

MAKING SENSE: REVIEWING PROGRAM DESIGN WITH THEORY OF CHANGE

ActKnowledge

Center for Human Environments
365 Fifth Ave., 6th Floor
New York, NY 10016
Tel: 212.817.1906
Fax: 212.817.1564
www.actknowledge.org

The Aspen Institute Roundtable on Comprehensive Community Initiatives

281 Park Avenue South
New York, NY 10010
Tel: 212.677.5510 x 27
Fax: 212.677.5650
www.aspenroundtable.org

Abstract

This article considers the value and pitfalls of Theory of Change as a tool for evaluating program design. Because the Theory of Change approach carefully scrutinizes program design it can unearth both positives and negatives about a program to its stakeholders.

Theory of Change and Evaluation: Evaluating Program Design

Most frequently evaluators and funders talk about process or formative evaluations and outcome evaluation. Proponent of using a Theory of Change as a framework for evaluation emphasize the ability to integrate process and outcomes evaluation because the theory asks “what happened” and “how and why did that happen”, so that each outcome is evaluated in terms of how well it was met *and* what processes were in place that brought it about, or at least are believed to have brought it about.

While this is certainly a key benefit of a theory-based evaluation, there is an under-emphasized evaluation that takes place at an earlier stage, and which is called in TOC jargon “quality review”. This term is often presented to people coming together to create their theories as the last step of building their theory. It sounds deceptively straightforward – now that you have laid out your theory, review it to test it for plausibility, doability and testability.

In our experience, however, quality review is a KEY evaluation stage. It is the point at which the program design is critiqued. Is the logic sound? Are the assumptions flawed or accurate? Are explanations of how change happens and what outcomes are needed consistent with what is known in a given field (e.g. what opportunities youth need for positive social development)? Are contextual conditions (both opportunities and barriers) accounted for?

Assuming that quality review is simply the last step of theory-building leads people to feel like they are at the end of the process and they are ready to move on. They are often surprised and dismayed (sometimes even panicked) when they realize that critique of the plan may mean rethinking things, getting new people or information on board, or finding weaknesses in underlying assumptions.

Quality Review Means Very Different Things at Different Times

There are different scenarios depending on who is doing the TOC and when. Quality review is simplest and least threatening when a group undertakes TOC at the outset of the initiative. They haven’t invested money or political will in certain strategies or program ideas, and finding a flaw in their program design simply requires fixing it. It may take a little extra time and some hard thinking, but it does not upset existing programs.

Often however, TOC is undertaken after strategic planning has been finished, and after funding decisions have been made and programs started. In that case, coming cross fundamental flaws in the logic or assumptions about change can have serious financial, political and practical consequences. Not surprisingly, groups have mixed feelings at this point about realizing their conceptions are flawed. On the one hand, they want the program to work, and they started the TOC process to make sure their program made sense and could expect success. They want to make improvements where they see they are needed. On the other hand, if dollars have already been spent, or funders and constituents bought

into the old description, it can be anywhere from difficult to disastrous to admit mistakes in design.

Another common situation is that different groups are involved. The program staff may articulate their theory and then have it critiqued by their funder or their stakeholders. For staff who may have invested years in developing what they believe to be good strategies, having their "logic" critiqued can be hard to welcome, even though its in the interests of improving their program.

In the ideal case, initiatives build their theory before making decisions about funding and program activities, but in fact that rarely happens. Therefore, we have to be savvy about what quality review means for program already funded and operational. One thing we should be clear about is that quality review of the theory, and all its components, *is an evaluation activity*. It should not be considered to be part of getting the theory down on paper, or part of a planning process, *unless* it occurs before the program starts. Even then, reviewing a theory to make sure it makes sense to all involved is a way of "vetting" an initiative that should be considered an evaluative step.

Quality Review is the Hidden Danger of TOC

For initiatives underway who want to undertake TOC either to better understand what they are doing, or as a way to create an evaluation plan, they usually do not foresee discovering that their fundamental philosophy is flawed, or missing pieces, and do not expect to be "exposed" to others. Yet, for programs that were started without a theory, and without making assumptions explicit, we really should expect that such problems might occur.

But despite these potential complications, we believe that the benefits usually outweigh the costs. Whether your initiative's funding is in the hundreds or the millions of dollars, finding and fixing your project's problem is necessary for a successful project even if might entail the occasional TOC bump on the road.