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Kurt Lewin's process model for organizational change: The role of leadership and employee involvement: A critical review

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ABSTRACT

Change is crucial for organizations in continuous growing and high competition in business environment. Different theories of change describe the effectiveness of modification of strategies, processes and structures for organizations. The action research model, the positive model and the Lewin's change model submit the views of the phases for change in organization. This study views the Lewin's model as three steps process (unfreezing, movement and refreezing) for change in organization. Although this model sets a general steps to be followed, more information is considered to guide these steps in specific situations. This article is critically reviewed for change theories in different phases of organizational change. In this critical review the change management has constructive framework for managing the organizational change through different phases of the process. This review gives theoretical and practical implications and somehow the immunity to change has been discussed.

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El modelo de proceso de cambio organizacional de Kurt Lewin: El papel del liderazgo y la participación de los empleados: Una versión crítica

RESUMEN

El cambio es crucial para las organizaciones en continuo crecimiento y la competitividad en el entorno empresarial. Diversas teorías del cambio describen la efectividad que tiene la modificación de las estrategias, los procesos y las estructuras de las organizaciones. El modelo de investigación, el modelo positivo y el modelo de cambio de Lewin presentan las opiniones de las fases de cambio en la organización. Este estudio, muestra el modelo de Lewin como un proceso dividido en tres (descongelación, movimiento y recongelación) para

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Recongelación
 Implicación del empleado en el
 cambio
 Conocimiento compartido
 Implementación del cambio

el cambio en la organización. Aunque este modelo establece unos pasos generales a seguir, se puede considerar más información para seguir estos pasos en situaciones determinadas. Este artículo revisa de una manera crítica las teorías de cambio en diferentes fases del cambio organizacional. En esta revisión crítica, la gestión del cambio presenta un marco constructivo para gestionar el cambio organizacional a través de diferentes fases del proceso. Esta revisión proporciona además, las implicaciones teóricas y prácticas y de igual manera, la inmunidad al cambio ha sido discutida.

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Introduction and research questions

The purpose of the study is to craft the relation between process model and change, this relation describes the ways of implementing change process by leader's knowledge sharing, and this sharing identifies the stages of change process, and these stages delineate the functional significance between organizational change and change implementation. The organizational life has been made inevitable feature by global, technological and economic pace, and many models of organizational change have acknowledged the influence of implicit dimensions at one stage or more stages of organizational change process (Burke, 2008; Wilkins & Dyer, 1988), and these models imitate different granular levels affecting the process of organizational change, and each level of them identifies distinctive change implementation stages (By, 2005). A model of organizational change in Kurt Lewin's three steps change process context was introduced in this study; which reflects momentous stages in change implementation process. Kurt Lewin's model is the early fundamental planned change models explaining the striving forces to maintain the status quo and pushing for change (Lewin, 1947). To change the "quasi-stationary equilibrium" stage, one may increase the striving forces for change, or decrease the forces maintaining the status quo, or the combination of both forces for proactive and reactive organizational change through knowledge sharing of individual willingness with the help of stimulating change leadership style.

The Lewin's model was used from an ethnographic study assumed for the investigation of the Lewin's model for change development, mediates implementation and leadership initiatives for change in complex organizations. The focus of this research on (i) how Lewin's change model granulates change, (ii) how knowledge sharing affects the change implementation process, (iii) how employees involve in change and willingness to change, and (iv) how leadership style affects the organizational change process in organization.

Model of organizational change

Process model

The organizational change explains the movement of an organization from the known (current state) state to the unknown (Desired future state) state. This is because the future of this

change is uncertain and may concern the people's worth, coping abilities, and competency, so the people of the organization do not support change unless they are convinced against the status quo (Cummings & Worley, 2003). The organization may have invested heavily for status quo; subsequently resisting change will take place to avoid uncertain future of organization. Consequently, the necessary actions are to be taken to motivate employees. For this purpose, the study explores the loop of organizational change process through a series of events, which focuses on fundamental steps taken for implementation of change. The model has been categorized into loops of leadership, management and organization. This process is being initiated through Lewin's (1947) three steps change model denoting the step by step phases of unfreezing, changing and refreezing, so employees are being involved and instructed by leaders regarding the issues related to change process (Porras & Robertson, 1992). This subsequence process of change elaborates the varying outline sequence upon the essential stages of change (Bate, Khan, & Pye, 2000). The reprisal in the process Burke (2008) and Whelan-Berry, Gordon, and Hinings (2003) underlined the importance of leadership before launching each phase at each stage of change. The leader's ethicality may be one of the most important sources for change from employees as Durand and Calori (2006) stated the ethics of leadership in change process. Yet, this study does not examine explicitly the role of leadership ethics or importance in spontaneous undergoing change process (Armenakis & Harris, 2009).

In this study the organizational change will be referred as planned change. In context of process model of change, the culture has been recognized by theorists as moderator for organizational change. As Burke (2008) identified the Burke-Litwin model from different process theorists for the culture of organizational change.

Organizational change and Lewin's model "unfreezing"

Change management defined by Moran and Brightman (2001) as 'the process of continually renewing an organization's direction, structure, and capabilities to serve the ever changing needs of external and internal customers'. Changing does not depend on size and age but occurs thoroughly in all businesses. The world changes very fast, so the organizations must have to be changed quickly for the development and surviving of the organization (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2008). The Models and theories have been proposed for driving changes

in organization for managers and leaders to monitor, evaluate and plan changes using structure for quick response to the internal or external environment and foresee the pattern of change by individuals, products, technology and market (Van Ossten, 2006). As stated by Glieck (1987) that organizational change is a kind of chaos, so number of variables are changing, the environment changing, frequent change and resistant to change create confluence of change process at the same time, that not only stimulates difficulties in prediction but also make control impossible. However, the repeatedly research literature, consistently link different classes of events in organizations for change. A new model has to be built to describe the causes of organizational change, exploring how does organization functions (i.e., a leads b), and causation of model change deliberately. The internal and external environment persuades organizations for change. Pierce, Gardner, and Dunham (2002) stated two kind of change in organization, reactive and proactive change. The reactive change takes place when internal or external forces pressurize the organization for change while proactive change takes place when the organization itself concludes about change to be desirable and Peters and Waterman (1982) developed cultural excellence model for change; Pettigrew (1973) developed processual approach as holistic view for organization and environment, which emphasize that change is heavily influence by power, culture and politics. Many theories have been propose for change process but here in this study the Lewin's three steps model for change have to be used for change process. As the organization is in stage of change, the Kurt Lewin's theory has been applied for change process. According to the study of Lewin, that successful organizational change may be planned and this requires the system to be unfreezed. As explained in literature review, there are different reasons for change of organization and this will divert from its current position or status quo to a new direction. This stage will increase the group behaviors for change or to increase the leader's pressure for change at higher level, and Lewin suggests that the forces involving for status quo will create minimum resistance and tension than the forces applying for change and this strategy will be more effective strategy for change.

Employee involvement in change and Lewin's model "change process"

Employee involvement (EI) has been defined by Glew, Leary-Kelly, Griffin, and Van Fleet (1995) as "Employee involvement seeks to increase members' input into decisions that affect organization performance and employee well being". This can be explained in four (power, information, knowledge and skill, and rewards) elements which promote the worker or employee involvement. For overcoming the resistance in organizational change, the employee involvement is the most oldest and effective strategy in formulating the planning and implementing change. The participation will lead high quality change and prevail over the resistance in implementing stage (Vroom & Yetton, 1973). By doing this a variety of information and ideas may be generated, which may contribute the innovations effective and suitable in the situation, raise likelihood, create member commitment in implementing change, and employee motivating and leading change effort in work

(Cummings & Molloy, 1977). After getting out of the status quo, the leaders are required to support employee's involvement for accelerating the change in organization. The study of Pierce et al. (2002) states that; to stimulate process, the employees must have to be addressed about change. The leaders should educate, communicate, participate, involve, task support, provide emotional support and incentives, manipulate, co-optate and coerce the employees about change.

The study of Morgan and Zeffane (2003) states that during change process the leader's transparency, reaffirms and enhance the trust of employee's involvement in organizational change process regarding the discussion and meetings whenever discussed in organization, this allows employees for their opinions and achieve better sense of control (Morgan & Zeffane, 2003). The leaders having encouraging behavior will provide the support or suggestions in the process of change will reap advantages of task commitment and effectiveness (Higgins, Judge, & Ferris, 2003). The active role of employees in organizational change tends employees toward positive feelings (Furst & Cable, 2008). This will enhance the employee acceptance for change process (Oreg, 2006) and also select changes during change process for encouraging the organizational support (Armenakis & Harris, 2009). This change process of Lewin second step will shift the behavior or attitude of department, organization, or individual to the next new level.

The employee's involvement will be more effective if employees are empowered in authority and responsibility (Mathieu, Gilson, & Rubby, 2006). Here in every step of Lewin, the role of leadership involves as change agent for behavioral integration in tasks and social dimensions. The study of Srivastava, Bartol, and Locke (2006) states that, knowledge sharing means in team is sharing information, task relevant ideas and suggestions between different levels of management.

Knowledge sharing and Lewin's model "change process"

The employees make sharing of knowledge about task assignments, customer service, performance outcomes and decisions making, information flow from multilevel, making business plans, competitive conditions, new technology equipments, work methods, ideas for organizational improvement, share skill and expertise, share development programs, contribute in solving problems and business operation (Cummings & Worley, 2003). The study of Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) states, that knowledge sharing is crucial among individuals of an organization. Knowledge sharing in organizational resources is critical for competition, sustainability and dynamic economy (Hakanson, 1993; Foss & Pedersen, 2002). So the organizations do not rely on training, staffing and managing system only but also the knowledgeable individuals share beliefs, experiences, skills, competencies and abilities (Ambrosini & Bowman, 2001; Brown & Duguid, 1991). One thing should be noted that how to transfer the knowledge and expertise from the knowledgeable experts to novices who are in need to know (Hind, Patterson, & Pfeffer, 2001). Bordia, Irmer, and Abusah (2006) concluded that knowledge sharing at individual level was studied in organization behavior, psychology (Lin, 2007), information systems (Wasko & Faraj, 2005) and strategic management (Reagans

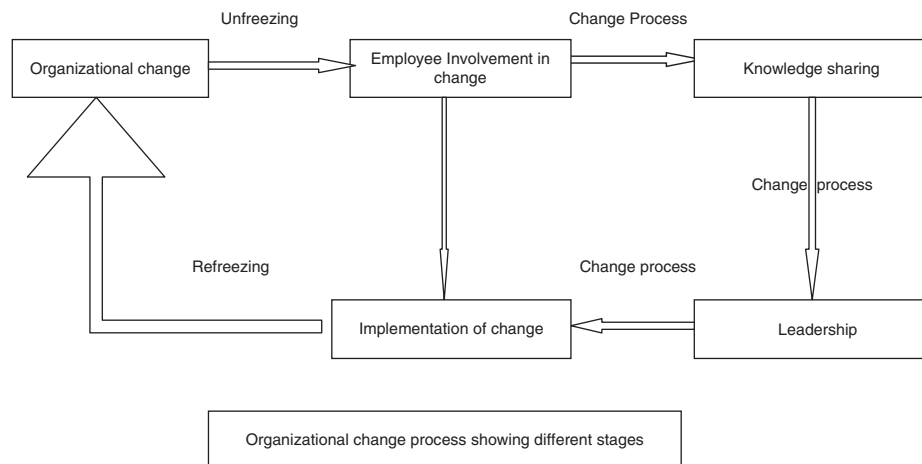


Fig. 1 – Model of organizational change shows the Kurt Lewin’s three steps model: Note: The arrows show different stages of Kurt Lewin’s three steps model and not the relationship between variables.

& McEvily, 2003). Knowledge sharing is done in individual, group and organizational level of the organization, starting at individual level; simultaneously expand to group level and ends at the organizational level (Bock & Kim, 2002) and this is explained by Uriarte (2008) as the framework of knowledge sharing consisting of three levels as enablers, levers and foundation.

In the change process when employees contribute, the knowledge sharing stage identifies the kind of knowledge that generates the value of organization after that generating the mechanism for that knowledge. The required knowledge is identified for organizational need which is getting from two sources of external as renting or consultancy from other companies or share knowledge by internal source in informal networks among employees who have expertise (Wenger, 1999). Sharing knowledge is actually the organizational learning process, which concludes, what the members or employees know about the organizational products, processes, customers, and competitive environments of organization. This knowledge may be the explicit knowledge which can be easily transferred in documents, databases and manuals and the tacit knowledge is the member’s internal skills, intuitions and memories (Polanyi, 1995). In the change process of Lewin’s three step model, the knowledge is codified and personalized. In codification phase the knowledge is stored which would be used by appropriate members but in personalization phase the knowledge is being focused that how to transfer it from person to person. The codification of knowledge is called explicit knowledge which can be easily transferred and personalization is called the tacit knowledge which is not easily transferable. The given below model explains the whole cycle or process of organizational change by applying the Kurt Lewin’s three steps model (Fig. 1).

Leadership and Lewin’s model “change process”

Leadership has been defined by Northouse (2004) as “a process by which an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve common goals”. The study of Cummings and Worley

(2003) has presented five activities of key leadership in change process. The activities are of motivating change, creating a vision, developing political support, managing the transition and sustaining momentum. The motivating change and creating a vision show to the unfreezing or current state of organization is being considered for change, developing political support and managing the transition show the moving stage of change and sustaining momentum shows the implementation and refreezing state of the change. In change process two factors play important role, the employee’s resistance (Stanley, Meyer, & Topolnytsky, 2005) and the openness to change (Wanberg & Banas, 2000). Resistance to change probably effects the change process which will lead to the negative outcomes (Bordia, Hunt, Paulsen, Tourish, & DiFonzo, 2004) while the openness of change of employees have to be focused during change process. The leadership in change context can be defined as “the process of diagnosing where the work group is now, and where it needs to be in the future, and formulating a strategy for getting there. Leadership also involves implementing change through developing a base of influence with followers, motivating them to commit to and work hard in pursuit of change goals, and working with them to overcome obstacle to change” (Laura & Stephen, 2002).

Leadership type is vital in change process of organizational change. Transactional leaders are involved in rewards and punishments with workers to encourage the performance of organization (Bass, 1985) and transformational leaders are charismatic, inspirational, intellectual and individualized consideration (Bass, 1985). This kind of leadership identifies the stakeholders for change process. The stakeholders (departmental managers, staff groups, and top level executives) can support change and make broad based support to maximize the risk of success and minimize the risk of resistance in change process by asking “who stands to gain or to lose from the change?” and this will build a relationship for creating the useful influence (Cummings & Worley, 2003). The stakeholders use three methods for motivation in change process, playing it straight, going around the formal system and using social networks (Greiner & Schein, 1988). The “playing it

straight” explains the need of changes by giving information and how these changes can make benefit the particular stakeholders. The second part “social network” forms alliances and coalitions with key decision makers, powerful individuals, groups, and with informal and formal contacts for gaining information. The third part “going around the formal system” is probably least used method involving circumventing organizational procedures and structures.

Implementation phase and “refreezing” of Lewin’s model

The Kurt Lewin’s model (unfreezing, changing and refreezing) is widely accepted in psychology for implementing change. The implementation of change involves the current state of organization have to be changed into a desired state, but this will not occur quickly but simultaneously. [Beckhard and Harris \(1987\)](#) identified three activities for implementing the change; activity planning, commitment planning and change management structures. The activity planning makes a road map or path for organizational change, events and specific activities must be occurred for successful change. The specific activities involve the integrated change tasks, temporal orient and explicitly tie the tasks according to the organization’s change priorities and goals. The commitment planning identifies the persons and groups whose commitment is required or needed for organizational change for the purpose to formulate and gain their support. The people or groups are, political support, the stakeholder’s plans and their commitment for change in process of change. The change management structure identifies the ambiguous, direction, and structure for managing change process. Which includes resources to promote change, the current leadership structure, change consultants, interpersonal and political skills to initiate the change process ([Beckhard & Harris, 1987](#)). The study of [Kanter \(1983\)](#) describes the three stages as information (expertise, technical knowledge, and political support); resources (personnel, materials and funds), and support (legal issues, backing of support, and endorsement).

Conclusion

Many theories have been given by different researchers, like action research model ([French, 1969](#)); the positive model by [Cameron, Dutton, and Quinn \(2003\)](#) and Lewin’s change model ([Lewin, 1947](#)). The Lewin’s change model was used in this study for organizational change process. As [Burnes \(2004\)](#) identified the organizational change as a feature of organizational life for strategic and operational level, so there is no doubt about the importance of change in organization, and it to be executed because, organization needs change. The study of [Podsakoff, Mackenzie, and Bommer \(1996\)](#) explores the active role of leadership style in organizational outcomes, employee satisfaction, and performance. In every step of the study; the leadership plays a role of a change agent in the Kurt Lewin’s model to unfreeze the organization. The transformational leadership style affects the organizational change process. In this type of leadership style, the leader coordinate with employees, share their knowledge, give opportunity in making decisions in organizational level.

Theoretical implications

The findings of this study show that leadership style and employee involvement in change is encouraging step for change process of organization. However, the effect of Kurt Lewin’s model is indirect through separate phases in the process. The transformational leadership style has been studies as the most important factor for change process in prior studies ([Gong, Huang, & Farh, 2009](#)). This paper associates positive impact of leadership style on change process. This study illustrates the effect of leadership style in terms of employee involvement in change, motivating employee for change, share the knowledge at individual and organizational level to make the loop of the change process. At each phase of the process model, the leaders and employees are considered to be one unit, and each phase will be shifted to the next step of the Kurt model.

Managerial implications

Different organizations use different organizational change model for stay in competition in the market. Like positive model, action research model, Lewin’s model, [Kanter, Stein, and Jick \(1992\)](#), [Kotter’s model \(1996\)](#) and [Luecke model \(2003\)](#) for organizational change. All of these studies showed that leadership is the key factor for change process. The study indicates the dominant role of leadership, employee involvement and sharing knowledge in change process of Lewin’s model. The study recommends for organization to elevate the awareness of change and phases for organization. As we see the knowledge sharing is an important catalyst for unfreezing stage and moving stage for the process. On the same time employee involvement is the main factor for shifting of organization from one phase to another, so all these factor are interrelated for the current change process.

Social implications

This study has significant social implications. The key factors that can encourage change in organization with swap of rewards and recognitions bring significant social implications for enhancing the organizational change process. This study has examined (1) the dominant role of leadership and employee involvement in change process necessary for bringing effective change in management, (2) the study explored a significant connection of knowledge sharing in change process with employees and leaders in implementing the change process, (3) the management should focus on the leadership style in change process, and finally (4) the review shows a framework of links among leadership to employees involvement, sharing knowledge and provides an insight to practitioners that how leader behavior relates to involvement and sharing knowledge in Lewin’s change model context.

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