Abstract
Kurt Lewin’s (1890-1947) democratic style of leadership was infused into his methods and research. Lewin’s democratic style combines degrees of leadership and freedom as an effective situational model. Applying democratic principles throughout his career he documented reliable results such as increases in industrial performance and successful implementation of change. This paper re-introduces Lewin’s “leadership as a triangle” concept and explores those implications with explanations from Lewin’s own action research and illustrations from the author’s OD practice. It should be noted that Lewin’s social science was a system, and that the democratic leadership style should be understood within the broader framework of Lewin’s field theory and other constructs, an exploration beyond the current scope. None-the-less, Lewin’s leadership model holds clear implications for research and practice regarding leadership, change, engagement, and other contemporary concerns.

Keywords
leadership, organizational development, groups/group processes/dynamics, OD practice, action research, group methods

Lewin’s Democratic Style of Situational Leadership – A Fresh Look at a Powerful OD Model
Kurt Lewin had a clear-eyed vision of authority as an essential function in human systems. As Lewin put it: “. . . power itself is an essential aspect of any and every group. . .” (Marrow, 1969, p. 172). Authority in Lewin’s theory is neither good nor bad, it is simply an ever-present aspect of group dynamics and leadership.

Lewin concluded this about leadership: “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).” Lewin’s democratic principles of
leadership holds the only corner of the triangle that combines leadership (or structure) and freedom, as illustrated in the following graphic:

**Lewin Leadership Style Triangle**

*Democratic Style combination of Structure & Freedom = High Performance and Morale*

**AUTHORITARIAN STYLE**

“TOO CONTROLLING”
REACTIVE (FIGHT)
UNRELIABLE PERFORMANCE
HIGH TENSION
LOW MORALE

**DEMONCRATIC STYLE**

“BALANCED/SITUATIONAL”
SELF-DIFFERENTIATION
HIGH PERFORMANCE
LOW TENSION
HIGH MORALE

**LAISSEZ-FAIRE STYLE**

“TOO PASSIVE”
REACTIVE (FLIGHT)
LOW PERFORMANCE
HIGH TENSION
LOW MORALE

Figure 1.1 Lewin Leadership Style Triangle

Lewin’s model first emerged from research in which leadership styles were rotated so that groups of children experienced each. Initially two styles were identified - “democratic” and “authoritarian.” The authoritarian leader told the kids what to do, who to work with, what materials to use, and solicited no questions. The democratic leader also told the kids what the task was, and then encouraged dialogue and influence.

In one of Lewin’s classic “Ah ha” moments, a leader attempting the democratic style hardly led at all. Lewin then identified and included passive leadership as a third style, which he called laissez-faire. He established clearer standards of behavior. *Even the adult leaders had to learn Lewin’s model of active democratic leadership.* As Lewin put it, “Autocracy is imposed on the individual. Democracy he has to learn (Lewin, 1997, p66).”
The kids knew how to comply with an authoritarian leader, even though they didn’t like it. They floundered under the laisse-faire style. They flourished under the democratic style.

In Lewin’s research the leaders periodically left the rooms. In their absence the kids in the authoritarian and the laisse-faire groups would stop working and start fighting with each other. When the leader left the democratic group the kids cheerfully kept working. That is true engagement.

The autocratic leader got results, but only while they were present. The laisse-faire style produced neither results nor harmony. My own experience indicates that while having an autocratic boss is feared by many, overly passive bosses are far more prevalent and create far more chaos. It has been easier over the years to help leaders who are “too controlling” move towards the democratic style than to help “too passive” leaders become more active. In both cases what Lewin called “group decision” - based on dialogue, feedback, and commitment to action - is the most reliable path towards change.

Lewin’s placing the democratic style into the triangle creates an effective situational frame. New employees need leaders who will slide to the left along the “leadership & structure” axis and then gradually slide back as employees become more experienced. Highly experienced workers need leaders who will slide down the freedom axis, while being careful not to spill over into laisse-faire. Every employee and every group should be involved in an on-going dialogue regarding the right blend of structure and freedom.

Because of my father’s OD career, which dates back to his first T-group in 1953, I found myself at the tender age of 24 facilitating just such a dialogue in every workgroup in two tomato processing plants. The CEO said, “Thou shalt do this process.” Each work team generated survey data, engaged in dialogue, came up with their own solutions, and implemented them.
Each group adjusted their own degrees of structure and freedom. This design, even in the hands of a novice facilitator, resulted in productivity and morale increases throughout the system! Lewin’s principles have yielded similar results throughout our careers, including a 72% productivity increase reported by *Businessweek Magazine* (1992) after supervisors were restored in a system that had attempted the laissez-faire approach of self-managed teams.

Lewin’s research indicates that his democratic principles can even decrease prejudices such as racism, sexism, and the role-based biases held in organizations, such as mistrust between management and labor. When people begin to blame less, interact more, support each other’s roles (whether they be bosses or subordinates, operators or engineers, etc.), and begin to see everyone as peers in their fundamental humanness, on-going objective dialogue about how much freedom and how much structure is optimal can take place.

OD must work with the power structure, not against it. Effective leadership requires the capacity to empower the people below and support the people above. Based on the research and practice to date it is my thesis that Lewin’s democratic principles deserve a renaissance in the profession of OD.

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