

Quasi-Stationary Social Equilibria and the Problem of Permanent Change
Chapter 6 in "Human Relations in Curriculum Change" (pages 39-44)

From Kurt Lewin,

“Group Decision and Social Change”

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*The intentional process of **radical social change** demands continual **tension** or **crisis**. These may be spontaneous or manufactured. This book helped lay the foundation for the psycho-social strategies that have transformed education and culture around the world. Based on the research begun at Tavistock (England), continued at the Frankfurt Institute (Germany) then moved to MIT, Columbia University, Stanford and various tax-funded "**Educational Laboratories**" after World War II, it established the strategies for brainwashing that now permeate our schools, media and organizations.*

1. The Objective of Change.

...It is important that a **social standard to be changed does not have the nature of a “thing” but of a “process.”**...

Any planned social change will have to consider a multitude of factors characteristic for the particular case. The change may require a more or less unique combination of educational and organizational measures; it may depend upon quite different treatments or Ideology, expectation and organization. Still, certain general formal principles always have to be considered.

2. The Conditions of a Stable Quasi-stationary Equilibrium.

The study of the conditions for change begins appropriately with an analysis of the conditions for “no change,” that is, for the state of equilibrium.

From what has been just discussed, it is clear that by a state of “no social change” we do not refer to a stationary but to a quasi-stationary equilibrium; that is, to a state comparable to that of a river which flows with a given velocity in a given direction during a certain time interval. A social change is comparable to a change in the velocity or direction of that river.

A number of statements can be made in regard to the conditions of quasi-stationary equilibrium...

(A) The strength of forces which tend to lower that standard of social life should be equal and opposite to the strength of forces which tend to raise its level. The resultant of forces on the line of equilibrium should therefore be zero.

(B) Since we have to assume that the strength of social forces always shows variations, a quasi-stationary equilibrium presupposes that the forces against raising the standard increase with the amount of raising and that the forces against lowering increase (or remain constant) with the amount of lowering. This type of gradient which is characteristic for a “positive central force field” has to hold at least in the neighborhood of the present level...

(C) It is possible to **change the strength of the opposing forces** without changing the level of social conduct. In this case the **tension (degree of conflict) increases**.

3. Two Basic Methods of Changing Levels of Conduct.

For any type of social management, It is of great practical importance that **levels of quasi-**

stationary equilibria can be changed in either of two ways: by adding forces in the desired direction, or by diminishing opposing forces. [See [Force Field analysis](#)] If a change from the level L1 to L [the present to a new level] brought about by increasing the forces toward L2 (the new level) the secondary effects should be different from the case where the same change of level is brought about by diminishing the opposing forces.

In both cases the equilibrium might change to the same new level. The secondary effect should, however, be quite different. In the first case, the process on the new level would be accompanied by a state of relatively **high tension**; In the second case, by a state of relatively **low tension**. Since increase of tension above a certain degree is likely to be paralleled by higher aggressiveness, higher emotionality, and lower constructiveness, It is clear that as a rule the second method will be preferable to the high pressure method.

The **group decision** procedure which is used here attempts to avoid high pressure methods and is **sensitive to resistance to change**. In the experiment by Bavelas on changing production in factory work (as noted below), for instance, no attempt was made to set the new production goal by majority vote because a **majority vote forces some group members** to produce more than they consider appropriate. These individuals are likely to have some inner resistance. Instead a procedure was followed by which **a goal was chosen on which everyone could agree fully**.

It is possible that the success of group decision and particularly the permanency of the effect is, in part, due to the attempt to bring about a favorable decision by **removing counterforces within the individuals rather than by applying outside pressure.** ...

4. Social Habits and Group Standards.

Viewing a social stationary process as the result of a quasi-stationary equilibrium, one may expect that any added force will change the level of the process. The idea of "social habit" seems to imply that, in spite of the application of a force, the level of the social process will not change because of some type of "inner resistance" to change. To **overcome this inner resistance**, an additional force seems to be required, a force sufficient to "break the habit," to "**unfreeze**" the custom.

Many social habits are anchored in the relation between the individuals and certain group standards.... If the individual should try to diverge "too much" from group standards, he would find himself in increasing difficulties. He would be ridiculed, treated severely and finally ousted from the group. Most individuals, therefore, **stay pretty close to the standard of the groups** they belong to or wish to belong to. In other words, the **group level itself acquires value**. It becomes a positive valence corresponding to a central force field... keeping the individual in line with the standards of the group.

5. Individual Procedures and Group Procedures of Changing Social Conduct.

If the **resistance to change** depends partly on the value which the group standard has for the individual, **the resistance to change should diminish if one diminishes the strength of the value of the group** standard or changes the level perceived by the individual as having social value.

This second point is one of the reasons for the effectiveness of "group carried" changes' resulting from procedures which approach the individuals as part of face-to-face groups. Perhaps one might expect single individuals to be more pliable than groups of like-minded individuals. However, experience in leadership training, in changing of food habits, work production, criminality, alcoholism, prejudices, all indicate that **it is usual easier to change individuals formed into a group than to change any one of them separately**.

As long as group standards are unchanged, the individual will resist changes more strongly the farther he is to depart from group standards. If the group standard itself is changed, the resistance which is due to relation between individual and group standard is eliminated.

6. Changing as a Three-step Procedure: Unfreezing, Moving, and Freezing of a Level.

A change toward a higher level of group performance is frequently short lived: after a "shot in the arm", group life soon returns to the previous level. This indicates that it does not suffice to define

the objective of a planned change in group performance as the reaching of a different level. Permanency of the new level, or permanency for a desired period, should be included in the objective. **A successful change includes therefore three aspects:**

- **UNFREEZING (if necessary) the present level . . .**
- **MOVING to the new level . . . and**
- **FREEZING group life on the new level.**

Since any level is determined by a force field, **permanency implies that the new force field is made relatively secure against change.**

The “unfreezing” of the present level may involve quite different problems in different cases. Allport” has described the “catharsis” which seems to be necessary before prejudices can be removed. To break open the shell of complacency and self-righteousness, it is sometimes **necessary to bring about deliberately an emotional stir-up. .**

The experiments on group decision reported here cover but a few of the necessary variations. Although in some cases the procedure is relatively easily executed, in others it requires skill and presupposes certain general conditions. Managers rushing into a factory to raise production by group decisions are likely to encounter failure. In social management as in medicine there are no patent medicines and each case demands careful diagnosis.

One reason why **group decision facilitates change** is illustrated by Willerman... . [His study dealt with an eating cooperative that sought to change from white to whole wheat bread] When a change was simply requested, the degree of eagerness varied greatly with the degree of personal preference for whole wheat. In case group decision, the eagerness seems to be relatively independent of personal preference; the individual seems to act mainly as a group member."

See also [Deceived by the Dialectic Process](#) and [The Dialectical Imagination Using Dissatisfaction \(a crisis\) for social transformation](#) and [Force Field analysis](#)

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