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MANAGING CHANGE

IN ORGANIZATIONS

SECOND EDITION

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LEWIN AND PLANNED CHANGE

Kurt Lewin's ideas on organizational change have for decades dominated the theory and practice of change management. As a humanitarian, whose main concern was on how social conflicts – religious, ethnic, marital or business oriented – could be resolved, he developed ideas about field theory, group dynamics, action research and the 3-step model of change. In later years, his ideas have been treated as separate models, in particular field theory and the 3-step model. However, Lewin's original idea was that these dimensions are strongly related (Burnes, 2020; Endrejat & Burnes, 2022).

Field theory, group dynamics and action research

Similar to the Human Relations movement, Lewin (1951) suggested that organizational change – changing ways of thinking, behaviour, routines, etc. – is most likely to be achieved by focusing on and influencing group dynamics and group norms. This is in contrast to classical behaviourism, where the focus is on trying to change and control a single individual's behaviour in a social vacuum with external stimuli, typically materialistic rewards. Lewin argued that human thinking and actions are primarily influenced by the work group's norms and dynamic, which is why changes of external stimuli, such as individual rewards, are less successful in changing people's behaviour at work. Stronger forces in work groups are rather the desire to perform in line with others and, subsequently, to be confirmed as belonging to the group. Thus, thinking and action should be seen as a function of the work group environment. The latter is regulated by various driving forces that make up the group dynamics, and it is central to understanding how these driving forces – norms, values, processes – reinforce or weaken people's behaviours in change processes. As indicated above, an important driving force in groups, which often counteracts change ambitions, is people's need for confirmation and recognition. People conform to group norms even though it may decrease the productivity of their group or even threaten its survival. Numerous experiments have demonstrated that individuals tend to stick to the view of the group even if it is obviously wrong or against the individual's personal convictions.

According to Lewin (1947), an organization is an arena where different forces – both driving and restraining forces – are at work, creating a so-called 'force field'. Consider, for instance, work in a factory where the effort of hard work and the pressure of group norms act as forces that suppress the production rate and various incentive systems act as forces that stimulate higher production levels. The production level can be understood as a 'quasi-stationary equilibrium' with equally high driving and restraining forces, as illustrated in (1) in Figure 4.1. In order to change it to a new position, the key forces that uphold it need to be identified and altered. Change is made possible when the driving forces are stronger than those restraining change. This can be achieved in two ways: by strengthening the forces for change (2a in Figure 4.1) or by undermining the restraining forces (2b in Figure 4.1). The former can be achieved by introducing new incentives for working harder. The production level will rise to a new equilibrium where the restraining forces equal the altered driving forces. The latter can be achieved by changing group norms and established ways of working. Lewin primarily advocated the latter as it makes change legitimate and reduces high levels of tension (Burnes, 2020).

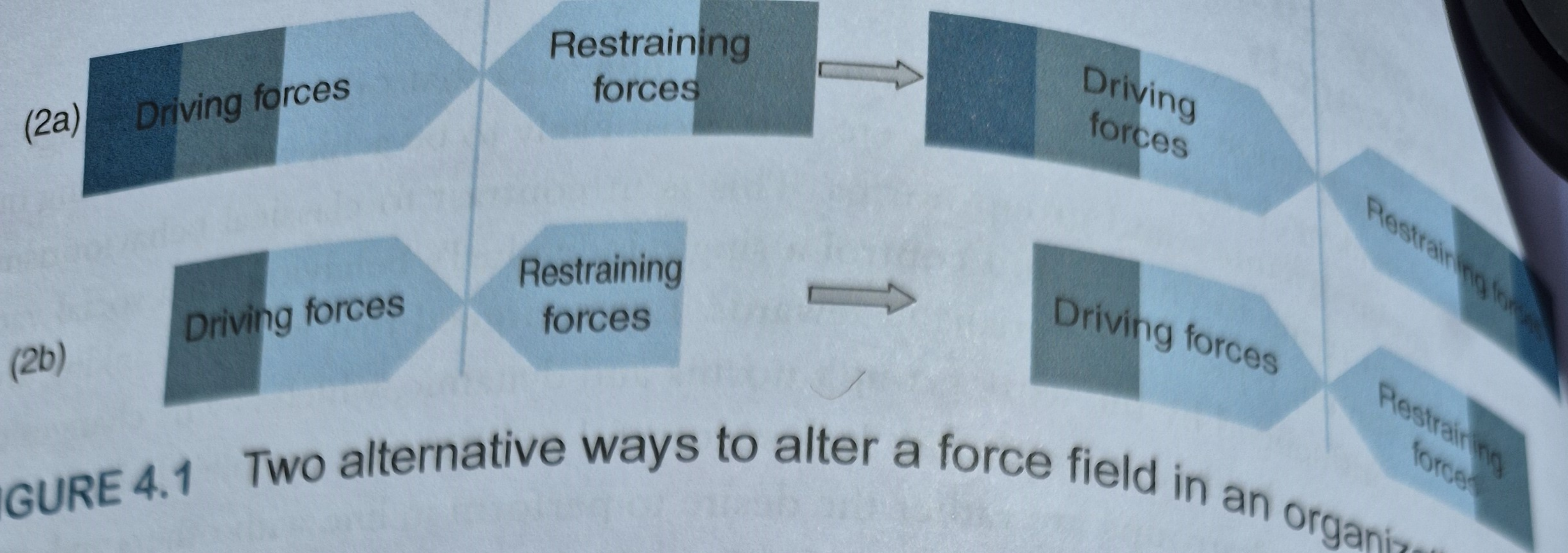


FIGURE 4.1 Two alternative ways to alter a force field in an organization

EXERCISE 4.2

Consider a change process that you have experienced. It can be a personal experience related to life circumstances in general, such as giving up smoking, altering eating habits or beginning an exercise regime, or related to more specific work experiences, such as changing jobs, acquiring a new skill or seeking a promotion.

- Identify the driving and restraining forces you experienced at that time.
- What do you think made the change possible? Was it primarily an increase in the driving forces or a decrease in the restraining forces?
- Could the change have been achieved using an alternative approach?
- Reflect on your analysis: What conclusions can you draw from it? Consider both practical insights of the change processes and the relevance and usefulness of the model.

Lewin describes the force field as complex, with several interrelating influences. Solely adding a driving force is seldom sufficient, since it can easily evoke counterforces and unintended

consequences. The whole context needs to be considered. Central when working with change, according to Lewin (1947), is to examine the total social field. It implies identifying the groups and subgroups involved and their group dynamics – norms, roles, values and accompanying behaviours – and building the organizational change from there. This work encompasses a switch between reflection and action, which are best supported by the participation of those affected by the change. Lewin worked with action research, in which he both studied organizational change processes as well as helped individuals to reflect on, and thereby better understand, their situation, and thus, in turn, enable change (Burnes, 2017). Through a continuous movement between identifying problems and taking action, it becomes possible to monitor if there is any real change in the group dynamics, norms and behaviours.

The 3-step model of change

When implementing change, it is not enough simply to accomplish movement. A common difficulty is to make sure that new ideas are substantially embodied in employees' thinking and acting. For example, it is not unusual that new working practices lapse into their previous form when the formal change process is over. Lewin (1947) recognized this insight when he described change as a three-step process: unfreezing, moving and freezing group standards. This is the most commonly cited of Lewin's ideas and is explicitly linked to the idea of force fields. It is often described using an ice cube metaphor. Schein (2004) developed the three-steps idea into a conceptual model for managing cultural change and described the stages as follows (see Figure 4.2).

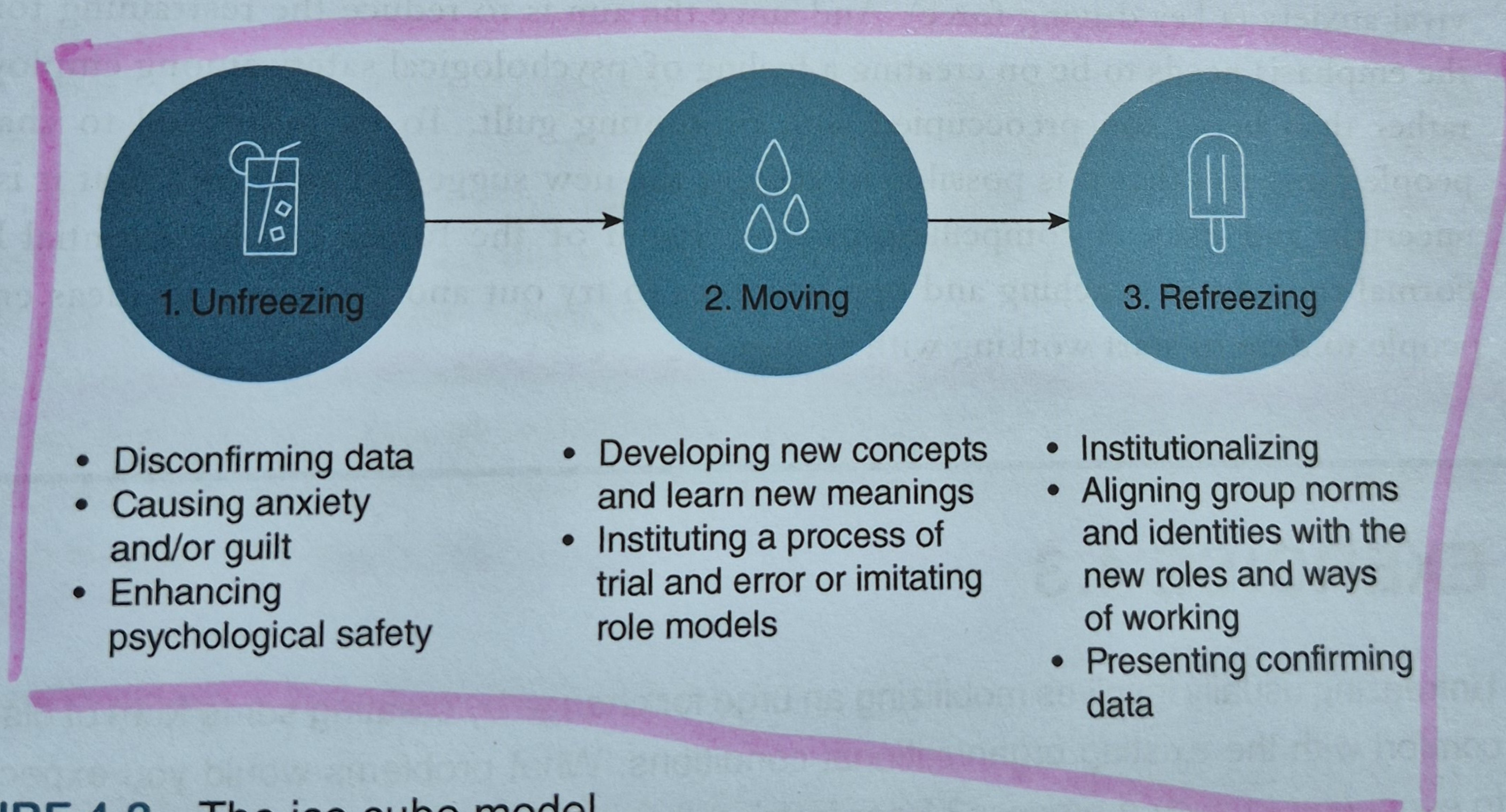


FIGURE 4.2 The ice cube model

The first step, *unfreezing*, is the process of preparing for change through undermining the restraining forces. This entails making co-workers understand that change is necessary in order to survive in the longer term. Often this process involves unlearning assumptions that are taken for granted. Schein suggests three aspects of unfreezing as being particularly important:

- a. **Disconfirming data:** Initially there needs to be sufficient data to disconfirm the belief that everything is alright the way it is and to convince workers of the need to change. By demonstrating misalignments, current thinking can be undermined and people recognize that there is a problem. For instance, when employees take their relations with clients for granted, disconfirming data might be the results of a customer survey highlighting that clients are not as happy with the quality of the products or services as is commonly supposed, or that their competitors have products or services that are more popular than is generally assumed.
- b. **Anxiety and/or guilt:** Individuals need to experience sufficient anxiety and/or guilt about the situation to be motivated to act. Relating disconfirming data to key goals and ambitions can cause this type of 'survival anxiety' and feeling, such as 'unless we change something bad will happen' (Schein, 2004: 322). In practice, it means exposing a gap between a desirable and the actual market position or highlighting a negative trend in rates of resignation or the number of employees on sick leave.
- c. **Psychological safety:** It is not enough to present disconfirming data that prompts anxiety and guilt, since ideas can be denied and rejected. In particular, learning new ways of thinking and acting can trigger 'learning anxiety', which is a fear of losing face, personal identity or group membership (Schein, 2004). Thus, for people to dare to be engaged in the change process, they must feel sufficiently 'safe' in psychological terms. In line with the force field logic, learning anxiety (a key restraining force) needs to be lower than survival anxiety (a key driving force). And since the aim is to reduce the restraining forces, the emphasis needs to be on creating a feeling of psychological safety among employees, rather than being too preoccupied with prompting guilt. To be motivated to change, people must feel that it is possible to achieve the new suggested state, not that it is too uncertain and risky. A compelling, positive vision of the future can be essential here. Formal training or coaching and opportunities to try out and practise new ideas enable people to dare to start working with change.

EXERCISE 4.3

Unfreezing usually involves mobilizing an urge for change by creating some form of discomfort with the existing organizational conditions. What problems would you expect to encounter in such a process? Bear in mind that creating discomfort means disconfirming people's beliefs in how something works, and thus often entails considerable emotional stress and anxiety. What role can leadership play in that process?

The second step, *moving*, is developing new concepts and learning new meanings. It can be achieved in a variety of ways. For instance, a transition from being an 'expert technical resource' to becoming

an 'internal technical consultant' may require the individual to learn to see themselves as a salesperson and not only as an engineer. The transition can be achieved by imitating role models or through a process of trial and error (Schein, 2004). To manage the former, leaders may attempt to 'walk the talk' themselves, or invite people who have already learned the new ways to inspire the workforce, or provide other 'role models', such as case studies or examples of similar organizations that have made similar transitions. However, if it is unclear how the new ways of working should be, and/or if tailor-made solutions are required, then the employees involved will need to figure out the new solutions themselves through a process of trial and error. The manager primarily sets the goals, but leaves it up to the employees to investigate and experiment with new methods and processes themselves.

The third step, *refreezing*, consolidates the change process in the long term. It involves ensuring that the new ways of working, work methods and routines gain a foothold and are firmly established within the organization. This step is important as many ideas and designs of organizational change often never leave the drawing board or remain subjects of talk in endless workshops without having any lasting organizational impact. Individuals might change their thinking about an organizational procedure while attending a workshop or a developmental activity in a remote conference facility, but on returning to their ordinary work group, they easily return to their old ways of thinking and acting. This is why it is necessary to work continuously at changing the norms and behaviour of a group and to ensure that the new ways of working harmonize with the group norms and behaviours. As Burnes (2020: 50) writes: 'Lewin saw social change as a group activity because, unless group norms and routines are also transformed, changes to individual behavior will not be sustained.'

In order to last, the new ways of working, new roles and assignments also need to align with the identities of the employees, i.e. how they see themselves and their capacities. Presenting confirming data – the opposite of disconfirming data – can help to reinforce the new ways of working. Highlighting data from key customers that indicates positive trends in sales and customer satisfaction is an example of confirming data (Schein, 2004).

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that refreezing requires a continuous effort. According to Lewin, change work is iterative and recurring rather than linear. For instance, in a case of implementing self-managing teams, former line managers must continuously allow the newly formed teams to manage their own work.

Reviewing the 3-step model

Even though the ice cube metaphor may not be so explicit in contemporary literature about organizational change, its ideas still form the basis for how many academics and practitioners view planned change, especially within the Organizational Development tradition (Burnes, 2020). A key insight is that a change not only implies a change *to* something, but also suggests a change *from* an original state. Thus, it is not enough to focus on the future; it is also necessary to break free of the present. Another key insight is the need to focus on reducing restraining forces (including learning anxiety) rather than on strengthening the driving forces to facilitate change.

Managing Change in Organizations

The 3-step model has received some criticism, however, mainly for its presumed linearity and the assumptions made about organizational stability. Critics claim, for instance, that the global, diverse and constantly changing business environment of today requires alternative frameworks since organizations do not have the time to refreeze (Helms-Mills et al., 2009). Another critique is that the three steps overlap in several ways, and it is not always easy to clearly separate them in practice. Defenders of the model, in turn, claim that the original ideas were more complex and iterative in character than the typical presentation of the model today suggests (Burnes, 2020; Rosenbaum et al., 2018).