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## Unfreeze / Refreeze: A Simple Change Model

by Robert H. Kent, Ph.D.

The unfreeze/refreeze model is one of the simplest models for understanding organizational or social change. It was developed by Kurt Lewin, a physicist turned social scientist. Because of his professional background, he used physical science analogies to help explain social phenomenon.

His analogy deals with changing the shape of a block of ice. Say your brother-in-law has a large cube-shaped block of ice. He brought it home with the intention of making a round tire-shaped ring of ice with cherries in it to float in a big punch bowl. You told him he needed ice to make a ring so he went out and bought some. Now you have to tell him, "Hey, that's no good, it's the wrong shape." So now he wants to change the shape. If the technique he uses to change it is to force the ice into a round ring, he's not going to have much success. He can squeeze it as much as he wants, or pound it with a hammer. Most likely it will shatter.

If he tries to use force to make the change it will be resisted. Why? Because that block of ice is a system made up of inter-related H<sub>2</sub>O crystals in a lattice-work that will resist being changed. So what can he do to make the frozen H<sub>2</sub>O more receptive to a change in shape? Obviously, he makes it a liquid. He melts it in a big pan on the stove and it ends up as a great big puddle of water. At least now he has it in a stage where it is amenable to change. But the shape he wants it to be in is a round ring. So he pours the liquid water into a circular mold. It's still the same chemical compound as it was when it was ice, but now it is a new shape. Unfortunately, it won't hold this shape. If he picks it up (as your crazy brother-in-law might do), it will pour all over the floor. He has to do something to make it keep its new shape. He refreezes it. He adds cherries to it and puts in the fridge. After he refreezes it, he can take it out of the fridge and plop it into his punch bowl. He has successfully converted a cube of H<sub>2</sub>O into a tire-shaped ring of ice with cherries around its circumference. The three stages he went through are unfreezing, change and refreezing. You can use the same three stages to describe any change in an organization, especially social changes. The problem is, in an organization, we often forget one of the three steps. Typically, we forget step one, or step three. We do step two -- we make the change -- but we're never really successful because there are three stages to consider, not one.

## Step One: Unfreezing

How do you unfreeze an organization so that it will accept change? In other words, how do you make the system receptive to change? How can the system be made to want to change if you are trying to install change in your organization -- for example a non-smoking policy or an affirmative action program. The first thing you have to do is get the organization receptive to change, otherwise your organization will be like that block of ice. It will naturally resist change.

One strategy is to go where the hurt is. Go where there is some feeling that things aren't working out right. That is where it will be more likely that change will be accepted. Another way of putting it is that "People gotta wanna change" -- or there will be this natural resistance. Go beyond that. Not only go to where the hurt is, but go where the hurt should be felt. Maybe it isn't being felt where it ought to be felt. What can you do to get people recognizing the need for change where it ought to be recognized? How can you get people to see that there is something wrong, that there is a need for change?

## The Unfreezing Process

Feeding back people's opinions is one good way to begin the unfreezing process. The survey feedback technique makes the organization aware that there are problems, that people are upset, that morale is low, or that work attitudes and performance are not what they ought to be. That's a form of unfreezing. For an individual, a doctor's report could be an unfreezing motivator. You refuse to accept the fact that there is any pressing need to diet until you get feedback from a doctor who tells you that if you don't diet you'll be dead in six months. That may unfreeze your feelings towards making a change in eating habits.

In a company, you could set up a committee to investigate a problem, to see if they can get enough data to unfreeze the organization. Or you could use a consultant to do the survey feedback. Often what motivates large organizations are fines. Your company is sued for wrongful dismissal. That is the unfreezing event that gets your organization more amenable to making changes in its human resource management practices. Some organizations now pay more attention to managing people only because their opinions have been unfrozen through massive suits.

Unfreezing is often missed in training programs, particularly management training. People are simply sent to courses. They don't see any need to change and so unfreezing has not occurred. They are not receptive to learning. Someone else is simply telling them that they should change their ways and they don't see any need to do so. Part of the problem is that the person perceives the management training program as focusing on changing the individual himself. In the person's view, someone is telling him that he has been doing the job wrong and he has to change. Naturally there is resistance.

Sometimes, authority is the only motivator that you can use to get people to learn new skills. They may not see that there is a need to change, or to learn new skills. It's a shame when you have to use authority as the motivator. It's better when you don't. What's better is when the learning of these management skills isn't perceived to be a sign of past failure but rather the person sees it as an opportunity to learn new skills, to improve himself or to do the job even better.

Management training often misses the mark because the person who is to learn new skills, or the organization that is to learn new skills wasn't unfrozen. Some effort must be made to put the organization or individual in a state more receptive to change. They gotta wanna change.

## Step Two: Making the Change

In step two you actually make the change. You propose the solution to the problem that you may have identified or highlighted in step one. Then you get people doing it. You start your diet. You learn new skills, etc. You make the change. Installing this change will be discussed in detail in the next section of this book.

## Step Three: Refreezing

This step is often missed. We get an employee to change his/her work habits but then don't refreeze that change. We put in a new system in an organization and we don't refreeze the change.

What's refreezing? We have to do something to the system or the organization so that the change becomes a permanent part of its operation. We refroze the water so that it would hold its shape permanently. You have to do the same thing in an organization. Just because the change happened once doesn't mean it will continually happen or that it will maintain itself. You've got to cement the change into the organization's culture, -- into the way things are done in the organization.

This step is usually missed in management training programs. We teach people skills; we hope they will use them back on the job but we don't build the use of these skills into the standard operating procedures of the organization. Suppose your organization wanted to implement Affirmative Action. How do you make the basic concepts and practices of Affirmative Action a permanent part of the organization's work patterns? If you have a zero defects manufacturing program that you want to implement in your manufacturing plant, how do you make that change of focus in production, a permanent part of the way things are done? By refreezing.

## Guidelines for Change

The strength of the unfreeze, change, refreeze model is in its simplicity. I think it gives very clear guidelines for implementing change. You've got to go through all three stages. Some stages may be very quick. You may do the unfreezing stage almost instantaneously to somebody by saying "Unless you change, you lose your job." That may put the person into a state rather quickly of wanting to accept change, but it is still a stage and it can't be missed.

You have to get the organization receptive to change. People must see that there is a need for change. Then you make the change. Once it's done, do something to build it in as a permanent part of the organization. With skill training, where employees learn specific skills to use on the job, refreezing can happen simply because the employee uses the skills. The feedback the employee gets is that the skills work -- it's giving me what I want. The results are positive and the employee is more likely to continue using his skills because the skills have been reinforced. That's why quick successful use of skills after a training program helps to refreeze change into the individual's personal practices.

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