

# THEORY OF CHANGE (TOC) OVERVIEW & APPROACH

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## Definition

- A TOC (Theory of Change) describes the overall focus and approach for creating change: a process of planned social (or other) change, from the assumptions that guide its design to the long-term goals it seeks to achieve.
- A TOC does not necessarily describe just one way of creating change - it addresses all the ways an organization may do its work. In the case of environmental organizations, for example, this likely means the TOC could grassroots organizing to litigation to science to policy - but lays out a clear case for why any of these strategies is chosen over other choices.

*A theory of change takes a wide view of a desired change, carefully probing the assumptions behind each step in what may be a long and complex process. Articulating a theory of change often entails thinking through all the steps along a path toward a desired change, identifying the preconditions that will enable (and possibly inhibit) each step, listing the activities that will produce those conditions, and explaining why those activities are likely to work.*

*From: Grantcraft - Mapping Change: Using a Theory of Change to Guide Planning and Evaluation*

## Rationale for a TOC:

A good TOC helps organizations draw logical connections between activities and outcomes. It helps them to articulate exactly what propositions and assumptions their work is testing — and therefore what they should be assessing in their evaluation plans.

A good theory of change does the following:

- It helps you understand the relationship between the problems you're addressing and the strategies you're using to get the work done.
- Helps you see what's possible and what's not possible to achieve with the intervention you've chosen to support.
- Helps you assess risks in your campaign or initiative – what might be more likely to work and what is more uncertain.
- It helps you think about what other inputs or resources might be needed and whether your input might fit in a catalytic place.
- It helps you examine whether or not your intervention will be powerful enough.
- It helps you promote accountability and transparency.
- Ultimately, it promotes the most effective and efficient application of scarce resources i.e. provides focus and priorities.
- It establishes common vocabulary and principles.
- It makes implicit assumptions explicit and it separates idealism – sometimes called “magical thinking” (what we think or believe *will happen* or *should happen*) from pragmatism (what we know will most likely happen and what our organization can likely deliver on).

A Theory of Change could potentially be perceived as a bureaucratic, idea-killing exercise in trying to predict the future. The opposite is hopefully the case: that a TOC approach results in highly engaging, sacred-cow challenging, highly creative ideas and plans. It is not intended to be a one-size-fits-all planning approach and can very effectively be used alongside other tools for generating ideas.

## Distinguishing the Theory of Change and Strategic Plan

The TOC and SP (Strategic Plan) are closely linked. Distinguishing them can be confusing - the TOC reflects more how you think change in general happens, while the SP captures more specific goals and strategies.

A theory of change developed at the outset of planning will help planners make more informed decisions about more specific goals, strategies and tactics. However, some organizations may find that they develop their TOC in an emergent way - the discussions about key strategic plan elements could directly lead into fleshing out the TOC.

And just as a strategic plan changes over time, a TOC may also evolve as circumstances change. However, a TOC is usually more enduring as the underlying way that change happens against your long terms goals is usually more durable. (An example of how a TOC can change can be seen in the US – and Canada more recently - in the way that environmental safeguards or achievements were obtained; as government openness to engaging on conservation issues, and as corporate ways of engaging shifted, conservation groups and others had to re-visit their whole TOC - and are still doing so).

## Describing/Capturing a Theory of Change

A TOC can be fairly detailed or fairly high-level - and perhaps ideally there might be two versions. Given that a TOC most importantly illustrates your thinking about how change is most likely to happen toward your goal (among other things), you might have a detailed TOC (e.g. at a program by program level, that captures all your assumptions) and a higher-level TOC that captures your main “if we do this then this will happen” that can be used for a broader audience (your board, for example). Most TOCs that you will find publicly are these high-level versions (they don’t reveal any specific strategies).

## Developing a TOC—Key Steps

**An important first step in the process is identifying a workable long-term goal and long-term outcomes. The long-term goal should be something the initiative can realistically achieve and that everyone involved understands.**

**Once a long-term goal is identified, the group then considers:**

**What conditions must be in place for us to reach the goal? Any such necessary conditions should be shown as outcomes on the Theory of Change pathway, underneath the long-term outcome. These outcomes act as preconditions to the long-term outcome. The process of identifying preconditions continues, drilling down the pathway by posing fundamental questions such as: “What has to be in place for this outcome to be achieved?” and “Are these preconditions sufficient for the outcome to be achieved?”**

([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theory\\_of\\_change](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theory_of_change))

1. Start with assumptions about the environment in which the organization is doing its work;
2. Identify key goals, each supported by a set of assumptions about why and how that particular goal would be important;
3. Break each goal down into discrete objectives and strategies, along with key evaluation questions and milestones that would indicate progress toward each goal.

## Theory of Change Key Elements:

A TOC can be a more detailed document or a general storyline. It can also be supported by a simple flowchart (like a logic model). It should have enough detail in it that readers get a sense of the core assumptions being made and the choices being made. The document does not have to include all the evidence that has been covered to support the TOC but that evidence should at least be referenced and captured somewhere else.

**A Theory of Change typically includes:**

- clear articulation of the problem or issue to be solved and the desired results/outcomes
- working backwards to identify, map and explain the preconditions, requirements, and community needs and assets necessary to achieving the desired goal
- identification of influential factors and assumptions about the context
- determination of strategies that will be undertaken to achieve the intended change
- indicators for measuring program outcomes
- a narrative that explains the logic of the plan

## Key Components:

Focus	Description
Long-Term Outcomes	<p>The long-term (20-30 years?) change in the world we want to see (i.e. what it would look like to be achieving our mission in 30 years' time) Includes the high-level assumptions are we making about:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Why these outcomes and not other outcomes? (i.e. of all the possible metrics describing how X could be improved which ones do we think are most important to focus on and why?)</li> <li>○ Why are we best/well positioned to pursue these goals (compared to others)?</li> </ul>
↓	↓
Pre-conditions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ What would have to be in place to support/allow these long-term outcomes?</li> </ul>
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High-level shorter-term Goals	<p>To support these pre-conditions being in place, what does success look like in the next 3-5 years i.e. what subset of that change in the world' are we committing to achieving as an organization (and not necessarily by ourselves)</p> <p><b>1. How will you know when you have succeeded?</b> What would count as progress/success after 1 year, 2 years, 3 years, and so on? What indicators will you use to measure your achievements/impact's</p>
↓	↓

<p><b>Broad Strategies</b></p>	<p>How we believe change happens i.e. what it takes to accomplish the goals. Strategies are based on an analysis of:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>Who or what needs to change in order for the vision, goal to be achieved? In what ways?</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Who - the target populations(s) - is going to do what, that will lead to certain outcomes?</li> <li>○ What will it take to support the target population acting in the necessary and sufficient ways? What tools or processes would we need to impact/ influence the identified groups/systems?</li> <li>○ What is the amount of change required to achieve success?</li> <li>○ Over what timeframe is the change expected to happen?</li> <li>○ What is the analysis that we have done to suggest our conclusions on all of the above are reasonably sound?</li> </ul> </li> <li>2. <b>How could we achieve that change?</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ What has and hasn't worked elsewhere?</li> <li>○ What are the factors that will influence our ability to create change?</li> <li>○ What assumptions are we making about what strategies will or won't work etc.?</li> <li>○ Who is best positioned to drive specific strategies (e.g. other organizations)? Who else is working in the field? Are there opportunities for cooperation and partnerships? Is there likely to be competition with others?</li> <li>○ What are the key solutions or strategies that will achieve the short, medium and long-term goals?</li> </ul> </li> <li>3. <b>What are the resources (financial, time, skills and knowledge - including ones outside the organization e.g. key partners) required to achieve the change and are they available?</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Where are the gaps in resources?</li> <li>○ What externally or internally imposed constraints are we operating under?</li> <li>○ How well is our organization positioned to deliver on specific strategies – strengths, weaknesses?</li> </ul> </li> <li>4. <b>How will we know we are making progress and have succeeded?</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ What would count as progress/success after 1 year, 2 years, 3 years, and so on? What indicators will we use to measure achievements/impact?</li> </ul> </li> </ol>
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## Examples of Core Assumptions about how Change Happens

Marshall Ganz (“Theory of Change”, National Organizing Institute) provides some valuable observations about a few of the different highest-level generic TOC’s that individuals or organizations may have:

**ALL OF US MAKE ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT HOW CHANGE HAPPENS, BUT WE CAN STRATEGIZE MORE EFFECTIVELY IF WE MAKE OUR ASSUMPTIONS EXPLICIT.**

**FOR EXAMPLE, SOME PEOPLE HOLD AN INFORMATION THEORY OF CHANGE—THEY BELIEVE THAT IF OTHER PEOPLE HAVE MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THE PROBLEM THAT WILL EVENTUALLY CHANGE THINGS. OTHERS HOLD A LEGAL THEORY OF CHANGE, BELIEVING THAT USING THE COURTS, OR CHANGING LAWS IS THE WAY TO GUARANTEE CHANGE. OTHERS OPERATE ON A CULTURAL THEORY OF CHANGE—BELIEVING IF THE CULTURE IN GENERAL BECOMES MORE ACCEPTING OF NEW IDEAS BY SEEING THEM REPRESENTED IN CULTURAL VENUES, CHANGE CAN HAPPEN. OTHERS USE A MARKET THEORY OF CHANGE, BUILDING SUPPLY OR DEMAND TO SHIFT MARKET DYNAMICS.**

Ganz goes on to describe his Theory of Change:

**SOMETIMES THESE THEORIES DO CONTRIBUTE TO CHANGE. HOWEVER, AS ORGANIZERS WE OPERATE ON A POWER-BASED THEORY OF CHANGE, BELIEVING THAT IF WE WIN CHANGE BY ANY MEANS, BUT HAVE NOT CHANGED THE UNDERLYING POWER DYNAMICS, THEN WE WILL CONTINUE TO SUFFER THE SYMPTOMS OF A DEEPER PROBLEM OF INEQUALITY.**

The bottom line is that it is critical to know what your TOC is and feel confident it is based on the most solid evidence you can muster – not based largely on passionate exhortations.

## Testing your Theory of Change

You should check that your TOC is:

1. *Plausible* (stakeholders believe the logic of the model is correct: if we do these things, we will get the results we want and expect);
2. *Doable* (human, political and economic resources are seen as sufficient to implement the action strategies in the theory);
3. Testable (Stakeholders believe there are credible ways to discover whether the results are as predicted);
4. Meaningful (stakeholders see the outcomes as important and the magnitude of change in these outcomes being pursued as worth the effort)

(source: Connell, J.P., & Klem, A.M. (2000). Journal of Educational and Psychological Consulting

## Theory of Change - Draft sample applying the above framework to a conservation organization

Area of Focus	Organization/Program Theory of Change focus (examples only)
1. What is our highest-level outcome we are seeking i.e. our long-term vision?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Our vision is a “healthy and intact (local) Ecosystem where critical lands and waters are adequately protected, wildlife is managed in a thoughtful, sustainable manner and a strong, diverse base of support is working to conserve and sustain this special place as part of a larger, connected regional ecosystem”</li> </ul>
2. Within that overall vision, what are the most pressing needs, issues, threats and opportunities? In other words, based on the best science and knowledge we have of the current and likely future state of this ecosystem, what aspects of the ecosystem functioning require the most attention or intervention in order for the vision to be realized?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ What is the current health/state of key aspects of the ecosystem?</li> <li>○ What is the likely, projected future health of the regional ecosystem?</li> <li>○ What are causes, drivers of these changes in the ecosystem health? Which ones if any are more impactful? How do they relate to each other?</li> <li>○ Etc.</li> </ul>
3. Within the overall vision, what are some realistic outcomes/goals we could achieve?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ What more specific outcomes do we believe would move us more toward the vision? E.g.               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Changes in the state of the land, waters, air, fragmentation.</li> <li>○ Changes in the state of wildlife</li> <li>○ Changes in the state of the community connection with the ecosystem (it is debatable whether this would come in her or later on in the ‘conditions for success’)</li> </ul> </li> <li>○ And what is the scientific evidence/theory that suggests these outcomes would move us closer to the vision?</li> <li>○ How would those outcomes be measured? Which metrics?</li> </ul>

<p>4. What are the conditions or pre-requisites that would have to be met in order for these goals to be achieved?</p>	<p>Example: Wildlife health</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Adequate food</li> <li>○ Adequate mobility</li> <li>○ Mortality rates minimized</li> <li>○ Adequate genetic diversity</li> <li>○ And what is the scientific evidence/theory that suggests these conditions would likely move us closer to the outcomes we have identified?</li> </ul>
<p>5. What would it take to get those conditions in place? (i.e. what are the high-level kinds of approaches to making change?)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ What kinds of decisions or actions would be needed in order to meet the conditions for change?</li> <li>○ Who would be the decision-makers? Who would influence them to make the right kinds of decisions?</li> <li>○ What kinds of broad strategies/ approaches would we need to impact those decisions or actions? (e.g. advocacy, public education, doing research, lobbying, etc.)</li> <li>○ And what is the evidence/ theory that suggests these types of strategies would likely move us closer to the outcomes we have identified?</li> </ul>
<p>6. Of all the possible goals, which ones will our organization take on as priorities?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Which goals are we best positioned to take on? Why? (and what is the best evidence we can find to suggest that based on more than our opinion e.g. external interviews, survey data)</li> </ul>
<p>Etc.</p>	