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PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT: TOWARD PROFOUND CHANGE

In his book, *The Dance of Change*, Peter Senge proposes that one thing is reasonably certain – continuing challenges will tax our collective abilities to deal with them. Failure to rethink our enterprises will leave us little relief from our current predicaments.¹ Change. It is scary. It is difficult. It is necessary, if we want to achieve different results. Change will occur at many levels whether we plan for it or not. However, change related to specifically desired outcomes will only come through purposeful planning and will likely only be embraced when a clear theory of change has been appropriately communicated to all stakeholders.

Senge contends that approximately 70% of all change initiatives fail.² Even without research this comes as no surprise to educators. Most educators have experienced the “flavor of the month”

approach to programming and planning. Most have seen initiatives and grand ideas come...and go. In those few instances when change has actually happened, it has rarely been sustained. While there can be numerous reasons for a change initiative to fail, one of the most prevalent is that the initiative lacked the foresight and intentionality which would have resulted in a well thought out theory of change.

Profound change requires investment – of time, energy, and resources.³ Profound change also requires clarity. One must be clear about what the desired change is – what it will look like, how it will sound, what it will feel like. One also must be clear about how that change will occur – what must happen, first, next, and last. This clarity can best be captured and conveyed through a theory of change.

What is a Theory of Change?

A **Theory of Change** is a tool to design and evaluate change initiatives. All too often the thinking is that change happens magically. By creating a blueprint of the building blocks required to achieve a change initiative’s long-term goal, such as improving student academic achievement, a theory of change offers a clear roadmap to achieve results identifying the preconditions, pathways and interventions necessary for an initiative’s success.

For our discussion, a theory of change defines the essential building blocks required to bring about a given long-term goal. This set of connected building blocks--interchangeably referred to as outcomes, results, accomplishments, or preconditions—is depicted as a graphic commonly known as a change framework. Built around the framework, a theory of change, describes in detail the specific steps and interventions selected to bring about the expected outcome. Each outcome is linked with a specific intervention thus, a Theory of Change clearly outlines the complex web of intentional activity, as opposed to the “magic,” that is required to bring about desired change.

A theory of change would not be complete without an articulation of the assumptions that stakeholders use to explain the change process represented by the change framework. Assumptions explain both the connections between early, intermediate and long term outcomes and the expectations about how and why proposed interventions will bring them about. Often, assumptions are supported by research, strengthening the case to be made about the plausibility of theory and the likelihood that stated goals will be accomplished.⁴

Stakeholders find theories of change invaluable as part of program planning and evaluation because they not only create a commonly understood vision of the long-term goals, but they provide detail as to how they will be reached and what will be used to measure progress along the way.

Creating a Theory of Change

The task of creating a theory of change can, in and of itself, be daunting. It requires a great deal of thought and work. Approaching the work through steps or stages makes the task less overwhelming. Typically there are four steps involved in creating a theory of change:

1. **Developing an Outcomes Framework**
2. **Identifying Assumptions**
3. **Determining Interventions**
4. **Identifying Indicators**

Step 1: Developing an Outcomes Framework

It would seem that determining the desired outcome would be the simplest step in developing a theory of change. This can, however, be the most difficult step. It is, perhaps, the most critical step. The developers of the theory must discuss, agree on, and become specific about the long-term goal or goals. This can be done in a variety of ways, but the important thing is to set a good, clear outcome. The quality of the rest of the theory hinges on this first step.⁵

Once the goal or goals have been identified, the developers map the preconditions required to bring about the long-term goal. Beginning the mapping process helps stakeholders to visualize and prioritize their goals as well as specify what they expect to change and for which outcomes they want to be held accountable.

After laying out the initial expectations and a simple change framework, comes a more detailed stage of the process. Building upon the initial framework, the developers continue to map backwards until a framework that tells the story believed to be appropriate for the purposes of planning emerges. Sometimes, this will require much more detail because stakeholders want to identify the “root” causes of the problem they hope to resolve. In other cases, the map will illustrate three or four levels of change, which display a reasonable set of early and intermediate steps toward the long term goal.⁶

Most change frameworks usually go through many revisions. Outcomes are added, moved and deleted until a map eventually emerges that tells a story the group can agree on. The debate and dialogue resulting during the process are often the most valuable components as expectations, assumptions and features of the change process are jointly defined.

Step 2: Identifying Assumptions

An integral step in developing the theory of change is identifying underlying assumptions that explain the underlying logic of what is depicted in the outcomes framework. Assumptions help explain the connections between the identified outcomes. Additionally, identification of assumptions encourages exploration of preconditions believed to be critical to bring about the outcomes. Finally, assumptions explain the connection between the identified interventions and the expected outcomes. There are typically three important types of assumptions to consider: (a) assertions about the connections between long term, intermediate and early outcomes on the map; (b) substantiation for the claim that all of the important preconditions for success have been identified; and (c) justifications supporting the links between program activities and the outcomes they are expected to produce. A fourth type of assumption which outlines the contextual factors that will support or hinder progress toward the realization of outcomes in the pathway of change is often an additional important factor in illustrating the complete theory of change.⁷

Step 3: Determining Interventions

After laying out the near complete change framework, the focus shifts to interventions, those things that the program or initiative must do to bring about the intended outcomes.

By identifying interventions, the developers explain how the work will bring about the intended change. Until this point, the change framework has been like a gumbo recipe without directions, a literal listing of intermediate ingredients—roux, shrimp, onions, okra, etc. The “recipe” has not explained explain how these components are used and put together. The interventions explain what the developers are going to do to achieve the desired outcomes.⁸

At every stage of the process, the developers should pause to question whether new revelations reveal an inconsistency in their logic. Does specifying interventions highlight an important gap in the outcomes framework? Do any of the assumptions suggest additional change pathways? The developers should check for clarity by asking whether the framework and interventions “make sense” and by thinking about whether the map reflects a plausible theory. Additionally, the developers should determine whether the set of interventions are actually feasible for implementation given the available resources.

Step 4: Identifying Indicators

During the fourth stage, indicators providing details are added to the change framework. This stage focuses on how to measure the implementation and effectiveness of the initiative. By collecting data on each outcome, the initiative can identify what is or is not happening.

Conclusion

The Theory of Change process hinges upon defining all of the necessary and sufficient conditions required to bring about a given long term outcome.

During the process of creating the pathway of change, participants are required to articulate as many of their assumptions about the change process as they can so that they can be examined and even tested to determine if any key assumptions are false. The Theory of Change approach to planning is designed to encourage very clearly defined outcomes at every step of the change process. This is critical as it causes the developers to give serious thought not only to what change is desired but also how that change can occur. Developers are required to specify details about the nature of the desired change—including specifics about the target population, the amount of change required to signal success, and the timeframe over which such change

Each indicator has four parts:⁹

- **The Indicator** is the actual variable being measured.
- **The Population** is the group being measured.
- **The Threshold** represents the acceptable minimum for the outcome to be successfully achieved.

is expected to occur. This attention to detail often helps all stakeholders reassess the feasibility of reaching goals that may have initially been vaguely defined, and in the end, promotes the development of reasonable long-term outcome targets that are acceptable to all parties.¹⁰

Professional development should result in change in both instructional and leadership practices and behavior and ultimately in student achievement. A clear map detailing the theory behind how change will occur creates clarity regarding what specific change is desired and increases the likelihood that the desired change will indeed occur. A well thought out theory of change benefits all stakeholders. Students will be the ultimate benefactors of this work – not only is the likelihood of change occurring increased, the likelihood that the change will be sustained also increased substantially.

1. Senge, P., Kleiner, A., Roberts, C., Ross, R., Roth, G., & Smith, B. (1999). *The Dance of Change*. New York: Doubleday.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 43.
4. Theory of Change as a Tool for Strategic Planning. (no pagination). Retrieved September 20, 2005 from <http://www.theoryofchange.org/scope.pdf>.

5. *Ibid.*

6. Theory of Change. (no pagination). Retrieved September 22, 2005 from <http://www.theoryofchange.org/html/basics.html>.

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*