



## **THE THEORY OF CHANGE: A PLANNING AND TEAM BUILDING TOOL**

Most people join a board because of a genuine desire to give back to the community. Sometimes it's at the invitation of a friend or colleague; other times it's in response to a community need that closely aligns with an individual's personal values.

While one member may be clear about his or her values and goals, the most effective boards are a collection of members who share and agree upon a specific set of beliefs and assumptions. These assumptions are consistent around:

- The current circumstances of a particular issue  
(The world as it is, and perhaps, how it could be different)
- An approach or intervention appropriate to producing a more desirable community
- How the community will be different if the selected approach is successful.

The intensity and passion that's intrinsic to serving in the nonprofit sector can lead to burnout: that overwhelming feeling that a problem is too big or the obstacles to solving a problem are not resolvable. That same intensity can lead to conflict within the board if people aren't operating under similar assumptions. The solution is to take some time to think about what you're doing and why, through a **Theory of Change** process. This article presents the Theory of Change as one tool for developing and expressing a collective "terms-of-agreement."

The Theory of Change isn't new. It's been around as an evaluative tool in one form or another for about 20 years. And, in spite of all the convoluted descriptions of what, exactly Theory of Change is, the concept is simple: It is a statement. *It describes the common assumptions that brings people to the (board) table and, building upon those assumptions, a hypotheses about what is needed to bring about a given long-term result or outcome.* The Theory of Change statement provides a board and staff with the foundation for defining the organization's mission and constructing the organization's logic model – the steps that will identify the results and activities needed to achieve the mission.

There are four essential components to Theory of Change that can be framed as questions:

- For you as an individual, what are your core beliefs and passions about the world and/or the circumstances you believe should be preserved or changed? (Nonprofits can be as much about retaining something precious - like art or species or even values - as much as changing some condition.) It is essential to note that your personal beliefs have been shaped by all of your experiences – educational, home, social, cultural, and spiritual to name a few. An understanding of your beliefs and assumptions about the world will help you understand if and how you "fit" within the rest of the board.
- For your organization, who is your primary customer/client and what is it about this constituency that calls you to action? This conversation will again be filled with discussions about your assumptions and beliefs. It is of course best if these assumptions could be informed by facts as these facts will shape the feasibility of the next question.



- What does the board collectively believe to be the most effective and practical approach or intervention that will produce the most desired results? The Theory of Change intervention statement expresses how change can be accomplished at the macro level. This is the “cause and effect” conversation that postulates: if we do “this”, then “that” will happen with “that” circling back to the core beliefs about the state of the world and then going forward to the desired results.
- What do you believe will be the results if your selected intervention is successful? Most importantly, will the results you describe in your answers produce the impact on the world and/or your selected constituency in accordance with your core beliefs and passions?

When nonprofits are already pressed for resources (time being a very precious resource) it can be a difficult proposition to allocate time for a new exercise. But investing in this process not only saves organizational resources, it often generates new ones and creates better outcomes. Your investment will make your organization more effective and more attractive to potential donors.

When your exercise is complete, the resulting Theory of Change provides the board with the framework for strategic and annual plans and with a primary reference point for measuring results and success. Instead of assuming you’ll be able to get there from here, or trying to forge a path on your own, you are working as a team to construct the road you plan to travel.

There are two options to creating your organization’s Theory: one is to have the staff develop a draft statement to be discussed by the board; the other is to have the board develop a Theory through a facilitated process. If you want the board to take ownership, you’re better off with the second option.

To take the road-building metaphor a little further: when you’ve discussed and agreed on building materials, direction, width, and other fundamental decisions, everyone clearly sees each person’s role in building the road. Expectations and long-held assumptions change. Stakeholders are more likely to carry out their responsibilities. When board and staff create the Theory together, we’ve found that working relationships improve and board meetings tend to be more effective. Another benefit: sometimes board members who want to go in a different direction will step aside, essentially clearing some of the roadblocks your organization has come up against.

How do you get started? If you’re not on our website, go there: [www.bwbsolutions.com](http://www.bwbsolutions.com) and contact us.

Let us know what you think. Feel free to send comments or questions to: [MikeB@bwbsolutions.com](mailto:MikeB@bwbsolutions.com)