

At the ActKnowledge Training on Theory of Change in May 2008, participants were asked to come to the final day of training with questions for general discussion. Time limitations did not allow us to get through many of the questions and we thought of posting them in a discussion forum where interested readers could discuss TOC issues and post their own questions and answers. We still want to set up the forum but pending that, we are posting the questions and our own best answers. If you have any thing to add, or a question or comment on these and other issues, please send to us in an e-mail to Dana Taplin, dtaplin@actknowledge.org or Heléne Clark, hclark@actknowledge.org.

Q. Is TOC itself strategic or is it a basis for laying strategy?

A. Theory of change is about charting the pathway along which goals are met. It is about breaking down broad goals, not into the usual set of objectives, but into *outcomes*, the desired circumstances and conditions that are expected to occur as a result of a program or initiative. The strategy piece lies in how you bring about those outcomes. So, in theory at least, a TOC is not a strategy but rather the framework of preconditions leading to a given long-term outcome. A well developed framework of precise outcomes, clear rationales, and assumptions brought to the surface provides ample basis for evaluating alternative courses of action, and for making your best bet given your resources, capacities, interests, and influence—i.e., for devising strategy. Where this theoretical distinction between TOC and strategy becomes cloudy in practice is in drilling down to the most particular, shortest-term outcomes: outcomes at that level can be hard to distinguish from objectives and achievements, thus confusing the action with its result. What seems so clear in the longer-term--the distinction between the actions and their results--seems, in the short term, difficult to sort out. In some sense, the closer your outcomes framework gets to the here and now, the more it resembles a strategic plan. In drilling down at this level, you tend to identify outcomes you can act on, leaving other possible outcomes unvoiced. Similarly, you increasingly limit the scope or breadth of the framework to areas where you have accountability and leverage, leaving whole arenas of work for others to do.

Q. How would you recommend using TOC as a tool for strategic planning?

A. We feel that TOC is most effective as a strategic planning tool in laying out a clear and agreed-upon pathway showing what conditions must be in place to reach long-term outcomes. A TOC breaks down big goals into feasible and measurable building blocks linked to one another in a causal framework. Having that architecture articulated enables strategic planners to ask what actions or courses of action are most likely to achieve the outcomes along the pathway.

Q. Is the TOC outcomes framework necessarily chronological or only coincidentally chronological?

A. Clearly there is a lot of chronology in a theory of change: the very terminology (long-term outcome, short-term outcome, etc.) points to a temporal sequence of unfolding outcomes. However, TOC is also a proposition of logic; it posits a *theory* that a certain set of preconditions will bring about a higher-order outcome. This logic does not necessarily follow a chronological path. A theory of change for student success, for example, is in some sense chronological: students must first succeed in primary and secondary school before they can succeed in college and go on to have productive adult lives. However, there is no chronology to the institutional structure necessary to support student success: the elements of the system—primary and secondary schools, colleges and graduate schools—must all be functioning in ways that support and produce student success *at the same time*. No theory of change would first improve the K-12 system, then the college system, and then the

graduate schools. In a plausible theory, outcomes in a variety of arenas, such as institutional practice, teaching effectiveness, state education policy, and public will-building, would appear on the same level of an outcomes framework because all are believed of equivalent importance in bringing about the long-term outcome. Sorting out the logical from the chronological in building outcomes frameworks can be tricky. Sometimes the logic and the temporal sequence neatly coincide. Often they do not, and the challenge is in crafting your outcomes framework so that it has the most explanatory power.

Q. What about the linearity of the model?

A. We all know that things don't happen in a straight-line sequence. Things impact each other in multiple, partly unpredictable ways, with all kinds of feedback loops that aren't modeled in this top-down diagramming format. How adequate is the linear TOC model as a description of what's going to happen? One answer to the question is that TOC does not, in fact, model how things happen; rather, it models how we believe things will happen. TOC is a forecast that shows what conditions we believe must exist for other conditions to come into being. Because it is forward looking and logical, TOC reflects the way we think *logically*—that is, if *a*, then *b*—and *chronologically*—first this, then that. The linear format is therefore appropriate. It can be helpful to complement TOC with a process model that shows how the TOC fits into a larger, more cyclical scheme in which theory leads to action, which leads to monitoring and evaluation, which leads to adjustment of the theory, which leads to the next action, more monitoring and evaluation, and so on. Such a process model depicts the linear theory as a conceptual driver of change which must, to remain useful, be accompanied not only by taking action but by evaluation and recalibration.

Q. Using TOC with emergent, structural change/complex initiatives with unclear outcomes?

A. This is a great question because it leads us back to the fundamental point that TOC is a process for articulating your best thinking about future outcomes. We know that many, probably most social change efforts involve complex phenomena in which knowledge and solutions are emergent. TOC in its linearity does not describe how things work out in practice; that is better left to evaluation—or history. If the phenomena are so emergent that outcomes cannot be forecast and logic cannot be applied then perhaps TOC is not the right tool. But in most cases change agents already have beliefs about what their spheres of interest should look like, whether media justice or educational change or healthy youth and families or welcoming, culturally diverse public spaces. TOC gives form to these beliefs and a means of tracking progress on outcomes.

Q. How can TOC be an informational structure for networked organizations?

A. As a participatory process, building a theory of change allows networked organizations, through their representatives, not only to have a voice in constructing the theory but to challenge one another's assumptions about goals, root causes, the conditions they're trying to change, time frames, and the means at their disposal. TOC should be an effective means of communicating assumptions, rationales, and posited outcomes among and within networked organizations. However, the causal, graphically modeled diagrams at the core of TOC can be less than clear in communicating the message to those who have not been involved in building the model. For TOC to be an effective communication tool, the diagrams must be distilled to model a few key outcomes and must be accompanied by a concise prose narrative that explains the logic and the rationale behind the outcomes framework. As an informational structure, the relationships in a TOC between outcomes and rationales, on the one hand, and actions, activities, interventions and strategies, on the other, should be clearly expressed.

Q. How much preparation before beginning with a group? Do you enter the room with everything “on the table” or sound out the key stakeholders in advance to separate what is feasible and acceptable from everything else before beginning the process?

A. ActKnowledge cautions against too much advance work because the process is about building a collective vision, rather than ratifying the preferences of the more powerful stakeholders. TOC can be messy and frustrating but we find participants to be both satisfied and enthusiastic at the end of the process. One of the training participants in May suggested taking a survey of stakeholders in advance of commencing group work. A survey can elicit people’s goals, ideas about scope, feasibility, time frame, etc.; preferences, and aversions. This information clearly helps the facilitator in guiding the participants through the process. For our part, ActKnowledge has entered TOC processes having already prepared an outcomes framework out of the positions outlined in reports, white papers, and other documents. Starting off with a framework based on the organization or initiative’s written record gives the participants in TOC something concrete to react to and it can help move the process forward. Neither of these tactics, it seems to us, risks undermining the credibility of the process by taking some things off the table beforehand or letting powerful stakeholders steer the course before the ship has set sail. One training participant observed that in real life, some clients will not put up with a process that opens up for discussion things they have already decided; that in these cases, TOC needs to focus on what is realistically in the window frame rather than on a universe of possibilities. There is no right answer, clearly: in each case practitioners must think of how to make theory of change as useful and effective as possible while allowing stakeholders a real stake in the process.

Q. High-level pooh-bahs (from systems, businesses, organizations...) need to feel ownership of change plans but are not going to involve themselves in the details of planning. How to balance this: to assure their buy-in without requiring their in-the-weeds participation?

A. Often it is the high level person who has endorsed and initiated the TOC process as something of value, so they have “bought in” at the beginning. The challenge is to sustain their support while letting others develop the theory. We feel this is similar to many other issues that come up in matters of hierarchy and delegation: effective leaders delegate and trust their teams to carry out the work. There are many variations on the model but usually it involves good measures of delegation and, conversely, of reporting back to get the leader’s thinking as the work progresses. It is necessary to come to high-level people having laid out your best thinking: don’t go to them without something concrete to which they can respond, but don’t wait until everything is perfect, either.

Q. How do you get the participants to focus and avoid mission drift?

A. Try to intersperse breakout group activities among the full group’s work. If possible, convene a group for shorter spans over two days rather than all on one day. Make the process truly participatory: Selim’s facilitation talk is instructive in this regard, where Selim would give out cards and markers and have the participants write out their own outcomes/assumptions/etc. More generally, Selim stressed the value of tactile media in the visualization process to keeping participants engaged. Participants can manipulate materials and move cards around on a larger sheet, rather than passively watching the facilitator move computerized objects around a field projected on a screen.

Q. How to measure qualitative impacts/qualitative indicators? And, How to do indicators?

A. In theory of change, we use indicators to track progress on outcomes. Indicators are said to “operationalize” outcomes by identifying and collecting data that can verify whether and how much you are moving the needle on the phenomenon of interest. Sometimes the phenomenon to be measured needs no indicator as it can be captured in its totality—for example, the percentage of Nebraska residents with college degrees. More often than not, the phenomenon of interest, whether it be attitudes, knowledge, values, or the behavior of people and institutions, cannot be captured as a whole. Instead you need to find one or more measures that *indicate* the condition of the phenomenon or the direction it is taking. Indicators are a step or two removed from the thing itself but well chosen indicators should prove to be reliable measures.

Indicator design criteria:

1. Determine what observable evidence represents the outcome.
2. Is there direct evidence available? For example, the outcome “Increased Voter Registration” is verified by direct evidence in the form of voter registration records; no other indicator is needed.
3. In most cases, you will need an indicator. Surveys, interviews, or focus groups gather indicative data on beliefs and attitudes. Changes in behavior can be indicated by observation (sometimes) and/or by events that result from changed behavior. For example, the outcome “high quality teaching” can be verified in part by observation and in part by consequent events, such as better student evaluation of teachers and courses, better attendance, and higher course registrations.

Indicator Design Checklist

Question	Example
Does the indicator really show the outcome?	Outcome: Students at NYC community have confidence in their future. Indicator: Score on Search Institute Developmental Assets Profile. Must ask: Is this set of questions a good measure of confidence?
Could other things influence the indicator?	Outcome: Residents in Carbon County, PA, are not living below poverty level. Indicator: Proportion/number of residents below poverty level. Must ask: What if the poor residents moved away? Is that consistent with your initiative? If not, you may need to track individual families.
Do data on the indicator already exist?	As in above example, is anyone already collecting data on residents below poverty level? Yes, the state keeps records on household income by zip code (if zip code straddles two counties you’d have a problem.)
Are there standardized, validated methods to capture an indicator that you can use?	Outcome: Students at NYC community school have confidence in their future. Indicator: Score on Search Institute Developmental Assets Profile. (The DAP is a statistically validated youth survey that captures eight concepts of opportunities and attributes youth need.) If such an existing measure can capture your specific outcome, don’t reinvent the wheel.

Using Existing Data

1. Can you get data for the geographic area you’re targeting? (e.g., east side of Indianapolis?)
2. Can you get data for your target population? (e.g., entry level salaries of youth 18-25)
3. Can you get it in time? (e.g., crime data are often not available until 2 or 3 years later)

4. Is it accurate? (e.g., you probably would not want census data for total population count in a community if the community has large percentage of illegal immigrants or students or doubled-up families.)
5. Does it cover your particular issue? (e.g., unemployment rates will not tell you anything about people who have never been employed.)

In designing indicators remember: There are two kinds of outcomes...

Program outcome: Change in program participants brought about by program activities

Population outcome: Change in a defined overall population (residents of Indiana, citizens of the United States)

You probably want to hold yourself accountable for program outcomes. Population outcomes, however, are very difficult to trace to your particular intervention.

Q. How do you develop the bridge between the outcomes pathway and evaluation?

A. When doing a TOC on a social change goal and core/root factors of racism, patriarchy, capitalism etc come up, how to address in ways that 1) validate the power analysis 2) Don't collapse into ideology debate 3) Don't get group stuck or feeling disempowered, overwhelmed, etc. 4) Integrate ways to undermine those systematic factors in the actual program.