

Developing and Using Your Program's Theory of Change to Support Implementation, Evaluation and Sustainability

Building Mentally Healthy Communities I/II National Grantee Meeting

September 26-27, 2002
Vienna, Virginia

Mario Hernandez, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
University of South Florida

Hernandez, M., & Hodges, S. (2001). Theory-based accountability. *Developing outcome strategies in children's mental health*. 21-40.

W.K. Kellogg Foundation. (1998). *Evaluation handbook*. 1-109.

W.K. Kellogg Foundation. (2000). *Logic model development guide*. 1-62.

W.K. Kellogg Foundation
P.O. Box 550
Battle Creek, MI 49016

<http://www.wkcf.org>

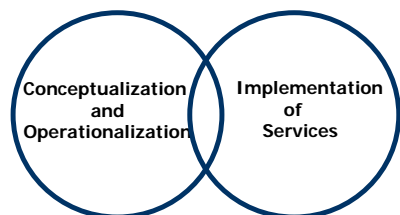
The Challenge of Complexity

- Human service programs are often asked to respond to multiple and changing needs
- Service delivery environments are complex and frequently changing
- Effective programs must find ways to respond and manage the complexity

- Community-based initiatives operate in complex environments where the scientific certainty of "proof" is seldom attainable.

This is where theory-based frameworks can be especially helpful.

Linking Ideas to Action



Theories of Change

Beliefs that funding agencies, planners, and stakeholders have about how to prevent and reduce the impact of family and community violence.

Theory of Change:

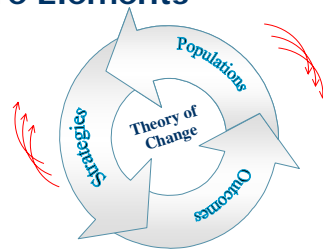
The underlying assumptions that guide a strategy and are believed to be critical to producing change and improvement for children, families and communities.

Components in Creating a Theory of Change

Component 1: Conceptualize and operationalize the three core elements:

- Who are you serving?
- What are your strategies?
- What do you intend to accomplish?

Component 2: Relationship Between the Core Elements



Understand and express the relationship between the three core elements

Potentially 3 theories of change

Recorded theory - Intended action as recorded in documentation such as grant proposals, statements of purpose, mission/ guiding principles. [Conceptualization]



Future orientation focuses on intended and expected action

Expressed theory - Expected action as expressed by system/ program stakeholders and participants. [Operationalization]

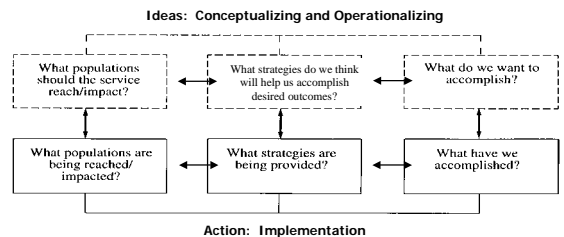


Active theory - Actual activities documented through evaluation processes. [Implementation]



Present orientation focuses on what is actually happening.

Linking Ideas to Action



Benefits of Articulating a Theory of Change

- Process supports building local solutions
- Facilitates communication and collaboration
- Allows systems and programs to specify where they are going and how they plan to get there
- Supports strategic planning, internal evaluation and quality improvement

- Most of the value in a theory-based framework is in the process of creating, validating, tracking and modifying the model...
- The clarity of thinking that occurs from building the model is critical to the overall success of the program (p. 43).

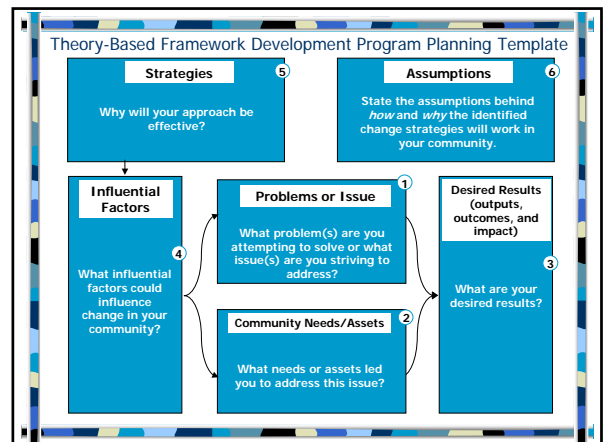
Theory-Based Framework

A theory-based framework is a tool for expressing the ideas and intended action of a theory of change. Theory-based frameworks document what strategies are believed to be critical to producing change for children and families.

- A theory-based framework links outcomes (both short- and long-term) with program activities/process and the assumptions/principles of the program.

- A theory-based framework links outcomes (both short- and long-term) with program activities/processes and the assumptions/principals of the program. The framework provides a roadmap of your program, highlighting how it is expected to work, what activities need to come before others, and how desired outcomes are achieved.

- Program design benefits
- Ongoing evaluation of the program
- Process of developing a logic model



Developing a Theory-Based Framework

Population Frame → Strategies Frame → Outcomes Frame

Consider issues and strengths

Consider principles and components

Consider short- and long-term outcomes

Theory of Change: What are the assumed relationships between population strategies and outcomes?

A picture is worth a thousand words.

The point of developing a theory-based framework is to come up with a relatively simple image that reflects how and why your program will work.

Doing this as a group brings the power of consensus and group examination of values and beliefs about change processes and program results.

Using a theory-based framework produces

- An inventory of what you have and what you need to operate your program.
- A strong case of how and why your program will produce your desired results.
- An anchor for program management and assessment.

- You can benefit from creating a theory-based framework at any point in the life of a program or initiative.

The theory-based development process helps people inside and outside your organization understand and improve the purpose and process of your work.

Better Position Programs For Success and Challenge by...

- Improved program Design and Planning
- Thoughtful Program Implementation
- Focused Program Evaluation and Strategic Planning
- Careful thinking to ensure feasibility and defensible uses of resources
- Bring Consensus

Beyond Accountability

Unlike approaches that rely only on the tracking of outcomes and indicators to build accountability, the theory of change approach:

- focuses on more than outcome information
- anchors measures in a context
- increases the usefulness of collected information

Maximize the Relationship



- **Effective evaluation is not an “event”** that occurs at the end of a project, but is an ongoing process which helps decision makers better understand the project; how it is impacting participants, partner agencies and the community; and how it is being influenced/impacted by both internal and external factors.

- The theory-based approach helps to clarify each element of your program, it enables you to respond to the question:

“ To what do I want to be held accountable?”

The Evaluation Forum (1999)

- A program is a theory and an evaluation is its test.

In order to organize the evaluation to provide a responsible test, the evaluator needs to understand the theoretical premises on which the program is based (p. 5).


Carol Weiss (1998)

- There is no one right way of doing evaluation. It is different for every community and project.

- Different mix of clients
- Different service delivery approaches
- Defines different outcomes
- Different phase of development
- Faces different contextual issues

Why Are You Doing an Evaluation?

- Improving your program
- Evaluating the effectiveness of a program
- Generating new knowledge

- 
- An effective way to narrow the possible field of evaluation questions is through the development of a theory-based framework.

Once you have built consensus on a theory-based framework, you will find that it provides you and your evaluation team with a focus for your evaluation by clarifying which variables are critical to achieving desired outcomes.



■ Developing Evaluation Questions

- What do you want your project to accomplish?
- How will you know if you have accomplished your goals?
- What activities will your project undertake to accomplish your goals?
- What factors might help or hinder your ability to accomplish your goals?
- What will you want to tell others who are interested in your project?



Things to Remember...

- The particular philosophy of evaluation
- Different stakeholders will have different questions.
- There are many important questions to address.
- Stay focused on the primary purpose for your evaluation activities at a certain point in time and then work to prioritize which are the critical questions to address.
- Examine the values embedded in the questions being asked. Whose values are they?





■ Basic Measurement Parameter of a Theory-Based Framework

Outputs are the direct results of program activities.

Outcomes are specific changes in attitudes, behaviors, knowledge, skills, status, or level of functioning.

Impacts are organizational, community, and/or system level changes expected to result from program activities.

- 
- **Outcomes and indicators** are often confused as one and the same, when they are actually distinct concepts. **Indicators** are measurable approximations of the **outcomes** you are attempting to achieve.

- 
- **Short-term outcomes**
 - **Long-term outcomes**



Criteria for Selecting Outcomes

- Is the outcome information useful to managers and administrators?
- Is the outcome information useful to front-line workers?
- Is the outcome information relevant to children and families?
- Is the outcome information relevant to other significant stakeholders?
- Does the process provide the opportunity for corrective action?



Criteria for Selecting Outcomes

- Does the parameter best reflect the status and intent of each frame?
- Is the parameter easily measured?
- Is the measurement of the parameter sustainable?
- Is the measurement of the parameter valid and reliable?



Frameworks can create challenges

- Loss of ambiguity can create conflict
- Clarification of goals can lead to anxiety about performance
- Establishing strategies collaboratively can challenge leadership styles
- Building agreement among people involved in the framework development process
- Consensus does not necessarily bring about effective strategies



Benefits of Articulating a Theory of Change

- Process supports building local solutions
- Facilitates communication and collaboration
- Allows systems and programs to specify where they are going and how they plan to get there
- Supports strategic planning, internal evaluation and quality improvement