**The Center for Public Research and Leadership**

**OPTA Manual**

# Overview

This manual is designed to guide you through the process of using OPTA to describe your organization’s Theory of Action for an initiative. This manual will also walk you through the steps to articulate the outcomes you hope to achieve, to understand how your work relates to your initiatives broader objectives, and to define a clear and measurable strategy to achieve your stated outcomes.

The process begins by giving you the chance to articulate a Theory of Action that describes the Inputs, Actions, and intended Outcomes of your initiative and how they relate to your desired Impact. The process also asks you to identify the metrics and indicators you will track to assess your progress against your goals. Together, you and your partner organization will monitor the indicators you have chosen to track progress towards your goals and to identify areas of success as well as areas in need of adjustment. Although only you and your partner organization can view the information in OPTA about your initiative, OPTA enables you to link your data to any of your partner organizations’ initiatives.

This manual summarizes how OPTA can be used to generate valuable results, but neither OPTA nor this manual is intended as a rigid set of processes or instructions. OPTA is designed to give users wide flexibility in designing and expressing their Theory of Action and selecting the indicators by which they are prepared to monitor their success.

OPTA also aims to leverage operators’ existing practices and to be responsive to the dynamic circumstances in which each operator works. It is assumed that operators will have suggestions for improving OPTA and this manual, and that both will be “living tools” that evolve in response to users experience with the system.

Finally, this manual is designed for users that have varying levels of experience with different components of OPTA, such as Theories of Action and performance indicators. If you are already familiar with these components, please skim the sections that provide introductory or definitional material. If you have questions, please feel free to contact us to clarify these concepts as they have been defined in this process.

# Part 1: Understanding the Logic Behind OPTA

## I. Theory of Action

***What is a Theory of Action?***

A Theory of Action describes the relationship between an organization’s actions and the outcomes it hopes to achieve. It communicates an organization’s primary objective—its *raison d’être*—and the strategy it expects to follow to fulfill that objective. Designing an effective Theory of Action requires two critical steps:

**Step One**: Articulate a clear and measurable objective.

**Step Two**: State the actions that, together, will achieve that objective.

These first two steps can be embodied in an “if-then” statement:

***If*** we do “X Action”…

… and “Y Action” …

… ***then*** we will achieve

“Z Objective.”

For example, here is an expression of “Organization A’s” Theory of Action:

***If*** Organization A attracts high-performing teachers...

…that effectively support schools and districts...

…***then*** Organization A will improve achievement among underserved students.

**An effective Theory of Action…**

**… is relatively stable but subject to modification.** An organization’s Theory of Action will rarely change drastically over time, but an effective Theory of Action statement should invite multiple, iterative modifications. As a Theory of Action is implemented and data points are collected, the Theory of Action statement should be updated, as relevant, to reflect lessons learned. For example, an organization may at first silently assume a necessary precondition to the effective operation of its actions or a supplemental link between those actions and the intended outcome. Alternatively, that organization may silently expect certain prerequisites to be put in place by someone else. When the absence of that action or link contributes to the failure of the organization’s actions to generate their intended effect, the organization will realize that its Theory of Action—and the practical steps it or others must take—will have to change in order to supply the missing prerequisite. Through this iterative process of change, the Theory of Action gains precision and accuracy, and the organization is better able to implement and evaluate strategies.

**… includes measurable actions and objectives.** The Theory of Action should be premised on actions and objectives that can be measured in a meaningful way. Even if the most accurate and valid metrics may not be available, using strong proxies can help an organization evaluate and track progress along their Theory of Action.

**… contemplates both leading and lagging indicators of success.** Often, an organization’s program and services are offered in pursuit of meaningful long-term impact that takes time to actualize. A Theory of Action should therefore contemplate some leading indicators that are reasonably strong predictors of the desired long-term impact. Conversely, if an organization’s program and services are focused almost entirely on producing short-term results, it is critical to consider the long-term implications of such results.

**… demonstrates a causal relationship between actions and objectives, as well as leading and lagging indicators of success.** The Theory of Action statement should present what at first is a *theory* of a causal relationship between actions and outcomes. An organization’s goals and objectives should be logically connected to, and causally linked to, the organization’s primary activities and actions. The iterative process of change described above reflects the organization’s acquisition of knowledge about how its causal theory lines up with—and can be changed to line up better with—actual practice.

***What indicators may be used to track progress implementing a Theory of Action?***

Lagging Indicator

An organization’s ultimate impact varies based on its mission. In some cases, an organization may hope its ultimate impact will be improved school leadership, teacher instruction, parent initiative, or school level finances. In other cases, improvements in student test scores, high school graduation rates, or success in the first year of college might be the desired impact. Each of these is a **lagging indicator**, which is used to mark the achievement of the organization’s long-term goals and may take several years to actualize. Lagging indicators are necessary, of course, but often will not provide information that is sufficiently timely and contextualized to reveal the short- and mid-term success of an organization’s work—*i.e.*, whether the intermediate changes the organization expects to occur, in order to set the stage for or drive the ultimate impacts, are occurring. Organization’s lagging indicators are not always expected to align with Public Square’s Impact measures, but may directly or indirectly affect them.

Reveals if a Theory of Action is being implemented well

Provides timely and contextualized information that can drive short- and mid-term adjustments to actions

Predicts future change in a lagging indicator

Leading Indicator

Reveals success achieving long-term goals and confirms trends

May be used to confirm or contradict expected outcomes and effectiveness of programs

Determining whether the important intermediate changes and effects are occurring, which in turn helps to predict future change in a lagging indicator, requires the use of **leading indicators**. For example, because increases in student attendance or decreases in teacher absenteeism often correlate with increases in student achievement, an organization’s Theory of Action may call for efforts to improve student attendance and reduce teach absenteeism, with the expectation that increases in student achievement will follow. In that case, changes in a school’s average student attendance and teacher absenteeism rates can serve as leading indicators of success that reveal whether the organization’s Theory of Action is being implemented properly and provide an early indication of whether student achievement levels can be expected to improve in the following months or even years.

## II. Evaluative Framework: Inputs, Actions, Outcomes, and Impact

OPTA uses an evaluative framework to help translate your Theory of Action into a set of concrete steps that can help you implement the Theory of Action and track your progress in doing so. An evaluative framework reveals the connection (or lack of it) between an organization’s actions and its goals and helps define indicators of progress in moving from actions (or the “if” statements in your Theory of Action), to the result or outcome (or the “then” statements). As used in OPTA, the evaluative framework also helps you (i) articulate the rationale behind your particular Theory of Action and (ii) identify what is logically necessary to realize your strategy.

The evaluative framework used in OPTA is composed of the following four steps:

**Inputs**

**Actions**

**Outcomes**

**Impact**

Resources necessary to implement actions (measured using operators’ Theory of Action design process)

Planned work necessary to produce outcomes (measured using operators’ Theory of Action design process)

Short- or mid-term effects of actions (measured by **leading indicators** that indicate progress towards goals)

Long-term results of actions (measured by **lagging indicators** that indicate **ultimate** success or failure)

The following is a brief description of the Evaluative Framework components:

*Inputs*

Inputs are the resources necessary to implement Actions, or the preconditions for your work. Inputs include financial information, such as the amount of funding, and may also include your organization’s and external parties’ commitments of time and personnel. For example, an organization may require salaries for five full-time staff members. You may also need to identify Inputs expected from districts, school leaders and staff, and other third parties that are necessary for the full and effective implementation of all Actions, such as weekly meetings with school principals or classroom space. Attributing an Input to an external party signifies that you have made the necessary arrangements with the other party to assure that Inputs are provided.

*Actions*

Actions are tangible work or activities necessary to achieve desired outcomes. In addition to articulating Actions, you must also select indicators that measure the implementation of those Actions. For example, an Action may be training principals to be instructional leaders. Implementation of this Action may be measured by tracking the number of principal classroom observations, and the average time spent providing feedback to teachers. If necessary, Actions may need to be attributed to districts, school leaders and staff, and other third parties in order to achieve desired outcomes. Attributing an Action to an external party signifies that you have made the necessary arrangements with the other party to assure that the Actions occur.

*Outcomes*

Outcomes are the expected short- and mid-term effects of the Actions. In addition to defining Outcomes, you must also select indicators to measure whether the Outcomes are materializing as planned. These Outcomes may be leading indicators, such as measuring the effectiveness of training principals to be instructional leaders by surveying teachers about the quality of observations and feedback sessions. They also may be lagging indicators**,** such as measuring the effectiveness of tutoring sessions and workshops designed for the lowest-performing students by calculating the gap in test scores between the highest and lowest performing students.

Indicators tracking Actions and indicators tracking Outcomes differ in the following respect. Action indicators measure whether an Action is implemented, (for example, counting the number of feedback sessions), but do not speak to the *quality* of a given Action. Outcome metrics assess the effectiveness of an Action. This enables you and your partner organization to differentiate between Actions that are ostensibly ineffective simply because they are not occurring and Actions that are actually ineffective. In such a case, the Actions are undertaken, but they simply do not lead to the expected Outcome.

*Impact*

Impact is the long-term result of initiatives across a portfolio of funded initiatives. By engaging with your organization, your organizing partner (usually a funder) has made the judgment that your organizational objectives, or Outcomes, sufficiently link to their Impact.

Your Theory of Action should link your organization’s work with these Impact measures. For example, although providing breakfast to students in the morning may not directly have an effect on test scores, a Theory of Action can demonstrate how ensuring that students are nourished in the morning will influence their ability to pay attention in class, to retain information and learn, and thus to raise their scores. Conversely, your work may be focused entirely on raising student achievement, thus overlapping your desired Outcomes with your organizing partner’s Impact.

**What is the value of this evaluative framework?**

One value of the evaluative framework is to diagnose weaknesses, hidden assumptions, or missing steps in a Theory of Action based on collected data. Although the “theory” driving the Theory of Action may draw upon well-established social science and research or hard-won practical experience, it may lack precision and accuracy in a given setting. The Theory of Action may be incomplete due to failure to identify hidden assumptions—often about what external stakeholders must do for an organization’s Actions to mature into Impacts. The evaluative framework in OPTA is designed as a logic model to test, as well as implement, the Theory of Action under a particular set of circumstances.

In order to have a Theory of Action that effectively links Inputs to Impact, each step along the evaluative framework must be *logically connected to* the following step. In other words, the Inputs should include *all* of the logically necessary resources for executing the Actions; the Actions—by *themselves* and without other unstated activities—can be reasonably expected to produce the Outcomes; and the Outcomes are reasonably expected to lead to the Impact. Identification of the critical elements in a Theory of Action enables an organization to test whether there are gaps in the contemplated chain of activities.

The evaluative framework helps diagnose mistaken assumptions about a link between a specified action and its intended result; such assumptions must be made explicit for the strategy to be successful. For example, a stated Action may be to conduct professional development sessions, and the success—or, the desired Outcome—of these sessions may require a particular level of teacher participation. If so, and assuming that teacher participation is the responsibility of the relevant school or district, not the organization itself, this condition or Input must be explicitly stated. Otherwise, if the desired Outcome does not materialize from these professional development sessions, though the organization seems to have fulfilled all of the Actions it specified in the logic model, both the organization and Public Square will find it difficult to diagnose and resolve the problem.

# Part 2: How to Use OPTA

## I. Step-by-Step Instructions

After logging in as a user and finding your Organization, OPTA will ask you to a) type in your organization’s Theory of Action, b) identify the Outcomes that you hope to achieve in each initiative, c) identify the Actions that you plan to undertake, or you assume others will undertake, in each initiative in order to generate those Outcomes, and d) specify the necessary Inputs for your work to be provided either by your organization.

STEP 1: Log in

STEP 2: Search for your Organization

(Make your organization’s page if none is found)

STEP 3: Add an Initiative

3a. Input a Theory of Action

3b. Input Outcomes

3c. Input Actions that support those outcomes

**STEP 1: Logging in**

**STEP 2: Search for your Organization**

**STEP 3: Add an Initiative**

**STEP 3a: Input a Theory of Action**

On the **Theory of Action** worksheet, insert your organization’s Theory of Action using the two key steps for creating a Theory of Action:

**Step One**: Articulate a clear and measurable objective.

**Step Two**: State the actions that, together, will achieve that objective.

. The Theory of Action should:

* Reflect your organization’s mission specific to your sponsored work (please note that this may differ from your organization’s broader mission)
* Be relatively stable throughout the initiative

Use the guidelines provided to craft a Theory of Action specific to your Public Square-sponsored work. Enter Theory of Action in text box provided.

**STEP 3b: Input Outcomes**

Starting here, the logic model of Actions 🡪 Outcomes is organized in reverse order as a backwards-mapping exercise, starting with the Outcomes you plan to achieve in this school.

Below is a screenshot of where you will specify your **Outcomes** for a specific initiative. The blue text provides an example of an Outcome and other data that an operator might type into this worksheet.

**Step B.** List up to three metrics that you will use to track whether or not you achieved, or made progress toward achieving, your desired Outcome. Choose metrics for which your organization will have access to the data.

**Step C.** At the start of your initiative, specify your mid- and end-of-initiative goals for each metric you choose.

**Step A.** Specify the Outcome (or one of the Outcomes) that you plan to achieve.

**Step E.** At the mid- and end-point of your initiative, report your actual results for the specified metric.

**ADD OUTCOME**

To add an additional Outcome and associated Actions, click this box. An additional row will appear in the worksheet.

**Step F.** At the mid- and end-points of your initiative, indicate whether you exceeded, met, or missed your goal for each metric.

Indicate “NA” if you made substantive revisions to the metric such that your initial goals no longer apply.

**Step D.** Metrics may need to change over the course of the initiative. At the mid- and end-points of the initiative, indicate whether you have made any revisions to the metric. Use the drop-down menu to specify whether you refined, added, or deleted a metric. Explain any changes you made using the comment boxes below.

If youno longer use a metric, please mark “Delete” in the drop-down menu, but **do not remove the metric**. If you want to add a metric, add a new row, write the metric in the space to the left, and select “Add” in the drop-down menu. If you have made changes to how you collect or define a metric, rewrite the metric text to reflect those changes and indicate “Revised” in the drop-down menu.

**STEP 3c: Input Actions that support those outcomes**

**Actions**

To the right of each Outcome, insert at least one and up to five Actions that your organization or some other party (for example school or district personnel) will undertake to help achieve that Outcome. There is also space for you to list the party or parties (your organization and/or someone else) that is responsible for executing the Action. You will be able to decide and report whether goals were on-track, on-going, or missed, or if changes were made to the metric based on your subjective judgment.

If achieving that Outcome will require more than five Actions, you may add additional Actions. Attributing Actions to someone or some organization besides your own signifies that you and that party have formally or informally agreed on everyone’s respective responsibilities. Together, all of the Actions listed should reasonably be expected to produce the associated Outcome.

The screenshot below shows how to enter this information. Again, the blue text provides an example of information an operator might provide, in this case about Actions.

**Step E:** At the mid- and end-points, report for each metric whether you have needed to make any changes, including refining, adding, or deleting metrics. Provide the reason for the change in the Comments box below. Follow instructions outlined above for adding, deleting, or refining metrics.

**Step A**. Specify the Actions you will undertake. Select Actions that can be reasonably expected to help achieve the Outcome.

**Step B.** Identify the party or parties responsible for performing this Action.

**Step C.** Specify up to three metrics you will track to evaluate whether or not the Action is being executed successfully. Select metrics that draw on data to which your organization has ready access.

**Step D.** For each metric, provide the existing amount or status at the beginning of the initiative and the benchmarks or goals you are setting for the mid- and end-points of the initiative.

**Step G.** For each metric, at the mid- and end-point of initiative, indicate whether you met, exceeded, or missed your goal. Indicate “NA” if you made changes to the metric.

**Step F.** For each metric, report your *actual* results at the mid- and end-points of the initiative. In comments, you can provide any context you believe will help Public Square understand your results.

**Inputs**

Below the Outcomes and Actions section, indicate the Inputs (resources or preconditions) that are necessary for your organization to be successful in executing the Theory of Action in this school. These Inputs should be factors that are logically necessary for the planned Actions to actualize in this school. Also indicate the party or parties responsible for providing the Input. Attributing an Input to a party other than you organization signifies that you and that party have formally or informally agreed upon the relevant division of responsibilities for providing Inputs. These Inputs include grants, personnel, and general conditions for success such as access to data and facilities. Together, all of the Inputs listed should be sufficient, in conjunction with the specified Actions, to produce the associated Outcome.

**Step C**: Specify the Inputs or resources that you are expecting to receive from external parties.

**Step E:** At the mid- and end-points of the initiative, use the drop-down menu to indicate whether that Input was adequately provided.

**Step D:** Specify the external parties (individual or group) responsible for providing the Input.

**Step B**: Specify the Inputs or resources that you are investing into this school from your own organization.

# FAQs

**Hard, quantitative data do not always reflect our progress. How do we communicate all that we accomplish?**

OPTA captures qualitative data, as well. Your qualitative feedback on your activities, progress towards goals, and real-life interactions with partners will bring contextual, more nuanced light to your initiative. This information can be included in the various areas in OPTA.

**We pursue the same Outcomes and engage in the same Actions for all of our initiatives. Can we report our results at an aggregate level?**

Not precisely. OPTA captures initiative-specific measures because often the work that succeeds at one organization may encounter challenges at another. It is important for the organizing partner to have information from each partner they work with so progress may be tracked on a case-by-case basis.

However, organizing partners may use identical metrics for multiple initiatives. It is possible to copy the completed metrics in the required fields into the identical fields for the additional initiatives you work in.

**What if our desired Outcomes will not actualize within the time frame?**

OPTA is designed to capture both short-term and long-term progress. It is understood that sustainable change will take time to achieve. Immediate and drastic progress within a limited time frame is not necessarily expected, but appropriate Actions and related metrics should be captured by OPTA to demonstrate interim progress.

In addition, strong leading indicators will demonstrate to your organizing partner that your programs and Theory of Action have been implemented well. Where available, qualitative data, including surveys and quality reviews, should also help to explain and support slow progress.

**How do funders measure and track the Impact of its portfolio of initiatives?**

Funders translate the aggregate actions of its diverse portfolio into indicators of ultimate Impact though an OPTA heat map, which is a composite of multiple indicators of performance.

# How to Interpret Your Results – Analysis

Analyzing the leading and lagging indicators you choose to input into OPTA can reveal:

1. That the logic behind an initiative’s Theory of Action may be incorrect.
   1. In this situation, there is no indication that the organizing or implementing partner has failed to state or implement the necessary Outcomes and Actions. However, despite faithful implementation and sufficient planning, as indicated by “on-track” goals on Actions in OPTA, one or more Outcomes fail to demonstrate success. This combination of events—adequate implementation but inadequate results—may suggest that the logic behind an initiative’s Theory of Action is flawed. All hypothesized Actions and Inputs have been supplied, but the expected change has not been achieved.
2. That Actions necessary for an initiative’s Theory of Action to succeed in generating the desired Outcomes have been omitted for one or more of the following reasons:
   1. A partner did not recognize the importance of those Actions. Similar to the above, this scenario contemplates that all *stated* Actions have been faithfully implemented. The partners should ask if there are any *unstated* Inputs or Actions necessary for successful execution of the Theory of Action.
   2. A partner recognized the importance of Actions and stated in OPTA that such Actions should be met, but assumed another party would execute those Actions while failing to state that such other party was responsible.
3. That there may be problems with the rigor of implementation for an partner for one or more of the following reasons:
   1. A partner has failed to adequately carry out the Actions capture in OPTA. The Action metrics in OPTA may provide indications of lack of implementation rigor. Performance may be below expectations, simply put, because a partner did not do what they said they were going to do in an initiative.
4. That additional or different partners are necessary to improve the current portfolio of initiatives and increase the organizing partner’s (usually, a funder’s) Impact.
   1. This situation concerns an organizing partner’s aggregate Impact. Analysis of the system’s leading indicators or lagging indicators may reveal that the current “mix” of initiatives in the portfolio will not or has not contributed to increased Impact achievement.
5. That in a situation in which the desired Impacts or Outcomes are not yet materializing, positive signals being received from the leading indicators suggest more time is needed for Impacts and Outcomes to catch up to effective implementation. Conversely, negative signals from leading indicators may suggest that ample time has already been given, that a new strategy should be employed, or that a relationship with a partner should be terminated.