

Manage Mission Risk with a Durable Theory of Change



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Avoid “mission creep.”

Avoid chasing contracts and grants that aren’t a fit for your nonprofit.

Put structure around aspects of your nonprofit’s work and goals that can be “squishy.”

Attendees at a [webinar hosted by the Equitable Recovery Wallet](#) late last year shared these phrases to describe what a theory of change can do.

Erika Van Buren, Ph.D., Principal Consultant at Line of Sight Consulting LLC, defined a theory of change as a way to outline how your nonprofit will go from strategy to outcomes in service of your mission.

It takes work to build a theory of change, and that work can be messy. But there’s a reason all those people attended that webinar. The lack of a theory of change can magnify the risks the attendees identified. Here’s an overview of the main points of a theory of change, how your nonprofit can build one, and why you might want to.

The Building Blocks of Theories of Change

A theory of change is both a process—a way to identify how your organization aims to make change in the world—and a product—a compelling example of the change your organization aims to make.

Many people diving into theories of change for the first time feel overwhelmed. Don’t give up. Let’s look at what a theory of change does to help understand what it is.

A theory of change defines the relationship among your organization’s:

- Inputs (resources you need to do your work: funds, staff, partnerships, policy change)
- Activities (programming, things you do to effect change in your community)
- Outputs (what your organization produces as a result of your programming: trainings, certifications, food boxes distributed, etc.)
- Short-term outcomes (behavioral changes participants make as a result of your programming: regular health care screenings, quitting smoking, completing a GED, eating more fresh fruits and vegetables)

- Long-term outcomes (children in your community experience less abuse and neglect, fresh food is more readily available throughout the community)

Plan for Success in Creating Your Theory of Change

The Annie E. Casey Foundation, which has [a comprehensive guide to theories of change](#), encourages nonprofits to consider the potential audiences for their theory and give those audiences the chance to weigh in on it. Who will use the theory your organization creates? What do they need it to communicate?

Allot time and resources to craft a robust theory of change. Some general guidance from the Casey Foundation: preparing to craft a theory of change might take one to two months; developing and refining your goals, strategies, outcomes, and assumptions could take two to six months; and communicating your theory and refining it with data and experience will be ongoing.

You might present your theory as a visual, a narrative, a mix of both, or something else entirely.

Put the Pieces Together

You're ready to begin crafting your theory of change. Where do you start? One creative tip from the Casey Foundation: brainstorm future news headlines about what your nonprofit has accomplished.

From a process perspective, you can start building your theory of change at the beginning, defining what your organization does and the resources it needs to do those things. Or you can start at the end, by identifying the long-term problem your organization wants to solve and working backward.

To define the problem, consider:

- What issue in your community do you most wish to solve?
- Whom does that problem most affect?
- How can your organization most effectively intervene?

Some important questions to answer, no matter where you start your theory of change, from the Casey Foundation:

- What are the actions to undertake?
- What will those actions make possible?
- What changes do you expect to occur as a result of those actions in the short term? Longer term?
- Who will benefit from those actions or changes?
- Have you spelled out the way you envision changes playing out? Make the linkages you assume explicit in your theory—X happens because you did Y.

Risk Review

Once you've outlined each part of your theory of change, stress test it with risk prompts. For example:

- What major assumptions have we made? How might those be wrong?
- How could our plans/proposed actions slip off the tracks or cause unintended harm? What indicators will alert us to trouble?
- Under what circumstances might we have to halt work and regroup?
- What external factors or forces could arise, making our plans impractical?
- What are the potential flaws in our logic that we should revisit and rework?

Conversations, Questions, and Difficult Decisions

Building a theory of change means having tough conversations, wrestling with hard questions, and making difficult decisions about programming. These actions go to the heart of any nonprofit mission, and if your organization does them well, you'll be better prepared to execute on that mission.

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