

Leadership: Letting Forces Be With You

Removing tension from an organization leads to more lasting and less stressful change.

By [Robert Pater](#) Jun 01, 2011

Ever wonder why it seems so difficult to move beyond a performance plateau? Where you've made good changes and seen positive results that then bog down? Where change momentum sludges while resources and effort drain away? Or, perhaps as frustrating, see gains come and go, where peaks and valleys sine-wave for no net gain (but after lots of expended energy)?

Master leaders relentlessly generate positive change. Rather than resting on past laurels, they focus on diverting the future-we-were-headed toward the-place-we-wish-to-be. Strong leaders are perpetually dissatisfied with the status quo, believing outlook, actions, and performance always have a next, higher step.

Safety leaders specifically make it more likely everyone -- workers, supervisors, managers, executives -- upgrades their perception of work environments, becomes more willing to consider and adopt ever safer actions, smooths communications with others, becomes more consistently engaged in organizational objectives, then, in turn, provides direction and leadership for others.

Have you heard of Kurt Lewin, a true changemaster who was capable of planning then catalyzing many kinds of seemingly impossible changes? He was more action-oriented than academic; one of his well-known quotes: "There is nothing as practical as a good theory." Lewin was able to influence dietary preferences to include abundant-yet-previously-shunned foodstuffs in the midst of war shortages. To raise and sustain factories' productivity. Turn around set-in-concrete key staff members -- and more.

Lewin's genius involved adapting Field Theory from Physics to human and organizational actions. Field Theory contends an object's position -- even something seemingly static like an iron filing on a desk -- is due to the result of all forces acting on it. These attracting and repulsing forces, though not always visible like magnetic or other energy fields, create "Dynamic Equilibria" of pressures on the particle. As Lewin found, the same principle applies to individual, company, and cultural dynamics.

Lewin developed Force Field Analysis as an instrument for planning and implementing significant, lasting improvements. I'm simplifying here, but consider any cultural dynamic -- say, the level of a company's "Active Executive Safety Leadership" -- is always a push-pull between two countervailing pressures, those that propel change (Lewin called these "Driving Forces") and those that block further improvement ("Restraining Forces").

It's as if your two hands were isometrically pushing against each other, up and down. The line between them might be your current level of Safety Leadership. There are two main ways to raise the line between your hands: 1. Push up harder from the bottom hand or 2.

Reduce pushdown from the top.

My experience is that many leaders, when wishing to "change the future," default toward the first strategy: trying harder, doing more, writing even more policies and procedures, pressuring others more strongly. Indeed, the line between your palms rises when your bottom hand pushes harder. But because you're increasing tension into the system, changes made are more unstable, and there is more stress. Lewin found the same in his organizational change applications. Doing more, pushing harder, often resulted in quick improvements that were difficult to sustain. In fact, sometimes things actually got worse; the level of performance settled below its initial level before forces were added.

Generally, stability results from lowering forces in a system. Lewin understood that by identifying and then reducing forces that get in the way of improvement, you're removing tension from an organization, leading to more lasting and less stressful change.

There are five steps to planning change using Force Field Analysis. It's important to customize this to a company at a given time -- forces are fluid and often change:

1. *List the Driving Forces that contribute to what makes Safety Leadership as strong as it is.* These might include: executive recognition and performance bonuses for safe performance, concern for workers, understanding the hidden importance of Safety to organizational strength & profits, pressures from customers to operate safely, effective Safety professionals, etc.

Although you won't "work" on these forces, it's important to see and maintain their number and strength (so when you later remove blocks, these will then create relatively stronger upward thrust).

2. *List those Restraining Forces currently blocking Safety Leadership from moving to a higher level.* These might include: shaky profits that reduce resources available for enhancing Safety, mixed messages about Safety vs. Productivity reduce credibility, being unsure of the "real value" of Safety to the company beyond injury prevention, leaders are uncomfortable talking confidently about Safety due to fear of being embarrassed, leaders default toward blame for accidents, honest near-miss or incident reporting is punished, supervisors aren't trained on weaving Safety leadership into all actions, etc.

3. *Determine which Blocking Force(s) to reduce.* Criteria for determining this?:

a) Strength: Which forces have the strongest contributing vector(s)/are responsible for most significant blocks?

b) Control: Which forces can you most readily influence (as opposed to relying on those who may be difficult to reach)? In the above example, you can't easily affect shaky profits but can affect execs' or supervisors' perceptions of Safety benefits.

c) Ease: Which forces could you change with least resistance?

d) Time: Within what time frame could you make changes?

e) Cost-effectiveness: Which could you affect with minimal cost or with current resources?

4. *Implementation:* Decide which specific actions will best reduce the target Blocking Force. How will you do this? What resources do you require? Who does what by when? (e.g., better influence an accessible and key decision-maker to, in turn, leverage Safety among her peers)

5. *Measurement:* How will you monitor whether you are indeed reducing the Blocking Force

-- and how this affects your overall goal? Then, report back on progress made.

I've seen companies achieve amazing gains in safety performance and culture by enlisting the Power of Negative Thinking -- first identifying those fluid forces affecting them, then reducing blocks to improvement. And you can do this, too.

About the Author

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