



M A RAINEY ASSOCIATES

Kurt Lewin: Some Reflections

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CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

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Like other fields of practice, organization development (OD) is examining the next phase of its growth in an effort to keep pace and remain of consequence in an increasingly complex and ever-changing world. OD has made significant contributions to the healthy functioning of organizations and other social systems and, although there are challenges, the future is quite promising, with unlimited possibilities. As the discourse unfolds about the current state and future of OD, indeed a healthy discourse, it is useful to reflect for a moment on the foundation on which OD stands. Good grounding in ancestry is beneficial for any institution for it lends a sense of identity, guides ambition, and guards against illusions of grandeur.

Surely, in the case of OD such a look back begins with Kurt Lewin (1890–1947), whose contributions to the field of OD are unparalleled. The relevancy of his work has not diminished, and he remains one of the most referenced authors in social science. Admittedly, I hold deep admiration and respect for Lewin. It stems from the moral courage he exemplified throughout his career and the philosophical soundness of his work. The comments that follow are not sourced in my all-knowing about Lewin but represent aspects that I believe are worth noting as the field of OD ponders its next horizon.

Life, Contributions, Relevancy

A good way to proceed in a discussion about Lewin is against a backdrop of his years growing up a Jew in Germany during the early 20th century. His experiences would greatly influence his passion for democracy and the eradication of prejudice. Lewin had many interests, including philosophy and scientific methodology, but was first a psychologist. His goal was to make psychology an applied science. He was a prolific theorist, researcher, writer, and practitioner. I often say that Lewin had a very exacting manner by which he demonstrated his humanistic values and, although not every time successful in capturing the understanding of his audience, he always held an honorable intent to educate and empower the oppressed, the underprivileged, and the underserved in society.

Lewin studied at Berlin University between 1918 and 1933, which proved to be a pivotal phase in his career. He would flee Nazi Germany for the United States in 1933. It was at Berlin University that he received confirmation of a psychological premise he was seeking to advance. Gestalt psychology was growing in popularity at the university when he arrived. Holism, the significance of the total set of conditions, was intrinsic to the research on perception being conducted by Gestalt psychologists. Lewin was drawn to holism as it related to the intangible aspects of human behavior and wanted to test his belief that behavior resulted from the total set of factors internal and external to the individual.

Field Theory

In a famous study conducted by protégé Bluma Zeigarnick, Lewin found that people remembered for a longer period of time the unfinished parts of a task than they remembered completed parts. He explained this by saying that psychological tension is associated with the unfinished situation; that once tasks are completed, psychological energy is released. The phenomenon would be known as the “Zeigarnick effect.” Lewin succeeded in establishing the influence of the environment on human behavior and symbolically expressed it as $B = f(P, E)$. The findings led to the creation of field theory and the foundation of Lewin’s research that would follow. Field theory also established a number of ideas that would parallel systems thinking, such as the holistic nature of group functioning, boundaries, the interdependence of elements and the whole, and the hierarchy and primacy of groups in system transformation.

Theory of Change

Lewin used field theory to explain the outcome of the struggle between the psychological driving and restraining forces in an individual's life space. This concept guided his theory of change, which he generalized as occurring in three steps: unfreezing, moving, and freezing. Lewin change model still forms the underlying basis of many OD and change management models and strategies for working with resistance.

Leadership Styles

In 1939, while working at the Iowa Child Welfare Research Station, Lewin collaborated with colleagues to study different styles of leadership. In the experiments, members of the local boys clubs were assigned to one of three groups with an authoritarian, democratic, or laissez-faire leader. While further research has identified more specific types of leadership, this early study was very influential in understanding, in very pragmatic terms, the psychological dynamics of oppression and freedom. The current global movement toward democracy in former and current autocratic societies would be well-served by considering Lewin's perspectives on leadership.

Group Dynamics

Lewin was interested in groups of all kinds—family, work, religious, military, social, and community. He first used the expression “group dynamics” in a 1939 paper, but it was later that his most innovative and acclaimed contribution about groups would take shape. It was while working on a conference on racial and religious prejudice in Connecticut in 1946 that Lewin and his team discovered the laboratory training or T-group methodology.

The process involved feedback and reflection in the evenings among faculty and participants about the day's work. The evening sessions were not initially designed to include participants but became routine when the facilitators realized the value of participant input. The process also included a survey to participants following the conference to determine the applicability of the training. Seventy-five percent responded that they were more skillful and more sensitive to the feelings of others (de Board, 1978). The outcome for Lewin was a clearly articulated theory of experiential learning.

Details of the conference in Connecticut sound eerily like seeds of today's large system interventions: A diverse group of thirty individuals—teachers, social workers, labor and business leaders, half African American and Jewish—coming together to address real social issues, meeting in

groups of ten with facilitators standing by where they are mainly involved in dialogue, role plays, and psychodrama to analyze, better understand, and learn practical skills for responding to challenges they face. Lewin certainly was ahead of his time.

Experiential Learning

Lewin's ideas about learning were in sharp contrast to the dominant thinking of his time that viewed learning as a detached, impersonal, and totally logical process. Instead, he advocated a more inclusive epistemology, affording equal value for subjective and objective knowledge and reflective (introspection and dialogue) and practical (application) knowledge. Today, when speaking of experiential learning, Lewin is included among the ranks of William James, John Dewey, Jean Piaget, Paulo Fiere, Carl Rogers, Carl Jung, and David Kolb. Initially associated with adult learning and education, experiential learning has become a standard for training and development worldwide.

Social Change

Lewin identified the group as the most effective vehicle for social change but cautioned that the journey from a collection of individuals to an effectively functioning group could be daunting, requiring, among other things, good leadership and management of the field of helping and hindering forces.

Action Research

The basic intervention model of OD is action research. Lewin was always concerned about the integration of theory and practice. His most memorable quotation, "There is nothing so practical as a good theory," is a testament of his commitment to the pragmatics of science. Action research involves the collaboration between the client system and OD consultant in the systematic collection, analysis, and feeding back of data, taking appropriate action based on the data, and evaluating the results. Action research methodology has endured and held its significance as a guide for planned change.

Organization Development

Laboratory training was important in the birth of OD. After his death, Lewin's colleagues and other T-group trainers began the transition from

laboratory training with stranger groups to developing teams in organizations. OD became a recognized field of practice in the 1950s from a mix of T-group technology, survey research and feedback methodology, action research, and Tavistock socio-technical and socio-clinical approaches (French & Bell, 1984). Either directly or indirectly, Lewin had some interface with each stem of OD, which makes it easy to see why he is called the “father of OD.”

OD has evolved. It has a global reach; new forms and technologies; and broader scales. There have been instances of revolutionary change, as in the case of appreciative inquiry. A combination of social construction theory and strength theory has resulted in a profound revisioning of action research in appreciative inquiry (AI). With the inception of appreciative theory and practice in the last quarter of the 20th century, OD experienced a profound shift from a sole emphasis on problem solving to one of embracing solutions driven by dialogue and collaboration. OD practitioners are designing interventions that highlight organizational prosperity and potential and inspiring optimism. AI has revitalized the practice of OD and has galvanized an international following. AI is a prime example of how innovation in OD can take place without losing the core of theory, practice, group, client partnership, and democratic values.

What Would Lewin Say?

However, in recent years the practice has seen a deepening fragmentation in its ranks, primarily among traditionalists, pragmatists, and scholars (Worley & McCloskey, 2006). The field is facing the challenge of creating a large enough container to hold the disparate voices. The question becomes: Is there room under the OD umbrella to honor its humanistic values, create meaningful knowledge, *and* serve as a catalyst for change? Lewin would likely respond “yes,” further advising OD to return to the basics of integrating theory and practice, doing so in a manner that respects democratic values and human dignity. I believe Lewin would lend support to resetting and redefining diversity, inclusion, and social justice to reflect the realities of the global context of OD work that brings with it a myriad of often competing cross-cultural forces. Few people know that Lewin used film in research; therefore, I imagine he would beseech OD to exploit the many technological resources and tools at its disposal to enhance interpersonal and social interactions and improve the general efficacy of OD methodology. He would be unequivocal in his call for OD to take the lead

in the quest for democracy in the world and teach principles of democracy and leadership to this and successive generations.

OD is also challenging its assumptions about change itself, asking whether there is a beginning and end to change or whether it flows forever. This leads us to question whether it is futile to invest in planned change or allow systems to evolve, self-organize, and self-construct. If this is so, then it begs still another question of what becomes of the change agent. And without at all diminishing its value, OD must ask whether dialogue is capable of sustaining the field. It is my guess that Lewin would see the current debate as concern and care and would encourage OD to stay in the spirit of inquiry and not fear the tension of its polarities and dilemmas. But he would likely advise OD to quicken its pace and not spend inordinate amounts of time looking inward. By all means, he would say look for the learning. After all, it is all about learning for, like Kurt Lewin, learning will never lose its worth.

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