

Theory of Change Brief Summary and Template

Theory of Change – broad description

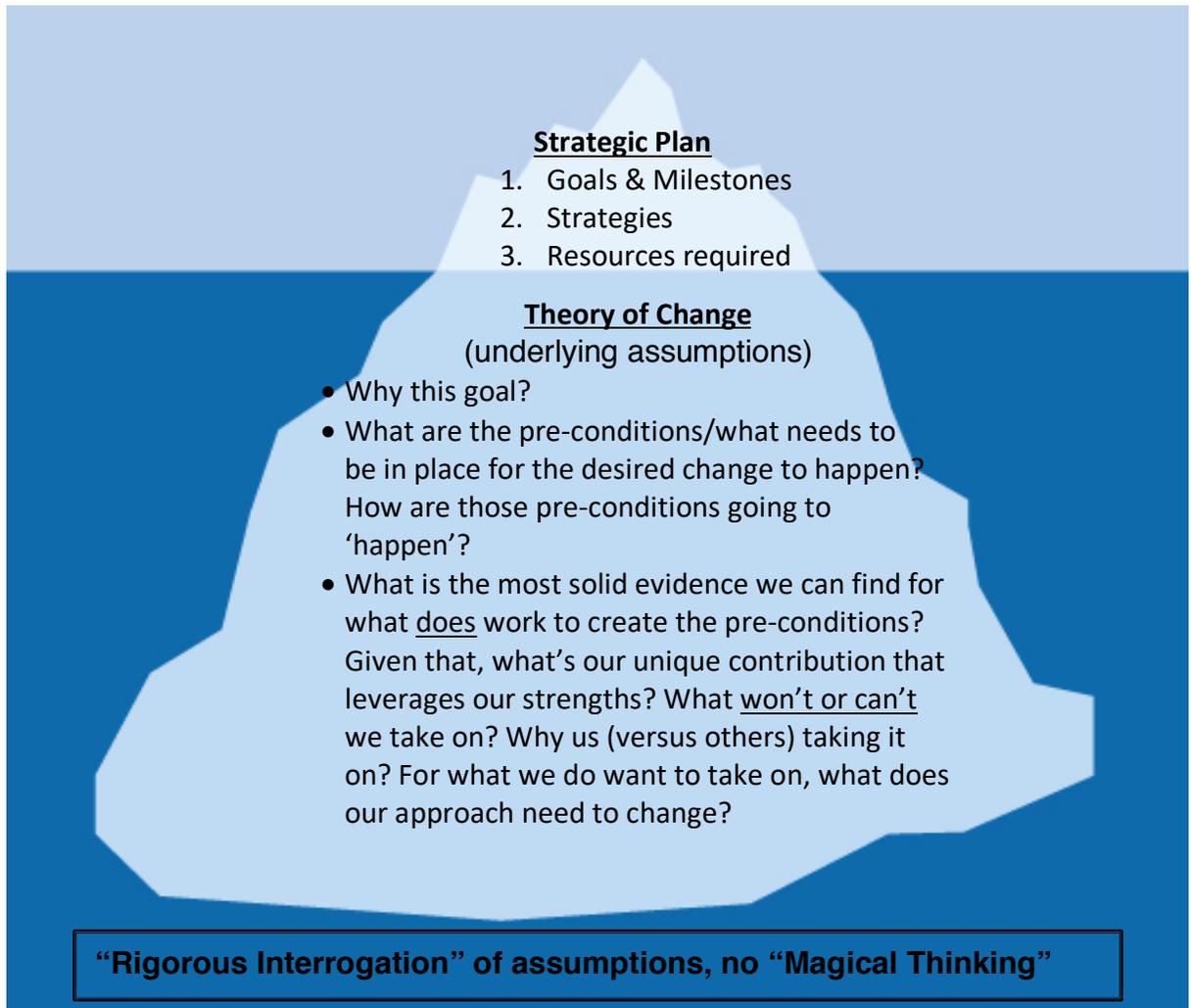
A Theory of Change (TOC) lays out the foundational thinking that is typically not articulated in a strategic plan. All strategic plans have either an explicit or implied TOC embedded in them. The diagram below shows how a strategic plan is like the above-surface part of an iceberg – while the TOC is somewhat like the not-usually-visible (i.e. stated, surfaced) assumptions, logic and analysis underlying a plan.

When organizations have scarce/precious resources and ambitious/complex missions, a TOC will help apply those resources for maximum impact because it forces you to ask the tough questions, surface the unspoken and sometimes-questionable assumptions being made, and go digging for evidence that will help make your plans more realistic and well-informed. By explicitly surfacing and testing those assumptions as a group you can draw on the best thinking and experience of the group and also ensure that individual biases or perspectives are minimized

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 cover 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, or how a combination might work.

“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



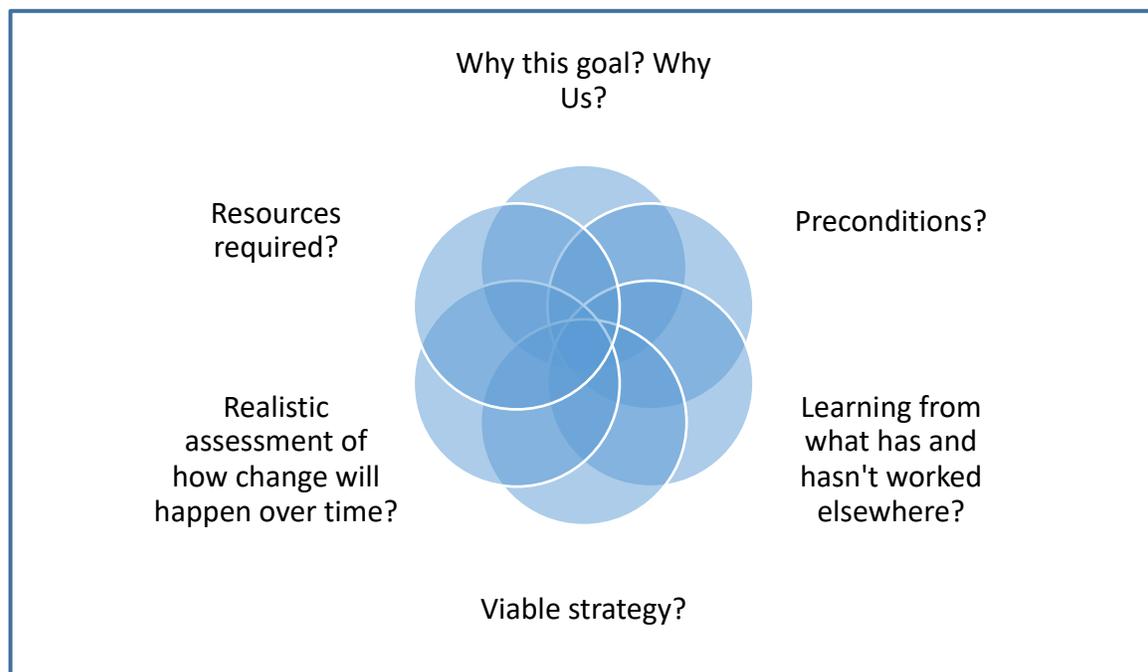
A good TOC helps organizations draw logical connections between activities and outcomes. It helps them to articulate exactly what propositions and assumptions their work is testing — and therefore what they should be assessing in their evaluation plans.

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)

Note: A Theory of Change is built by assessing a number of factors, not necessarily in a purely linear manner:



For each program/campaign/function please address the following

1. (Outcome) What is the long-term outcome we want to see (as specifically, tangibly, etc defined as possible – the more vague, general and broad your outcome is the less robust will be your TOC).
2. (Pre-conditions) *What has to be in place for this outcome to be achieved? (i.e. imagine a future where your outcome is looking very achievable and highly likely in the short term – how would you describe all the factors, elements, conditions etc that are in place that makes you confident).*
3. (Sufficiency) *Are these preconditions sufficient for the outcome to be achieved? (i.e. are we being realistic and rigorous in imagining what needs to be in place or are we being overly optimistic or simplistic?) What are the wild cards – things that might be factors that are completely unpredictable)*
4. (Short-term milestones) *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) What indicators will you use to measure your achievements/impacts?*
5. (Target audiences) *Who or what needs to change in order for the vision, goal to be achieved? In what ways?*
 - Who - the target populations(s) - is going to do what, that will lead to certain outcomes?
 - 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?
 - What is the amount of change required to achieve success?
 - Over what timeframe is the change expected to happen?
 - What is the analysis that we have done to suggest our conclusions on all of the above are reasonably sound?

6. (Broad strategies) How could we achieve that change? *(This is where the narrative of “If we do this ... Then this will happen ... because ...” comes in. Literally write the story that you tell about how you ‘win’ – with as much clarity and detail that is needed to make the story credible. It may help to assess the following)*
 - *What has and hasn’t worked elsewhere that informs our approach, that we can learn from, and that makes us confident we have a solid chance of succeeding?*
 - *What are the factors that will influence our ability to create change?*
 - *What assumptions are we making about what strategies will or won’t work etc.? How grounded/well-thought out etc. are they?*
 - *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?*
 - *What are the key solutions or strategies that will achieve the short, medium and long-term goals?*

7. 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? Consider:
 - *Where are the gaps in resources?*
 - *What externally or internally imposed constraints are we operating under?*
 - *How well is our organization positioned to deliver on specific strategies – strengths, weaknesses?*

8. Based on all this analysis above:
 - a) *What strengths (current or historical) are we under-utilizing that we could ramp up?*
 - b) *What concerns, gaps, etc are clearly evident that we need to address in our strategy?*
 - c) *What questions would you like to bring to the group to help you feel more confident in your program goals and strategies?*

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*)