

Theory of Change

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I am increasingly convinced that the difference between effective and ineffective people is their skill at developing a theory of change. Theory of change is a funny phrase — I first heard it in the nonprofit community, but it’s also widespread in politics and really applies to just about everything. Unfortunately, very few people seem to be very good at it.

Let’s take a concrete example. Imagine you want to decrease the size of the defense budget. The typical way you might approach this is to look around at the things you know how to do and do them on the issue of decreasing the defense budget. So, if you have a blog, you might write a blog post about why the defense budget should be decreased and tell your friends about it on Facebook and Twitter. If you’re a professional writer, you might write a book on the subject. If you’re an academic, you might publish some papers. Let’s call this strategy a “theory of action”: you work *forwards* from what you know how to do to try to find things you can do that will accomplish your goal.

A theory of change is the opposite of a theory of action — it works backwards from the goal, in concrete steps, to figure out what you can do to achieve it. To develop a theory of change, you need to start at the end and repeatedly ask yourself, “Concretely, how does one achieve that?” A decrease in the defense budget: how does one achieve that? Yes, you.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Congress passes a new budget with a smaller authorization for defense next year.

Yes, that’s true — but let’s get more concrete. How does that happen?

AUDIENCE: Uh, you get a majority of the House and Senate to vote for it and the President to sign it.

Great, great — so how do you get them to do that? Now we have to think about what motivates politicians to support something. This is a really tricky question, but it’s totally crucial if we want to be effective. After all, if we don’t eventually motivate the politicians, then what we’ve done is useless for achieving our goal. (Unless we can think of some other way to shrink the defense budget.)

But this is also not an insoluble problem. Put yourself in the shoes of a politician for a moment. What would motivate you? Well, on the one hand, there’s what you think is right. Then there’s what will help you get reelected. And finally there’s peer pressure and other sort of psychological motivations that get people to do things that don’t meet their own goals.

So the first would suggest a strategy of persuading politicians that cutting the defense budget was a good idea. The second would suggest organizing a constituency in their districts that would demand they cut the defense budget. And maybe one of you can figure out how to use the third—that's a little trickier.

But let's stick with the first, since that's the most standard. What convinces politicians that something is the right thing to do?

AUDIENCE: Their beliefs?

In a sense, I suppose. But those are going to be pretty hard to change. I'm thinking more, if you have a politician with a given set of beliefs, how do you convince them that cutting the defense budget advances those beliefs?

AUDIENCE: You outline why to them.

Well, OK, let's think about that. Do you think if you ran into Nancy Pelosi in the hallway here and you tried to explain to her why cutting the defense budget would accomplish her beliefs, that you'd convince her?

AUDIENCE: Probably not.

Why not?

AUDIENCE: Because she wouldn't really listen to me — she'd just smile and nod.

Yeah. Nancy Pelosi doesn't trust you. She's never met you. You're not particularly credible. So you need to find people the politicians trust and get them to convince the politicians.

Alright, well, we can continue down this road for a while — figuring out who politicians trust, figuring out how to persuade *them*, figuring out how to get them to, in turn, persuade the politicians, etc. Then, when the politicians are persuaded, there's the task of developing something they can vote for, getting it introduced so they can vote on it, then getting them to vote on the specific measure even when they agree with the overall idea. You can see that this can take quite a while.

It's not easy. It could take a while before you get to a concrete action that you can take. But do you see how this is entirely crucial if you want to be effective? Now maybe if you're only writing a blog post, it's not worth it. Not everything we do has to be maximally effective. But DC is filled with organizations that spend millions of dollars each year and have hardly even begun to think about these questions. I'm not saying their money is totally wasted — it certainly has some positive impacts — but it could do so much more if the people in charge thought, concretely, about how it was supposed to accomplish their goals.

I'll close with one more example, showing how this strategy can be used personally as well. I was at a party once and I told someone I was writing a book and that I wanted it to be a bestseller. They laughed at that and I think it's because they had a theory of action model in their head: you write the best

book you can, and of course you want it to be a bestseller, but either it does or it doesn't.

But I was working backwards, I had a theory of change: I asked, What makes something a best seller? Well, lots of people buy it. OK, how do you get lots of people to buy something? Well, you have to persuade them it's something they want. OK, how do you persuade them it's something they want? Well, first it has to meet some desire or need they have and second you need to explain to them how it meets that need. So what are the desires or needs people have? (Looking at bestsellers: entertainment, escape, self-improvement, etc.) What are the ways of explaining your book meets their need? (Being popular early on, appearances in the media, persuading readers to tell other readers, etc.)

Again, we can keep going for quite a while until we get all the way back to something I can actually do. But because of this, I didn't have to simply have to hope that my book became a bestseller, like every other author. I could actually do something about it.

That's the power of a theory of change.