What are theories of change?

Theories of change are a description of the research base or roadmap of the belief system (e.g., assumptions, "best practices," experiences) and strategies for making positive change in the lives of individuals and the community. They provide a clear expression of the apparent relationships between actions and hoped-for results. Theory of change frameworks are highly individual and reflect an organization's or community's unique needs and preferences for what kind of changes it wants to make as a result of its efforts.

How are theories of change used?

Theories of change are used by organizations or communities to guide them toward a long-term goal. Groups will enter the process at different points, and build it out and narrow it down. It is a participatory process that is democratic and flexible.

Why use theories of change?

Theories of change provide a high-level lens for accountability and aid planning and communication with funders and other stakeholders. They are an integral part of outcome-based planning and evaluation.

"Layer Cake" of Outcome-based Planning and Evaluation

The "Layer Cake" is a graphic-based illustration of the multiple components involved in Outcome-based Planning and Evaluation.
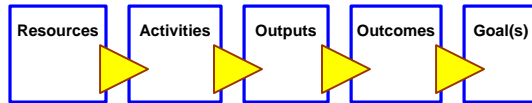
definitions ▶▶   ▶▶

Evaluation / Accountability Plan

Action / Budget Plan

Logic Models / "So That" Chains

Theory of Change Outcome Maps

Strategic Plan / Goals and Objectives

Background Research

"Layer Cake" Definitions

Background Research

A review of best practices and effective strategies and consultation with expert advisors to support the development of recommendations.

Strategic Plan / Goals and Objectives

Strategic catalyst points for targeting investments of time, money and energy to provide clarity and focus for carrying out the mission and vision of the organization or community.

Theory of Change Outcome Map

Often referred to as the roadmap, pathway to change, engine of change, or blueprint, it is a visual diagram that depicts relationships between initiatives, strategies and intended outcomes and goals. A theory of change allows groups to clarify goals; identify powerful strategies; identify short-term, intermediate, and long-term outcomes; and show the relationship between strategies, outcomes and goals. An outcome map is typically a 30,000-foot aerial view and provides the pathway and directions of change. Specific outcomes, activities, indicators and accountabilities are based on this theory of change and are developed as the next stages in a process. There may be many outcome maps from one set of goals and objectives. See also "Theory of Change Techniques."

Logic Models / "So That" Chains

A visual description of the elements of a program or initiative (i.e., the resources, activities, outputs, outcomes and goals) that articulate the underlying "logic" of how programs work. It is a series of If / Then statements that suggest the specific resources needed to carry out specific activities that will produce specific accountable outputs in order to achieve specific outcomes that contribute to overall goals. Logic models are usually created for prioritized strategies that are constrained within a theory of change. This is the basis for the action plan and the evaluation / accountability plan. See also "Theory of Change Techniques."

Action / Budget Plan

Often called a work plan or an implementation plan, the Action / Budget Plan details specific tasks that need to take place to improve the likelihood that the outcome-based planning and evaluation become a true management tool for the organization. It also specifies a timeline, who is responsible, and by when these tasks need to be accomplished. It is the What, Who and When document.

Evaluation / Accountability Plan

The measurement system, such as a dashboard, set of performance measures, monitoring system or evaluation plan that utilizes data to ensure that initiatives are having their intended effects. This is also an important part of continuous learning and improvement.

Theory of Change
Techniques

LOGIC MODELS
A diagram of relationships between inputs and outputs.

Strength: Concise picture of relationships between inputs and impacts.

**Weakness**: Works best for direct service model; more difficult to apply to community change.

Resources	Activities	Outputs	Outcomes	Goal(s)

OUTCOME MAPS
Road map that links strategies to short-term, intermediate, and long-term outcomes.

Strength: Visual picture of pathways for change.

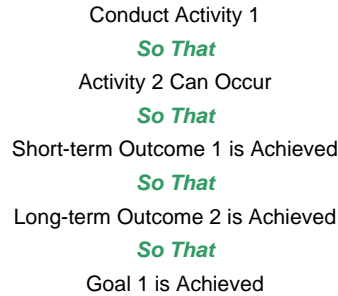**Weakness**: Interrelationships among strategies and outcomes can lead to complex picture.
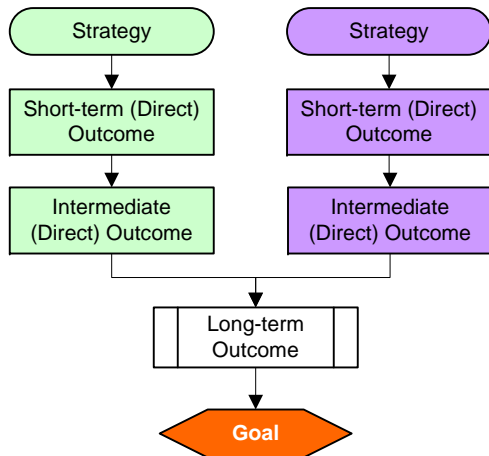
"SO THAT" CHAINS
Linear sequential statement of activities and intended outcomes.

Strength: Clearly defined and easily understood.

Weakness: Presumes linear relationships if used as a solo strategy. May reflect only a slice of a bigger initiative. Does not show the interconnectedness of other strategies.

Conduct Activity 1
So That
Activity 2 Can Occur
So That
Short-term Outcome 1 is Achieved
So That
Long-term Outcome 2 is Achieved
So That
Goal 1 is Achieved

NARRATIVE AND DIAGRAMS OF WORKING ASSUMPTIONS
Narrative statement of underlying assumptions, as well as illustrations.

Strength: Detailed description of underlying assumptions.

Weakness: Tends to be lengthy and complex.

Narrative statement assumption 1

Narrative statement assumption 2

Narrative statement assumption 3

Narrative statement showing key connections of resources...

Key Resource 1
Key Resource 2
Key Resource 3

Types of Change

Many types of incremental change must occur along the way to deep, lasting change. These types of changes may reflect actual changes in people's lives, changes to entities beyond the individual or organization, or changes in public or private investment.

IMPACT
Changes in the lives of individuals and family.
Examples: attitude, knowledge, skills, behaviors, values, health, economic status.
Impact-targeted Strategies: direct service, demonstration.
Sample Outcome Statements:
- **Changes in knowledge**: increased knowledge among neighborhood residents of community resources.
- **Changes in health**: decreased blood pressure.
- **Changes in financial status**: increased family savings.

INFLUENCE
Changes in group, community, organizations, institutions and systems that support and/or sustain changes in people's lives.
Examples: visibility of an issue, community tolerance for problem/condition, changes in community norms, changes in partnerships, changes in public awareness, changes in public will, changes in policies, changes in regulations, changes in services.
Influence-targeted Strategies: research, TA/consultation, system analysis, policy analysis, convening, advocacy, dissemination.
Sample Outcome Statements:
- **Changes in visibility of issue:** media increase frequency of coverage of issue.
- **Changes in partnerships:** partners increase referrals to one another.
- **Change in political will:** legislators co-sponsor bills that support community priorities.

LEVERAGE
Changes in public investment, private investment and/or philanthropy that support and/or sustain changes in people's lives.
Examples: pooled funding/co-investments/integration of funds, additional funding for a priority issue, in-kind resources allocated to a priority issue.
Leverage-targeted Strategies: co-investment, financing TA, workforce analysis.
Sample Outcome Statements:
- **Changes in public funds:** new funding methods (pooled, matched, blended) increase monetary resources to support community priorities.
- **Changes in philanthropy:** foundations previously uninvolved in community begin to provide funding for community programs, agencies and initiatives.
- **Changes in resources available to the community:** new physical resources (computer rooms, meeting rooms) are available to the community.