

WHAT'S YOUR THEORY?

Tips for conducting program evaluation

A program theory is simply a clear explanation of why you do the things you do, given what you hope to accomplish.

All human service programs are designed to make a difference in the lives of people or to improve our society. But how?

When you set out to design or redesign a program, you are choosing among many options. For example, if you want to prevent violence or help people heal after being victims of crime, how do you decide which activities to include? Since you can't do everything that might help, which services are most important? Which ones need to be combined with other services in order to be most effective?

These questions all get at your underlying program theory. A program theory explains how and why a program is supposed to work. Spelling out that theory can be one of the most important things you do for the success of your program. It provides a logical and reasonable description of why

the things you do – your program activities – should lead to the intended results or benefits.

Clarity and plain language are essential. Can you explain it to your neighbor, or to your third cousin at a family reunion? Don't assume that your funders or staff members are any more sophisticated in their need for a clear description.

Not only will a clear program theory help others see the sense of your program, but it will help you make sure you are actually providing the package of services that have the best possible chance of helping participants. And when it comes to evaluating your results, a clear program theory makes it much easier to choose the most appropriate outcomes (results) to measure.

The if-then connection

Program theories can often be captured in a series of "if-then" statements – IF something is done with or for the program participants, THEN something should change.

For example, a program to reduce aggression based on social learning theory could have an underlying theory like this:

"IF facilitators model nonviolent conflict management strategies and provide opportunities for participants to practice these strategies, THEN participants will develop skills in nonviolent conflict management."

A program theory should also spell out why you expect the changes to happen. Between



If-then connection, continued:

the “if” and the “then,” there should be some solid evidence or some well-established connection supporting the idea that your service package will accomplish your program goals.

A good program theory also reflects the fact that change happens in stages. For

Sample outline for a program theory

- IF a certain set of resources (such as staff, equipment, materials) are available, THEN the program can provide a certain set of activities or services to participants.
- IF participants receive these services, THEN they experience specific changes in their knowledge, attitudes, or skills.
- IF individuals change their knowledge, attitudes, or skills, THEN they will change their behavior and usual practice.
- IF enough participants change their behavior and practice, THEN the program may have a broader impact on the families or friends of participants or on the community as a whole.

A gut feeling is not enough

Some human service programs sound promising, but do not result in the desired changes for participants. Of course, this could be because a good theory is not being carried out well, but in some cases the problem is the theory itself. Make sure that your theory not only looks clear and makes sense on paper, but that it is based on good underlying evidence about what makes programs successful and how people really change.

example, many programs have a goal of changing some type of behavior. However, there are usually several things that have to happen first. People usually change their behavior after first learning some new information, developing a new skill, or changing their attitude about something.

For example, an after-school violence prevention program could have the following theory:

Qualified counselors provide violence prevention training to children.



Children gain knowledge of nonviolent conflict resolution and coping strategies.



Children practice non-violent conflict resolution and coping strategies.



Children reduce their violent behavior and demonstrate improved social skills.



As a result of the reduced violent behavior of individual children, violent behaviors in schools will decline.

To avoid a shaky theory that leads to disappointing results, go deeper than common assumptions about how certain activities lead to outcomes. Instead, consider the available theories and research evidence that support these connections. In this way, you can be more confident in the underlying strength of your service delivery model.

If you're not sure what the current research is showing, take some time to find out. Talk with colleagues in the field about what evidence they've seen lately. Look online or in a library for recent

information. Review material presented at the best conferences in your field to see what the latest research and evaluation studies are showing.

Here's how to start

To develop a program theory, select one of your activities and answer the following three questions.

- IF the activity is provided, THEN what – realistically – should be the result for participants?
- WHY do you believe the activity will lead to this result? (In other words, what is your assumption about how this kind of change occurs? Are you drawing from an established theory used by others?)
- What evidence do you have that the activity will lead to this result (such as previous results from your own or

other programs, published research, or consistent feedback from participants)?

Repeat the same three questions for each activity or service that you provide. Don't worry, you don't need to develop a theory for everything! Administrative tasks, such as training staff or doing paperwork, typically are not included in a program theory. These activities, while a necessary part of running a program, are usually not the important services that produce change in participants. Focus on the main services you provide – the ones you most count on to promote positive results.



How does a theory differ from a logic model?

A program theory is similar in concept to logic models, which have become increasingly popular in human services programs over the past several years. (We'll go into logic models in an upcoming Evaluation Tip Sheet.)

In simple terms, a logic model is a picture of your theory – a drawing that shows how one thing leads to the next, like a flow chart.

A logic model uses short phrases to represent things that you explain in more detail in the program theory. Another key difference is that, while a logic model can just use an arrow to show that one thing leads to the next, your program theory needs to lay out the evidence to show *why* you believe one thing will lead to the next.

Quick links to more information

Theory of Change

<http://www.theoryofchange.org>

Making Evaluation Integral to Your Asset-Building Initiative: Employing a Theory of Action and Change

<http://www.search-institute.org/research/knowledge/MakingEvaluationIntegral.html>

Theory of Change: A Practical Tool for Action, Results and Learning

<http://www.aecf.org/initiatives/mc/readingroom/documents/theoryofchangemanual.pdf>



In future tip sheets

What a logic model can do for you

Building a logic model

Prioritizing evaluation questions

Find previous tip sheets on the web: www.ojp.state.mn.us/grants/index.htm or www.wilderresearch.org.

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