Theory of Change

Writing and Critiquing Your Theory of Change

This worksheet builds on the definitions of theory of change and the necessary elements that must be a part of a Theory of Change (ToC). Use this worksheet to write out and critique your theory of change for your specific program and identify elements that need strengthening. After you have identified the areas that need to be strengthened, redo the worksheet and submit it via email to Info.AmeriCorps@ServeAlabama.gov with the subject line: **Theory of Change Worksheet**.

**Definitions**

An **Intervention** is a set of activities that you have chosen as a means to address the need, based on evidence that a similar approach has worked in the past or elsewhere.

**Outcome** is the change in attitude, knowledge, behavior, or condition that the intervention generates.

A **theory of change** defines a cause-and-effect relationship between a specific intervention, or service activity, and an intended outcome.

**Community problem** is the specific need in the community you have chosen to address through your program/project.

**Data documenting the need** are statistics that document the extent and severity of the community problem or need your program/project will address. The best data come from reputable primary sources, (such as government agencies, institutes, foundations, and universities that have conducted their own research), are as current (up to date) as possible, and are as locally relevant, as possible. News reports are NOT primary sources. Data from multiple (reputable) sources increase reliability.

**Data describing the community problem/need should address three broad areas.**

* **Scope:** The extent of the issue in your local community. What is the severity/intensity of the need for those affected by it? For example, how many individuals or families are directly affected by the need, either in absolute terms or as a percentage of the entire community?
* **Significance:** This is the “so what” question. Why we ought to care about this particular need?
* This includes data telling us how the need affects the community more generally, and how this is connected to other community issues. Sharing data on trends or the likelihood that the need will worsen also speaks to significance.
* **Causes:** Why the need exists and how it came about, such as historical data showing how the need started and how long it has been around.
* Data on the scope and relevance pertain to describing the community need.
* Data on the causes of a problem will also inform your choice of intervention or service activity.

**Evidence** is information from performance measurement results or evaluation/research findingsthat inform your understanding of why the intervention you have selected will result in the change identified as the outcome.

**Performance measures** flow from your program’s theory of change; the need, intervention, and outcome.

**Community Problem/Need**

**Intended Outcome**

**Specific Intervention**

Remember that the arrows in the theory of change diagram depict the logical flow or “if-then” relationship between each element. However, the thought process used to formulate a theory of change starts with the reason for the intervention - the problem or need - then the intended change - the outcome - and then the activity that will bring the outcome about - the intervention.

When we speak of alignment within the theory of change, we are looking for the logical flow and connection between the three main elements;

* the identified community need or problem to be addressed, as documented by available data on the negative conditions that exists;
* an intended outcome that addresses or resolves the need; and
* the evidence-based intervention with a specific design and dosage that has a clear cause-and-effect relationship with the intended outcome.

The first key alignment issue to confirm is that the intended outcome is based on the identified community need; that the change or intended outcome clearly addresses the community need.

Next, check to affirm that the selected intervention can be expected to result in the intended outcome.

If the elements in your theory of change are aligned, you have good reason to believe that if you do an activity in a certain way, it will result in the change you want to see by addressing the problem you identified.

**Here is a simplified example of a theory of change for a veteran’s project.**

**Community Problem/Need**

**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**Young veterans have high rates of unemployment**

**Intended Outcome**

**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**Veterans find or are placed in jobs.**

**Specific Intervention**

**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**Assistance in finding programs and financial aid; tutoring resources and internship placement.**

The **problem in the community** is identified as a high unemployment rate among young veterans, and it is attributed to a lack of marketable skills, including a lack of education degrees, training credentials, and professional experiences.

The **outcome** - Veterans find or are placed in jobs - directly responds to the identified problem of unemployment. This outcome is closely aligned with the need.

The **intervention** provides veterans with assistance to find vocational training or educational program opportunities, sources of financial aid, tutoring support, and internship opportunities. The evidence shows that the wrap-around education support services identified in the intervention will ensure completion of the credentials and provide professional experience and impact veteran employment, which is the outcome. This service activity is directly tied to filling the education degree or credential gap identified in the need.

The **project supports** veterans by helping them locate training programs, secure financial aid for higher education, and by providing tutoring resources and internship placements.

Other **outcomes** might be considered including, an **attitude outcome**: “Veterans increase confidence that they will find employment or Veterans exhibit positive changes in mental state“ or a skills outcome: “Veterans demonstrate new technical skills or Veterans acquire new skills necessary for job placement.” **All of these would be good and are very important, but the project’s intervention was designed to change the condition of the veterans.** The question they really needs to be answered is, “Do the veterans that we support get jobs?” This question reflects the purpose of their project and their intended outcome. If the project were to select the attitude or skill acquisition outcomes, they would not be measuring whether they actually affected the condition of the veterans - their key outcome measurement question. In summary, your **outcome performance measure** needs to be closely examined to ensure it is meaningful, realistic, and accurate before moving toward measurement.

Now let’s consider **how to ensure strong alignment within a set of performance measures; that is between an output performance measure and an outcome performance measure.**

When we talk about **an aligned set of performance measures, we are referring to the strong link between the output and outcome**; the outcome results from the output. Remember, an output is the amount of service completed, such as the number of students mentored. An outcome reflects the changes or benefits that occur as a result of the service activity, such as improved school attendance.

**Alignment also means that the output you are measuring is produced by the intervention.** For example, if the intervention is that national service participants mentor youth, then the output would track the number of youth who are mentored. **In addition, an aligned output and outcome measure the same intervention and the same beneficiaries.**

By measuring outputs along with outcome, programs have the context for reporting; they will know their level of success. Of those served, how many change? For instance, the output is that 100 children complete the early education program and the outcome is 75 of those children improved numeracy skills. The output establishes the pool of beneficiaries we are looking to change. In the example, the level of success is that 75 out of 100 of the children improved numeracy skills.

Let’s look back at the veterans’ example and see if the output and outcome are aligned.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **NEED:** 35% of young veterans (18-24 years old) are unemployed (Department of Veteran Affairs, 2011). Economists cite a lack of marketable civilian skills and the need for education degrees, vocational certifications…  **INTERVENTION**: AmeriCorps members support veterans in completing training programs by assisting veterans with locating appropriate programs, securing financial aid, and by providing tutoring resources and internship placements | **WHICH TYPE OF OUTCOME?**   1. Veterans report increased confidence about finding employment. (attitude) 2. Veterans demonstrate new technical skills. (knowledge/skills) 3. Veterans are placed in jobs. (condition) |
| **INTERVENTION:** AmeriCorps members support veterans in completing training programs by assisting veterans with locating appropriate programs, securing financial aid, and by providing tutoring resources and internship placements  **OUTPUT:** Number of veterans who participated in a CNCS supported program (CNCS supported assistance).  **OUTCOME:** Number of veterans who secure employment | Do the intervention and output align?   * Yes * No   **Why or why not?** It is logical to assume that participation in a well-designed and well-implemented project offering young veterans assistance in locating training programs, securing financial aid, and providing tutoring resources and internship placements will lead to securing employment for young veterans. |

**Community Problem/Need**

**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**Young veterans have high rates of unemployment**

**Intended Outcome**

**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**Veterans find or are placed in jobs.**

**PM-OUTCOME:** Number of veterans who secure employment

**Specific Intervention**

**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**Assistance in finding programs and financial aid; tutoring resources and internship placement.**

**PM-OUTPUT:** Number of veterans who participated in a CNCS supported program (CNCS supported assistance).

**Sticking Points and Common Issues**

The following are a few of the common issues that learners may encounter as they work with developing and/or critiquing theories of change.

**Community Problem/Need Issues and common pitfalls:**

* Explains the intervention activities instead of presenting data demonstrating the specific problem/issue in the community the intervention will address.
  + *This makes it difficult to know if there is truly a need for the proposed intervention and whether the intended outcome identified makes sense. One cannot fully know if there is a need in the areas where the intervention will be provided.*
* Uses state or national data instead of local data describing the need in the specific communities where the service will occur.
  + *This makes it difficult to know if program resources are being utilized effectively to address critical local needs and if it is even a community need.*
* Turns into a “data dump” with too many indirect or unrelated statistics provided.
  + *This makes it difficult to identify the specific need that the intervention will address as there is irrelevant information to sift through.*
* The community need and intended outcome are not closely related.
  + *This makes it difficult to know if an appropriate intervention has been selected and if the activities will address the identified need. It is also unclear which is inaccurate - the need statement or the identified outcome. The need and outcome should be very closely related.*

**Intervention Issues:**

* Description of the design and service dosage (frequency, intensity, and duration) is incomplete.
  + *This makes it difficult to know if the intervention can produce the intended outcome.*
  + *It also is difficult to assess whether the target (expected degree of change) is likely to be achieved based on the design and dosage.*

**Outcome Issues:**

* Isn’t likely to occur based on the specific intervention.
  + *May need to rethink choice of intervention or choose another outcome to measure.*
* Doesn’t directly relate to the community need.
  + *This makes it difficult to know where the issue is – is it just a poorly chosen outcome or is it that the intervention doesn’t directly address the community need?*

**Worksheet**

Use the worksheet below to write out the elements of your program/project’s theory of change. After completing the worksheet, review it for any issues identified through the use of the ToC checklist. Once any areas have been identified and corrected, submit the completed worksheet to the Governor’s Office of Volunteer Services for review.

**Example Theory of Change – Mentoring Program**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Community Need/Problem | Intervention | Outcome(s) |
| *Specific need in the community we have chosen to address* | *If members/volunteers do this…* | *…then this will happen.* |
| Many Marigold City youth are at risk of dropping out due to feeling disengaged from their schools and having no caring adult to confide in.  **Documentation:**  According to Euphoria Higher Education Consortium’s 2010 Report, Marigold School District had a high school dropout rate of 28.3% as compared to the statewide average of 13.4%.  The State of Euphoria Prevention Needs Assessment (PNA) found more than 1 out of every 3 students surveyed responded "no" when asked, "Is there an adult that you can talk to about your problems?" A 2010 United Way Youth Survey conducted in Marigold found that 21% of youth in Marigold have never participated in sports teams and 70% report that they have never participated in a service club.According to the 2008 PNA for Marigold, 30% of surveyed students report that they "often" or "almost always" hate being in school. Research has demonstrated that youth who are disengaged are at risk for poor academic achievement, skipping classes, and ultimately dropping out of school (National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine, 2004). | Three full-time members and five halftime members will be placed in Marigold to recruit and place 60 volunteers to serve as mentors to middle school youth identified as at risk by teachers and parents with Mentor Inc. Mentors will each be matched with one student and will spend at least 2 hours a week with their assigned youth engaged in homework help and enrichment activities for at least one year.  **Evidence:**  Research has demonstrated that having caring adult role models mentor at-risk middle school youth at least 2 hours a week for 12-24 months increases youth engagement in school as well as youth graduation rates. (Albert,B., Lippman, L., Franzetta, K., Ikramullah, E., Keith, J., Shwalb, R., et al. (2005) Freeze frame: A snapshot of America's teens. *Journal of Adolescent Research.* | Youth served will experience improvements in academic engagement (ED27) by demonstrating a positive and significant change in at least one of the following four behaviors or attitudes over the course of one year:   * Increased interest in school * Increased attachment to school * Increased attendance in school * Increased participation in school or community activities |

**Theory of Change Worksheet**

Name of Legal Applicant: Click or tap here to enter text.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Community Need/Problem** | **Intervention** | **Outcome(s)** |
|  | *If members/volunteers do this…* | *…then this will happen.* |
| Briefly describe the negative condition that exists in the community.  Documentation (reputable, current, local) | Describe your intervention design—the specific member or volunteer activities designed to address the problem.  Describe the dosage of your intervention.  Frequency:  Intensity:  Duration: | Describe the change in beneficiary attitude, knowledge, behavior or condition that will occur as a result of the intervention. |

**Reflection Questions:**

1. What data exist to document the extent or severity of this problem in your community? Provide real and concrete examples of relevant data sources and data, not general or hypothetical ones.
2. Why does the problem exist? What data or research can you provide to support your rationale for why the problem exists?
3. What evidence exists to document that the proposed intervention (specific activities delivered at the dosage described) is an effective way to solve the problem?

Theory of Change Checklist

Use the following checklist to help you determine if the theory of change for your program/project has all needed components and is in alignment.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Element** | **Criteria** | **Status** | **Ideas for improvement** |
| **Community Need** | 1. Makes clear statement of the problem or issue the program will focus on | Y  N |  |
| 1. Provides statistics to document the problem: | Y  N |  |
| From a **reputable source** | Y  N |  |
| **Current** (if not within past few years provides explanation) | Y  N |  |
| **Local** (Relevant to the proposed service locations) | Y  N |  |
| **Intervention** | 1. Provides a clear description of the activities volunteers / members will provide (design) | Y  N |  |
| 1. Clearly describes the dosage: | Y  N |  |
| Frequency | Y  N |  |
| Intensity | Y  N |  |
| Duration | Y  N |  |
| 1. Intervention directly addresses the identified need | Y  N |  |
| **Evidence** | 1. Demonstrates high likelihood intervention will achieve intended outcome | Y  N |  |
| 1. Provides directly relevant performance measurement, evaluation and/or research results | Y  N |  |
| 1. Data used appears to be high quality and collected using rigorous methodology. | Y  N |  |
| 1. From a program with similar design | Y  N |  |
| 1. From a program with similar dosage | Y  N |  |
| **Outcome** | 1. Change likely to occur based on proposed intervention | Y  N |  |
| 1. Relates to community need | Y  N |  |
| 1. Is achievable within one year | Y  N |  |
| **Overall** | 1. All elements are in alignment. | Y  N |  |
| 1. Clearly shows cause and effect relationships | Y  N |  |

**Points to Consider**

**FOLLOW-UP DISCUSSION**

*What insights did you have about your theory of change from doing the exercise?*

*What ideas do you now have for how to strengthen your theory of change?*

*What areas are you concerned/struggling with that you need assistance with?*

For more information on writing a strong ToC, please visit [https://www.nationalservice.gov/resources/performance-measurement/theory-change](https://www.nationalservice.gov/resources/performance-measurement/theory-change%20)