

The Developmental Evaluation Toolkit

THEORY OF CHANGE PROCESS

A Theory of Change in the context of developmental evaluation can be designed to guide strategy, evaluation, or both. As a strategy tool, it can be helpful for communicating with others and documenting current thinking. As an evaluation tool, it can help in testing assumptions and identifying areas for development and adaptation.

Unlike a logic model, a Theory of Change in the context of developmental evaluation need only have three things on it: Strategies, Outcomes (or Preconditions), and the “End of the Road.” Also unlike a logic model, they typically are not lined up in a row.

Strategy: A defined approach to implementing multiple smaller actions (tactics), which are collectively intended to achieve a particular outcome (or precondition). Strategies are completely **within your partners’ control** to implement or not implement as they choose.

Outcome (or Precondition): The change your partners **hope to influence** as a result of their strategies. It may be a change in people (themselves, their target audience, community members) or even a change in the environment (built environment, health of habitats, public policy, etc.). They cannot control whether it occurs, only do their best to influence the change. In the context of developmental work, there can and should be unknowns in their outcomes, areas that no one is quite sure what needs to happen.

End of the Road: The reason they are doing the work. A concrete statement(s) of what the world will look like when their work is complete. It may be one year out, two years out, 10 years out, or more, but it is **what really matters**, what makes their strategies so important to implement.

The process of developing a Theory of Change begins with articulating the End of the Road – a realistic, achievable though ambitious change that everyone wants to cause in the world as a result of the work. Once that is agreed upon, the brainstorming can explore strategies and outcomes.

If you are developing the theory of change as your own exploratory tool, adapt the steps below to exclude external stakeholders.

Designing a Theory of Change

Theories of Change are visual representations of strategies and outcomes. For this reason, it is most effective to facilitate the dialogue using a visual presentation of information.

Before the meeting, you will need to:

1. Plan who will facilitate the meeting and who will take notes. These two roles are critical and sometimes having a note taker who is not invested in the outcome of the meeting is helpful, so they can do nothing but capture what is being said.
2. Cover the wall in flip chart pages.

Are you interested in more tips and tools for developmental evaluation?

Spark Policy Institute’s (www.sparkpolicy.com) interactive Developmental Evaluation Toolkit is available at www.sparkpolicy.com/DEtoolkit. Please join us and share your stories about developmental evaluation, share your tools, and access the tools and ideas from other evaluators.

3. Bring large sticky notes (8"x6") of at least three colors and sharpies to write on them. If you don't have sticky notes, consider sticky walls, taping large index cards to the wall, or other means for flexible movement of information that everyone can see clearly.

A typical agenda for theory of change meeting includes:

1. Discussion as needed by the group to ensure everyone agrees on the End of the Road.
2. Exploration of preconditions to the End of the Road. Try asking, "What needs to be in place before the End of the Road is possible?" Map backwards, identifying the major changes needed for the End of the Road to be possible.
3. Exploration of strategies. Try asking, "What actions need to be taken to achieve the preconditions? Are those our actions or someone else's actions?"
4. You will end up with many sticky notes on the wall, which will need to be ordered and cleaned up before the dialogue is done. Ask the participants to talk about how to order them, connect them to each other, and create one cohesive roadmap. Gradually move them around, drawing arrows between them (thus the flip chart paper underneath the sticky note!) to refine the visual.

By the end of this process, the Theory of Change on the wall should meet the following criteria:

- Clear articulation of both strategies and the outcomes they are intended to cause, with a logical progression from the early strategies and outcomes to the later strategies and outcomes.
- Plausible relationships between the strategies and the desired outcomes.
- Easily understood descriptions of both strategies and outcomes, so as to facilitate day-to-day use.
- Meaningful outcomes, even if they aren't always measurable. If a strategy is supposed to result in an outcome, and that outcome is an important piece in achieving the End of the Road, it should be part of the Theory of Change even if no one can think of a way to measure it.

Note: Theories of Change in developmental evaluation are living documents that should be tested and refined over time. They can help everyone to engage in experiments to see if the strategies they are using can lead to the types of outcomes they identified and whether those outcomes are, in fact, preconditions to the End of the Road.

Resources

- For a description of a theory of change process of this type, please see *Strategic Learning in Practice: Tools to Create the Space and Structure for Learning* by Jewlya Lynn, published by the Center for Evaluation Innovation, available at

http://www.evaluationinnovation.org/sites/default/files/SL_Tools_FINAL%20.pdf

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