9.3: Theories and Models of Change Theories

Knowledge of the science of change theory is critical to altering organizational systems. Being conversant with various change theories can provide a framework for implementing, managing, and evaluating change within the context of human behaviour. Change theories can be linear or non-linear; however, even linear theories do not unfold in a systematic and organized pattern. In the following section, we identify the role of leader and the typical pattern of events that occur in a change event.

Force Field Model and The Unfreezing-Change-Refreezing Model

Kurt Lewin (1951) is known as a pioneer in the study of group dynamics and organizational development. He theorized a three-stage model of change (unfreezing-change-refreezing model) in order to identify and examine the factors and forces that influence a situation. The theory requires leaders to reject prior knowledge and replace it with new information. It is based on the idea that if one can identify and determine the potency of forces, then it is possible to know the forces that need to be diminished or strengthened to bring about change (Burnes, 2004).

Lewin describes behaviour as "a dynamic balance of forces working in opposing directions" (cited in Shirey, 2013, p.1). The force field model is best applied to stable environments and he makes note of two types of forces: driving forces and restraining forces. **Driving forces** are those that push in a direction that causes the change to occur or that facilitate the change because they push a person in a desired direction. **Restraining forces** are those that counter the driving force and hinder the change because they push a person away from a desired direction. Finally, change can occur if the driving forces override or weaken the restraining forces.

This important force field model forms the foundation of Lewin’s three-stage theory on change (1951) (see Figure 9.2.1). **Unfreezing** is the first stage, which involves the process of finding a method to assist individuals in letting go of an old pattern of behaviour and facilitating individuals in overcoming resistance and group conformity (Kritsonis, 2005). In this
stage, disequilibrium occurs to disrupt the system, making it possible to identify the driving forces for the change and the likely restraining forces against it. A successful change ultimately involves strengthening the driving forces and weakening the restraining forces (Shirey, 2013). This can be achieved by the use of three methods: (1) increase the driving forces that direct the behaviour away from the existing situation or equilibrium; (2) decrease the restraining forces that negatively affect the movement away from the current equilibrium; or (3) combine the first two methods.

The second stage, moving or change, involves the process of a change in thoughts, feelings, and/or behaviours. Lewin (1951) describes three actions that can assist in movement: (1) persuading others that the status quo is not beneficial and encouraging others to view a problem with a fresh perspective; (2) working with others to find new, relevant information that can help effect the desired change; and (3) connecting with powerful leaders who also support the change (Kristonis, 2005). This second stage is often the most difficult due to the fact that there is a level of uncertainty and fear associated with change (Shirey, 2013). Therefore, it is important to have a supportive team and clear communication in order to achieve the desired change.

Lastly, stage three, which Lewin called refreezing, involves establishing the change as a new habit. The third stage is necessary to ensure that the change implemented (in the second stage) will “stick” over time (Kristonis, 2005). Success at this stage will create a new equilibrium state known to be the new norm or higher level of performance expectation (Shirey, 2013).

Although Lewin’s model on change is well known and widely accepted in health care settings, it is often criticized for being too simplistic and linear. Change is often unpredictable and complex, and an effective leader must be aware of many change models.

Figure 9.2.1 The Steps of the Unfreezing-Change-Refreezing Model

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