

THEORY OF CHANGE: EIGHT COMMON MISTAKES

2016

Theories of Change (TOC) are becoming par for the course among charities, with funders increasingly jumping on the bandwagon.

The reasons for the popularity of what is essentially *an illustration of how and why a desired social change is expected to happen in a particular context* are tenfold. (Please take a look at the example [Theory of Change](#) guidance before you read on!).

Creating a TOC encourages critical thinking that gets you clear on the underlying logic of your programme and its overall purpose. It helps you to then communicate this rationale to a wide variety of audiences, including your staff, funders, beneficiaries and even Joe Public. Furthermore, it guides your evaluation plan and supports you to demonstrate the impact of your work, motivating you to learn and improve your practice. It can even reveal to you areas where you might seek to build partnerships with other organisations in the sector.

At its most valuable, a TOC can be used to make evidence-based decisions that increase your positive social impact.

But onto more pressing matters. Here's a collection of common mistakes that trip up even the noblest efforts.



existing literature to ensure your model is as compelling and realistic as possible.

2. **Oligarchic ownership**, where debates are heavily influenced by one or two people (senior and with power) and then imposed on the rest of the organisation. A TOC should enthuse managers, practitioners and beneficiaries alike. It should be an empowering exercise, whereby the logic is 'owned' and understood by all contributors. Get everyone in the room and make it real.

3. **Bad outcomes.** Outcomes are the lynch-pins of your model. They explain the *change* that occurs as a result of your intervention and together contribute towards your final goal. Here are some of the best ways to avoid the common mistakes we tend to see:

- Use words like 'increased', 'improved' or 'decreased' to convey that *change* is taking place.
- Use the past test to avoid confusing outcomes with activities i.e. '*increased self-esteem instead of 'increasing self-esteem'.*
- Define a single change, not many, so that '*increased resilience, confidence and self-esteem describes three outcomes, not one.*
- Make sure your outcomes are specific enough to be meaningful and measurable; '*increased knowledge*', for example, is neither.
- Acausal path where an activity leads to an outcome but doesn't connect to your ultimate goal, should either be scrapped or linked up appropriately.



yet evidence something does not make it an assumption. *'We assume that delivering our intervention increases a person's well-being, therefore "increased well-being" is an assumption'*. NO! *'Increased well-being'* is an outcome. Ask yourself instead *'why might this activity not lead to that outcome in practice?'* – e.g. we won't see an improvement in well-being if the young person only attends 70% of sessions, making the assumption that *'the young person attends more than 70% of sessions'*.

5. **Everything leads to everything**, where each activity impacts every outcome. This is often the case when dealing with soft outcomes, given that there are many prerequisites for change in a person's level of confidence, for example. The trouble is that this doesn't make for an aesthetically pleasing TOC, nor one that uncovers the magic of your intervention or lays the foundation for a precise evaluation plan. We generally recommend that you only include the *strongest* causal links in your diagram, leaving out some of the weaker ones for the sake of clarity and digestibility.

6. **Too big a leap**: Where a TOC says something like *'group tasks'* lead to *'improved social relationships'*, either the activities haven't been properly described or you've jumped to an intermediate outcome without unpicking what comes before (something like *'increased exposure to like-minded peers'*). Here, assumptions come into their own. Push yourself to identify at least one assumption that gets into the detail of exactly how *this* leads to *that*.

7. **Mass un-appeal**: We often see over-simplified or over-complicated TOCs that think nothing of how the information will be consumed. A TOC is one of the most powerful communication tools at your disposal, and should therefore appeal to any Tom, Dick or Harry. Take care of the overall look and feel (content and design) as well as the detail (correct spelling, sufficient labelling and colour-coding, clear pathways). Ask yourself:



- Would a layman understand what my activities and outcomes are from the descriptions I've included?
- Could any of the content (e.g. definitions, assumptions, and explanations of underlying theory) be moved to an appendix, without sacrificing the overall logic?

8. **A dusty document:** Finally, a TOC should not be kept in a dark corner, but rather treated as a living document and a reference point for the whole organisation. You should revisit it to remind yourself of what you are trying to achieve, and then update it as you build your evidence base, and evolve your intervention design and priorities as an organisation.



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