

An Intrepid Outlook at Organizational Change



Pragmatic truths to prepare your organization for change

An excerpt from *The Leadership Wisdom of Jesus: practical lessons for today*

By Charles C. Manz

A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty (Matthew 13: 3–8).

In this parable, Jesus provides a metaphor that can shed light on one of the most important aspects of leadership: laying the groundwork for positive influence and change. His teaching suggests how important it is to prepare the soil for the seeds of leadership. Indeed, many potential followers will simply not be ready for positive influence, even when serving with the best of leaders. The following reflects on the formidable challenge of preparing others for positive influence and change.

Change is one of the most feared and avoided phenomena in life. Most people simply are not comfortable with change and will resist it in a variety of ways. Consequently, attempting to lead others to positive change is an undertaking that deserves some serious consideration. One of the best models for understanding the challenging process of change was developed by Kurt Lewin. His work on the change process provides some useful guidance to leaders. Specifically, he outlined a very clear and logical three-step process. The most important step for this lesson is

the first—*unfreezing*—which involves thawing out the rigid status quo.

The focus is on preparing for the possibility of change. Jesus' teaching emphasizes the significance of the nature of the soil that receives the seeds. Some ideas

simply cannot be accepted by some people at a given point in their lives. Surely a rock cannot receive a seed. But Lewin's model suggests that we can think in terms of ice rather than rocks. If current rigid attitudes and resistance can be set free—unfrozen—then positive influence and change is made possible.

This might involve, for example, providing information that shows a gap between current and more desirable behaviors and practices, and allowing those people who are most affected to participate in planning the change. As a consultant, I have encountered this in many organizations. Once management is able to communicate the need for and opportunities of a change clearly and credibly, a formerly

resistant workforce often opens up to considering and then supporting new approaches.

Once the unfreezing stage is completed, the second step can be taken—*moving or changing* behaviors, values and/or attitudes. A leader might introduce the desired change with the aid of new organizational structures, procedures or training, for example.

Finally, the third step—*refreezing*—involves introducing factors that lock in the new approach. For example, the leader could rely on incentives, systems, policies, structures or norms to promote the continuation of the desired change.

The importance of unfreezing cannot be overemphasized. As Jesus clearly points out, soil that is not ready to receive the seeds in a healthy way will render the sowing useless. Sometimes this reality has been well understood by organizations and their leaders, and careful steps have been taken to assure that the soil is prepared for change. One of the best examples of this, that I have encountered, occurred in the mutual fund operations of IDS, a division of American Express. A decision was made to change to an empowered work-team approach for servicing the division's clients (primarily independent financial planners).

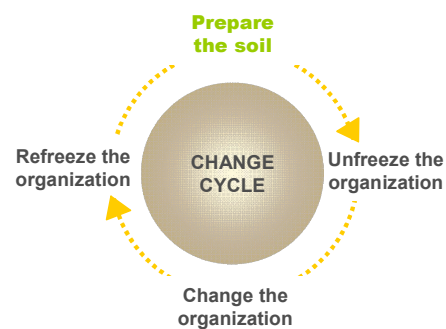
To prepare for the change, eleven people, representing a cross section of the division, were selected from volunteers to work full time on designing and planning for the team system. This design team addressed issues and concerns of the employees and identified ways to be responsive to these needs in a team environment.

The process took more than eight months, and then a pilot team was launched to try out the design and work out the bugs in the system. When teams were finally rolled out across the entire organization months later, performance was excellent: quality indicators immediately shot up, backlogs seemed to disappear and productivity increased significantly.

Many problems were encountered along the way, but the organization's soil had been well

prepared. Consequently, the teams seemed genuinely determined to make sure that the system worked well from the very beginning. One of the managers enthusiastically summed it up, "This team concept really works!"

When I was a young boy in Michigan, my friends and I enjoyed building snowmen. We learned that they would last longer if we poured water over them, which froze to a hard coating of ice. This created difficulty later. If we wanted to alter our work (let's say, to make a snow dog), we had to unfreeze the outer surface. Helping people change is difficult, whether they are made of snow or flesh, because they are (we all are) largely struggling, fearful, resistant human beings who have formed hardened outer shells for self-defense. But with careful attention to preparing the soil (to unfreezing), the seeds of leadership can bear good fruit.



Jesus did go on to explain what he meant in his story about the seeds. His explanation provides further insight into the importance of preparing followers for leadership influence to make a positive change. He said,

Hear then the parable of the sower. When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who

hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty. (Matthew 13: 18–23)

In this passage, Jesus describes three important reasons why people may be unable to respond to constructive influence in working toward positive changes. *Ignorance* is one important barrier. Oftentimes, people just don't see the logic of why something needs to be done or changed. Another barrier is an *unrealistic understanding* of the effort and sacrifice that are involved. As the old saying goes, most things that are worth doing don't come easily, or, more simply, no pain, no gain.

If people are going to respond faithfully and serve with a leader, they need not only to embrace the cause, but also to understand the difficulty that will be faced and be prepared to hang in there when the going gets tough. Finally, Jesus also points to the distractions of *other cares and concerns*. Is the undertaking that the leader is pointing to enough of a priority that it doesn't get lost in the barrage of other endless pressures and

priorities? In summary, Jesus' story suggests that leaders need to promote clarity, realistic expectations and the priority of the undertaking.

Maybe the most important lesson overall is that leaders should not expect much of a result from their leadership if they don't lay the necessary groundwork first. That is, we should not expect a very good crop if we haven't prepared the soil. Once again, this view shifts the focus away from the leader and toward others. If a person is sincere about wanting to be a positive force for change—an effective leader—the focus needs to be on the others who are involved.

The leaders at IDS seemed to understand this leadership wisdom. Striking dramatic poses in front of the masses or in front of the mirror will not accomplish much, nor will inspiring rhetoric and captivating visions that don't address the specific needs and concerns of the persons being led. Rather, sincerely trying to help, support and enable others to embrace and pursue worthwhile changes from a solid base of understanding, realistic expectations and priority is the key. From this solid base, the necessary unfreezing that enables change and refreezing may be possible.

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NOTES: **1.** See Kurt Lewin, *Field Theory in Social Science* (New York: HarperCollins, 1951) and Kurt Lewin, "Frontiers in Group Dynamics," *Human Relations*, 1947, 1, pp. 5–41. **2.** For a more detailed description of this case see Henry P. Sims Jr., Charles C. Manz, and Barry Bateman, "The Early Implementation Phase: Getting Teams Started in the Office," in Charles C. Manz and Henry P. Sims Jr., *Business Without Bosses* (New York: Wiley, 1993), pp. 85–114.