Finding a model for managing change

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Human beings thrive on regularity in their daily lives—ask any therapist and you will be told that change is one of the largest stressors humans can experience. In the 1960s Holmes and Rahe undertook some large-scale studies from which they developed a well-known table ranking the amount of stress produced by various life events—from death down to a change in sleeping habits. This change/stress scale still has currency today.

Nowadays, it is an unavoidable fact that change occurs constantly and is present in all types of workplaces, large and small. Unless it is managed in a thoughtful way, an organisation may experience problems when attempting to change the status quo. These problems may include a drop in staff motivation, a decrease in productivity, an increase in absenteeism and resistance; and as stress goes up, a cultural shift can cause anger, fear, speculation and gossip.

The body of practice utilised by organisations to negotiate an intended change is known as ‘Change Management’, a relatively new practice that grew from the field of Project Management.

How to define Change Management is one of those ‘how long is a piece of string’ questions: if you ask five people in a room, you are likely to get six different answers—and you may be none the wiser after a morning Googling ‘Change Management’ definitions, either.

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Change Management has its roots in IT, and the function is typically situated in a project to manage the people side of an intended initiative. For example, a project team is formed and the deliverable is to roll out a new computer system. For the best chance of success, Change Management systems and processes, to a change in organisational culture.

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There are many excellent formal models and frameworks that can be studied (formally or otherwise) and utilised in an organisational Change Management initiative to help bring a deeper understanding of what change means and how to negotiate it successfully. Of course, change, by virtue of what it is, is not predictable and there is no one-size-fits-all Change Management model that will guarantee you have ‘done’ change correctly if you follow all the steps; it is up to you to examine the various models, then pick and choose what will work in your organisation.

Some of these frameworks include:

- Kotter’s Eight-Step Model
- Bridge’s Managing Transitions
- Lewin’s Three-step Model
- Prosci’s ADKAR Model
- The Beckhard and Harris Change Equation
- The Kubler-Ross Model.

Given how large a field of study Change Management actually is, combined with the continuing challenge the sheer sprawl
of change literature creates, this article will describe one framework for managing change. I have chosen Lewin’s Three-step Model because of its simplicity and because it forms the basis of many current Change Management models.

Psychologist Kurt Lewin (1951) was one of the first to understand that organisations don’t change just because new systems, processes or organisational structures are introduced. Instead, successful change occurs when the people within the group make their own personal transitions, allowing the organisation to move forward and reap the benefits. Lewin maintains that change involves a move from one static state to a new state, through a three-stage process he labels Unfreeze, Change (originally known as Move) and Refreeze (originally Freeze) (see above diagram).

The first step involves unfreezing, or unpacking, the current state of affairs. This means identifying the driving and the resisting forces to a change, defining the end state and getting people motivated to make the change. Unfreezing and getting everyone onboard for the change is about weighing up the pros and cons and deciding if the positives outnumber the negatives before any action is taken. This step is the basis of the tool Lewin called the Force Field Analysis. The tool is used by doing something as simple as drawing a line on a whiteboard and then by listing all of the factors (forces) for and against your proposed change on either side. The idea is to look at strengthening the forces that support the change and managing the forces against the change, so that it’s more successful—the factors for change must outweigh the factors against change; if not, there’s low motivation to change.

The challenge of this stage is creating the right conditions for the change to proceed, which makes it a critical one to negotiate successfully. Lewin’s model assumes that change will encounter resistance, as the basic tendency of most people is to seek an environment that offers a sense of safety and control that in turn offers a sense of identity and belonging; when change threatens the status quo it causes discomfort and resistance. Lewin’s model and, depending on the change, coaching and training. [Note: the Kubler-Ross Model and the related Change Curve which focuses on the specifics of personal transitions are useful reading for understanding the specifics of how individuals deal with a changing environment].

Refreezing is the last step. The goal of this phase is to create a state of stability and productivity, to institutionalise the changes achieved by the transition, and to ensure people are reconnected to what they perceive as a safe and familiar environment. The approaches used will depend on the organisation, but may include the setting of policy, rewarding success and establishing new standards.

Lewin’s model has been criticised for being too simplistic, but elements of it appear in Bridge’s Theory of Transition, the Prosci ADKAR Model and Kotter’s Eight-step Model. Because of its wide application, it is a useful place to start your journey into Change Management. As I said earlier, there is no one perfect universal formula, so it is up to you to examine the various models, select what will work in your organisation, and adapt it as necessary.

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