

CHANGE MANAGEMENT

Foundational Models of Change

Lewin · Kotter · Bridges · Beckhard

PAPER 01 / 03

A Furtherance reference compendium on the intellectual traditions behind organisational design, leadership, execution, and culture.

IN THIS PAPER

This paper opens the Change Management series in Furtherance's reference library. It sets out the foundational, planned-change tradition – the models that treat change as an episode to be led from a current state to a defined future one. The question it answers: what has to happen, and in what order, for a deliberate change to take hold?

Almost every change method in use descends from the four figures here. Lewin supplies the underlying physics – change as a shift in a field of forces. Kotter turns it into a leadership sequence. Bridges adds the human transition that runs underneath the structural change. Beckhard gives the readiness equation that says whether change will move at all.

They share a premise worth naming up front: that change is episodic and broadly linear, with a stable end-state to be reached and locked in. That premise is the strength of this tradition and, as the next paper argues, its limit.

Kurt Lewin 1890–1947

Social psychology · field theory · the founder of change theory

CORE THESIS

Behaviour is held in place by a balance of opposing forces – a **quasi-stationary equilibrium**. To change it, you do not simply push harder; you first loosen the forces holding the current state, shift, then re-stabilise. Lewin also showed that reducing the **restraining** forces is usually better than increasing the **driving** ones, which only raises tension.

FRAMEWORK

Step	What happens
Unfreeze	Loosen the current equilibrium; build awareness that change is needed
Change (move)	Shift attitudes, behaviours and structures toward the new state
Refreeze	Stabilise and embed the new state so it becomes the norm

Change is diagnosed through **force-field analysis**:

Force	Role in the field
Driving forces	Push toward change; increasing them raises resistance and tension
Restraining forces	Hold the status quo; reducing them is the lower-tension lever

METHODOLOGY

Field theory and group-dynamics experiments. Lewin coined **action research** – cycles of intervention and reflection with those affected – which became the method beneath most later change and OD practice.

SIGNIFICANCE AND CRITIQUE

The reference point for the entire field; unfreeze–refreeze is change management's founding metaphor. The critiques: it casts change as linear and episodic with a stable “refreeze”, which fits poorly with continuous change; and scholars note the tidy three-step model was distilled from Lewin's richer field theory largely after his death.

John Kotter b. 1947

Leadership and change · Harvard Business School

CORE THESIS

Most transformation efforts fail, and they fail in patterned ways. Success follows an **eight-step process**, demands **leadership** rather than mere management, and begins with genuine **urgency**. Skipping steps, or declaring victory too early, is what derails change.

FRAMEWORK

Step	Action
1 · Urgency	Establish a real sense that change matters now
2 · Coalition	Build a guiding team with power and credibility
3 · Vision	Form a clear strategic vision and direction
4 · Communicate	Enlist a volunteer army behind the vision
5 · Enable	Remove barriers and empower action
6 · Short-term wins	Generate and make visible early results
7 · Sustain	Consolidate gains and keep driving change
8 · Anchor	Embed new approaches in the culture

METHODOLOGY

Observation of more than a hundred organisations attempting transformation, distilled into a common pattern of success and failure. Later reframed as eight concurrent “accelerators” and a dual operating system of hierarchy plus network.

SIGNIFICANCE AND CRITIQUE

The most widely applied change framework in corporate practice. The critique is that it is practitioner-derived rather than empirically validated, top-down and linear, and that “urgency” can be manufactured; it fits planned change far better than emergent change.

William Bridges 1933–2013

Transition management · the psychology of change

CORE THESIS

Change and transition are not the same thing. **Change** is the external event – the new structure, system or role. **Transition** is the internal, psychological process people move through to let go of the old and take up the new. Change can be scheduled; transition cannot, and initiatives fail when leaders manage the former and ignore the latter.

FRAMEWORK

Phase	Psychological experience
Ending, losing, letting go	Grief and resistance as the old reality is given up
The neutral zone	Disorientation and low morale – but also the seedbed of creativity
The new beginning	New identity, energy and commitment take hold

METHODOLOGY

Drawn from consulting practice and a psychological reading of how people process loss and reorientation, rather than from controlled study.

SIGNIFICANCE AND CRITIQUE

The essential complement to the structural models: it foregrounds the emotional reality that determines whether a change is actually absorbed. The critique is that it is descriptive rather than predictive, the phases overlap and recur, and it works at the level of the individual more than the system.

Richard Beckhard 1918–1999

Organisation development · change readiness

CORE THESIS

Beckhard helped define **organisation development** as a planned, organisation-wide, top-managed effort to raise effectiveness through behavioural-science interventions. His most portable contribution is a readiness diagnostic: change happens only when the forces for it outweigh the resistance to it.

FRAMEWORK

The change formula (Gleicher / Beckhard–Harris): change occurs when $D \times V \times F > R$.

Element	Meaning
D – Dissatisfaction	Discontent with the way things are now
V – Vision	A clear picture of what is possible
F – First steps	Concrete, credible early moves toward the vision
R – Resistance	The cost and inertia opposing change; the product of D, V and F must exceed it

METHODOLOGY

Organisation-development practice and action research across large institutions. He also gave teams the GRPI model – goals, roles, processes, interpersonal relations – as a diagnostic sequence.

SIGNIFICANCE AND CRITIQUE

Beckhard institutionalised OD and produced one of the field's most durable, quotable diagnostics. The critique: the formula is heuristic rather than quantitative – if any term is near zero, change stalls – and its top-managed assumption reads as dated in flatter, more distributed organisations.

Synthesis

Theorist	Core contribution	Model	Standing critique
Lewin	Change as a shift in a force field	Unfreeze–change–refreeze	Linear; episodic; posthumously simplified
Kotter	Leadership sequence for transformation	Eight steps	Observational; top-down
Bridges	The human transition beneath change	Ending–neutral–beginning	Descriptive; individual-level
Beckhard	Readiness as a precondition	$D \times V \times F > R$	Heuristic; top-managed

FOR THE OPERATOR

The foundational models give the operator the grammar of planned change – loosen and re-stabilise, lead with urgency and coalition, manage the human transition, and check readiness before moving. Their shared limit is the shared premise: change as a bounded episode with a stable end-state. The next paper takes up the harder case – change that has no settled destination to refreeze into.