



# Theory of Change

*Reference Document*



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# What is a Theory of Change?

- Helps organizations, programs, networks or initiatives\* articulate social change efforts through clarifying:
  - Intentions – why are you doing what you are doing
  - Expected outcomes – what do you expect will happen as a result of your actions
- Shows the pathways and interventions necessary to reach intended results
- Can be reflective or prospective
  - For planning: lays the foundation for future activity and expected outcomes
  - For evaluation: articulates outcomes that will guide evaluation (but not the evaluation methods, which would be stated in an evaluation plan)
- Demonstrates an organization's reasoning and approach to its work
- Brings discipline and alignment to practice; ensures logical coherence to an organization's work and expected results

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\*Referred to as organization for short hand abbreviation throughout the remainder of this document

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# Assumptions

## Definition

- The values and rationale for the approach that undergirds the work of an organization
- The things which need to be in place for the organization to be able to continue its work
- Issues relevant specifically to the work of the organization, not necessarily the field or environment in which it operates (i.e., the assumptions of the organization could be very different than prevailing opinions in the field)

## Examples

- Collaboration leads to innovation
- Public-private partnerships are valuable
- Institutional research effectively shared can change belief systems
- Recruitment and retention of highly qualified staff will result in improved services and programs
- Learning by doing is more effective than learning by being told
- A healthy transition to adulthood requires support and guidance from responsible adults and peers
- Knowledge and awareness will lead to behavior change

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# Context

## Environmental Context

- Events or conditions external to the organization (economic, social, political, environmental, institutional) that influence the work of an organization

### Examples

- Target constituencies lack access to safe and affordable housing
- Many at-risk youth have unstable family lives
- Governmental regulations require compliance paperwork that takes a great deal of time
- In working at the intersection of labor, environmentalism, social justice, business and other fields, significant changes in the agendas of key players in any one of these areas could impact an organization

## Organizational Context

- Conditions in the program or organization itself that may have bearing on the Theory of Change
- May describe the relationship of a program to its parent organization

### Examples

- Characteristics of where an organization is in its developmental lifecycle (e.g. formation, plateau)
- Organizational restructuring or key leadership transition
- Tension within an organization that affect its ability to do its work
- Shrinking organizational budget; lack of clarity on effect on the program
- Changing funding priorities of the parent organization

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# Purpose Statement

## Definition

- Single statement of the organization's overall purpose
- For organizations, purpose is the same or very similar to the mission of an organization—depending on how fresh or useful the mission statement is.

## Examples

- The purpose of the <organization> is to help build a sustainable system that provides better programmatic and financial support for California's after-school and summer programs
- The <organization> exists to give visibility to Silicon Valley arts and culture organizations in order to expand audience and create a more vibrant and engaged civic and cultural community
- The purpose of the <organization> is to increase the capacity and commitment of talented, early-career Jewish professionals to build a career in Jewish communal institutions

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# Problems/Needs Addressed

## Definition

- The specific conditions that the organization hopes to change through its programs or services
- In general, include no more than five problems in a Theory of Change
- Use the language of “problems,” “barriers” or “issues addressed,” depending on what is more appropriate for a particular Theory of Change

## Examples

- Public policies and planning decisions do not consider the health needs of growing Latino populations
- Many at-risk youth lack sufficient job skills and experience necessary for finding and keeping jobs
- Leaders of synagogues and agencies lack sufficient capacity to adequately address interfaith outreach
- There is limited availability of prepared or qualified Jewish spiritual care providers
- There is an impending leadership gap within the community clinics field.

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# Strategies & Tactics

## Definition

### Strategies

- A plan of action to produce a desired goal

### Tactics

- The specific activities pursued to implement the strategy
- Tactics can be modified over time to address a single strategy

A strategy should remain consistent over a period of time, whereas the tactics used to achieve that strategy may shift over time.

## Examples

- Strategy: Grantmaking
- Tactics: Capacity-building grants; general operation support; program-specific grants
- Strategy: Mentoring and supervision
- Tactics: Weekly supervision meetings; on-the-job mentoring, as needed; brown-bag lunches
- Strategy: Skills training
- Tactics: Job readiness trainings; leadership development; educational services and academic readiness
- Strategy: TA coordination
- Tactics: Support TA for start-up programs; develop a model for system-wide TA support

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# Target Constituencies

## Definition

- Who does the organization intend to affect with its strategies?
- Can include individuals, organizations, networks, a field or sector
- Can include a geographic description
- Can be described in bullet points or graphics (i.e., concentric circles or spheres of influence)
- Can include more than one constituency (e.g., primary, secondary, ultimate, etc.)

As needed, constituencies can be prioritized (e.g., primary, secondary, tertiary).

## Examples

- Women and girls from low income communities of color
- Arts organizations in the San Francisco Bay Area
- California after-school programs receiving ASES funding
- The California after-school field
- Experiences nonprofit executive directors

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# Outcomes

## Definition

- A measureable result or change a program/organization would like to see take place over time that stems directly from what the strategies are designed to do or accomplish
- Different from outputs (quantifiable activities, services or events that reach target constituencies that are often identified as milestones or benchmarks)
- Can be organized by:
  - Target constituency (e.g., individual, organization, community)
  - Strategy
- Typically include both short-term and long-term outcomes—specific timeframes vary depending on organizational needs
  - Short-term: typically one to three years
  - Long-term: typically three to five years

## Examples

- Improved knowledge, skills or effectiveness
- Increased organizational capacity
- Youth demonstrate greater financial responsibility (i.e., Create and follow a monthly budget, pay bills on time)
- Increase representation of target population's health issues, needs and voices in the California healthcare reform debate

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# Ultimate Impact

## Definition

- In the long term, how will the world look when the organization has achieved its purpose?
- Similar to an organization's vision statement
- Aspirational
- Cannot be achieved only by the actions of the organization; take into consideration what others are doing—the organization makes a contribution to the ultimate impact

## Examples

- All elementary and middle school children supported by the ASES system will be in well-run after-school and summer programs that prepare them to succeed in school and life
- More philanthropic funds are effectively contributed and coordinated to create positive social change

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# Graphic Overview

**PURPOSE:** Insert purpose here.

## PROBLEMS

- Example
- Example

## STRATEGIES

- Example
- Example

## TARGET CONSTITUENCIES

- Example
- Example

## SHORT-TERM OUTCOMES

- Example
- Example

## LONG-TERM OUTCOMES

- Example
- Example

**ULTIMATE IMPACT:** Insert ultimate impact here.