


PLANNED CHANGE

Why Kurt Lewin's Social Science is Still
Best Practice for Business Results, Change
Management, and Human Progress



GILMORE CROSBY

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A PRODUCTIVITY PRESS BOOK

“Gil Crosby has accomplished what most of us in the world of applied behavioral science, in general, and OD and T-Group training, in particular, have not—making the theoretical father of our work accessible. Thus, this book is a gift and with it we can understand more deeply and teach others more accurately what Lewin actually stated and meant. Moreover, the book is reader-friendly, visually appealing, and humorous rather than academically boring. Thank you, Gil!”

Dr. W. Warner Burke

E.L. Thorndike Professor of Psychology and Education
Teachers College, Columbia University

“Students and practitioners of Organization Development will find this analysis of Lewin’s theories and models very helpful both to understand better how this brilliant mind worked and to see how his theories of change led both to seminal research and to the training of several generations of consultants. Much of what we take for granted was first formulated by Lewin and his students, and much of our practice of experiential learning such as the use of group dynamics and the T-group evolved directly out of Lewin’s models. This book is both important history and a useful statement of change theory and practice.”

Edgar Schein

Professor Emeritus, MIT

Author with son Peter of *Humble Leadership* (2018) and the third edition of *The Corporate Culture Survival Guide* (2019)

“Kurt Lewin’s insights were the starting point for a school of thought that has been immensely influential. Without the practice he engendered, our organizations – and our world – would run amok. Two hours with this book will bring you up to speed.”

Art Kleiner, author, *The Age of Heretics*

“Lewin was one of the great psychologists of the 20th century, but today much of his work has been forgotten or misunderstood. This well-written and well-researched book introduces us to Lewin the man, Lewin the scholar and Lewin the practitioner. It not only illustrates the depth of his work, but also the humanitarian values on which it was built. Above all, it demonstrates the continuing relevance of Lewin’s work and the concerns that drove it. Gil Crosby has produced a great book and I very much look forward to buying it and recommending it to colleagues and students.”

Bernard Burnes

Chair of Organisational Change, Stirling Management School
University of Stirling, Scotland

“I have used Crosby’s coaching for over two decades, and it has consistently paid off for me personally and for the teams and organizations I have led. I strongly endorse this book for anyone in a leadership position, whether they are just starting out or are in an executive-level position and deep into their career. There is a science behind organization effectiveness, and that science is made clear in this book. The guidance and insights regarding change and leadership are invaluable.”

Senior Utility Executive

“Congratulations Gil on your composing an astute, thorough, and timely analysis of Kurt Lewin’s creative contributions to applied social psychology. I especially appreciate your Chapter 8 on education and how beautifully you celebrate your father’s ways of building on the Lewin legacy in the later chapters. I hope that this significant and well-written manuscript will inspire readers to return to the seminal works of the master.”

Dick Schmuck

Professor Emeritus, University of Oregon

“Meeting Gil Crosby was a pivotal moment in my life. A moment that would lead me on a journey to change my approach to group dynamics. I gained knowledge that greatly enhanced my ability to work and achieve goals with others. Before meeting Gil I would describe my approach to group dynamics as helter-skelter at best! I would insert my personal emotions into every situation. Some things just don’t merit an emotional response; they just merit process! Good luck my friend...this is a good read!”

Pat Roberson

Ret. United Steel Workers, VP local 9448

“Gil Crosby has written a must-read primer for anyone considering sustainable organisational change and improvement, while at the same time taking us back to the basics of social science through a thorough understanding of Kurt Lewin’s principles of planned change. The most fundamental learnings in my career about how to effect change, what leadership is and how social dynamics and ‘T-groups’ can unlock an organisation’s potential came from Gil’s organisation. Read this book...and learn from one of the best.”

Bridget McCall

Business Improvement Manager, Kestrel Coal

“Gilmore Crosby has provided more than the technical and practical understanding one needs to appreciate and apply my grandfather’s ideas in this book. Crosby has also captured the heart, the values, and the high respect for the individual that drove all of Kurt Lewin’s work. I am glad he is continuing to share and pass along this valuable insight about Lewin’s legacy, which is needed as much now as anytime since his death.”

Michael Papanek

Leadership and OD Consultant, Grandson of Kurt Lewin

“This book is a rich, thoughtful and accessible integration of Kurt Lewin’s theoretical framework of change theory and the many applications to organizations, communities and practice. Kurt Lewin’s life’s work has been foundational to my professional practice as an organization development and leadership consultant, faculty and writer. It is an essential foundation for anyone who seeks to integrate the individual, group/team, organizational, and societal levels. Gil Crosby has made this treasure trove accessible and engaging with his storytelling style and the focus of the many applications including social justice, group process and planned change.”

Ilene C. Wasserman, Ph.D.

President, ICW Consulting Group
Board Member –The Lewin Center
Senior Leadership Fellow, Executive Coach and Learning
Director, McNulty Leadership Program /Wharton School /
The University of Pennsylvania
Faculty, PCOM Medical College School of Psychology

“Gil’s new book peels the onion back on the methods he used during our long and fruitful collaboration. This exploration of Kurt Lewin’s planned change methods teaches eye opening lessons and provides a reliable path to high productivity and results. The only reason to not follow these methods is a lack of awareness that they exist. This book will hopefully eliminate that excuse. The book is an easy read that provides clarity on how to change individuals, groups, organizations, and even societies. It shows the potential of democratic leadership, and the folly of authoritarian and passive leadership styles. Companies should use it to create effective groups and leaders at all levels within their organization!”

Jerome Maxwell

Former Managing Director, Jamalco Alumina Refinery

“I’m glad Gil Crosby decided to write this piece. I have been using the principles taught by Lewin for over 18 years during my Operations Management journey in the mining and chemical world. Cotton and Gil did a nice job at communicating how Lewin principles applied to the workplace and how this information applied to our personal improvement. I have been a part and a witness of amazing culture transformation in organizations due to the discovery of this information by every individual that participated. It is up to us now to continue to practice the knowledge developed by Lewin, adapt it to our own realities, and enjoy the benefits of engaging the entire organization.”

David Ledesma

Plant Manager, DuPont – Buffalo NY

“Reading Gil's book left me with the feeling of sorrow that our field no longer produces giants to take the next steps forward in our rapidly changing world. The next steps forward must be grounded in the intent and context of what the founder father Lewin was all about—and no one does this better than Gil.”

Allon Shevat

OD Professional, Tel Aviv

“This book provides a well written overview to the life, theories and impact of Kurt Lewin, the social psychologist who catalyzed the study of group dynamics and the creation of democratic, re-educative processes for organizational and social change.”

Gervase Bushe

Professor of Leadership and Organization Development
Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, Canada

“Occasionally an extraordinary person steps out of accepted thought and takes a new path—illuminating a new reality; new truths; new methods. Psychoanalytic thought was dominant when Kurt Lewin’s theory essentially said, Wake up! Look! What’s going on now was not all caused from the past. Pow! New vision. New territory. New methods. We now see the importance of relationships, small groups and interactions as a focus for social change, rather than personal typologies or personalities. Gil’s book is a wonderful introduction to Kurt Lewin’s motivation, his theory and current examples of what his thought has stimulated. It is a ‘Must-Read’ for organizational change agents. Thank you Gil.”

Ron Short, Ph.D.

*Author of *A Special Kind of Leadership**

“Gil’s arduous curation of the history of Lewin is a supreme service. The movement from Lewinian precepts to the granular detail of Lewin’s own personal values and struggles grips the reader in primal delight. Gil ably demystifies the origins of action research and organization development with delectable placement of events and their significance to the impact Lewin had on them.

The anthropological, sociological, psychological and political history of Lewin’s life-history make for rich multidisciplinary evidencing, right through the book. It will likely restore the role of science in OD at a time when the action bias has distorted practice. The pristine quality of Lewin’s work as process of inquiry is the book’s welcome relief from the anxious excess on outcomes in our lives.

This rare work makes for the Gestalt that the hurried OD practitioner has missed or at best paid lip service to.”

Joseph George Anjilvelil

Founder, Workplace Catalysts LLP, Bangalore, India
Author of *BEING PEOPLE : Life-histories of Six HRD Professionals of India*

“Kurt Lewin was a pioneer in the theory and practice of organizational development, but his life and work are not well known. Gilmore Crosby has done our field a great service by writing this well-researched and accessible book.”

Adam Kahane

*Author of Power and Love, Solving Tough Problems
& Collaborating with the Enemy*

“As a social worker and chief executive of a non-profit human services agency, I grew into an accidental OD professional. Learning from contemporary researchers and a variety of consultants, including Gil Crosby, I increasingly designed and implemented cultural interventions to help the organization achieve aspirational goals for youth. What a difference this book could have made earlier in my career! *Planned Change* provides an overview of Kurt Lewin’s research and theories of group process and organizational change. With just a little bit of imagination, I could see the connections between this grandfather of organization development work and current initiatives in schools and work places to address emotional intelligence and build agency in individuals and groups. I recommend this book for any organizational leader as an important introduction to this modern social scientist’s work, foundational to our developing efforts to support powerful and effective individual and group performance.”

Janis Avery

Retired Non-Profit CEO

“I have known Gil Crosby since the 1970s and have watched him mature into an extraordinary OD professional. Standing on the tall shoulders of ‘giants’ like Marvin Weisbord, Richard Schmuck, and his father, Robert (Bob) Crosby, Gil has emerged as the foremost authority on the founder of our field, Kurt Lewin. This book, which is an exciting exploration and interpretation of Lewin’s writing, proves my case. Well done young Crosby!”

Dr. John J. Scherer

Founding Partner, Scherer Leadership Center

Author, *Facing the Tiger: Five Questions that Change Everything*

“A fresh and very readable, actually enjoyable, book about the Gestalt psychologist who conceptualized social-psychology and thus mightily influenced the lives and practices of many. Certainly OD may not have even existed without this genius who lost his mother in the holocaust. This book highlights how Lewin, an apostle for democracy, is incredibly relevant today. He fled Hitler’s ultra-nationalist, xenophobic, anti-semitic fascism. My son Gil has brought Lewin to life in a new way.”

Robert P. Crosby

Founder, Crosby & Associates

Leadership Institute of Spokane/Seattle

Author of *Memoirs of a Change Agent: T-groups, Organization Development, and Social Justice*

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Gilmore Crosby



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Dedication

This text is dedicated to a dear friend and a great Lewinian practitioner, Carey “Cotton” Mears. Cotton not only created his own highly effective version of T-group based learning and action research, he was also a great example of Lewin’s strategy and values around transferring knowledge to the people the social scientist was serving.

My father, Robert P. Crosby, lives by that creed. While delivering OD services at an aluminum smelter in Indiana, dad and Cotton, a pot room tender (one of the toughest jobs in the smelter) and union steward, formed a lasting bond. Dad was there training and transferring social science skills to people at all levels of the organization, including Cotton. Cotton loved what he learned and turned it into a new path for himself and many others. RIP Mr. Mears.



Carey “Cotton” Mears: 1956 - 2019



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Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I owe my professional career to the subject of this book, Kurt Lewin. The book itself should be ample testimony to my respect for and debt to this extraordinary man.

My knowledge of Lewin and his methods has come primarily from my father, organization development (OD) practitioner extraordinaire, Robert P. Crosby, and so he gets the second tip of my hat. Dad, by the way, is still sound of mind and engaged in life socially and professionally at 91 at the time of this writing. His latest book, *Memoirs of a Change Agent: T-groups, Organization Development, and Social Justice*, just hit the presses in October 2019. You will get to know him better, especially towards the later end of this book.

From my father, with my mother's help (thanks, Mom!), came my primary professional peer, a skilled OD professional and a scholar in his own right, my brother Chris Crosby. Chris has been a support through thick and thin, which is a rare blessing for an independent consultant to have. And like most brothers, we have had our fair share of conflicts, and are both the better for it. Thanks Chris!

Thanks also to my son Willow, for helping my colleagues and me understand Lewin's formulas, and for helping me get over my fear of topography. I'm proud of his doctorate in physics!

Another deep tip of my hat goes to the plethora of other mentors and colleagues I have been blessed with, including my OD professors John Scherer, Ron Short, Brenda Kerr and Denny Minno, my early OD supervisor Rob Schachter, my step-mother and OD colleague Patricia Crosby, my sub-contractors and peers Cotton Mears, Mark Horswood, and Pam Madison, just to name a few.

I appreciate the respect and support Michael Papanek, the grandson of Kurt Lewin, has given me in this project.

I would know nothing and be making my living some other way if not for my customers, especially Jerome Maxwell, Paul Hinnenkamp, who have pulled on me for decades, and David Ledesma, my current “full speed ahead” collaboration. I’ve had many other great partnerships along the way, and I am thankful for all of them. A big thank you to the thousands of people in organizations who have given me a chance and helped my interventions succeed.

This book, with its brushing of cultural anthropology, brought me back full circle to my favorite undergraduate professor, Stephanie Coontz. Stephanie took me under her wing when I was a nervous freshman and helped me learn to think systemically and across disciplines. Her objective approach to the social construction of gender roles helped me become more scientific in all of my thinking.

A gigantic tip of the hat to my OD colleague professor Rodney Coates and his co-authors Abby Ferber and David Brunisma for bringing much needed scientific objectivity to the emotionally charged topic of race.

Like my mom’s much appreciated contribution of bringing my brother and me into the world (as well as my other siblings, even though they did not follow the OD path), my son Parson (“Par”) has taught me a lot as he has become a father and I in turn a grandfather. My grandson, now almost three, is in a photographic example in this text. Mom did a great job of raising us by the way, as my son is also doing. As a father I know that is easier said than done. My grandson gets a tip of the hat for doing a great job of developing!

Every day I give thanks to the Great Spirit from whence we all have come. As my maternal grandfather, Methodist Pastor Lewis Frees used to say every day, in good times and bad, “God is good.”

Last but not least, I would be lost without my wife Lisa, who puts up with my hours of writing and my frequent business trips with surprising patience. Like the song says, you, my love, are my motivation.



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Introduction

Kurt Lewin (1890-1947) was a visionary psychologist and social scientist who used rigorous research methods to establish an approach to planned change that is both practical and reliable. He mentored and inspired most of the early professionals who came to identify themselves as practitioners of organization development (OD). He also fostered the emergence of the experiential learning method known as the T-group, which uniquely structures group dynamics into a laboratory for dramatic individual and team development. In the early days, most OD professionals learned much about themselves and about group dynamics through T-group experiences.

Lewin's methods, though little known, yield consistent business results such as increased performance and morale. His methods have the rare impact of not just changing behavior, but of changing the beliefs that underlie behavior.

Sadly, most OD professionals today, business and organizational leaders, community organizers, and people in general, have never read any of Lewin's actual writing beyond a quote or two. Indeed, some in the OD profession have rejected or distanced themselves from what they think Lewin taught, even though they and many others seem to know very little about his methods or history.

This problem is not for lack of material. Lewin was a prolific writer. On the other hand, even for someone who deeply admires Lewin, reading his material isn't always easy. His multi-disciplinary approach integrates scientific research methodology, sociology, anthropology, physics, and topography as well as other subjects into an experimental framework that can be overwhelming at a glance. Some of his writing, however, such as *Experiments in Social Space* (Lewin, 1939, 1997, p59-67), is easy enough to understand and apply, and should be a requirement in any OD education.

Although Lewin held a doctorate in psychology and most of his publications are in psychological journals and books, this book is written from the perspective of an organization development practitioner. Having said that, my secondary field is psychiatric social work. In studying for my MSW and for certification to practice I was educated in psychology. That was a long time ago, but I don't recall ever hearing of Lewin during that time. Whether you are familiar with Lewin or not, if you are a psychologist, I hope this kindles your interest in his writing. Although my focus here is on planned change, in Lewin's universal frame work that includes individual change, and absolutely includes psychology.

With that in mind, this book is aimed at introducing Lewin in a new way, both simplified yet substantial enough to guide anyone who is trying to plan change, whether at the individual, group/team, organizational, or societal level.

Lewin often used graphics to illustrate his findings. My hope is that by interspersing them along with other pictures and drawings the concepts will be brought to life in a way that speaks to a wide audience. If it says "Crosby" after a drawing, that one is mine!

A wide audience is important because Lewin was not trying to create methods for OD professionals alone (or for social scientists as he regarded himself). In his interventions he taught everyone he could how to continue to do their own version of planned change. He believed social science might be the light that helps create a brighter future for humanity. I have the same hope. Transferring this knowledge to a broader audience is my intention here, as it has been taught to me by my Lewinian mentor.

I became an OD practitioner in 1984, following in the footsteps of my father, Robert P. Crosby. Dad was in his first T-group in 1953, and was mentored by one of Lewin's primary proteges, Ronald Lippitt, for decades. I had a vague idea that

I was practicing Lewinian OD all these years, but that heritage has become much clearer to me recently, as I became motivated to explore the writings of Lewin in a much more disciplined way. What I have discovered has taught me, an old dog, new tricks. I am determined to spread the wealth.

I have relied heavily on Lewin's writing, organized with the intention of weaving together his thinking in a manner that paints a clear picture for the reader. There are many quotes and citations. Many of Lewin's papers are collected in two wonderful anthologies published by the American Psychological Association (APA). The first, *Resolving Social Conflicts & Field Theory in Social Science*, was published in 1997, the second, *The Complete Social Scientist*, in 1999. To acknowledge these anthologies, I have chosen to cite the original source by year, and add the APA dates and pages (since the two APA books are where most readers are likely to access the material). Hence you will see citations like this throughout this manuscript: (Lewin, 1943, 1997, p____).

Please also note that if a quote runs more than one page, I am only citing the starting page.

I have bolded what I consider to be key phrases and concepts throughout the text, many of which are summarized in Chapter 1. These are identified by the annotation (my bolding).

Most quotes, of course, are in quotation marks. Long passages, such as those with their own heading, are separated from the surrounding text rather than being placed in quotation marks.

My father's approach to Lewinian OD is important to this text. That left me with the awkward choices of either always referring to him by name (as if he were not my father, which is something that I don't actually do), referring to him as father, which is more formal than I prefer, or calling him dad, which

is what I actually do. For better or worse, I decided to intermix all three.

Finally, although it may hurt the acceptance of my work by bucking up against established norms of “serious scholarly writing” in some circles, I none-the-less prefer a sense of humor in my reading and have tried to instill it in my writing. I also believe a bit of levity is true to Lewin’s character, so as Jimmy Buffet would say, “that is my story and I am sticking to it.”