

## **Comparison of Change Theories**

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### **ABSTRACT**

**The purpose of this article is to summarize several change theories and assumptions about the nature of change. The author shows how successful change can be encouraged and facilitated for long-term success. The article compares the characteristics of Lewin's Three-Step Change Theory, Lippitt's Phases of Change Theory, Prochaska and DiClemente's Change Theory, Social Cognitive Theory, and the Theory of Reasoned Action and Planned Behavior to one another. Leading industry experts will need to continually review and provide new information relative to the change process and to our evolving society and culture.**

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**T**here are many change theories and some of the most widely recognized are briefly summarized in this article. The theories serve as a testimony to the fact that change is a real phenomenon. It can be observed and analyzed through various steps or phases. The theories have been conceptualized to answer the question, "How does successful change happen?"

### **Lewin's Three-Step Change Theory**

Kurt Lewin (1951) introduced the three-step change model. This social scientist views behavior as a dynamic balance of forces working in opposing directions. Driving forces facilitate change because they push employees in the desired direction. Restraining forces hinder change because they push employees in the opposite direction. Therefore, these forces must be analyzed and Lewin's three-step model can help shift the balance in the direction of the planned change ([http://www.csupomona.edu/~jvgrizzell/best\\_practices/bctheory.html](http://www.csupomona.edu/~jvgrizzell/best_practices/bctheory.html)).

According to Lewin, the first step in the process of changing behavior is to unfreeze the existing situation or status quo. The status quo is considered the equilibrium state. Unfreezing is necessary to overcome the strains of individual resistance and group conformity. Unfreezing can be achieved by the use of three methods. First, increase the driving forces that direct behavior away from the existing situation or status quo. Second, decrease the restraining forces that negatively affect the movement from the existing equilibrium. Third, find a combination of the two methods listed above. Some activities that can assist in the unfreezing step include: motivate participants by preparing them for change, build trust and recognition for the need to change, and actively participate in recognizing problems and brainstorming solutions within a group (Robbins 564-65).

Lewin's second step in the process of changing behavior is movement. In this step, it is necessary to move the target system to a new level of equilibrium. Three actions that can assist in the movement step include: persuading employees to agree that the status quo is not beneficial to them and encouraging them to view the problem from a fresh perspective, work together on a quest for new, relevant information, and connect the views of the group to well-respected, powerful leaders that also support the change ([http://www.csupomona.edu/~jvgrizzell/best\\_practices/bctheory.html](http://www.csupomona.edu/~jvgrizzell/best_practices/bctheory.html)).

The third step of Lewin's three-step change model is refreezing. This step needs to take place after the change has been implemented in order for it to be sustained or "stick" over time. It is highly likely that the change will be short lived and the employees will revert to their old equilibrium (behaviors) if this step is not taken. It is the actual integration of the new values into the community values and traditions. The purpose of refreezing is to stabilize the new equilibrium resulting from the change by balancing both the driving and restraining forces. One action that can be used to implement Lewin's third step is to reinforce new patterns and institutionalize them through formal and informal mechanisms including policies and procedures (Robbins 564-65).

Therefore, Lewin's model illustrates the effects of forces that either promote or inhibit change. Specifically, driving forces promote change while restraining forces oppose change. Hence, change will occur when the combined strength of one force is greater than the combined strength of the opposing set of forces (Robbins 564-65).

### **Lippitt's Phases of Change Theory**

Lippitt, Watson, and Westley (1958) extend Lewin's Three-Step Change Theory. Lippitt, Watson, and Westley created a seven-step theory that focuses more on the role and responsibility of the change agent than on the evolution of the change itself. Information is continuously exchanged throughout the process. The seven steps are:

1. Diagnose the problem.
2. Assess the motivation and capacity for change.
3. Assess the resources and motivation of the change agent. This includes the change agent's commitment to change, power, and stamina.
4. Choose progressive change objects. In this step, action plans are developed and strategies are established.
5. The role of the change agents should be selected and clearly understood by all parties so that expectations are clear. Examples of roles are: cheerleader, facilitator, and expert.
6. Maintain the change. Communication, feedback, and group coordination are essential elements in this step of the change process.
7. Gradually terminate from the helping relationship. The change agent should gradually withdraw from their role over time. This will occur when the change becomes part of the organizational culture (Lippitt, Watson and Westley 58-59).

Lippitt, Watson, and Westley point out that changes are more likely to be stable if they spread to neighboring systems or to subparts of the system immediately affected. Changes are better rooted. Two examples are: the individual meets other problems in a similar way, several businesses adopt the same innovation, or the problem spreads to other departments of the same business. The more widespread imitation becomes, the more the behavior is regarded as normal (Lippitt, Watson and Westley 58-59).

### **Prochaska and DiClemente's Change Theory**

Initially, the purpose of Prochaska and DiClemente model of change behavior was to show where a patient was in their journey to change certain health behaviors. Throughout the years, this model has been extended to other audiences other than solely health patients. The model defines a more general process of change and, therefore, it tends to be less specific. Prochaska and DiClemente found that people pass through a series of stages when change occurs. The stages discussed in their change theory are: precontemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, and maintenance. Progression through the stages is cyclical, not linear. This is because initially many individuals relapse on their change efforts and do not successfully maintain their gains the first time around (Hicks 1).

Prochaska and DiClemente have created a spiral model to represent the various stages of their theory. The first aspect of the model shows the movement of intentional change from precontemplation to contemplation of the issue. Precontemplation exists when an individual is unaware or fails to acknowledge the problems without engaging in any change process activities. Individuals in this stage do not want to change their behavior and may insist that their behavior is normal. Contemplation exists when the individual raises consciousness of the issue. Individuals in this stage are thinking about changing their behavior, but they are not ready to commit to the change process yet. The

next stage of Prochaska and DiClemente's change theory is preparation. Preparation occurs when the individual is ready to change their behavior and plans to do so within the next two weeks. These individuals will need counseling, social support, and assistance with problem solving during this stage of change. The action stage follows shortly thereafter. It is characterized by an increase in coping with behavioral change and the individual begins to engage in change activities. Finally, maintenance is the last stage of Prochaska and DiClemente's change theory. In this final stage, actions to reinforce the change are taken coupled with establishing the new behavioral change to the individual's lifestyle and norms. This stage may last six months up to the lifespan of the individual. Counseling to avoid relapses is necessary to ensure a successful long-term change. (<http://northwestahec.wfubmc.edu/professional/Behavior%20Change%20Model.pdf#search='prochaska%20and%20DiClemente'>).

In this spiral model, individuals have the ability to exit at any time if they decide not to change. The model takes into account behavioral relapses or return to the previously existing behavior. In the case of relapses, many individuals do not let up. They can revisit the contemplation stage and prepare for action in the future. The spiral pattern of the model suggests that many individuals learn from their relapses instead of circling around the issue

([kumc.edu/instruction/conted/online/substance/module3/mod3comp1.html](http://kumc.edu/instruction/conted/online/substance/module3/mod3comp1.html)).

### **Social Cognitive Theory**

Individuals can learn by direct experiences, human dialogue and interaction, and observation. Social learning theory, later renamed social cognitive theory, proposes that behavior change is affected by environmental influences, personal factors, and attributes of the behavior itself (Robbins 46-47).

The individual must possess self-efficacy. They must believe in their capability to perform the behavior and they must perceive that there is an incentive to do so. Social learning theory is an extension of operant conditioning. In other words, behavior is a result of consequences. Individuals react to how they perceive consequences of their behavior. Consequently for social learning to exist, the individual's positive expectations of the behavior should outweigh their negative expectations. The consequences or outcomes may be classified as having immediate benefits such as feeling energized or long-term benefits such as experiencing improvements in cardiovascular health. Self-efficacy is believed to be the most important characteristic that determines a person's behavioral change because these expected outcomes are filtered through a person's expectations or perceptions of being able to perform the behavior in the first place. Self-efficacy can be increased in several ways. Three methods to increase self-efficacy include: provide clear instructions, provide the opportunity for skill development or training, and model the desired behavior (<http://newcity.ca/Pages/moorechange.html>).

When implementing employee-training programs, there are four processes that should be exercised that can significantly increase the likelihood of success. They include: attentional processes, retention processes, motor reproduction processes, and

reinforcement processes. Attentional processes take into account that individuals learn from a model when they can relate to it and pay attention to its details. Individuals are more easily influenced when the model is neat, attractive, compelling, attention grabbing, and relates to something they care about. Retention processes take into account the degree of which an individual can remember the model and its characteristics. Motor reproduction process illustrates an individual converting seeing (observation) into doing. Reinforcement processes are used when an individual changes behavior due to rewards and positive incentives. The changed behaviors that are targeted will be given greater attention, better rewards, and performed more often. To be effective, models must evoke trust, admiration, and respect from the observer. Conversely, models should not appear to represent a level of behavior that the observer is unable to visualize attaining (Robbins 46-47).

### **The Theory of Reasoned Action and Planned Behavior**

The theory of reasoned action states that “individual performance of a given behavior is primarily determined by a person's intention to perform that behavior.” ([http://www.csupomona.edu/~jvgrizzell/best\\_practices/bctheory.html](http://www.csupomona.edu/~jvgrizzell/best_practices/bctheory.html)).

There are two major factors that shape the individual's attention. First, the individual's attitude towards the desired behavior must be positive for change to occur. Second, the influence of the person's social environment or subjective norm is another factor that shapes the individual's attention. This includes the beliefs of their peers and what they believe the individual should do as well as the individual's motivation to comply with the opinions of their peers.

The theory of planned behavior includes the concept of perceived control over the opportunities, resources, and skills necessary to perform the desired behavior. The concept of perceived behavioral control is similar to the concept of self-efficacy. A vital aspect of the behavioral change process is perceived behavioral control over opportunities, resources, and skills necessary to perform a behavior ([http://www.csupomona.edu/~jvgrizzell/best\\_practices/bctheory.html](http://www.csupomona.edu/~jvgrizzell/best_practices/bctheory.html)).

### **Comparison**

This section of the article will compare the differentiating characteristics of each change theory to one another. Lewin's Three-Step Change Theory, Lippitt's Phases of Change Theory, Prochaska and DiClemente's Change Theory, Social Cognitive Theory, and the Theory of Reasoned Action and Planned Behavior have different methods and

assumptions that make each theory unique. It is important to note that some of the theories do share some commonalities with one another.

Lewin's model is very rational, goal and plan oriented. It doesn't take into account personal factors that can affect change. Conversely, social cognitive theory proposes that behavioral change is affected by environmental influences, personal factors, and attributes of the behavior itself. Lewin's model makes rational sense, but the Social Cognitive Theory because it takes into account both external and internal environmental conditions.

Lippitt's Phases of Change is an extension of Lewin's Three-Step Theory. The focus on Lippitt's change theory is on the change agent rather than the change itself. Lewin's change model attempts to analyze the forces (driving or restraining) that impacts change.

Prochaska and DiClemente's change theory is differentiated from the other theories discussed in this article. The model is cyclical, not linear. This theory takes relapses or failures to convert to the desired behavior the first time into account. Individuals that may relapse can revisit the contemplation stage and make plans for action in the future.

Self-efficacy is the most important characteristic of both the theory of planned behavior and social cognitive theory. Self-efficacy is defined as having the confidence in the ability to take action and persist in the action. Self-efficacy must be present in order for theory of planned behavior and Social Cognitive Theory to be applied resulting in successful change.

### **Summary**

Lewin's model is very rational, goal and plan oriented. The change looks good on paper, as it makes rational sense, but when implemented the lack of considering human feelings and experiences can have negative consequences. There may be occasions when employees get so excited about a new change, that they bypass the feelings, attitudes, past input or experience of other employees. Consequently, they find themselves facing either resistance or little enthusiasm.

There is no right or wrong theory to change management. It is not an exact science. However through the ongoing research and studies by the industry's leading experts, a clearer picture of what it takes to lead a change effort effectively will continue to emerge. It is important that we must continually review and consider how our changing society and culture will require fresh insight on the appropriate change process.

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