnosis of the people and situational forces involved, and understanding the interplay between them.

understanding of a situation in order to change it, but that understanding actually deepens throughout the change process, and therefore "you cannot understand a system until you try to change it."

Lewin's model describes a three-step process for achieving personal or organizational transformation. The first stage—which he called "unfreezing"—involves recognizing that change is necessary, and dismantling old beliefs and practices. Change occurs in the second stage, and is often accompanied by confusion and distress as the old mindset or system breaks down. The third and final stage, "freezing," occurs when a new mindset is crystallized and there is an accompanying sense of comfort and stability within the new framework. The process is difficult because it involves painful unlearning, difficult relearning, and the restructuring of thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and perceptions.

> "We all need each other. This type of interdependence is the greatest challenge to the maturity of individual and group functioning."
> **Kurt Lewin**

Unfreezing beliefs

The unfreezing stage is perhaps the most complex stage of the process, as people are naturally inclined to resist changes to their established mindsets and routines. It requires careful preparation; many change efforts within organizations fail simply because employees are not adequately prepared, making them more resistant to change and less likely to function effectively under the new system. Preparation might include creating an exciting vision for change that employees can rally around, communicating it effectively, developing a sense of urgency and necessity for change, providing employees with support, and allowing them to participate actively in the process.

On an individual level, people may react to this stage defensively, not wanting to leave their comfort zone and undergo the challenge of learning new skills or accepting a new set of beliefs. This natural resistance can be overcome if the individual is helped to accept that the change is necessary, valid, and will lead to the best outcome, and if support is given to engender a feeling of psychological safety.

Lewin demonstrated the positive effect of creating an environment of psychological safety during the unfreezing stage (and of allowing active participation in the change process) in his efforts to convince American housewives to serve animal organs as food at home during World War II. Historically, offal had only been eaten by low-income families, but the American government wanted to ensure that nutritious food was not going to waste during a time of food shortages, especially as kidneys, livers, and hearts are all high-protein foods. The US Department of Agriculture called upon Lewin to help convince housewives to include these »

> Learning is more effective when it is an active rather than a passive process.
> **Kurt Lewin**

meats in their family meals. During interviews with housewives, Lewin realized that there were both helpful and hindering forces at play. The helpful forces, or incentives, toward changing the housewives' view of organ meat was its high nutritional value. The hindering forces, or barriers, to change centered around the women's view that the meat was inappropriate for them and their families, and to a lesser degree, that it would not taste good.

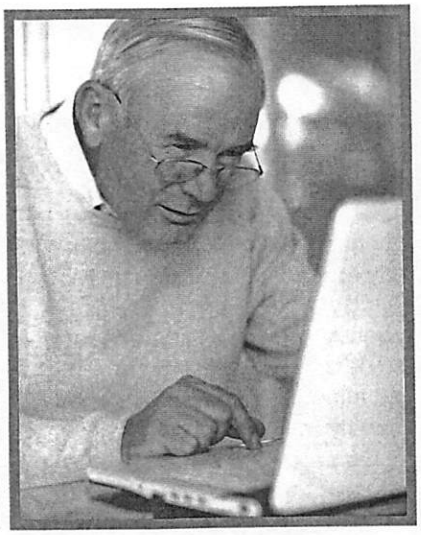
Lewin set up a study using two groups of housewives to explore the best ways of initiating change. The first group was told repeatedly that eating offal was beneficial for them, while the other group took part in a small group discussion focusing on how the food shortage problem could be eased if women like themselves could be convinced to take part in a program of using secondary cuts of meat such as livers, kidneys, and hearts. When around one-third of the women who had participated in the discussion group later served offal for dinner, Lewin concluded that increasing the level of people's involvement also increases the likelihood of changing their attitudes and behaviors. Lecturing to the first group had proved ineffective, but in the discussion group he had created an environment in which women felt psychologically safe enough to express their concerns and opinions. Through exploring their beliefs as well as the realities of the food shortages, he helped them change their opinions about which meats were edible and guided them toward a new belief: that offal is acceptable to buy and serve at home.

Making the change

During Lewin's second stage—the actual change process—people are confronted with the daunting and confusing task of implementing a new system. They must give up familiar routines and practices and master new skills (which itself can arouse feelings of uncertainty or a fear of failure). In an organization, the new system will be defined by the leadership, and often relates to technology, structure, procedures, or culture. It is important at this stage to provide sufficient support for employees and ensure the elimination of obstacles.

At the level of personal change, people cannot be given a new belief system, but must find and accept one for themselves. When an old belief has been proven wrong or ineffective, we are naturally inclined to replace the old value system with a new one, filling the uncomfortable void left by the unfreezing process. We do this in a combination of ways: relying on our instinctive feelings, studying role models, and looking more generally to the vast array of information available. We hope in this way to expose ourselves to a new piece of information that will solve the problem. Once this insight is achieved, we have accepted and established a new mindset.

In the case of the American housewives during World War II, Lewin provided the women with new information by educating them about the good taste and nutritional value of offal (thereby replacing their old belief that it was an inferior meat), and convincing them that given the reality of wartime food shortages, there was absolutely no shame in serving it to their families (thereby replacing their pre-wartime belief that they would be viewed as social inferiors for eating it).



The freezing stage

After change has been implemented within an organization, it must become part of the company's culture (or "frozen") in order for it to be successful in the long term. The new thought processes, practices, and behaviors adopted during the transition must become routine. Management can help to ensure changes become more firmly established by publicizing the ways in which change has benefited the company, and by nurturing positive

Learning to use new technologies in place of old ones is made easier by an increase in driving forces—such as the ability to contact friends and family worldwide, instantly and inexpensively.

During World War II, housewives were encouraged to change many of their beliefs, from the types of food and clothing that were acceptable to their capability to do "men's jobs."

feelings toward the change among employees, perhaps by delivering rewards for implementing the new skills or processes. For example, in the 1990s, Continental Airlines was forced to file for bankruptcy. In order to stay in business, the management implemented a major change: they shifted the company focus from saving costs to putting out a quality product that met high customer standards. They decided to reward employees for adopting the new policies and practices (to ensure compliance to the new priorities) by offering them a $65 bonus if the US Department of Transportation rated the company among the top five airlines. The use of Lewin's change model marked Continental's evolution from being the poorest-performing airline to being named Airline of the Year.

At the individual level, the freezing stage marks a time when new beliefs and practices are tested through trial and error; this either reinforces the changes or starts a new change cycle. For example, after a week of serving offal to her family, a wartime housewife might assess whether her family seems to enjoy the meat, whether they seem healthy, and whether other families seem to be judging her positively or negatively based on her meal choices. If the answers to these questions are positive, she will continue to serve offal at dinnertime. If, however, her children do not appear to be as healthy as they were when eating chicken or steak, or if other women are criticizing her choice of meat, she may decide to abandon offal and look for other ways to feed her family, starting the unfreezing and change processes all over again.

Lewin's pioneering experimental work into social systems has led him to be widely recognized as the founder of social psychology. He was the first psychologist to study "group dynamics" and organizational development in a methodical way. He applied rigorous social science to effect useful social transformation, and his work has been influential across the fields of experimental and social psychology. ■

> "There is nothing so practical as a good theory."
> **Kurt Lewin**

Kurt Lewin

German-American psychologist Kurt Lewin was born in 1890 into a middle-class Jewish family in Mogilno, Poland (then Prussia). In 1905, his family moved to Berlin, where he studied medicine at the University of Freiburg before transferring to the University of Munich to study biology. During World War I, he served in the German army, but returned to Berlin to complete his PhD after being injured. He worked at the Psychological Institute, Berlin, from 1921 to 1933, when restrictions on the Jewish population compelled him to resign and seek refuge in the US. He began working at Cornell University, then moved to the University of Iowa where he became a professor. In 1944, he became director of the Center for Group Dynamics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, but died of a heart attack just three years later.

Key works

1935 *A Dynamic Theory of Personality*
1948 *Resolving Social Conflicts*
1951 *Field Theory in Social*