



Organizational Change: lessons from Rocky Balboa

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Abstract

Leadership and organizational theory is ever-present, even on the silver screen. In this feature, Michael Petty explores how the classic saga Rocky III demonstrates a near-match with Lewin's Unfreeze-Change-Refreeze model and Argyris' Intervention Theory. Proper application of these theories to your change can help reduce pain and keep you from being knocked down for the count.

In the popular 1982 movie, Rocky III, the aggressive challenger to Rocky Balboa's championship title, Clubber Lang, is asked to give a prediction of the outcome to the upcoming fight. His simple prediction: "pain!" Unfortunately, it is the blunt recognition and acceptance of organizational "pain" that is all too often the only catalyst to organizational change. As unfortunate as this may seem, it is exactly what must occur to initiate the process of change as espoused by several leadership experts, the late Kurt Lewin, Chris Argyris, of Harvard, and Edgar Schein, of MIT. This article will highlight the requirements for successful organizational change as illustrated by the application of Lewin's "unfreeze-change-refreeze" change model and Argyris "Intervention Theory" by Rocky's "leadership team" to help him make necessary changes to his business model.

As the saga begins, Rocky's career is riding high on a string of successful defenses of his championship title. His business model had been successful – the application of unsophisticated brute force, fight after fight. Then along comes the unsung contender with his own successful business model – unsophisticated brute force, fueled by a burning hunger to be number one. The bell rings and Rocky takes a brutal beating for three rounds before being knocked out and losing the championship. His career looks to be over.

Unfreeze

Disconfirmation. As Rocky contemplates a comeback, at the urging of his long-time nemesis, Apollo Creed, he comes face to face with Kurt Lewin's change theory as described in his unfreeze-change-refreeze model.¹ Lewin's model is sequential; each stage must be accomplished before the next can be considered. The "unfreeze" stage is critical to any organizational change strategy. In this stage the organization must experience disconfirmation, the recognition that the data of reality is not in support of the organization's

expectations. In other words, the organization must feel the pain of its reality. Rocky's disconfirmation takes place as he takes the ten count looking up from the canvas.

As Edgar Schein of MIT points out, disconfirmation alone is not enough to motivate change since the conflicting information can be dismissed or ignored; its cause blamed on other factors; or, more commonly, its validity can simply be denied.² This may have been the case for Rocky who viewed this champion defense against Clubber Lang as "only" another fight, even as his long-time trainer, Mickey Goodwin, emphatically cautioned him that he could not win with the warning, "He'll kill you to death, Rock."

Survival Anxiety. Schein suggests that for change to take place the disconfirmation must be linked to something that has value to the organization and its leaders. The disconfirmation must arouse a "survival anxiety" or as Schein says "the feeling that if we do not change we will fail to meet our needs, ... or some goals or ideals that we have set for ourselves."³ In Rocky's case his "survival anxiety" was the issue of the validity of his former championship titles. Was he a valid heavyweight champion of the world, or were his title defenses merely "setups?" Did Mickey hand-pick contenders that could easily be defeated or was each defense a legitimate challenge? In Rocky's mind, doubts still lingered about the legitimacy of his championship title. And for Rocky, that was all that mattered.

Learning Anxiety. Schein also suggests that a significant barrier to accepting disconfirming information is "learning or change anxiety."⁴ He suggests that this anxiety is the admission, through learning or change, that our prior actions were wrong or imperfect, and that this admission and the act of changing will damage our effectiveness, our self-esteem, or even our identity. He also suggests that poorly adapting to the organization's reality and failing to meet the organization's desired expectations may be more desirable than risking failure and the loss of self-esteem through the change process. In fact, this is the fundamental restraining force that opposes the acceptance of disconfirming information (the

organization's pain) and, according to Schein, overcoming it is the key to producing change. Rocky faced "learning anxiety" as his potential new manager, Apollo Creed, explained to him that regaining the championship would require a major change from the brute-force style he had used so successfully throughout his career. For Rocky, his anxiety was whether he could radically change his style from a brawler to a boxer to successfully regain his championship. Should he fail, would the pain and humiliation associated with the failure of his changed style be psychologically greater than the physical beating he took in losing the title?

This action by Apollo Creed is an application of Chris Argyris' Intervention Theory.⁵ According to Argyris significant change requires the intervening of an agent into the process or relationship requiring change. A prime function of the intervention is to provide valid and useful information not otherwise recognized. Rocky needed valid and useful information about his chances of success and his need to change from a reliable, outside source.

Psychological Safety. The ability to overcome "learning/change anxiety," and hence be willing to accept the disconfirming information, is facilitated by what Schein calls "psychological safety."⁶ Psychological safety is the personal belief that the necessary change can be successfully implemented and the outcome of the change process will be successful. Schein suggests that the fear of failure and/or losing face in doing something new and/or untried has to be overcome by whatever means possible in order to prepare the organization for change. Any and all tactics that create a sense of confidence in the ability to succeed in the changed environment is required. It is Schein's belief that "true artistry in change management lies in the various kinds of tactics change agents employ to create psychological safety." Before Rocky considered a rematch against the now champion, Clubber Lang, he needed to be convinced that he could change his style from being a slugger to being a boxer, and that with this new style he could regain the championship. Apollo Creed and his old trainer, Duke Evers, had analyzed the championship fight that Rocky had lost and other Lang fights, and convinced Rocky that if

he was willing to change, and they could show him how to change, then he could take advantage of Lang's weaknesses and regain the title. Rocky's insightful wife, Adrian, prodded and supported his damaged psyche; and even his inept brother-in-law, Pauley, provided psychological safety, as only he could do. Rocky had gone through the "unfreeze" stage of Lewin's model, but the actual change still remained a significant challenge.⁷

Change

Cognitive Restructuring. The recognition for the need to change only makes the change process possible. The "change" itself is yet another process. Schein calls the process "cognitive restructuring," which may also be called "reframing" of the new information or new reality.⁸ He indicates that this process may result from 1) a re-definition of the environment or task or function that requires change; 2) a broadening of the change target under consideration; or 3) a changing of the standards on which performance may be measured.

In Rocky's case his prior success was as a brawler not a boxer. His future success would require a redefinition of his role, which would be the subject of change. Rocky's change would also require him to fundamentally adjust his overall strategy. Historically, Rocky's success was a result of his sheer will and physical ability to "go the distance" of twelve full rounds. To be successful in recapturing the title, a new training approach and strategy would strive for effectiveness in six rounds or less, not his normal twelve. Finally, Rocky would have to redefine what a successful performance meant for him. In his first championship fight he was satisfied to "go the distance" whether he won or lost. When he lost his championship to Clubber Lang, in only three rounds, the loss devastated his self-esteem. Now, as the challenger, although winning back the championship was the goal, giving it his best shot, with no excuses and no setups, was his new measure of optimal performance. Schein suggests that this process of cognitive restructuring is fundamental to effecting change that lasts.

Identification with a role model. Schein states

that the processing of this new information, which makes change possible, is the result of one of two processes: 1) learning through identification with some available positive or negative role model, or 2) trial and error process of scanning the environment for new concepts.⁹ Many organizations requiring change use a role model through the application of best practices, such as Value-based Management, Total Quality Management or Six-Sigma for example, or engage consultants experienced in the required field of expertise. The use of a role model can help walk an organization through the change process. Rocky, fortunately, had such a role model in Apollo Creed. Apollo was a boxer, not a brawler. He utilized finesse as opposed to sheer power. He knew how to train Rocky to effect "change" in his technique, strategy, conditioning and mindset to defeat the physically stronger opponent and regain the title.

Scanning. An alternative to the use of the role model is environmental scanning in order to identify possible solutions to the organization's problem. Schein suggests that possibly the best and most stable solutions for change may be those insights that are discovered or created by the organization's members themselves.¹⁰ The use of role models may be more efficient, but internally generated change may provide more lasting results. Although Rocky had an appropriate role model in Apollo, Rocky's training team reviewed films of Clubber Lang's previous fights in search of any weaknesses or tendencies that would provide Rocky an opportunity for success. This scanning identified the fact that all of Lang's victories were early knockouts resulting from his ferocious all-out physical attacks; he was never tested beyond three or four rounds. The necessary change would be to resist going toe-to-toe in a slugfest, as was Rocky's typical approach, and instead defend Lang's attack with finesse, letting the brawler expend his energy and strength.

Argyris' Intervention Theory suggests a second requirement for change to be effective, that being free, informed choice.¹¹ Rocky's trainer, Apollo Creed, had intervened providing Rocky with valid and useful information needed to assess the probability of recapturing the title

and the changes that Rocky would have to make. But, as Argyris' theory points out, it is only with Rocky's free, informed choice to do so that can he initiate the required changes.

Refreeze

In Kurt Lewin's model the final stage is "refreeze."¹² In this stage, the new reality has been accepted as a result of the unfreeze stage, change targets have been identified, and actions are initiated to make the changes and make them permanent. This stage cannot be successfully accomplished unless the organization has successfully and completely navigated the preceding two. Likewise, Argyris' Intervention Theory suggests that for change to be successful and permanent the final requirement is total commitment to the new course of action.¹³ Once Rocky accepted his new reality and understood the need for and degree of change required, and felt psychologically safe in doing so, he was ready to freeze the required changes in place. He made the personal, total commitment to change.

To complete the "refreeze" stage Apollo took Rocky to the root of his own personal championship quest: the sweaty gym in east LA where fighters' dreams were born. There Rocky's trainers changed his training routine. Gone were the days of long endurance runs through the streets of Philly; replaced by laps in a pool and sprints in the sand. Gone were the power lifts and body-bag sessions; replaced with the speed-bag and sparring with welterweights. Rocky's training and preparation for this new reality were completely different than that which he had ever employed before. When he entered the ring for his rematch with Clubber Lang to regain the heavyweight championship of the world, he was a completely different fighter. As the ringside commentator remarked, "he looks like a middleweight." The 220 pound brawler, who previously relied on brute force and "going the distance" was now a 180 pound boxer relying on speed and finesse. The end result: a second round knockout and the regaining of his championship.

Organizational Change

Kurt Lewin's unfreeze-change-refreeze model and Chris Argyris' Intervention Theory provide organizations with not only a sound theoretical understanding of the change process, but practical models for change implementation. The stages are sequential and each is invaluable in effecting long-lived change. Many organizations today are experiencing the boxing equivalent of a standing eight count: they've been pummeled by the reality of a rapidly changing environment, yet they are still on their feet. They are bloodied but still in the game. These organizations, and others that may be fortunate enough to recognize the need for change before the pain gets too great, are well advised to consider the actions of Rocky and his leadership team and make the necessary changes to regain the championship and dish out some pain of their own. For as Apollo Creed adroitly stated, "There is no tomorrow."

About the Author

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