

## Essay: Why Lewin Still Matters - and Why We Must Evolve Beyond Him

Every few years, I find myself revisiting the classics. The thinkers who shaped the earliest language of strategy and management. The frameworks that gave structure to the chaos of organizational life. And every time I do, I come back to Kurt Lewin - the father of change theory, the man who attempted to bring order to the most unpredictable forces inside organizations: human behavior, culture, and transformation.

Lewin's Change Theory is one of the earliest - and still one of the most referenced - models for leading change. It gave the world three words that have been echoed in countless strategy decks, consulting pitches, and management books: **Unfreeze. Change. Refreeze.**

For a model created in the 1940s, it has astonishing staying power. And yet, the world Lewin built his framework for is not the world we lead in today. Not even close. But before we critique it, we have to honour it - and understand why it worked so well, for so long.

### Understanding Lewin: The Three Stages That Defined Change

Lewin's genius was his simplicity. He believed that change wasn't just a decision; it was a psychological journey. A social reconfiguration. A shift in the equilibrium of habits, routines, and beliefs. And his model captured that with three stages that, for decades, made intuitive sense.

#### 1. Unfreeze

Every change begins by loosening what is currently held in place. Lewin understood that people don't resist change - they resist *loss*. *Loss of control*. *Loss of familiarity*. *Loss of competence*. Unfreezing meant creating the emotional and cognitive readiness for change by:

- Communicating the rationale for change and building awareness
- Engaging leaders and key influencers early
- Assessing readiness and diagnosing barriers through surveys and conversations

In Lewin's time, this stage was the critical reset button. It prepared people to let go.

#### 2. Change

Once the old mindset softened, the real work began. This was the moment when new behaviours were introduced, supported, and modelled. The "Change" stage involved:

- Training and building new capabilities

- Offering ongoing coaching and support
- Adjusting the plan based on feedback and real-world friction

Change, in Lewin's language, wasn't a switch. It was a transition.

### **3. Refreeze**

After the new ways of working were in place, organizations needed stability. They needed a point of arrival. "Refreezing" ensured the new behaviors didn't fade back into old habits. This meant:

- Embedding the change in policies and processes
- Reinforcing and rewarding the new behaviors
- Gathering feedback to improve and maintain the new state

In the 1940s, where change was infrequent, and environments were stable, this made perfect sense. You changed, you stabilized, and you carried on.

### **Why Lewin's Model Worked So Well - For His Time**

To appreciate Lewin, you have to step back into his world.

- Industries were stable.
- Markets were predictable.
- Competitive advantages lasted decades, not quarters.
- Technology cycles were measured in years, not weeks.

In that environment:

- Change was rare.
- Organizations had time.
- Leaders had clarity.
- Employees expected continuity.

So, a model built on a clear beginning (unfreeze), a defined middle (change), and a stable end (refreeze) fit the rhythms of the era. It was orderly, rational, and reassuring at a time when most organizations needed exactly that.

And make no mistake - Lewin's thinking fundamentally shaped modern organizational psychology. He gave us the foundation. He gave us vocabulary. He gave us a way to structure something that often felt chaotic.

But the 1940s are long gone, and so is the type of world Lewin assumed.

### **Why Lewin Is No Longer Enough: The Modern Context**

If Lewin were alive today, I suspect he would be the first to say his model needs an upgrade. Because the world has rearranged itself dramatically. And I believe the gaps in the model reveal themselves immediately when we apply it to the speed and ambiguity of modern leadership.

Today:

- Strategies shift in quarters
- Customer expectations evolve in weeks
- Disruptions arrive without warning
- Teams reorganize in cycles
- Technology reshapes industries relentlessly

In this environment:

- You cannot freeze anything for too long.
- You cannot assume clarity before taking action.
- You cannot treat change as an event.

The cracks in Lewin's model start showing quickly:

#### **1. Unfreeze assumes clarity - but today's leaders start in ambiguity.**

Organizations often don't know *exactly* what is changing. They sense shifts long before they understand them. They act before perfect information is available.

Lewin's model assumes you know the "why" before you begin. Today, you rarely do. And I contend that this is one of the most significant limitations.

#### **2. Change assumes linear movement - but today change is iterative.**

You don't redesign once. You pilot. You test. You adapt. You launch, learn, and relaunch.

#### **3. Refreeze assumes stability - but modern organizations never stop moving.**

If you "refreeze" anything for too long, the environment moves past you. Stability becomes stagnation. Consistency becomes fragility.

So Lewin isn't wrong.

He's just incomplete for the speed, uncertainty, and nonlinearity of our time. And this is where, in my view, the evolution begins.

### **The Two New Stages Modern Change Needs: Sense and Evolve**

If Lewin gave us a three-step recipe, today's world demands a five-step rhythm. And the two additions are not simply cosmetic - they fundamentally shift how leaders understand and manage change. I propose these stages not as a critique of Lewin, but as a continuation of his logic, adapted to the world we now lead in.

#### **Stage 0: SENSE - The Missing Beginning**

Before we unfreeze anything, we have to **sense** what is emerging. I believe this is the most critical missing piece in the original model.

This is the stage Lewin never needed because his world was stable enough that problems were clear. Ours is not. Modern change begins in:

- weak signals
- early indicators
- emerging patterns
- customer whispers
- internal friction
- technological shifts

Leaders today must interpret the fog before defining the path. They must explore before they decide. They must make meaning before they mobilize.

Sense is the stage of curiosity, humility, and continuous environmental scanning. Without this, every other stage rests on shaky assumptions. And I challenge any organization to attempt meaningful change today without this foundation.

#### **Stage 5: EVOLVE - The Missing Ending**

After Refreeze, Lewin assumed the journey was complete. But in today's world, arrival is temporary. Every new way of working is simply the next starting point.

**Evolve** is where organizations:

- revisit assumptions
- refine new practices

- build learning loops
- strengthen adaptability
- keep the organization fluid

This stage ensures that change is not a one-time event but a continuous capability. It prevents rigidity and protects relevance. Evolve honors the reality that nothing stays still - not customers, not technology, not teams, not strategy, not culture. And I contend that without this stage, organizations risk hardening themselves into irrelevance.

### **The New Model: A Rhythm for Modern Leadership**

Here is the updated framework in its full arc:

#### **Sense → Unfreeze → Change → Refreeze → Evolve**

It maintains the wisdom of Lewin, while acknowledging the velocity and volatility of our time.

- It respects stability, but does not worship it.
- It embraces movement, but does not glorify chaos.
- It gives leaders a structure that breathes, bends, and grows.

Because change today is not a ceremony. It is a rhythm. A cycle. A continuously renewing arc of awareness, action, and evolution.

### **Closing Reflection: Why This Matters Now**

The leaders I work with are not looking for more tools. They're looking for frameworks that respect the complexity of the world they navigate every day.

Lewin helped us understand the psychology of change. But modern leadership demands that we also understand the *continuity* of change - the fact that our organizations are living systems in constant motion.

Adding *Sense* and *Evolve* to Lewin's model is not an act of criticism. It is an act of completion. It brings his ideas into alignment with the realities we now face. And I propose this evolution because I genuinely believe it reflects the leadership demands of our time.

And perhaps most importantly, it reminds us that leadership is not about holding things in place. It is about guiding people through movement - with clarity, compassion, and a willingness to grow alongside the world we serve.