

Why Bother with Theory of Change and Logic Models?

By Eleanor A. Smith

Like it or not, nonprofit organizations must now prove to stakeholders that we are meeting our goals or at least making measurable progress. Individual and institutional philanthropists alike are demanding both sharper thinking and greater evidence than ever that an organization has made--or is on track to make--a meaningful difference in the world. In the current economic climate, the groups that thrive are those that focus on what they do best, routinely document their progress and attract support by easily communicating their impact.

One way effective nonprofit leaders demonstrate their ability to deliver results is by articulating their group's theory of change. This is a high-level summary—typically a flow chart depicting a chain of results--relating an organization's work directly to its vision of long-term social change. A powerful communication tool, a one-page theory of change graphic depicts the flow from current efforts to first-stage outcomes to next-stage outcomes and continues until the ultimate desired futures are attained. This is an excellent tool to illustrate how multiple interventions by one organization are driven by a single long-term vision. If possible, it is helpful to clarify a theory of change before undertaking the more concrete work of developing a logic model.

Logic models are similar to theory of change in that they also link the present to the desired future. Logic models are used to identify the relationships between a single program's inputs and outputs and the trail of expected results from the intervention, starting with preliminary outcomes to intermediate changes and finally to longer-term results. Unlike the more conceptual theory of change, outcomes in a logic model are written in specific and measureable terms; data indicators to assess achievement of outcomes are also included. With their greater focus on the tangible, logic models form the guiding frame for both internal and external evaluations of programs or other activities.

Both the theory of change and logic model are presented as single-page summaries that empower leaders to communicate quickly and easily exactly how the dots are connected from their current efforts to their vision of long-term success. When tailored for external audiences, they provide a clear and compelling case for the organization, showing how and why the group does what it does, how it will realize its mission, and how lessons learned will be captured and integrated. As such, these tools can be used in any or all of the organization's fundraising and marketing communications.

The development of both these tools involves a process of research, reflection, and strategic thinking. Creation of a logic model and theory of change surface underlying (often unspoken) assumptions and often illuminate the need for validating the group's approach through research into best practices. This iterative process enables leaders and staff to ground their theories in field research, compare their knowledge and beliefs and, together, develop a working theory and model of how they intend to produce and document outcomes. The resulting tools are then translated into an evaluation design for ongoing data collection and analysis to fuel continuous learning and performance improvement.

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In addition to the benefits of more successful communications and increased evaluation capacity, the mere process of developing these tools increase organizational focus and clarity of purpose, as well as transparency and accountability—all attributes of exceptional nonprofits.

Smith is Principal of Eleanor A. Smith & Associates, which helps nonprofit organizations work smarter for greater social impact. Since 1997, Eleanor has worked as a grantmaker, led groups in strategic planning and helped raise millions of dollars for healthcare, human services, education, youth development and environmental groups. Her greatest passion is assisting nonprofit leaders to clarify their vision for ultimate social change and build their capacity to conduct their own program assessments. She offers training and coaching in evaluation, logic modeling and theory of change (including her popular "What Does Success Look Like?" workshops) at conferences and nonprofit support centers and to private groups.