

Making Decisions Using Force Field Analysis¹

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Introduction

Making complex decisions is often difficult because many factors are at play, each with differing degrees of importance. For example, “Should I adopt water conservation practices?” “Should I start a community garden?” and “Should I stop using fertilizer on my lawn?” are just a few complex questions individuals or groups may ask. A common decision-making strategy is to write a list of pros and cons and then make the decision based on whichever list is longer. However, this practice falls short because it fails to accommodate the weight placed on each pro and con (MindTools, 2014). Put another way, if you were deciding whether to adopt a casual Friday wardrobe policy, the pro of “I really enjoy wearing my Hawaiian shirts on Fridays” likely carries less weight than the obvious con of “the boss currently says no to casual Fridays,” even though both might be listed as a pro and con respectively.

The force field analysis is useful “for diagnosing a situation by looking at both the driving and restraining forces that influence change in an organization” (Witkin & Altschuld, 1995, p. 94). This technique was developed by Kurt Lewin (Narayanasamy, 2009) and is based on the idea that a point of equilibrium exists within any system. Any proposed change causes a shift in this equilibrium. For example, within Extension programming, there exists an equilibrium point in everything from current volunteer-led programs to an entire water education agenda. When considering a change to this equilibrium, one must consider the forces that would drive any proposed change forward or prevent the change from happening. In effect, in order for the change to happen, the forces for change must outweigh the forces against change. Often, efforts toward change are ineffective because they give little consideration to these

two forces. Conducting a force field analysis is a simple technique that can help an individual or groups more effectively make decisions and also more holistically consider key factors that may undermine the success of the proposed change.

How do I conduct a force field analysis?

Assuming a change of some sort has been suggested, the framework of the force field analysis helps individuals or groups to identify the forces that would support the change and the forces that would act against it (Witkin & Altschuld, 1995). The following steps can be used to conduct your own force field analysis. Figure 1 shows the recommended in the steps below.

1. Write the change you are considering in the center of your paper.
2. Write all forces for the change on the left side of the page and all forces against the change on the right side of the page.
3. Score the significance of each force on a scale of one to five with one meaning the force holds little significance and five meaning it holds great significance.
4. Total the scores on each side. If the score for the forces **for** the change outweigh those against, then it is likely you should make the change. However, if the score for the forces **against** the change outweigh those for, then consider what steps might be taken to shift the imbalance.

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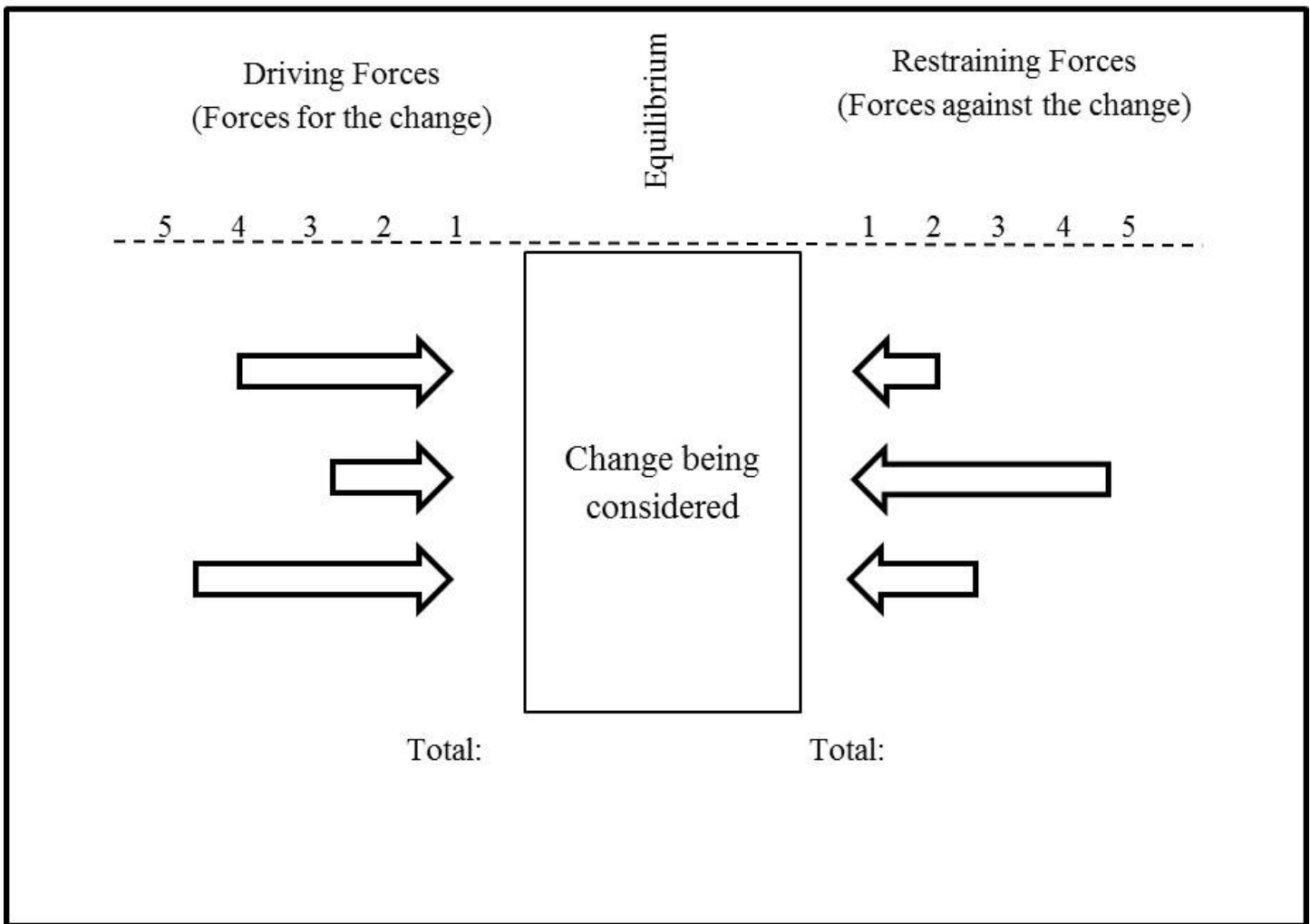


Figure 1. Prototypical force field analysis layout

5. Finally, take a step back and view the process holistically. Have a conversation with your group or yourself, if working independently, about the collective forces for change and the change under consideration. While it is often the best strategy is to try and minimize the forces against the change, in some circumstances, the overriding forces against the change may be so insurmountable the proposed change may not be feasible. Remember, force field analysis is a process, not a strict protocol to be rigidly adhered to.

Relevant Example

Let us assume, for the purpose of an example, that you are working with a group of homeowners who are considering a change that would require all residents in their neighborhood to use Florida-friendly landscaping. The group has already spent significant time considering several factors affecting the feasibility of the proposed change. You decide to use a force field analysis to help them clarify their

thinking and ultimately make an informed decision. The group generates the following list of forces driving and restraining the proposed change:

Driving forces—water conservation; the vegetation attracts wildlife; and the practices help avoid excess application of fertilizers.

Restraining forces—The homeowners association (HOA) is very strong in the neighborhood and is opposed to this landscaping method; the financial barriers to choosing this method; and ultimately deciding who will be responsible for monitoring and enforcing compliance with the new requirement.

After creating these lists of forces and writing them on the paper, the participating homeowners are asked to weight the significance of each of these items, with five being extremely significant and one being minimally significant. The participants felt the HOA was a very significant factor

and so weighted it a five. However, even though Florida-friendly landscaping attracted wildlife, that factor only merited a medium amount of significance, so they awarded it a three. All other values can be seen below in Figure 2.

Finally, participants tallied the scores for each side. They found the total score of forces restraining the change was thirteen, which is greater than the forces driving the change, which scored eleven. The group discussed different things that could be done to balance the scores and, eventually, cause the score of driving forces to outweigh that of the restraining forces. They decided the HOA, while powerful, would likely not change its position but also could not stop their efforts. The group instead chose to focus on ways to reduce the financial cost of implement the change, which would make it more affordable to homeowners to adopt the practice. After some good discussion, the group decided to adopt the plan requiring all residents to use Florida-friendly landscaping.

Possible Applications

Force field analysis has some limitations. The main limitation is that, when using the relatively basic approach of the force field analysis, we run the risk of missing key complexities which are inherent to forces for and against change that may be better understood by using more complex analytical methods (Swanson & Creed, 2013). However, its simplicity and low cost make it an invaluable tool for quickly identifying driving and restraining forces of change that can later be addressed with different strategies during planning and implementation of change. Additional examples of the application of force field analysis to different contexts can be found in Ajimal (1985), Baulcomb (2003), and Parker (2013). Force field analysis has a wide variety of applications for groups as well as personal use. This technique has been used successfully in conducting needs assessments, considering a change of any kind, simply trying to gain clarity on the potential barriers involved in adopting an

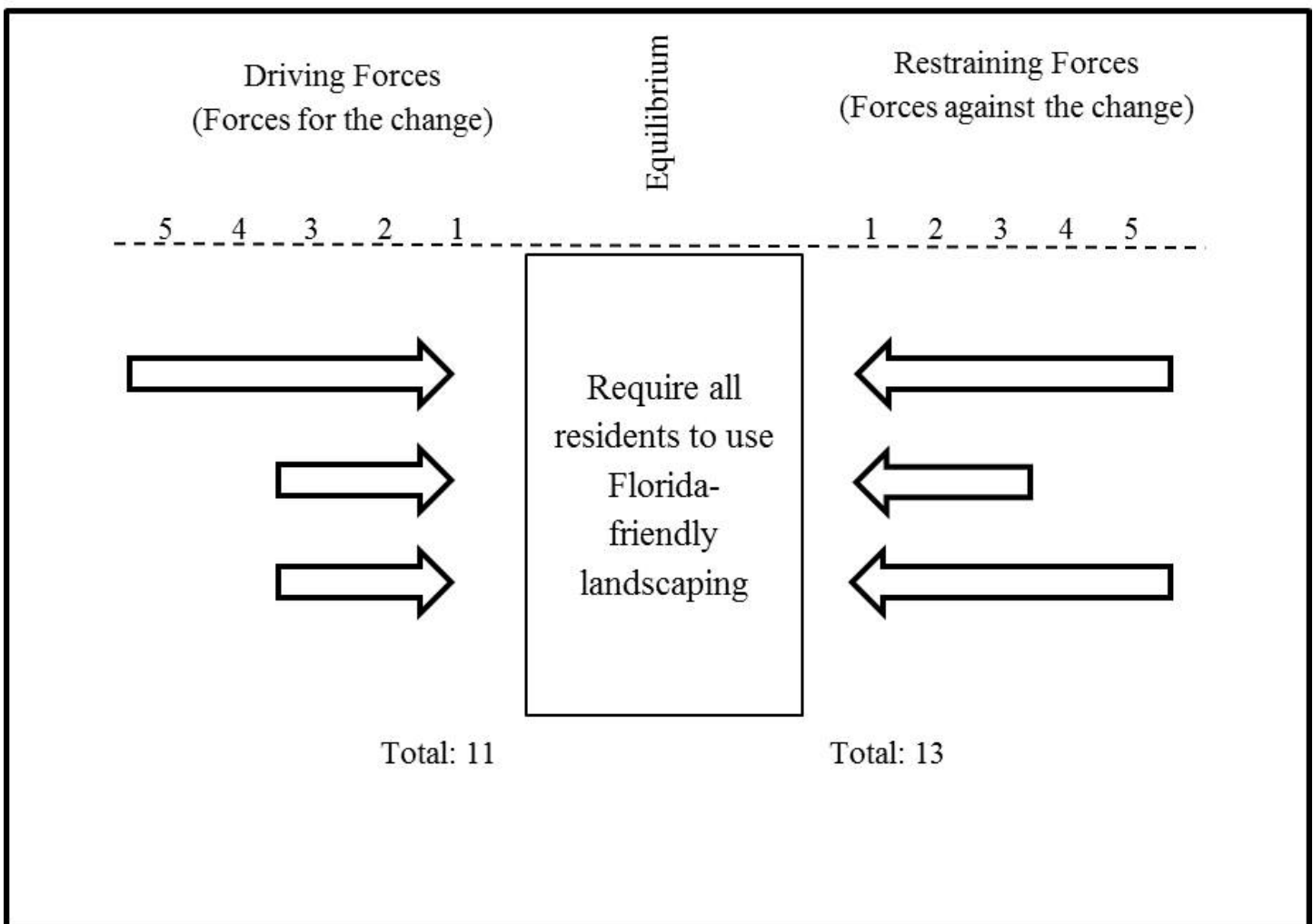


Figure 2. Example application of the force field analysis

innovation, and in many other situations. Ultimately, force field analysis is a useful tool to add to a facilitators' toolkit any time they work with groups or individuals seeking clarity or insight into making difficult decisions.

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