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Creating Theories of Change:

Moving Beyond Optimistic Guesswork

InnerDrive



CREATING THEORIES OF CHANGE

By InnerDrive

WHAT & WHY

Change is a seemingly inescapable part of school leadership and often an essential one if leaders want to continually improve outcomes for their students. Whether it's a new curriculum, uniform or behaviour policy, leaders and staff are regularly required to invest time and resources into shifting people and processes from their current state to a better one. Although constant, change and the way it is managed is far from consistent in most schools, but help can be found in the process of TOC (Theory of Change) creation.

Theories of change are project specific roadmaps that explain how and why a desired change is expected to happen and were popularised by Carol Weiss (1995) in her work on evaluating complex community initiatives. Much more than just a pretty diagram, TOCs provide a rigorous description of how change will actually unfold (Taplin et al., 2013). When created proactively and collaboratively, they force leaders and staff to push past optimistic guesswork and instead logically sequence outcomes and activities, uncover hidden assumptions and plan for the inevitable friction. When completed, TOCs provide leaders with a concise communication tool, milestones for reviewing progress and an evaluative framework for post-project assessment.

MAKING THE MAP

Despite the wide-reaching use of TOCs by organisations such as the United Nations or the World Bank and high-profile individuals like Bill Gates and Carol Weiss herself, there is not a formalised process for their creation. Core to each of the approaches however is the process of backward mapping and beginning with the end in mind (Covey, 2004), establishing causal logic between outcomes, surfacing underlying beliefs and distinguishing activity from impact.

Steps 1 & 2 - Outcome & Activity Mapping

Once the long-term outcome or goal has been agreed, the next key step is to identify the intermediate outcomes that will need to occur

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in order to be successful. If 'G' is the goal, then what are A, B, C, D, E and F? Leaders need to be careful at this stage not to jump straight into activities (e.g. provide staff training) or outputs (e.g. 50 staff trained) and instead maintain a focus on outcomes (e.g. improved staff confidence). Get this wrong and leaders can easily become operationally blinded and too focused on poor success metrics like attendance and completion rather than impact.

The next step in the process is to explore what actions, activities and outputs sit between the different outcomes. What will you do, produce or provide to actually get from A to B? Key considerations for leaders at this stage include the evidence base and agreed efficacy of any possible activities, the feasibility in terms of resourcing and the probability that the planned action will have the desired effect. When leaders get this stage wrong, they put forward activities that they personally enjoy, things that have already had time and resource invested in them or ignore the levels of external dependency that are required.

Steps 3 & 4 - Identifying Assumptions and Mitigations

Even the most pristine logical frameworks run into the messy reality of school life. Michael Fullan (2006) notes that change is inherently non-linear and fraught with unpredictable cultural friction. If a leader treats a Theory of Change as a rigid script, the project will fracture at the first sign of staff turnover, budget constraints, or operational drift.

Now that the logical sequence of outcomes has been mapped and the activities which will enable the change identified, the next step is to dig deep, raise the psychological safety levels and explore any hidden assumptions or beliefs. Leaders and staff need to ask themselves, what are we assuming will happen with X in order to get us from A to B? Assumptions attached to a parent newsletter aimed at raising engagement might be that they will receive it, read it, understand it or know how to respond to it. Critical friends or devil's advocates can be useful at this stage to minimise groupthink or confirmation bias and to ensure that no potential pitfall goes unchallenged.

Strong theories of change have a built-in insurance policy for failure in the form of mitigations and contingencies. For instance to ensure delivery of the parent newsletter, leaders and their teams would need to identify ways by using multiple communication channels or improve the readability by including translations or a key terminology section. This step requires leaders to evaluate the controllability of issues,

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identify trigger points for contingency actions and carefully consider the additional resource allocation required for mitigations. Danger levels are often at their highest during these late stages of creation and leaders must ensure that mitigations don't become wishful thinking or that they overstretch themselves and their staff by trying to mitigate everything.

TOCA

For leaders who already have strategic plans, goal maps or freshly created TOCs in place, Theory Of Change Analysis (TOCA) is a vital tool in the pursuit of effective change. Completed before project launch or at key review points, the process requires leaders, and ideally their teams, to critically examine the structure and plausibility of the plan using the questions below:

Structure

- Does the TOC clearly define the goal?
- Are there sufficient intermediate outcomes?
- Are the causal links clearly set out?
- Do the outcomes follow a logical sequence?
- Are there any outcomes missing?
- Are the assumptions well defined?
- Is there a response for each assumption?
- Are key monitoring points identified?
- Does the level of detail match the goal complexity?

Plausibility

- Is the TOC generally agreed by stakeholders?
- Are the results measurable?
- Is the timeline feasible?
- Are the causal links credible?
- Are the assumptions accurate?
- Are the responses evidence-based?
- Are the responses sufficient?
- Are the required resources realistic?
- Are the responses sustainable?

Common mistakes made by leaders during TOCA include the temptation to defend the draft and to become too emotionally attached to the initial design and being sucked into what psychologists call the 'Sunk Cost' fallacy. This cognitive bias pushes people to continue with a decision or course of action because of previously invested resources. The fact that it took a team of twenty, six months to create the theory of change can stifle honest evaluation and the uncovering of blind spots.

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FINAL THOUGHTS

Great ideas are often let down by poor execution and that often emerges from ineffective planning. Wishful thinking and a focus on activity over impact can rob leaders of the transformational change that improves student outcomes and so the creation and use of theories of change must be part of a leader's toolkit. By backward mapping goals, logically and objectively selecting activities, fiercely interrogating underlying assumptions and actively planning for operational friction, leaders can protect against failed innovation, change fatigue and resource wastage.

Change is rarely easy, but when leaders collaboratively build transparent, evidence-informed plans they give staff a destination to believe in and a map to trust.

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Fullan, M. (2006). Turnaround Leadership. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Taplin, D. H., Clark, H., Collins, M., & Colby, D. C. (2013). Theory of Change Technical Papers: A Series of Papers to Support Development of Theories of Change. New York: ActKnowledge.

Weiss, C. H. (1995). Nothing as practical as a good theory: Exploring theory-based evaluation for comprehensive community initiatives for children and families. New Approaches to Evaluating Community Initiatives, 1(65-92), 9.

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Articles

Theory of Change Review (James, 2011) theoryofchange.org/wp-content/uploads/toco_library/pdf/James_ToC.pdf

The Center for Theory of Change theoryofchange.org/what-is-theory-of-change/

Books

Leading in a culture of change (Fullan, 2020) Leading-Culture-Change-Michael-Fullan/dp/1119595843

Measure what Matters (Doerr, 2018) Measure-What-Matters-Simple-Drives/dp/024134848X

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