

UNFREEZING

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1. Core Definition

Unfreezing constitutes the indispensable initial phase within a structured process designed to achieve and sustain change, applicable across individual, group, or large-scale organizational systems. At its essence, unfreezing is the deliberate preparation of the subject system by destabilizing its current state of quasi-stationary equilibrium. This equilibrium is typically maintained by entrenched psychological and systemic forces, manifesting as **rigid beliefs**, deeply established behavioral routines, defensive mechanisms, and fixed **stereotypes** concerning the self, other people, and the external environment. The core therapeutic objective of unfreezing is to relieve a person or system of these rigidities, making them psychologically and operationally receptive to new learning and alternative modes of functioning.

The necessity of the unfreezing stage stems from the inherent human and organizational tendency toward homeostasis and cognitive conservatism. Individuals and groups naturally resist information or external pressures that threaten their established identity or operational comfort zone. Therefore, successful unfreezing requires increasing the perceived necessity for change--often termed creating 'readiness'--by either elevating the internal driving forces (e.g., dissatisfaction, urgency) or, more effectively, neutralizing or diminishing the restraining forces (e.g., fear of failure, inertia, habitual resistance). Without this critical preparatory phase, attempts to implement new structures or behaviors (the subsequent 'Moving' stage) are invariably met with passive resistance and are prone to temporary compliance rather than genuine, internalized transformation, leading to rapid regression to the original state.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The theoretical foundation of the unfreezing concept is attributed almost entirely to the work of the renowned German-American social psychologist, Kurt Lewin. Lewin (1890-1947), who is considered a founding figure in modern social psychology, developed the influential Three-Step Model of Change in the 1940s. This model--known as the **Unfreeze-Change-Refreeze** model--was a direct outgrowth of his Field Theory, which viewed behavior as a function of the interaction between the individual and their total environment. Lewin utilized the physical metaphor of changing the shape of a block of ice: to form a new shape, the ice must first be melted (unfrozen), molded (changed), and then solidified (refrozen).

Lewin's model provided a revolutionary perspective on planned change, moving the focus away

from simple coercion or structural rearrangement toward the psychological preparedness of the participants. He conceptualized any social system--from a small group to a large organization--as being held in a delicate balance by a force field where opposing forces (driving toward change versus restraining against it) are in near-perfect equilibrium. Unfreezing is the deliberate act of disrupting this specific equilibrium. Later, Lewin's students, most notably Edgar H. Schein, expanded upon this framework, deepening the understanding of the psychological dynamics involved, particularly emphasizing the role of psychological safety in managing the anxiety inherent in abandoning established, comfortable ways of thinking and behaving.

3. Key Concepts and Components of Disruption

The unfreezing stage is psychologically complex and is triggered and sustained through specific components designed to overcome resistance. The primary mechanism is **disconfirmation**, where the system receives undeniable evidence that its current assumptions, beliefs, or practices are ineffective, costly, or detrimental. This evidence must be sufficiently powerful to puncture existing denial mechanisms and cognitive defenses. For instance, in therapy, this might involve confronting a patient with the tangible consequences of their self-limiting beliefs, and in business, it might be the stark realization of market failure or regulatory non-compliance.

A second essential component is the creation of controlled anxiety, often termed **survival anxiety** or change-related guilt. Disconfirmation often generates psychological discomfort, as the system realizes its current state is untenable. This anxiety must be managed carefully: if too low, the system slips back into complacency; if too high, it triggers pathological defense mechanisms like denial, scapegoating, or heightened resistance. The delicate balance required necessitates the simultaneous introduction of **psychological safety**, which acts as the counterbalance. Psychological safety assures the system that while the old ways must change, the learning process will be supported, failure will be tolerated, and personal or organizational identity will ultimately survive the transition, thus channeling anxiety into productive motivation rather than defensive paralysis.

Therefore, the unfreezing process is not merely about identifying problems; it is about creating a structured environment where existing cognitive maps and emotional attachments to the status quo can be safely examined and relinquished. This often involves techniques that promote self-discovery of the problem, such as diagnostic interventions, appreciative inquiry (examining what is lost if change doesn't happen), and peer feedback, all designed to shift the perception of the problem from an external threat to an internal, solvable challenge.

4. Therapeutic and Organizational Applications

In clinical psychology, unfreezing is the foundational element for initiating profound behavioral and

cognitive shifts, particularly in interventions like Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) or schema therapy. Before a client can adopt new coping mechanisms or challenge irrational thoughts, their existing, rigid schemas--the stereotypes of self (e.g., "I am incapable") or others (e.g., "People are untrustworthy")--must be unfrozen. The therapist acts as the change agent, using gentle confrontation and empirical evidence to disconfirm the client's deeply held, limiting beliefs, thereby creating the psychological space necessary for the 'moving' phase of skill acquisition and behavioral practice. The success here is directly correlated with the client's ability to tolerate the temporary sense of disorientation that accompanies the loss of familiar cognitive moorings.

In organizational settings, unfreezing precedes any major restructuring, cultural shift, or technological implementation. For change to stick, leaders must effectively communicate a compelling narrative of crisis or opportunity. This involves making the pain of the current state more visible and acute than the pain of change itself. Tools used in organizational unfreezing include external benchmarking, stakeholder interviews that reveal organizational blind spots, and large-scale organizational diagnostics. For example, during a merger, unfreezing involves dismantling the identity attachment to the pre-merger company cultures, forcing employees to confront the reality that their old way of working is incompatible with the new combined entity's success.

5. Factors Influencing the Ease of Unfreezing

The efficacy and speed of the unfreezing process are highly dependent on mediating factors, which include both systemic elements and individual psychological traits. As observed in applied psychology, the ease with which one's beliefs are unfrozen is directly dependent upon that person's **personality** and their degree of inherent **stubbornness**. Stubbornness, often defined by high levels of cognitive rigidity and low openness to experience, functions as a powerful, internal restraining force. Individuals exhibiting high levels of need for closure, dogmatism, or authoritarianism will present significantly higher resistance to disconfirmation and will require more intense and prolonged interventions to achieve the necessary psychological disruption.

Conversely, individuals characterized by high emotional intelligence, psychological flexibility, and a high learning orientation tend to unfreeze more readily, often viewing the challenge to the status quo as an opportunity for growth rather than a threat to identity. On the systemic level, key influencing factors include the organizational history of trust, the transparency of the change process, and the perceived legitimacy of the change agent. A lack of trust or transparency immediately amplifies restraining forces, causing individuals to retreat into defensive routines and leading to the outright failure of the unfreezing stage. Effective leadership must acknowledge and validate the emotional toll of unfreezing, ensuring that the process is perceived as fair and necessary.

6. Limitations and Criticisms

Despite its foundational role, the Lewinian model, and by extension the unfreezing concept, faces significant modern criticism, primarily regarding its applicability in dynamic, continuously changing environments. Critics argue that the three-step model implies a discrete, episodic process leading to a stable endpoint (Refreeze). However, contemporary organizational reality is often characterized by perpetual disruption--a condition where systems cannot afford to 'refreeze' fully before the next change imperative arises. This has led to concepts like "continuous change" or "unfreezing in perpetuity," which challenge the linear assumptions of the original framework.

A second major criticism centers on the potential for abuse or mismanagement of the unfreezing stage. If not executed with high ethical standards and psychological acumen, the intentional introduction of crisis or discomfort can quickly devolve into organizational trauma, manipulation, or excessive employee stress. When managers use fear tactics (amplifying driving forces) without simultaneously providing adequate psychological safety, the result is often widespread cynicism, defensive compliance, and high employee turnover, rather than genuine commitment to change. Furthermore, some critics suggest that the emphasis on disconfirmation can lead to neglecting existing organizational or individual strengths that should be leveraged during the transition, focusing too heavily on perceived deficits.

7. Significance and Impact

Despite its limitations in continuous environments, the concept of unfreezing remains profoundly significant as the primary theoretical prerequisite for any intentional transformation. Its enduring impact lies in forcing change agents--whether therapists, consultants, or executives--to recognize that change is fundamentally a psychological process before it is a technical or structural one. The model mandates that attention must first be directed toward the human element, ensuring that inertia, fear, and cognitive rigidity are addressed before resources are expended on implementing solutions.

Unfreezing established the paradigm that effective change management is not about overcoming resistance but about creating the conditions under which resistance is rendered irrelevant by the compelling need for adaptation. By defining the necessary precursors--disconfirmation, survival anxiety, and psychological safety--Lewin provided a durable, systematic road map for overcoming the inherent human tendency to maintain a comfortable but potentially dysfunctional status quo, making it one of the most cited and fundamental concepts in applied social and organizational psychology.

Further Reading

[Kurt Lewin and Field Theory \(Wikipedia\)](#)

Edgar Schein and Organizational Culture

Psychology Today: Understanding Cognitive Rigidity

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