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## **Coping with Uncertainty during Change: A Relational Approach inspired by Kurt Lewin**

### **Abstract**

Change is a constant; it is emergent, relational and it happens through interaction. Kurt Lewin (1890–1947) was not only one of the first social scientists to understand this, but he was also one of the first to actually practice it. A partial return to Lewin's original conceptions of action research, field theory, and participative change could provide practitioners and scholars today with a valuable theory-based approach, not only to cope with uncertainty but also to see uncertainty as a source of change. Coping with uncertainty as a source for change is, in essence, what Lewin meant by the process of 'unfreezing', which is about cleansing, opening, and refining the doors of perception which, over the years, when combined with later social constructionists' insights, have been developed by practitioners and theorists to create a 'relational' approach to organisation development (OD).

### **1. Introduction**

Uncertainty can be defined as "an individual's perceived inability to predict something accurately" (Milliken, 1987, p. 136). During organisational change, employees are likely to perceive uncertainty in relation to a range of different organisational issues, including the rationale behind the change, the process, and the expected outcomes of the change. As such, uncertainty is considered to be an undesirable state which motivates people to engage in coping strategies aimed at reducing such perceptions. While much attention in change management literature has been given to employee uncertainty, the majority of this literature has focused on change content disseminated

by senior management (Allen et al, 2007). However, considering that many organisations fail to provide employees with adequate information during change, employees often seek information through interaction with people they know and trust in a quest to resolve their uncertainty. In this regard, it is interesting to introduce Lewin's profound faith in mutual participation and continual interaction in decision-making. Lewin's way of working was cyclical, in which every step involves the full participation of all concerned regarding the subject at hand; in doing so, everyone has a mutual sense of what is going on (Van Nistelrooij et al, 2013).

This contribution starts by emphasising the way Lewin framed social science as the study of the challenges of real life and how he connected these challenges to theory. The next section emphasises how Lewin approached his interventions by starting to look at the whole psychological 'social field', which Lewin called 'field theory', because he was particularly influenced by Gestalt psychology. The process of considering the whole can be used today as a principle to guide the setting up of a dialogical process to help people to cope with their uncertainties. The fourth section discusses Lewin's original theory of change. The same section concentrates on the pivotal process of 'unfreezing', which can be linked to Gergen's 'generativity' and ultimately to the relational conditions of what is called 'dialogical OD'. This contribution closes with some practical reflections.

## **2. Connecting Lewin's action research to an emergent collaborative inquiry process**

Lewin was convinced that if you want to describe and explain the essence of human phenomena, you have to intervene directly in the processes as they occur in order to observe what happens. Lewin translated this action research into the following three general principles (Lewin in Coghlan & Shani, 2017, p.124–5):

### ***1) Wholeness and uniqueness of a given social situation***

Change of one kind of behaviour is associated with change of other kinds; it is important when bringing about change to look at the entire social setting involved, rather than isolated actions or decisions.

### ***2) Practical knowing in the present tense***

Just as in the case of organisation development, action research is grounded in a philosophy of practical knowing which, according to Lewin, emphasises the following characteristics:

1. the everyday concerns of human living;
2. how practical knowing is socially delivered and constructed;
3. how its uniqueness in each situation needs to be attended to; and
4. how practical action is driven by values and is fundamentally an ethical process.

### ***3) Collaborative challenges to the status quo***

Action research also challenges the status quo from a participative or collaborative perspective. In other words, it is not only about observing what is happening but also – simultaneously – about intervening in how things are and determining what they can become.

Using these principles, a change effort can be focused on the individual in relation to his or her entire social behaviour setting. Moreover, in this way, interventions can be undertaken in the spirit of collaboration and co-inquiry, whereby observing and intervening are constructed, enacted and evaluated *with* people, rather than *on* or *for* them. Nowadays, when discussing these principles, we talk in terms of an emergent collaborative inquiry process.

### ***3. Linking Lewin's field theory to context, perception and interaction***

Lewin's field theory argues that behaviour is derived from the totality of co-existing and interdependent forces that impinge on a person or group and make up the social life space in which the behaviour takes place. According to Lewin, the social life space is the whole psychological environment that the person experiences subjectively, although not necessarily consciously. In this regard, in order for individuals to undertake action, this action has to be perceived (by individuals) as meaningful for the entire social setting. Thus, Lewin (1951, p. 228–9) maintains that looking at individuals separately from each other and separately from the person's perceptual or psychological environment produces a misleading view of the causes of human behaviour and how it can be changed. Therefore, how a person behaves depends not just on the forces that impinge on them, but also on their subjective perceptions of these forces. To sum up, a field or a whole social (life) setting is characterised by:

1. An emphasis on a person's subjective perspective;
2. The incorporation of all that is subjectively relevant to a person; for example, his or her perceptions, emotional goals, needs, desires, intentions, tensions, and cognitive processes;
3. the elements and their relations which comprise this whole social setting, which are interdependent and stand in a dynamic mutual relationship.

Altogether, these characteristics position Lewin's field theory as closely associated with Gestalt psychology. Although we mostly interact with our environment through direct physical contact, it is our perceptual interactive contact with the environment that enables us to anticipate the required neuromuscular control, as stated in Lewin's formula  $B=f(p,e)$  in which B stands for Behaviour, which is a function (f) of a person (p) and environment (e). This three-way relationship between context, perception and interaction allows us to become aware of our social perception in the way that

our environment responds to the actions we take. In the words of Lewin and Grabbe (1948, p. 57): “Social action no less than physical action is steered by perception.” Likewise, our social actions are steered by the position in which we perceive ourselves and others within the total social setting (Van Nistelrooij et al, 2013).

#### **4. Lewin’s theory of change and ‘unfreezing’**

Lewin argues that it is usually easier to change individuals in a group than to change any one of them separately. In his own words, Lewin (1951) describes a change effort as follows:

A change towards 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 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 (p.228–9).

Lewin’s theory of change became widely applied in OD and was later also widely criticised because of its discontinuous and overly simplistic nature regarding the ‘freezing’ of change. However, as Cummings and his colleagues (2016) argue, what we know of Lewin’s theory of change is more than changing in three steps and, above all, this theory is largely a post hoc reconstruction and an empirically supported plea for a more quasi-equilibrium perspective on change. For example, Lewin (1951) was adamant that group dynamics must not be seen in simplistic or static terms and he believed that groups were never in a steady state, seeing them instead as being in continuous movement, albeit having periods of relative stability or “quasi-stationary equilibria” (p.199). Lewin’s desire in this respect links to the view that while

change and constancy in the life of an individual and in language may seem paradoxical, their co-existence in the life of a group is not; an understanding of the force field made up of the elements promoting change and the elements promoting constancy is key. Finally, despite our in-born need for stability, order and a stationary state of being, unfreezing is much-needed, mostly to prevent us from being susceptible to entrained thought.

In these fast-changing times, the reason so many change efforts are ineffective is usually directly traceable to not providing the right attention to the feeling of (perceived) loss processes and uncertainty. Without proper attention to the process of unfreezing, the change effort will be nothing more than what Lewin calls a 'shot in the arm'. In this regard, the process of unfreezing seems to be about organising time and space for coping with and accepting this loss. Moreover, it also has something to do with becoming conscious of one's own assumptions and perceptions regarding the change proposals and the extent to which we find ourselves capable of successfully realising these changes. However, as Schein (1996, p.29) made clear, there is more to the endeavour of unfreezing than simply managing the process of dissatisfaction. In fact, he describes it as intertwining processes of unlearning (de-construction) and learning (re-construction).

### ***5. Linking Lewin's 'unfreezing' to today's dialogical OD***

The way Lewin describes the importance of the process of unfreezing has a lot in common in with how Gergen introduced the concept of generativity in the social sciences. Later on, in 2007, generativity was picked up by Bushe (2013) as being the distinct virtue of what has become known as 'Dialogic OD'. Gergen (1978) defined generativity as the "capacity to challenge the guiding assumptions of the culture, to raise fundamental questions regarding contemporary social life, to foster reconsideration of that which is 'taken

for granted' and thereby furnish new alternatives for social actions" (p.1346). While reflecting on the concept, Bushe (2013, p.90) specifically asserts that a generative image allows people to see the world anew, identify new options, formulate new strategies, and even cope with their uncertainty. The most generative images influence our feelings and motivations as well as our thoughts. People take new decisions and actions because of how attractive that image is.

Dialogic OD is based on a view of organisations where groups of individuals and their actions result from self-organising, socially constructed realities created and sustained by the prevailing narratives, and conversations through which people make meaning of their experiences (Bushe & Marshak, 2013, p.194). In this way, change can be seen as part of a continuous process of self-organising and practices resulting from emergent rather than directed processes. In other words, one does not plan for a specific change, but instead helps to foster the following relational conditions that lead to new ways of thinking and processes of new reality-constructing:

- Disrupting prevailing social reality by adding a diversity of ideas, questions, actors, processes, and so forth to the existing situation. This reduces uncertainty and introduces new narratives and perspectives from which new social agreements about the state of affairs and what to do can emerge.
- Creating a social field that provides the right ingredients and space for participants to inquire together, making room for both individual and collective expression, through which old ways of thinking are contested and new possibilities emerge.
- Emphasising unfreezing rather than solving a problem or enhancing a current condition. A generative idea offers people new ways of thinking and acting which they hadn't been able to consider before, but that they had wanted to act on. For example, reckoning with what we don't seem to understand; confronting or reframing prevailing ways of talking

about or experiencing things; or creating new images, language, or stories that open doors to new ways of conceiving of a situation.

Echoing Lewin's work in this way, a dialogic OD mindset assumes that people self-organise socially constructed realities that are continuously created, conveyed, and changed through exchanging narratives and images.

## ***6. Some closing practical reflections***

These reflections on Lewin's action research, field theory, and unfreezing bring us to the following practical features of how to enable people to cope in a collaborative way with uncertainty, by means of collectively deciphering a purpose, the relevant relationships and people:

### **1. Relationships**

To establish a meaningful pattern between people, we ask ourselves, for example, "Who's interacting with whom?" However, in the same way we ask ourselves, "To what extent are people behaving in a mutually dependent way?" and "How do these interdependent relations and interactions between them relate to the purpose of the whole social field?" By repeatedly asking these questions of the directly involved participants, we are looking for the boundaries, dynamic structure, and context of the social system that we are trying to decipher. The first contours of such a social whole are demarcated when participants recognise that they share the same purpose.

### **2. Purpose**

One way to deduce the purpose of a social life space is to watch for a while to see how the people in it interact. However, instead of observing the interaction of a group of people, we can also follow Lewin's adage that "You cannot understand a system until you try to change it!" For example, when we try to alter a vicious recursive pattern, we can expect, as a reaction, less or more symptomatic behaviours exemplary of the social system we are studying.



Thus, by intervening directly, we see exactly what autonomous behaviour a group of people produces and, of course, the problematic-enforcing behaviour and the corresponding problem-solving behaviour. Both of these are symptoms of the same problematic recursive pattern because they are related to the purpose of this whole of interacting people.

3. People

We tend to assume that because we understand individuals and their behaviour that we understand the relationships between them. Therefore, we assume that we understand the purpose of what they are doing as a group. Changing people or their behaviour usually has the least effect on what goes on. As Lewin (1951) explains, a group of people with a shared purpose and mutually dependent relationships has a tendency towards a quasi-stationary equilibrium. This means that the group generally goes on being itself, changing only slowly, if at all, even with complete substitutions of its elements – as long as its interconnections and purposes remain intact.

In Figure 1, the above social field components are linked with practical questions, which can help us to decipher and demarcate a social field as a whole. Discussing them with the participants helps us to define the scope of the intended change as well as to invite other participants to see them, which helps with the first interventions.

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<b>Purpose (why?)</b>	Define related issues and challenges:
Define objectives (push and pull)	What is it that we want to get rid of (push)? What is it what we want to realise (pull)?
<b>Stakeholders (who?)</b>	Which individuals or groups have a stake
Define the participants	in realising these objectives? Which do we need in the process of realising these objectives?

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<b>Differential diagnosis (what?)</b> Define 'current reality' from different perspectives	What are the problematic issues and what are the problem-solving behaviours? How do they differ according to the various perspectives of all participants?
<b>First encounters and steps (how?)</b> Recursive activities, which repeatedly validate the above	Compose a process group, validate all the above, formulate a leading question, and prepare the programme for a collective dialogue session.

Figure 1. The components of identifying a preliminary social field

Deciphering the social field in this way allows us to understand perceptions, images, interpretations, and convictions that sustain participants' uncertainties. Moreover, this also identifies those forces that would need to be either strengthened or weakened in order to cope with their uncertainties and bring change. In this regard, bridging the link in a systemic way between individual perception and collective meaning will have the greatest chance of taking first steps in the direction of realising the purpose we have all agreed upon. In the words of Lewin and Grabbe (1948): "Only by this change in social perception can change in the individual's social action be realized" (p.61). Changing an individual is difficult and most likely to happen when the direct environment – the total social interactive setting – of the individual is included in the change intention. Change intentions that facilitate participative decision-making and organisational support have also been shown to influence employees' perceptions of uncertainty and trust in what is about to happen (Robinson, 1996). Today, dialogical OD practitioners such as Bushe describe the importance of seeing the whole social field, which is needed to interactively address the right issues at the right time with the right people.

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