

THEORIES OF CHANGE AND EVIDENCE BASED PROGRAMMING OVERVIEW

Current Context

Problems and Challenges your communities and people face are increasingly complex and deeply entrenched.

One of your major funders, CNCS, is requiring you to develop a theory of change and demonstrate evidence in programming as a part of being competitive for grant funding

Why Should You Care:

Process that engages organizations and people in critically thinking through change effort:

- Raises important questions that are essential to real change happening
- Challenges existing logic and programming
- Forces stakeholders to be explicit about how resources will be used
- Helps build consensus
- Develops a shared understanding
- Helps you be clear about your assumptions – are there gaps in your knowledge? Are there leaps of faith you take versus decisions based on evidence?
- Funders and the community are requiring organizations to be accountable for their work and results

Big Questions

What is required to make your change initiative happen?

What demonstrates that the path you are taking will lead you to success and real change?

UNDERSTANDING KEY DEFINITIONS/TERMINOLOGY

DEFINITION 1: Theory of Change/Pathway to Change

Storyline

Tool for developing solutions to complex social problems - Depicts how a complex change initiative will unfold over time

- Illustration of the various moving parts that must operate in concert to bring about a desired outcome
- Visual map that illustrates the relationship between actions and outcomes

Explains how a group of early and intermediate accomplishments sets the stage for producing long range results.

South Cluster National Service Training Conference
Evidence Based Programming

- Predicts exactly who or what is going to change over what period of time and by how much at every single step in the process
- Shows how outcomes are related to one another over the lifespan of the initiative

Articulates the assumptions about the process through which change will occur

DEFINITION 2: Long Term Goal

Ultimate change you want to achieve as a result of your collaborative and concentrated effort

To develop, consider the following questions:

- What are the ultimate goals of this program or initiative?
- How will you define success in this program?
- What are your funders or program participants expecting to get from their investment in the program?
- Given what you know today, what will be different in your community in the long term as a result of successfully reaching your goal?

Be as specific as possible – not too vague like “improved family functioning” - Vague outcomes lead to fuzzy thinking, sabotage the ability to build consensus about programming and resource allocation, make it difficult to develop a measurement strategy

Examples:

1. Long-Term Employment at a Livable Wage for Domestic Violence Survivors
2. The visual appeal of neighborhoods will improve.

DEFINITION 3: Outcomes/Preconditions

Change that must happen along the way so that the ultimate long term goal can be achieved

Tells the story of how success will be recognized at each step in the pathway of change

What must change or be produced before thinking about how to actually do it - What must exist prior to the existence of the long term goal

Answers the question: What are the necessary and sufficient preconditions for the long term outcome to be achieved?

Examples:

1. All properties in identified neighborhoods will be brought up to standard in accordance with city/state rules and regulations.
2. Survivors Attain Coping Skills
3. Survivors Have Marketable Skills in Non-traditional Areas

South Cluster National Service Training Conference
Evidence Based Programming

DEFINITION 4: Indicators of Success

Evidence/Details you will use to show that each outcome/pre-condition has been achieved by responding to the following questions:

- 1) TARGET POPULATION - Who or what do you expect to change?
- 2) BASELINE - What is the current status of our target population on this indicator?
- 3) THRESHOLD - How much change has to occur on this indicator for us to claim to have successfully reached the outcome?
- 4) TIMELINE - How long will it take to bring about the necessary change in this indicator in this target population?

Help you to measure success – lets you know when you have successfully achieved each outcome

DEFINITION 5: Interventions/Strategies

Specific activities, policies, interventions or strategies that will help to achieve each of the outcomes listed on the pathway to change.

That which you, as an organization, or others that you may partner with have some influence over that will help ensure the outcomes are achieved

Examples include:

- Program strategies
- Campaigns
- Initiatives
- Collaborations
- Public awareness efforts
- Capacity building efforts
- Community mobilization efforts

DEFINITION 6: Assumptions

Set of beliefs and evidence that guide a group to believing change will happen

Expectations about how and why proposed interventions will bring outcomes about

Explains why the whole theory makes sense

Where the evidence comes into play because the assumptions should be supported by research, best practices, evidence, data which strengthen the case to be made about the plausibility of the theory and the likelihood that stated goals will be accomplished

Answers the following questions:

South Cluster National Service Training Conference
Evidence Based Programming

- 1) Why is this important?
- 2) What values and beliefs underline your work and programmatic decisions?
- 3) What makes you think that your interventions will result in the change you have outlined?

FINAL REVIEW QUESTIONS

Overall Questions:

1. When you look at the total picture, do you believe that the theory makes sense?
2. Can we get real community change toward this outcome?
3. Do the preconditions make sense as the logical steps toward the long-term outcome? Is the planned intervention enough to achieve the goal? Are these really the only required outcomes to reach the long term goal?
4. How will we be able to bring about the outcomes at the levels we have predicted? Do we have the resources we need to implement this intervention?
5. Is there anything going on in the real world that may make it difficult to get this theory off the ground the way we've planned it? Are there conditions outside our control that will impact our ability to produce the outcomes we laid out?
6. Do we need others to help achieve our ultimate goal? Are there other organizations/partners in the community that can combine resources to help us make our real change initiative happen?
7. How long will it take to reach our long-term goal?

Three Standards of Quality Questions:

1. Is this theory of change **PLAUSIBLE**? Have we created a compelling story about the pathway of change that would lead to the long-term goal in this community?
2. Is this theory of change **FEASIBLE**? Do we have the capacities and resources to implement the strategies that would be required to produce the outcomes in the pathway of change?
3. Is this theory **TESTABLE**? Have we specified how success will be measured clearly enough that we can recognize progress toward our goal when we see it? Have we defined indicators for each outcome in clear terms that a researcher or evaluator can use to produce a research plan?

Outcome Categories

(taken from Annie E. Casey Foundation)

Table 1. IMPACT: Individual and Family Outcome Areas and Sample Outcome Statements

Outcome Area	Sample Outcome Statements
Changes in attitudes, e.g. perceptions and beliefs	<p>Increased view among parents that local schools are positive “hubs” for families.</p> <p>Increased desire among neighborhood residents to become engaged in community change efforts</p> <p>Increased feeling of safety among residents.</p> <p>Increased desire of parents to create a personal savings plan.</p> <p>Youth have increased belief that they will have a positive future.</p>
Changes in knowledge	<p>Increased knowledge among neighborhood residents of community resources.</p> <p>Increased knowledge of parents and caregivers about child development milestones.</p>
Changes in awareness	<p>Increased awareness among neighborhood residents of a neighborhood’s history.</p> <p>Increased awareness of US laws regarding acceptable child discipline among immigrants and refugees.</p>
Changes in skills	<p>Increased parents’ employment skills.</p> <p>Increased parent ability to locate child care.</p>
Changes in behavior	<p>Neighbors more frequently call on one another for assistance.</p> <p>Increased parent involvement in their child’s education.</p> <p>Residents vote more frequently.</p>
Changes in health	<p>Decreased blood pressure.</p> <p>Families have access to a “medical home”.</p>
Changes in family stability	<p>Families’ children attend the same school for all of their elementary grades.</p> <p>Families maintain a stable residence.</p>
Changes in financial status	<p>Increased family income.</p> <p>Increased family savings.</p>

Table 2. IMPACT: Population Level Outcome Areas and Sample Outcome Statements

Outcome Area	Sample Outcome Statements
Changes in health	Reduction in the incidence of asthma attacks. Reduction in the incidence of lead poisoning.
Changes in education	Greater percentage of high school students graduate. Improved student scores on state standardized tests.
Changes in social conditions	Increased community cohesion.
Changes in economic conditions	Decreased poverty. Decreased unemployment.
Changes in safety	Decreased violent crimes.

Table 3. INFLUENCE: Outcome Areas and Sample Outcome Statements

Broad Outcome Areas	Sample Outcome Statements
Changes in visibility of issue	<p>Local media accurately cover the message(s) of the media campaign.</p> <p>Media increase frequency of coverage of issue.</p> <p>Public or community raises issue to a higher priority.</p>
Changes in community norms	<p>Community decreases tolerance for certain behaviors or attitudes.</p> <p>Community increases belief in its own power to create change.</p> <p>Community increases acceptance of culturally diverse community members.</p>
Changes in partnerships	<p>Partnerships become more strategic.</p> <p>Strategic partners deepen their collaborative relationships.</p> <p>Strategic partners jointly implement actions toward agreed-upon goals.</p> <p>Partners improve group functioning</p> <p>Partnership increases ability to articulate a shared purpose.</p> <p>Partnership shares a plan of action.</p> <p>Partnership improves articulation of roles and responsibilities within the group.</p> <p>Partners increase formal interagency agreements and/or other collaborative protocols.</p> <p>Partners increase referrals to one another.</p> <p>Partners increase sharing of resources.</p> <p>Partners increase seamless presentation to consumers.</p> <p>Partners increase sharing of data.</p> <p>Partners routinely use data to evaluate their efforts and refine strategies to achieve specific results.</p>

Table 3. INFLUENCE: Outcome Areas and Sample Outcome Statements (cont'd)

Broad Outcome Areas	Sample Outcome Statements
Change in public will	<p>Community is motivated to take action on an issue.</p> <p>Community (neighborhood, city) has decreased tolerance for a specific problem or condition.</p> <p>Community increases shared definition of specific problem or condition.</p> <p>Residents increase their willingness to demonstrate around an issue.</p> <p>Community members place a higher priority on a specific issue.</p> <p>Consumers of public services increase demand for improved services.</p> <p>Community members change attitudes and/or beliefs toward an issue.</p> <p>Community members increase their sense of community.</p> <p>Community members increase their awareness of an issue in the community.</p>
Change in political will	<p>Political leaders increase awareness of issue.</p> <p>Political leaders increase willingness to take action on issues.</p> <p>Legislators co-sponsor bills that support community priorities.</p>
Change in policies	<p>Specific policy changes.</p> <p>Increase in policy statements that support community goal.</p> <p>Policymakers adopt common language in policies and regulations.</p> <p>Policymakers draft legislation that reflects community priorities.</p> <p>Policymakers adopt new legislation that reflects community priorities.</p> <p>Policymakers maintain legislation that supports community priorities.</p> <p>Policymakers fund legislation that reflects community priorities.</p>

Table 3. INFLUENCE: Outcome Areas and Sample Outcome Statements (cont'd)

Broad Outcome Areas	Sample Outcome Statements
Change in regulations	<p>Specific regulations change.</p> <p>Increase in regulations that support a specific community goal.</p>
Changes in service practice(s)	<p>Service providers increase cultural competence.</p> <p>All staff that directly interact with service consumers increase their knowledge of the cultural backgrounds and experiences of their consumer populations.</p> <p>Service providers increase their linguistic competence.</p> <p>Service providers change the hours of service delivery to better match the availability of consumers.</p> <p>Service providers change the locations of service delivery to better match the location of consumers.</p> <p>Service providers routinely elicit consumer feedback and otherwise evaluate their performance to improve effectiveness.</p>
Change in business practice(s)	<p>Key businesses (grocery store, drug store, bank) are newly available in community.</p> <p>Businesses/service employees in community improve day-to-day interactions with diverse customers.</p> <p>Businesses change practices (hours, advertising, product selection) to meet community preferences.</p> <p>Businesses change recruiting practices to attract a more diverse pool of qualified applicants.</p>

Table 4. LEVERAGE: Outcome Areas and Sample Outcome Statements

Outcome Areas	Sample Outcome Statements
Changes in public funds	<p>New public funds allocated toward community priorities.</p> <p>Public funds redistributed toward community priorities.</p> <p>New funding methods (pooled, matched, blended) increase monetary resources to support community priorities.</p> <p>Public funding practices (RFP process, selection criteria) change to increase availability of funds for community priorities.</p> <p>Public agencies provide detailed or loaned staff for work on a particular program or strategy.</p>
Changes in philanthropy	<p>Increased funding available for community priorities.</p> <p>New funding methods (pooled, matched, blended) increase monetary resources to support community priorities.</p> <p>Foundation funding practices (RFP process, selection criteria) change to increase availability of funds for community priorities.</p> <p>Foundations make new types of funding available (e.g., PRI).</p> <p>Foundations previously uninvolved in community begin to provide funding for community programs, agencies and initiatives.</p>
Changes in resources available to the community	<p>New physical resources (computer rooms, meeting rooms) are available to the community.</p> <p>New transportation resources (buses, taxis) are available to the community.</p> <p>New service resources (copying, printing, delivery) are available to the community.</p>
Changes in private investment	<p>Investments in commercial development increase.</p> <p>Private investments in housing development increase.</p>

Theory of Change Examples

(taken from The Community Builder's Approach to
Theory of Change: A Practical Guide to Theory
Development supported by the Aspen Institute)

THE IMPORTANCE OF QUESTIONING ASSUMPTIONS

The following example, drawn from a comprehensive community revitalization plan, illustrates the importance of probing

assumptions. Here is just one outcome from the group's theory of change with its related precondition and interventions:

OUTCOME

The visual appeal of neighborhoods will improve.

PRECONDITION

All properties in identified neighborhoods will be brought up to standard in accordance with city/state rules and regulations.

INTERVENTIONS

1. Conduct research and disseminate rules and regulations to landlords, tenants, and property owners.
2. Plan and conduct mandatory educational workshops for property owners and renters based on violations of city and state regulations.
3. Recruit technical assistance from agencies, city, state, and other sources to develop and implement a beautification program for identified neighborhoods.

One assumption implied by the set of action strategies is that owners are simply unaware of the regulations, and that by sharing the regulations with them they will change their behavior. But is this reasonable? It's probable that landlords in particular may need to be forced by the threat of a fine to cooperate. Another assumption in question is that the homeowners can afford to fix the violations, and that once they're made aware of them

they'll act accordingly. If this assumption proves false, then the project is unlikely to reach its long-term outcome. These are just a few of the questions that could be posed to this group, illustrating the importance of testing assumptions before programs are implemented. In both of these cases, the planned intervention may make sense at first blush, but with a little probing, we see that it's quite possible that neither assumption will hold up under scrutiny.

1. Case Study: Project Superwoman³

Project Superwoman is a community-based program to assist women who have survived domestic violence and who are unable to find stable employment at livable wages. This case study is based on a real program, but modified to use as an example to show a theory of change in action.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

Project Superwoman was founded as a collaboration of a social service provider, a nonprofit employment training center, and a nonprofit shelter for women experiencing domestic violence. Their goal was to help women obtain the kind of employment that can keep them out of poverty and off public assistance while providing stability and upward mobility. With these criteria in mind, the collaborative identified jobs in electrical, plumbing, carpentry, and building maintenance as viable options providing entry-level positions, possible union membership, and opportunities for advancement at higher than minimum wage scales.

Like any program, Project Superwoman is based on a number of assumptions. One is that women can learn nontraditional skills and that employers can be identified who will hire them. Based on this premise, the project's strategy was to provide both training and support needed by this population to enter

and remain in the workforce. The founders believed that most of the women they could train would be single mothers and that having been in an abusive situation, these women would have low self-esteem and impaired coping skills. They also recognized that even women whose lives were fairly stable may face crises from time to time and need practical help to resolve problems and/or psychological support.

The founders had learned from previous experience that women who had not been in the workforce before—and those who had experiences with the courts, foster care, and the welfare system—had learned adaptive behaviors to dealing with these systems that were counterproductive in the workplace. Therefore, they devised a program that provides training in nontraditional skills, training in expectations in the workplace, and intensive psychological support. Based on their resources, they decided to provide assistance with some crises, such as housing evictions or court appearances, but not take on the larger issue of helping women get their lives in order. To make this feasible, they identified screening criteria to ensure that the women entering the program had already addressed major issues such as dealing with substance abuse or foster care problems.

3. This case was created by Heléne Clark, Director of ActKnowledge. She can be reached at hclark@actknowledge.org.

Assumptions

- A** There are jobs available in nontraditional fields for women.
- B** Jobs in nontraditional areas of work for women, such as electrical, plumbing, carpentry, and building management, are more likely to pay livable wages and are more likely to be unionized and provide job security. Some for these jobs also provide a ladder for upward mobility, from apprenticeship to master, giving entry-level employees a career future.
- C** Women who have been in abusive relationships need more than just skills; they need to be emotionally ready for work as well.
- D** Women can learn nontraditional skills and compete in the marketplace.
- E** The program cannot help all women, and so entry into the program must include screening so that women who have sufficient literacy and math skills to take the training and have lives stable enough to attend classes are admitted. The program does not have the resources to handle providing basic skills or major social services.
- F** Women who have left abusive situations are often single mothers and therefore cannot work unless they have child care.
- G** Women must be out of the abusive situation. The program assumes that women still in abusive situations will not be able to attend regularly, may pose a danger to others, and will not be emotionally ready to commit.

Interventions

- 1 Implement outreach campaign
- 2 Screen participants
- 3 Set up counseling sessions
- 4 Lead group sessions
- 5 Provide help for short-term crises, such as housing evictions or court appearances
- 6 Provide one-on-one counseling
- 7 Develop curricula in electrical, plumbing, carpentry, and building maintenance
- 8 Conduct classes
- 9 Develop curricula and experiential learning situations
- 10 Conduct classes
- 11 Identify potential employers
- 12 Create employer database
- 13 Match women to internships
- 14 Help women secure permanent jobs

Sample Indicator

OUTCOME:

Long-term employment at a livable wage for domestic violence survivors

INDICATOR:

Employment rate

TARGET POPULATION:

Program graduates

BASELINE:

47% of program attendees are unemployed
53% are earning minimum wage

THRESHOLD:

90% of the graduates remain in job at least six months and earn at least \$12 per hour

South Cluster National Service Training Conference
Evidence Based Programming

Tools to Support Your Own Theory of Change and Evidence Based Programming Work

The Community Builder's Approach to Theory of Change: A Practical Guide to Theory Development supported by the Aspen Institute – www.theoryofchange.org

Theory Of Change: A Practical Tool For Action, Results And Learning prepared for Annie E. Casey Foundation prepared by Organizational research Services (2004)

Mapping Change: Using Theory of Change to Guide Planning and Evaluation – Grant Craft – www.grantcraft.org

Six Theories of Change Pitfalls to Avoid by Matthew Forti – Nonprofit Management; May 23, 2012

Research to Results Briefs from Child Trends (Process Evaluations)

When and How to Use External Evaluators (Association of Baltimore Grantmakers)

Evidence-Based Programs: An Overview - What Works, Wisconsin – RESEARCH TO PRACTICE SERIES - ISSUE #6, October 2007 By Siobhan M. Cooney, Mary Huser, Stephen Small, and Cailin O'Connor - University Of Wisconsin–Madison And University Of Wisconsin–Extension