

Theory of Change

Focus organizational strategy on achieving more equitable outcomes. Listen to constituents and impacted communities.

Introduction

A Theory of Change examines the explicit and implicit assumptions of an organization's activities to predict what strategies and actions will lead to near-term, intermediate and long-term outcomes—eventually driving population impacts.

A compelling Theory of Change encourages your organization to:

- Listen to and identify the most important needs of your intended beneficiaries
- Articulate the most important mechanisms to meet those needs
- Link your activities to your beneficiaries' needs through a chain of cause-and-effect relationships

Data is a crucial starting point for developing a strategy for your organization.

[Consider Examples Of Qualitative And Quantitative Data](#)

Learn more about developing an equitable Theory of Change, below:

Tools for equity

Consider this five-step process for developing an equity-aligned Theory of Change:

Step 1: Plan

Determine which inequities your organization hopes to address.

The first task is to produce an outcomes statement that specifies the disparities you would like to reduce or eliminate in a given place and timeframe. This means defining, as clearly as possible, the focus of your change effort over the coming months and years.

Key Questions

- Is there a specific area of inequality and disparity you would like to focus on?
- At what scale will you seek change? Issue? Institutions or organizations? Community? County? State? Region?
- What will “equity” look like in your outcome area? How can you measure your equity goals?
- When do you expect to see results? What is the timeframe? Two years? Ten years?

Example equity outcome statements

- To eliminate racial disparities in juvenile sentencing in X city/county/region within two years
- To reduce Black and Latino high school dropout rates in X city/county/region by 50 percent within ten years
- To produce X units of affordable, multi-family housing in high performing school districts in Y locations within five years

To inform priorities and engage community stakeholders, organizations may consider conducting an internal self-assessment and external data gathering. POWER MOVES, from the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, provides an internal questions checklist and sample interview/survey questions for community input.

Sources

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Step 2: Set

Determine the key building blocks to bring about desired outcomes for your beneficiaries.

Key Questions

- Build: Invite people in your organization to support community and stakeholder outreach to ensure that all stakeholders feel welcome to participate in the vision or mission statement development process
- Facilitate: Host in-person and virtual “Town Hall” sessions for:
 - organizational leaders to share their thoughts about equity in relation to their vision for the organization and personal commitment, and
 - stakeholders to share their perspectives on your organization’s equity vision or mission statement
 - Provide additional opportunities for stakeholders to provide input via online survey or feedback forms
- Communicate: Distill key takeaways from “Town Hall” sessions and other feedback mechanisms, and make a report detailing these key takeaways publicly available to all stakeholders

Examples of building blocks to eliminate juvenile racialized sentencing disparities

- Similar arrest rates for white, black and brown youth in the same community or region for any given offense
- A wider menu of positive recreational options for local youth
- Preventive rather than aggressive community policing
- Culturally competent police officers and juvenile justice officials

Sources

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Step 3: Review

Consider what might support or impede your efforts to address inequities.

For each building block, identify public policies, institutional practices and cultural representations likely to determine whether or not that building block materializes or stays in place. These policies, practices and representations are the specific things that community-change stakeholders must promote or target to enable the outcomes you seek to produce. Remember to take a cross-sectoral approach. Policies and practices across multiple sectors (e.g., education, housing and employment) often cumulatively reinforce inequities.

Example of an “alternatives to prison” building block that might be undermined by a convergence of the following policies, practices and cultural representations

- Mandatory sentencing laws (policy)
- Prison construction as a rural economic development strategy (policy)
- Public housing regulations requiring eviction of convicted felons (policy)
- Employer practices against hiring individuals with criminal records (practice) and
- Pervasive images of inner cities, crime and violence, so that mass incarceration seems inevitable (representation)

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Step 4: Map

Map the change landscape enabling/hindering your building blocks. Understand the politics of change in the communities where you work. Stakeholders may be elected officials, interest groups, government bureaucrats, business executives, media and entertainment organizations, unions, opinion leaders, etc.

Racial equity work is as much political as it is technical and programmatic. Much of it involves building alliances for action, developing public will to support change, and productively countering the resistance you may encounter.

Key questions:

- Does your organization have the will to take on this type of work for a sustained period?
- Do the board, staff and other leaders within your organization share a race analysis that will prioritize this work?
- Does the leadership have the courage and commitment to take this on?
- Does your organization have the capacity to do what's necessary to change or promote policies, practices or representations?

Key considerations:

- Who are the key “players” in a given context?
- How does the governance process work at the level you want to engage?
- Who and what are likely to undermine or undo progress toward creating your building blocks?

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Step 5: Act

Having planned, set, reviewed and mapped, determine how your organization should act to bring about desired outcomes.

With this clearer sense of what your organization can do to achieve the desired racial equity outcomes, you can develop a detailed action plan that is both realistic and in line with your social change vision.

What will your organization seek to achieve?

- What will be your initial focus?
- What can you initially test, refine and/or assess before taking additional steps to support or grow further?
- What (specifically) do you think you will have accomplished by the end of year one?

- What can your organization achieve in five or ten years? How will you know you have succeeded?

Besides staff and financial resources, consider other capacities:

- Analytical: deep knowledge of specific policy, legislative and regulatory environments; familiarity with racial dynamics and outcomes of specific institutions; capacity to identify and assess power of narratives, images and other representations linked to race; capacity for strategic thinking
- Convening: capacity to bring together disparate stakeholder groups; provide “safe space” for honest discussion with an agenda that moves the process forward to support ongoing learning
- Communication: ability to frame information and reach critical audiences in local government, business and civic sectors
- Networking: ability to develop, participate in and join formal and informal networks and coalitions; ability to acquire resources through those relationships

Sources

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