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The Cycle of Change

In 1947 Kurt Lewin studied the issue of personal learning and change and noted that most people are in a “frozen” state in terms of their openness to learning and change. Each person carries his or her own set of unexamined attitudes and habitual modes of perceiving and responding. Lewin described the cycle of change as unfreezing (opening up, for some reason, to the possibility of learning or changing), change (a learning of some kind), and refreezing (using the changed habits—attitudes or behaviors—in place of the old ones). A simple figure can be used to illustrate this concept.

Unfreezing

People in organizations often do things in the same ways for years. Even if they do not like the ways in which things are done, people tend to prefer the known over the unknown and will resist change. Even in experiential learning groups, unless the participants have benefited from a considerable amount of previous training, they will come to the event in a “frozen” state. Before people can undergo change, they must unfreeze their typical attitudes and behaviors—a process that can be very threatening. Sometimes unfreezing is the result of trying something that clearly does not work because the consequences are so negative; one then decides that it might be done better another way. Sometimes the change is imposed from the outside; in this case, there is more resistance on the part of the person who is targeted for change. In order to reduce the threat of change and the resulting resistance, people must examine their old attitudes and/or behaviors and decide that they are willing to experiment to see if some changes would be beneficial.

Change

The atmosphere of the training group is important in facilitating change. The process is greatly enhanced when an atmosphere of support, mutual risk taking, and trust exists. The democracy and intimacy that are part of training-group process support self-examination and reduce the risk of trying out new responses. In fact, the mutual process among participants creates a norm that makes change desirable, rather than a sign of weakness or failure. As participants become involved in the training group, they begin to share its responsibilities, and the group becomes more cohesive. Fears about changing are reduced, and risk taking is rewarded.

Depending on the training objectives, change can be facilitated by a number of techniques. Primarily it involves the participants examining some aspect of themselves or the area of focus, experimenting with new ways of thinking or behaving, learning new concepts that they can relate to their existing knowledge and use as models for new ways of thinking or behaving, and practicing the change with feedback and support from the facilitator and the other group members. Many different training technologies can be used to aid in this process.

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Refreezing

Refreezing is the process by which the new attitudes and behaviors are integrated into the participants' own ways of thinking and being. This integration actually is not a frozen state, because the process of change is a cycle: once experienced it opens up the individual to experiment and change again. The extent to which this takes place depends on the extent to which the person identifies with and internalizes the change. This, in turn, is dependent on the degree and quality of support and reinforcement the person receives. If one's changed attitudes and behaviors lead to more satisfying and effective relationships or a greater sense of self-awareness, or if others provide positive feedback, there is an incentive to continue the change.

