Tutorial: How To Write a Theory of Change

Here's a quick quiz for you.

Theory of change is:

a) foundation-wonk terminology that doesn't mean much

b) a great name for a band

c) just another way of saying how social value is created

When in doubt, pick "c"... [1]

Your theory of change can make the difference between a grant check and a turn-down letter.

Chances are, if you've written a grant proposal for a large national foundation, you've had to include information about your organization's "theory of change."

Foundations like the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and the Hewlett Foundation require fluent discussions of the theory of change that drives your organization or program.

But even if most of your grant proposals go to smaller local foundations whose donors and proposal reviewers may not know the term "theory of change," your proposals will be strengthened if you know and can articulate how your organization creates social value.

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[1] *(The correct answer is c. It's possibly also but probably not b, but definitely not a.)*

Many grantmakers look for a theory of change in any project they are considering supporting -- and once they understand why you believe that what you propose to do will result in the change you want to see, funders also scrutinize your budget to make sure the resources you have are adequate to pull this off.

In the cartoon below (from a blog about international development[2]), we see <mark>a grantseeker who didn't make his theory of change quite clear enough.</mark>

"Dear Mr. Gandhi, We regret we cannot fund your proposal because the link between spinning cloth and the fall of the British Empire was not clear to us."

Written by *M. M. Rogers* and illustrated by *Ariv R. Faizal, Wahyu S., Ary W.S.*
Creative team for Search for Common Ground in Indonesia

Let's dig a little deeper into what a theory of change looks like.

A theory takes two concepts and marries them to each other. The astroid married to the dinosaurs results in the extinction of the dinosaurs. Smokers married to the capacity of quitting result in reduced risk of cancer.

A theory of change makes clear and convincing links between the activities of a nonprofit and the outcomes it wants to see in the world.

As defined by Grantmakers for Effective Organizations, a theory of change "is a **systematic assessment of what needs to happen in order for a desired outcome to occur**.

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[2] http://findwhatworks.wordpress.com/2010/12/08/dear-mr-gandhi-we-regret-we-cannot-fund-your-proposal/

Theories of change should be designed to explain how and why change happens, as well as the potential role of an organization's work in contributing to its vision of progress."[3]

One of the nifty things about theories of change is that they make you articulate your assumptions about how the world works. Once that assumption is out in the open, it can be tested, or backed up by existing credible research.

Examples of theories of change include:

- ✓ **Heifer International's "coffeelands" projects** help to ease food insecurity among small-scale coffee-growers by diversifying coffee farmers' income and helping them to grow and raise their own food sources.

- ✓ **KaBOOM!** (which builds playgrounds) believes that powerful citizenship can be activated by pursuing smaller common goals (a playground, skatepark or field complex) via a one-day build that results in achievable wins, toward collective causes (the well-being of children).

(Note that these are my abbreviated summaries of the organizations' more lengthy official theories of change. But if you can't say it in a sentence, it's probably not a good theory of change.)

Here's how to write a theory of change.

The organization ActKnowledge has an online "Theory of Change Community" – visit www.theoryofchange.org – that will give you a number of resources to get educated and skilled in working with organizations to create theories of change (most of the resources are free as long as you register for the site). The organization is available to give on-site trainings and consultations as well.

But you might be feeling a bit overwhelmed about how to get started and perhaps bogged down in all the information out there.

The most simple, direct way to begin to articulate your theory of change is to ask a series of "so that" questions. (A report on theory of change prepared for the Annie E. Casey Foundation introduces this idea[4].)

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[3] http://www.giving.org.nz/sites/all/files/GEO%20Funders%20evaluation%20report.pdf
[4] http://www.aecf.org/upload/publicationfiles/cc2977k440.pdf

1. Start with a strategy that is important to your organization (one that you do, or are considering doing).

Example: *We teach low-income people how to efficiently cook meals from scratch with affordable, healthy ingredients.*

2. Add the words "so that" to your strategy.

So that people will have the resources to feed their families more nutritious food at home.

3. Add another "so that" to the first "so that" idea.

So that families can become more resilient because they have improved their health through better diets and saved money through less eating outside the home.

4. Add another "so that" to the second "so that" idea.

So that there are positive changes in the lives of vulnerable children and families, with the possibility of children learning essential life skills to teach future generations.

5. Keep going until there are no more "so thats."

At the logical end of the "so that" chain, you have revealed the ultimate outcome that your strategy and activities are capable of producing. ==Your theory of change says that this final "so that" can be brought about by your organization's strategy.==

Ready to run with this? **Here's a theory of change worksheet for your project or organization.**

The strategy that is important to us is: _____.

We carry out this strategy so that: _____ …

… so that: _____ …

… so that: _____ …

… so that: _____ …

… so that: _____ …

… so that: _____ …

… so that: _____ !