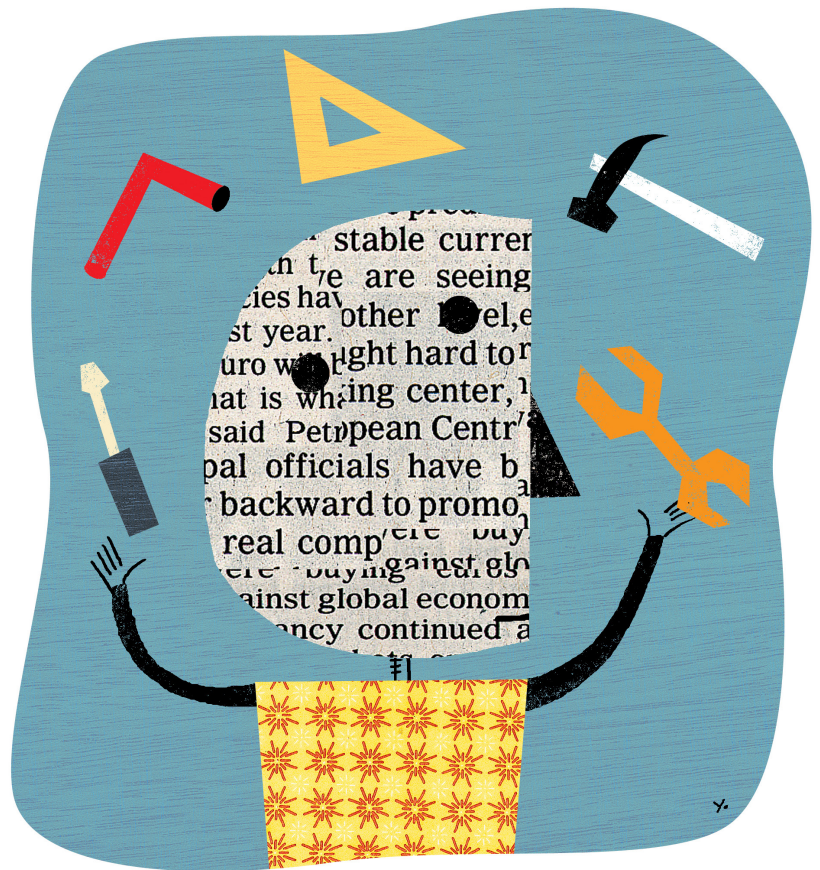




# A Lewinian OD Framework

Gilmore Crosby



## Abstract

Inspired in part by the Organization Development (OD) Network's Global OD practice framework, the thesis of this paper is that there is no OD theory as practical as Kurt Lewin's social science, and that a specifically Lewinian OD Framework can offer a new interpretation so as to empower new and experienced OD practitioners alike. A challenge is that Lewin's theory and methods are rich, comprehensive, and can be organized in countless ways. The author, based on a continuing study of Lewin's materials, on his work as an OD practitioner since 1984, and on his father's OD career which traces back to Lewin's inner circle starting in 1953, offers a framework which guides his own practice and can be applied reliably by any agent of change, whether an OD practitioner, an organization leader or an advocate for social change.

**Key words:** *Lewin, Change, Group Dynamics, Leadership, Action Research, Field Theory, DEI*

The six-part framework described in this article was crafted for organizational leaders and organization-development (OD') practitioners who deserve to know Kurt Lewin, not as a historical nicety, but as a reliable and relevant guide to contemporary theory and practice. Lewin devised a social-science (which he never called 'OD') with an integrated, systems-perspective. Informed by it, this framework is one of interconnected parts (see Figure 1). It builds on the work of my father, Robert P. Crosby who was mentored by Lewin's colleague, Ronald Lippitt, for decades from the 1950s onwards. I joined his OD

practice in 1984 as an inexperienced 24-year-old with nothing but a sound process and a clear-headed mentor. One of my first assignments involved facilitating dialogue, solution-generation and action-implementation in intact teams (managers with their direct reports) in two tomato-processing factories. Soon, every group in both plants were doing their own action research and the plant metrics quickly and dramatically improved. Those same basic methods, reflected in this framework, have been effective to this very day.



## Section One: Training-Action-Research

One of Lewin's best-known contributions is 'action research' which he described as "action, research, and training as a triangle (Lewin, 1997, p. 149)". He consistently included in his interventions training in behavioral skills such as active listening and managing conflict as a foundation for creating collaboration and dialogue. Such opportunities to bring groups (such as managers and employees) together changed relations between them, as evidenced in his race relations interventions (see Section Six below).

Lewin's training included teaching people how to do action research. He taught everyone 'how to fish' (how to solve their own problems continuously without outside help). Furthermore, this training took place as people were *actually doing* action research, not in classes separate from problem solving. This was learning-by-doing (with guidance) *by* the people who were addressing a problem. He supported industrial workers to form their own hypotheses about what level of productivity they could achieve, what barriers were holding them back and what actions could decrease the barriers, whilst implementing those actions and assessing the results. *That* is action research for quick results.

That the people facing the problems should apply their own expertise to solving them is vital to Lewin's approach. He would help whoever was in need to 'think out loud' and devise their own solutions – college students, mothers, farmers, gang members, executives, industrial employees, the state department etc: "The laws (of social science) don't do the job of diagnosis which has to be done locally. Neither do laws prescribe the strategy for change (Lewin, 1997, p. 150)". An expert can teach and facilitate methods for group dialogue and decision-making, for example, but it must be those facing the challenges who participate in the dialogue and propose the solutions. "It can be surmised

that the extent to which social research is translated into social action depends on the degree to which those who carry out this action are made a part of the fact-finding on which the action is to be based (Lewin, 1997, p. 55)."

The framework I am offering here is not an 'expert' model. It is a humble model. Lewin's research (he did controlled experiments *while* he helped people do their own action research) established time and again that locally generated solutions were more likely to be implemented than those imposed by an expert/leader. When possible, people would rather think for themselves than be told what to do. That is the power of Lewinian action research. The methodology for applying the framework described here is also fast and efficient. There is no requirement for a survey (although survey data that is *immediately fed back to the group that generated it* can be useful in an action-research process), or a long study, or a planning team involved in many meetings. People, whether a group of janitors or a group of scientists, do the thinking, come up with the solutions, implement the change, monitor their own progress, and know how to repeat the cycle into the future. Actions may be identified as soon as they come together, and implementation may begin the same day.

## Section Two: Group Dynamics

Lewin's extensive research established that dialogue with peers is more likely to lead to changes in thinking and behavior than lecturing them – even if they are listening in a group. When facilitated effectively, thinking out loud with peers to influence action leads to higher commitment to action and much more reliable implementation of change:

"...experience in leadership training, in changing of food habits, work production, criminality, alcoholism, prejudices—all seem to indicate that it is usually easier to change individuals formed into a group



than to change any one of them separately. As long as group values are unchanged the individual will resist changes more strongly the further he is to depart from group standards. If the group standard itself is changed, the resistance which is due to the relation between individual and group standard is eliminated (Lewin, 1997, p. 329)."

Most of the groups I work with in industry at or near the 'shop floor' have a high mistrust of their leaders and little faith that they will really be listened to. They also are wary of outsiders, including me. I enter by openly empathizing with their mistrust. Such humility is essential to Lewin's methods which depend on genuinely joining people in their effort to understand their situation and to implement change. If I think I am better or smarter than them, I am already my own worst enemy.

The leaders who hire me, no matter their history with their groups, must explain the business goals and circumstances that are compelling them and the organization to try something new. Providing such clarity about 'why' is their job, not mine. The intervention I then offer relies on group dynamics, the driving force for which will be the participants who, no matter how cynical, are hoping for change. Once the group moves into a dialogue about what is in the way of getting their work done, it is hard for even the most discouraged to resist participating in conversations about issues that are important to them. This can be further encouraged every now and then by giving them time to talk in pairs so there is privacy (a chance for introverts to warm up) and more freedom to be honest. I do not have to talk people into anything. Any system, as I experienced in the tomato plants, can be brought to life in this way.

Lewin formulated this dynamic in this way:  $B = f(P, E)$ . Behavior is a function of the person *and* the environment. It is not all nature; it is not all nurture. Group dynamics predicts that the environment is the more powerful factor when implementing change: "...it is easier to change ideology or cultural habits by dealing with groups than with individuals (Lewin, 1999, p. 289)." He came to that conclusion based on extensive research which my own work, and my father's before me at the Leadership Institute of Seattle (where thousands of students have graduated from his OD program), has validated.

### Section Three: Field Theory and Change as Three Steps ('CATS')

To understand Lewin's approach to change, we need to understand Field Theory. Lewin applied physics, topography, sociology, psychology, anthropology (one of his associates was Margaret Mead), and anything else that fitted into his social science, to understand and influence all levels of system - individuals, the largest groupings and even nations. A fundamental aspect of his theory is that every system is in a state of homeostasis or 'semi-quasi equilibrium' (acknowledging that no system is 100% stable or unchanging), held in place by 'forces'. He noticed that

most attempts at change involve implementing solutions (a new driving force). His research showed that imposing a solution increases tension in the system. The act of forcing a solution is, in itself, a restraining force which, combined with other restraints (such as mistrust and a history of 'failed' solutions), undermines implementation and/or diminishes the potential of the solution.

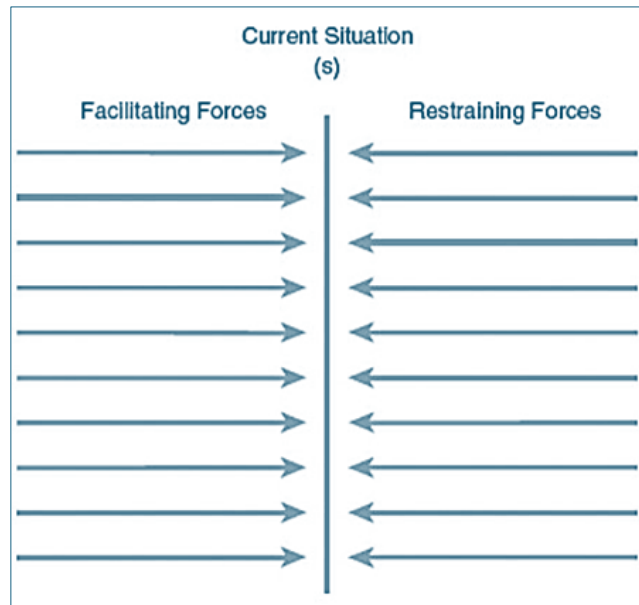


Figure 2: Force Field Analysis (Schmuck, 2006, p11).

The Lewinian change agent, whether a formal leader, an OD practitioner or a person who understands Lewinian change, focuses on 'unfreezing' mistrust by engaging people in the ways already described. They know that a new and healthier homeostasis (as measured by variables such as high performance and morale) must be built on "a change in the level of functioning" of groups through effective group dynamics such as dialogue. Unfrozen by an effective change agent working in alignment with formal and informal leaders, the group can begin their own analysis of the field of forces within which their own performance and morale are held in stasis. Sustainable change happens by replacing restraining forces such as overfunctioning by leaders and experts (a direct cause of underfunctioning by everyone else) with the driving force of local analysis and solution generation. As groups identify and address their own restraining forces, change happens in the moment and a transformational ability to adapt to new challenges and opportunities spreads throughout the system. A new homeostasis 'freezes' the field, replacing the old. This is Lewin's change method as three steps, a rich systemic approach that can be applied with confidence to any situation. He describes his three-step change process for unfreezing, moving and freezing group standards (which others later labelled as 'CATS') thus:

"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 L1, moving to the new level L2, 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 simplicity of the CATS formula does not mean that change is simple. Lewin was well aware that it is complicated and full of setbacks and surprises, many of which emerge along the way:

"...somewhere along the road...I am sure we will have to face major crisis. I have observed this type of development in many research undertakings, and we will have to be unusually lucky if this time we avoid it. To my mind the difference between success and defeat in such undertakings depends mainly upon the willingness and the guts to pull through such periods. It seems to me decisive that one knows that such developments are the rule, that one is not afraid of this period, and that one holds up a team that is able to pull through (Marrow, 1969, p, 176)."

Despite such complications, the experience of the author and his father during the past 70 years validates that, when applied effectively, Lewin's Field Theory leads to rapid culture change, problem solving and the implementation of solutions, and a significant portion of that *happens in the first intervention with any group*. There is minimal diagnosis or gathering of data and maximum integration of thinking and doing, with 'deeper dives' possible by group members later on as needed. Once the basic process is learned, groups can apply dialogue and Field Theory to any challenges which arise. As Lewin intended, outside expertise becomes less necessary.

## Section Four: Democratic Principles of Leadership

As a Jewish male living in Germany during the rise of Hitler, Lewin was keenly interested in the group dynamics of leadership and power. Despite the horrors he experienced firsthand, including losing his mother to the death camps, Lewin did not conclude that power must, or even could, be eliminated from human affairs. Instead, he studied how the expression of power fosters or diminishes performance and morale:

"One point should be seen clearly and strongly. There is no individual who does not, consciously or unconsciously, try to influence his family, his group friends, his occupational group, and so on. Management is, after all, a legitimate and one of the most important functions in every aspect of social life. Few aspects are as much befogged in

the minds of many as the problems of leadership and of power...We have to realize that power itself is an essential aspect of any and every group...Not the least service which social research can do for society is to attain better insight into the legitimate and non-legitimate aspects of power (Marrow, 1969, p172)."

In other words, every person, leader, and OD practitioner – many of whom are unaware of how their own authority issues are adding fog to an already befogged dynamic - is trying to exert influence.

For several consecutive years, Lewin studied groups led with three different styles of leadership, and then he repeatedly tested his theory of leadership on groups inside and outside industrial settings. He concluded that a blend of leadership (or structure) and freedom, which had to be adjusted depending on group and individual needs (such as new versus experienced employees), brought about consistently high productivity and morale. Because it is based on clarity about who is in charge mixed with respect and the engagement of all, he called the target style 'democratic.'

"These groups... showed very striking differences during periods when the leader left. Whereas the work morale of the democratic group was sustained at a high level, that of the autocratic group fell rapidly. In a short time, the latter group ceased entirely to produce...The organization of work, like any other aspect of the organization of the autocratic group, is based on the leader. It is he who determines the policy of the group; it is he who sets the specific goals of action for the members within the group. That means that the goals of the individual as well as his action as a group member are 'induced' by the leader. It is the leader's power-field which keeps the individual going, which determines his work morale, and which makes the group an organized unit. In the democratic group, on the contrary, every member has had a hand in determining the policy of the group; every member has helped to lay out the plans. As a result, each is more 'we-centered' and less 'ego-centered' than the member of the autocratic group. Because the group goes ahead under its own steam, its work morale does not flag as soon as the power-field of the leader is eliminated... (Lewin, 1997, p. 88)."

My own experience validates these dynamics. Once groups understand their purpose and the process they will use to achieve it, they work with enthusiasm. In a nutshell, the democratic leader allows group members as much influence and freedom as possible within a structure of role and goal clarity. They do not overfunction by assuming all decision-making power, nor do they underfunction by being too passive (or "laissez-faire" as Lewin put it). He described these three styles (one functional, the other two dysfunctional) this way:

"Autocracy, democracy, and laissez-faire should be perceived as a triangle. In many respects,



autocracy and democracy are similar: They both mean leadership as against the lack of leadership of laissez-faire; they both mean discipline and organization as against chaos. Along other lines of comparison, democracy and laissez-faire are similar. They both give freedom to the group members in so far as they create a situation where the members are acting on their own motivation rather than being moved by forces induced by an authority in which they have no part (Lewin, 1999, p286)."

The democratic style, then, is the only corner of the triangle combining leadership *and* freedom, creating group dynamics that freeze high performance and morale in place. The following is the author's own illustration of Lewin's triangle:

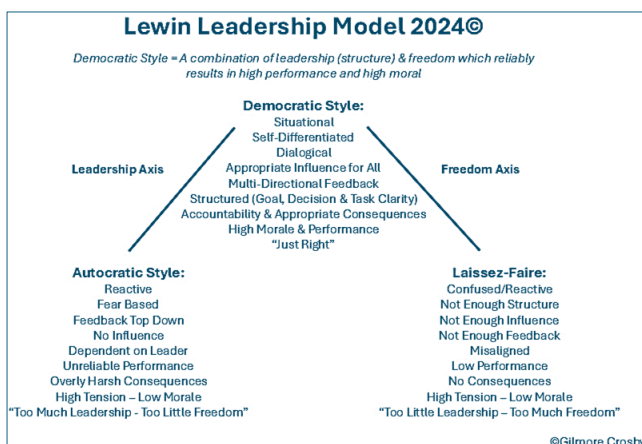


Figure 3: A Lewinian Leadership-Style Triangle (Crosby, 2025, p. 157).

The leader who applies Lewin's Leadership model intentionally influences the culture towards higher productivity and morale by leveraging group dynamics that balance freedom and structure in an ever-shifting quasi-equilibrium. Leaders can inquire of those whom they lead whether or not they want more freedom (to make certain decisions for example) or more structure (more information, more guidance etc.). Likewise, followers need not be passive; they can advocate for more freedom and more structure according to their own needs and preferences. Such needs will vary for different individuals and will change according to the situation. The change agent uses the same approach. Ongoing dialogue is essential and, to that end, behavioral-skills training plays a role, so that people are more capable of talking openly about work dynamics. One of Lewin's last inventions, the T-group (with the 'T' standing for 'training'), is a means to that end, and is also a valuable tool for helping people overcome deeply held beliefs such as mistrust, blame, and prejudice.

Lewin believed the same leadership principles applies to political democracy. He authored papers on the social conditions in Germany that led to the collapse of democracy and the rise of authoritarianism. He asserted that effective members of a work team, like effective citizens of a democracy, need to be active, not passive, and that the skills to be so have to be developed in the home and in schools. If the culture teaches about democracy but does so in an authoritarian manner whereby the young

learn the 'correct' answers rather than think for themselves, they will grow up to be citizens prone to being authoritarian leaders. As Lewin put it:

"In democracy, as in any culture, the individual acquires the cultural pattern by some type of 'learning'. Normally such learning occurs by way of growing up in that culture...experiments indicate that autocracy can be 'imposed upon a person.' That means the individual might 'learn' autocracy by adapting himself to a situation forced upon him from outside. Democracy cannot be imposed upon a person; it has to be learned by a process of voluntary and responsible participation (Lewin, 1997, p. 38)."

Although he passed away in 1947 before the Marshall Plan was fully implemented, Lewin wrote about and advised the state department on the reconstruction of Germany, further proof that his social science applies to macro as well as micro social phenomena. The same models and skills that help create high productivity and morale in organizations also apply to fostering a stronger democracy.

## Section Five: The Social Construction of Reality

Culture change, whether in society or at work, requires changing values, beliefs and behaviors which Lewin asserted are *socially constructed*, a concept widely accepted by anthropologists and sociologists. From this perspective, the environment (or E) plays a bigger role than innate personality traits.

In my own OD interventions, a key element of any change effort is shifting social (cultural) habits such as blame and defensiveness (which fuel each other) towards supporting individuals to take responsibility for their own emotions and reactions, towards a different way of thinking and interacting. That is only possible *because* thinking is socially constructed rather than determined in some other way that is fixed and unalterable. The "Social Construction of Reality...what exists as reality for the individual is, to a high degree, determined by what is socially accepted as reality...Reality therefore is not an absolute. It differs with the group to which the individual belongs...the general acceptance of a fact or a belief might be the very cause preventing this belief or fact from ever being questioned (Lewin, 1997, p. 49)."

Shifting socially-constructed reality in a way that will last (a change Lewin called "re-education") is achieved most reliably through a group dialogue that allows for freedom of thought rather than through an over-controlled process:

"When re-education involves the relinquishment of standards which are contrary to the standards of society at large (as in the case of delinquency, minority prejudices, alcoholism), the feeling of group belongingness seems to be greatly heightened if the members feel free to express openly the very sentiments which are to be dislodged through



re-education. This might be viewed as another example of the seeming contradictions inherent in the process of re-education: Expression of prejudices against minorities or the breaking of rules of parliamentary procedures may in themselves be contrary to the desired goal. Yet a feeling of complete freedom and a heightened group identification are frequently more important at a particular stage of reeducation than learning not to break specific rules (Lewin, 1997, p55)."

In other words, if a person hides their thoughts, saying only what is permitted by the leader or the facilitator, then they have not really changed. This is especially important when confronting a false hypothesis such as "you can't trust management/labor", or racism, sexism or any other form of 'Us' and 'Them' (such as maintenance and production, headquarters and locations etc):

"Re-education is frequently in danger of only reaching the official system of values, the level of verbal expression and not of conduct; it may result in merely heightening the discrepancy between the super- ego (the way I ought to feel) and the ego (the way I really feel), and thus give the individual a bad conscience. Such a discrepancy leads to a state of high emotional tension, but seldom to correct conduct. It may postpone transgressions, but it is likely to make the transgressions more violent when they occur. A factor of great importance in bringing about a change in sentiment is the degree to which the individual becomes actively involved in the problem. Lacking this involvement, no objective fact is likely to reach the status of a fact for the individual concerned and therefore influence his social conduct (Lewin, 1997, p. 52)."

The individual must ultimately come to a new way of thinking on their own, and that is unlikely unless their peers are also moving in a new direction. Such change can be intended and planned, but the individual must still arrive there of their own free will. If all you get is forced compliance, the resulting tension will lead to trouble.

Lewinian dialogue does not require strictly controlling what people say. Appreciation, pessimism, fear and the full range of relevant thoughts and feelings need to be explored. His methods result in fast and sustainable change yet paradoxically require patience: such mentalities only shift in a dialogue which respects openness about concerns. Once peers begin to move from blame to respect and from fear to openness, a freely chosen reconstruction of socially held beliefs takes place, including increased empathy for other groups.

## Section Six: Minority Relations – Social Justice

Lewin had a unique interest in prejudice, forged by his experience as a Jewish male growing up in Germany during the pre-Nazi years and Hitler's rise to power. His social science addresses the impact of the environment on the individual when there is a power imbalance such as racism or sexism. Both the powerful and the powerless are caught in a web (or a field of forces), with fear and anxiety heightened by the inherently unjust nature of social inequality. The likelihood of confusion, blame, defensiveness and misunderstanding are high. Lewin's aforementioned formula,  $B = f(P, E)$ , speaks to the influence the environment has on us all, with the behavior (B) of the 'minority' or powerless individuals likely to include hyper-vigilance for real and perceived slights and threats, compounded by the hyper-defensiveness of those 'in power'. Each person (P) adds a variation of responses, but an environment (E) of systemic inequality has a predictable, pervasive and damaging influence on self-esteem, beliefs and behavior. Imagine how much more harmonious relations would be in a world of relative social and economic equality. As Lewin proposed, "The solution, I think, can be found only through a development which would bring the general level of group esteem and group loyalty which in themselves are perfectly natural and necessary phenomena to the same level for all groups of society (Lewin, 1997, p. 151)".

Changing prejudice involves re-constructing the social construction of reality (see Part 5 of the framework). Lewin actually stumbled upon one of the best techniques for doing so, the aforementioned T-group, during a workshop designed to address racial tension and inequality in the State of Connecticut. In a T-group everyone is a peer in terms of learning about themselves, about basic (but difficult) communication skills, and about group dynamics. In the process, it is almost impossible not to respect the people you are learning with, and to re-evaluate beliefs that might hold you apart. In other words, people think for themselves while being influenced by healthy group norms.

Changing prejudice also requires taking action to decrease inequality. Lewin applied his social science to understanding and overcoming social inequities and prejudicial beliefs. In addition to the Connecticut workshop, from the time he launched what was known as the Commission for Community Interrelations (CCI) until the time of his death, he and his staff conducted more than fifty different 'minority-relations' training-action-research projects focused on these matters, especially racism (Marrow, 1969, p. 203).



## Conclusion

Lewin was convinced that social science could be a guiding principle for the construction of a truly harmonious future and humanity's best bet for preventing its own demise: "I am persuaded that scientific sociology and social psychology based on an intimate combination of experiments and empirical theory can do as much, or more, for human betterment as the natural sciences have done (Lewin, 1997, p. 67)". Living as he was in the shadow of the nuclear age, he added: "The theoretical developments will have to proceed rather rapidly if social science is to reach that level of practical usefulness which society needs for winning the race against the destructive capacities set free by man's use of the natural sciences (Lewin, 1997, p. 301)". Sadly, social science seems in disarray since Lewin's death. It is long past time for a new generation to pick up the mantle. The future of humanity may very well depend on it.

## BIOGRAPHY

Gilmore Crosby is an Organization Development (OD) practitioner and Professor of Applied Social Science at the Leadership Institute of Seattle (LIOS). His career began in 1984, following in his father's footsteps (whose own OD career had begun in 1953). He has published seven books. His latest, *Leadership and the Frontline Workforce*, teaches leadership and Lewinian change illuminated through interviews of frontline workers and others who have been there.

While embracing the past, Crosby experiments in the present, conducting T-group learning in organizations, on-line T-groups, and various uses of new technology and social media.

His mission is to help create a better future for humanity. He believes the most reliable means for doing so lies in the theories and methods of Kurt Lewin. Crosby's credo is asserted in the title of his fourth book: *Planned Change: Why Kurt Lewin's Social Science is still best practice for Business Performance, Change Management & Human Progress*. His sixth book, *Diversity without Dogma*, applies Lewin's science to decreasing prejudice. Mr. Crosby is a father, a grandfather, and happily married to a Jamaican.

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