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# **FACILITATOR'S SOURCE BOOK**

## **SOURCE BOOK FOR FACILITATORS**

### **LEADING THEORY OF CHANGE**

#### **DEVELOPMENT SESSIONS**

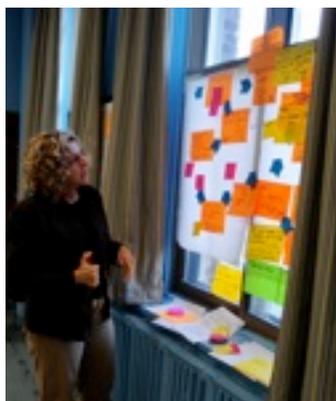
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**March 2012**

# Theory of Change *Facilitator's Source Book*



## A Theory of Change is an organization's story of how and why the world will be different because of what it does...



A Theory of Change is an organization's "theory", or story, of how it will make change in the world. A theory explains the group's beliefs about how change will unfold. The fundamental component of a Theory of Change is the pathway of change diagram of:

- Your intended impact on the world, and how communities will be different because of your work - called **outcomes**.
- Outcomes are arranged in a "causal" pathway of change. Most outcomes are also **preconditions**: they are necessary before outcomes farther up the chain can be achieved.

As we build the connections between shorter and longer-term outcomes (the **pathways**), we ask ourselves the following questions to check the validity of our thinking at each stage of the process:

- Why do we think a given precondition, or short term outcome, will lead to (or is necessary) to reach the one above it?
- Are there any major barriers to the outcome that need to be considered in our planning?

A Theory of Change eventually includes indicators, which are simply signs that we would observe when and if we are making progress. It is important that social change organizations be able to demonstrate what impact they expect to achieve, over the short term, and how these earlier outcomes set the stage for longer-term impact. It also helps organizations to understand and be able to explain why they can expect to see these changes. The process of honing your outcomes and plotting the pathways gives you the chance to air all your assumptions about the context and forces in the environment that affect your expected changes. Working on your theory of change can open up creative thinking, strengthen your program strategies and overall effectiveness, provide a solid framework for monitoring and evaluation, and help you describe the impact you are making or hope to make.



## Facilitator Preparation

Doing some homework before the first meeting will help you to better facilitate the planning process. The less you know about the group you will be working with, the more preparation you will want to do before your first meeting.

### Understand the *purpose* of the Theory of Change process you are leading.

Make sure you understand what stage of development best describes the project at this point. Is it in the *planning*, the *implementation*, the *evaluation*, or the *readjustment* stage? Are there already “givens” with which you must deal, or are you starting with a clean slate?

**Has all necessary “pre-work” been done?** If the purpose of developing a Theory of Change is to solve some existing problem in the community, has all of the necessary fact-finding been done to insure that the nature of

the problem, or its root cause, has been accurately determined? The old adage about “garbage in, garbage out” applies here. If the problem you are attempting to address is not accurately defined, the best Theory of Change map in the world, won’t bring about successful solutions.

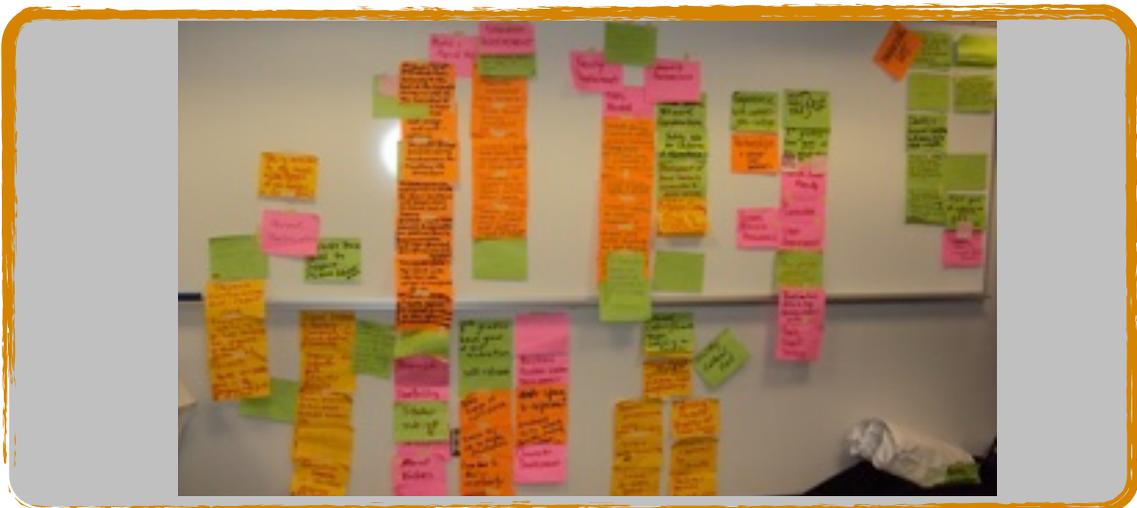
### Know the key players and any agendas that exist.

Who are the key decision makers for this project? Try to insure that they will be at the table when the ToC process takes place. Interview each of the key decision makers, so that you better understand what some of the issues are. If they will not be participating in the TOC, make sure you understand their position, any biases they have, and whether or not their intent is to support the outcomes of the process or only to use it as a tool in their decision-making. Is there anything that is totally “off the table” about which you should be aware? Prepare a list of questions for the interviews, so that you cover the same questions with everyone you are interviewing.

Face to face meetings are best, but telephone interviews will work if necessary.

**What’s the right number of participants?** A ToC process is most effective when many perspectives and viewpoints are represented. If you are facilitating a community planning process which will transpire over a number of weeks and where participants are coming from more than one location, more participants initially is better than fewer participants. You can usually expect fall-out in subsequent meetings, so your first meeting will probably have the most participants. Ideally, you don’t want fewer than 6-8 in any given planning session. Starting with as many as 15 during the first meeting is not too many.

**How long should the first meeting be?** Allow for a minimum of two hours, ideally 3-4 hours (unless you have the ability to plan an all-day meeting). You will want time for introductions, establishing meeting “rules” and an overview of Theory of Change,



## One or More Face-to-Face Sessions

Start the first meeting out by allowing everyone to introduce themselves and identify their relationship to the group/project. Then, use your judgment about using an icebreaker (some people love them, some hate them.) A good one to use is to ask people to pair up with someone they don't know well, and have them spend two minutes interviewing the other person, asking them, "Tell me what I would be interested in knowing about you relative to this project"; or, if the group knows each other pretty well already, have them ask and answer the question: "What is something important in your life at the moment that the group would be interested in knowing about?"

Following introductions, the group should establish "ground rules" for the following meetings. Some things that you might want to consider in establishing ground rules are:

1. Will you start the meetings on time, or give latecomers a few minutes to arrive?
2. Showing respect for others' opinions and not interrupting when someone is speaking
3. Any assignments made/accepted will be completed on time
4. Putting aside personal agendas and being open to new ideas
5. How will decisions be made?

- a. Consensus (people continue to talk until everyone agrees with the decision made)
- b. Modified consensus (the majority agree, but those who don't can "live with" the decision reached)
- c. Majority vote (the majority rule)

Be sure to have flip-chart paper posted around the room and lots of large post-its and marking pens available for the group to use. In addition to blank flip-chart paper in the front of the room, you should also have a sheet labeled "Parking Lot", and a sheet labeled "Interventions."



## Long-term Outcome

The goal of this session is to clearly define a long-term goal of the theory of change. Begin the process of defining the long-term outcome with some group brainstorming. Some questions you might want to pose to the group are:

- How will you know if your project has been successful?
- If the local newspaper were to write a headline on the success of this project, what would it say?
- What are your funders expecting to see?

Have group members write down their ideas on post-its and post them on the board. Once you have completed the brainstorming process, group the ideas based on similarities. A group discussion should then follow on the ideas presented. Obtain group agreement on the ideas that should be included. Before proceeding further, have the group identify the length of the project. At what point will they be measuring their success? The project can be of any length, but it is important for the group to agree on what the timeline will be.

### Crafting the Long-term Outcome

Instruct each participant to write out their ideas about the long-term goals, using post-it notes and/or sheets of white paper. Participants should write one definition per post-it note so they can be sorted later.

When finished, have participants place the post-its on flip chart paper in front, and group them by similarity. Then ask several people with statements representative of others in their group to explain their vision statement to the group. Encourage group discussion about key phrases and differences between the different statements, and start to move the group towards consensus around the

components that should be included. You may want to write key words or phrases that everyone has agreed upon on post-its, and then start crafting a goal on which the group can agree. This is also a good way to eliminate “outliers,” ideas which really do not belong in a Theory of Change, by simply *not* including them in a grouping of similar ideas. It is important to manage these ideas tactfully, but it is equally important not to try to make ideas fit somewhere in the map if they really do not belong. These ideas can be moved to the “parking lot” for review at a later time, if it seems appropriate.

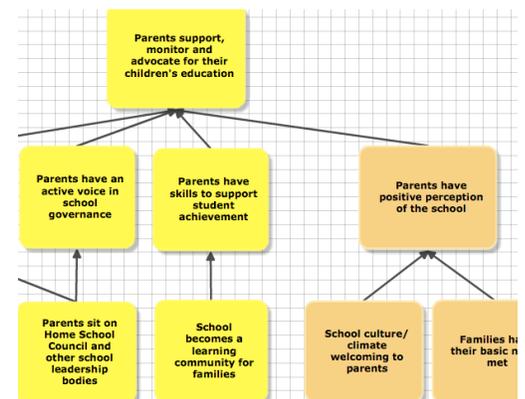
As the group continues to refine the long-term outcome, there will be some ideas that come up that are really preconditions. If the group agrees that certain ideas are such preconditions, those post-its should be placed in the parking lot to be brought up again once the backwards mapping process begins.

Remind the group that as they continue to refine their ToC map, other insights may come up that could cause the group to revisit and makes changes to the original long-term outcome. The LTO is not “final” until the group has finished the project, and may continue to be refined years into the future as the map is used to guide future programs and projects.

## Backwards Mapping

A pathway is the sequence in which outcomes must occur to reach long-term goal. Pathways are depicted by vertical chains of outcomes connected to one another by arrows, proceeding from early outcomes at the bottom to longer-term outcomes at the top. Pathways represent a causal logic; each level along the pathway depicts the outcomes that must come into being for the next outcome up the chain to be achieved.

A key component of the ToC experience is the process of “backwards mapping,” beginning with the long-term outcome and working back toward the earliest changes that need to occur. This is the opposite of how we usually think about planning, because it starts with asking “What preconditions must exist for the long-term outcome to be reached?” rather than with “What activities can we be doing to advance our goals?” That comes later in the process.



Most initiatives have multiple pathways that lead to the long-term outcome. For example, there might be a law enforcement pathway, a community involvement pathway, and a community resources



pathway that together lead to safe neighborhoods via a series of preconditions.

Starting with the long-term outcome (LTO), the facilitator must ask your group, “What outcomes must be brought about before we can achieve our LTO?” These outcomes get placed directly underneath the LTO as its direct

preconditions. When you have captured that information, continue backwards mapping by repeating the process for each of the outcomes you just identified. Ideally, the first row should include 4-6 preconditions. If you have many more than that, the map may become overly complex, and the mapping process will become unwieldy. A good way to start is to give each participant a pad of post-its and to ask them to write down all of the *necessary* and *sufficient* preconditions to achieving the long-term outcome. Caution the group about identifying “interventions” as opposed to “preconditions.” Interventions are the activities, strategies--the work--done to achieve the outcomes. Keep track of potential interventions on the flip chart sheet labeled “Interventions.” They can be referred back to when it comes time to develop interventions.

It is important to get the group to focus on preconditions that represent the most immediate

preconditions to the long-term outcome. You may have to remind the group about the backwards mapping process – starting from the ending point, and working backwards to the beginning point.

Have them put their completed post-its on a flip-chart at the front of the room. Group them by similarity and facilitate a group discussion about which ones should go onto the map and what the specific language should be. Again, outcome language can always be changed later, so it isn’t necessary to insure that the language be perfect at this stage.

The above steps should be completed iteratively, until all of the *necessary* and *sufficient* preconditions for all of the outcomes have been identified (although this may not be achieved in the first one or two sessions.) You should start with one outcome and determine the necessary preconditions for that one outcome (we call this “unpacking” an outcome). Not all outcomes have to be “unpacked”: For example, an outcome for which the group will not hold itself accountable, such as “improved economic conditions” does not need to be unpacked. Or, if another group is specifically working on one of the outcomes you have identified (if there is more than one group working on a similar project that might have the same precondition), you would not need to unpack that outcome. You will want to make sure that you note among the group’s assumptions why you have chosen not to unpack specific outcomes.

This process is also called “drilling down” the outcome pathways.

### **“Flipping” outcomes into preconditions**

One useful way of drilling down the outcome pathways is to have the group, or a breakout group, identify all the barriers in the way of achieving a given outcome on the framework. The group should make a list of these barriers. Then, discuss how to express each of these barriers as preconditions to the outcome in question.

Thus, the barrier is inverted from a negative to a positive. The group can list the preconditions, then place them in a causal order. These drill downs can then be assembled later and included within the theory of change framework.

This kind of work is usually done by small groups and/or committees which are charged with making progress on the theory in between face-to-face sessions.

## Assumptions and Interventions

As you work through the outcomes framework the discussions among the group will cover many things that aren't exactly classified as outcomes. Some of these things will fall into the "assumptions" group and others, the things people want to do, will fall into the "interventions" group. It is very useful and important to keep track of both.

Of course, the whole theory of change is, in a sense, a set of assumptions. The group is modeling what they believe will change, and will have to change, as a result of their initiative. The particular meaning of assumptions in this case is those conditions in the arena or environment in which the initiative will take place which are important to recognize and which must hold true for the theory to be realized. These conditions are assumed to already exist and to continue to exist during the life of the initiative. The conditions which do not yet exist, and which must be brought about by the initiative, comprise the outcomes on the theory. It can be very rich for participants in the theory of change session to surface and share one another's assumptions about the conditions that underlie and are necessary to the success of the work.

Assumptions should be kept track of during the sessions as they come up. Assumptions which the group feels are uncertain can be tested by including them as outcomes on the framework rather than as background assumptions.

Later on, the group can critique its theory according to its assumptions about prevailing conditions.

Interventions is the term ActKnowledge uses for all of the activities—including actions, tactics, strategies—to be undertaken in the course of the project or initiative. It is important for the facilitator to keep in mind—and to communicate to the group—that the most distinctive characteristic of theory of change in



contrast to other methods is that theory of change focuses first on outcomes rather than on interventions. Annual plans, strategic plans,

and planning documents of all kinds tend to emphasize 'what we're going to do' and to give lesser attention to 'what we're going to achieve'. Theory of change inverts this relationship, pushing a group to articulate and organize all its expected outcomes first before identifying project activities.

Another thing to be mindful of is the often confusing distinction between what is in outcome and what is an activity. In theory, outcomes are the results of project activities. That sounds like a clear distinction but one often has to think it through. Things discussed in planning sessions that appear to be better classified as interventions than as outcomes should be kept track of, perhaps in the parking lot.

It can be very helpful for making use of a theory of change map to place the interventions on the map in the appropriate locations. An intervention can be placed along a connecting arrow leading to the outcome that will most directly come about as a result of the particular intervention. In the real world, groups typically go through a theory of change process while work is already under way, or at least after a project has been pilot-tested, and in those cases it can be useful to map existing interventions to the theory so as to determine whether existing work is causally related to the expected outcomes.

## Capturing the Group's Work Between Meetings

Whether the theory development extends over several face-to-face sessions or is limited to one, it will be up to the facilitator to take the sheets of flip chart paper with all of the post-its, and put them in digital form. This is one of the most critical parts of the facilitation process and will require your understanding of the group you are working with and the project/program they are attempting to map. There are several good flowchart programs available for the mapping part: we have used OmniGraffle and Microsoft Visio with good results. As of 2011, ActKnowledge's own Theory of Change Online (TOCO) is available for any facilitator to use in capturing the work done in face-to-face sessions and in further developing the theory. TOCO has the advantage of having fields in its database for all the components of the theory, not just the map. Additionally, your group or client can have access to the work in TOCO, which is web-based, and log in to review, comment on, or work on components of the theory on their own. We find it helpful to have a camera with you during the face-to-face session to be able to photograph all the post-its in the positions they were in during the meeting. That way you have a record of the layout, since the post-its often get disassembled when the meeting ends.



As you review the map that was created in the last working session, you will want to be refining both the outcome statements and their placement in the framework. Although there is a risk in presenting the group with something they no longer recognize as their own work, most groups appreciate having the facilitator improve upon the framework—not by drilling down the pathways oneself but by clarifying outcome statements, eliminating redundant outcomes, taking outcomes off the map that are better expressed as interventions or as indicators, and by making the pathway structure as logical as you can make it.

The post-its are often on different color paper – perhaps you begin the last facilitated session by using orange for longer-term outcomes or, say, green for organizational capacity outcomes, but by the end of the session the colors probably make little sense and it is best to rethink the whole color scheme when capturing the framework in digital form. If you are using TOCO, you can identify the rationales that were discussed for the connections between

preconditions and outcomes directly on the map. If you are not using TOCO, a separate document containing the rationales should be started. Even if rationales were not expressed during the meeting you may find it helpful to work out the rationales for yourself to support the logic of how you have improved upon the layout of the pathways as well as to communicate that logic back to the group.

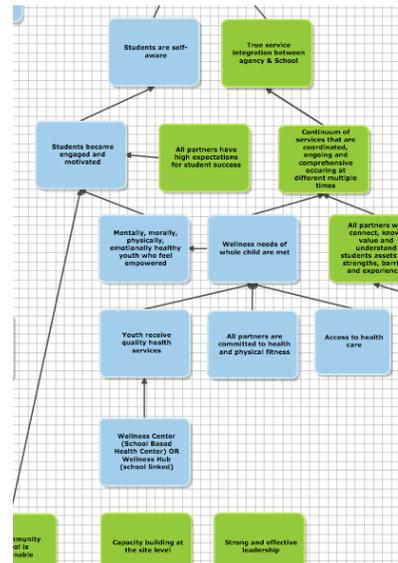


Make copies of your map available online and/or send copies of the map out to all participants for review prior to the next meeting. Take enough copies of the map to your next meeting for all participants. Start the next meeting by reviewing the map you created and noting any changes that you made and why. Test your changes with the group to make sure they are in agreement with your logic. Make any changes to the map that the group wants to see made, and then begin creating the rest of the map repeating the same steps described earlier.

## When Do You Stop the Backwards-mapping Process?

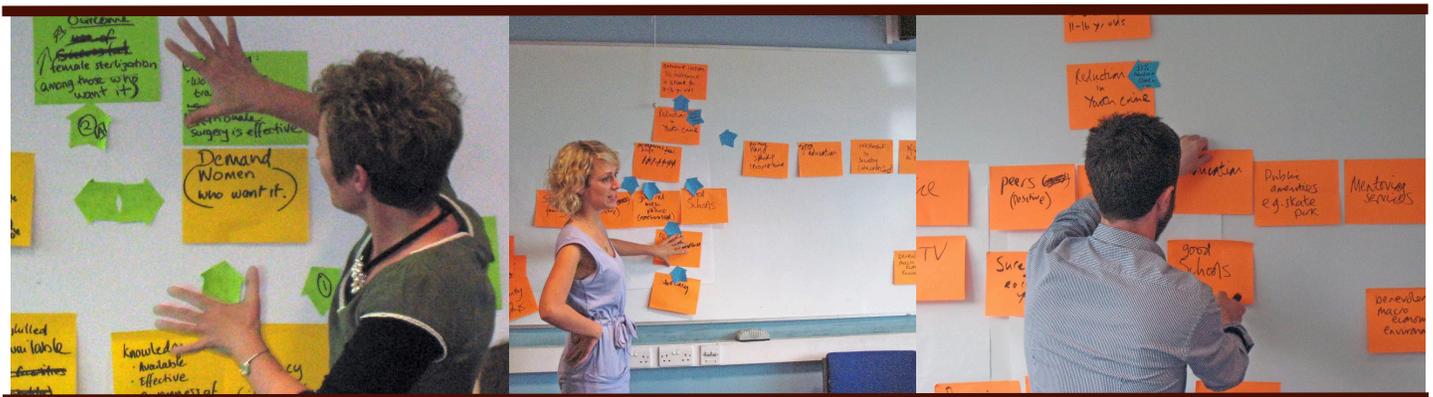
Now you may ask “How far do we go?” We refer to a theory’s *scope* as the extent to which the theory attempts to account for all the factors necessary to reach the long-term outcome. Different scopes are appropriate for different purposes. In general, each group must decide the “breadth” of its theory—that is, how many of all the possible pathways for change will you identify—as well as its “depth”, how far to drill down, or how many levels of preconditions? The scope should be broad enough to cover all the outcome areas that the initiative can realistically include. If the long-term outcome is “Safe Neighborhood”, one pathway could refer to aspects of policing, another to residents looking out for each other, and a third to changes in the physical environment. However, if the neighborhood is one of many caught in a foreclosure crisis, and boarded up houses proliferate, you may want to show a pathway of change that addresses instability in the housing market even if the solution requires concerted action in the national arena, well beyond the initiative’s scope.

The depth of a theory is determined by how far the group is able to drill down from the longer-term outcomes. In some cases, the group may need to learn more through pilot-testing before it can map near-term outcomes. In other cases a group may



choose to let others decide how to configure the pathway: a foundation, for example, may feel that its grantees are better able to plot out the more detailed levels of change. By way of contrast, a community-based organization may have enough knowledge and experience to drill down to a six-month time frame.

There is no hard and fast rule about how far down you should go in the mapping process. You want to stop when it appears clear that there are no more *necessary* preconditions to an outcome, and that an “intervention” at this point is obvious. As a general guideline, going three or four steps down from the first row of outcomes is typically adequate to understand the pathway required to reach the long-term outcome.



## Defining Indicators

Once the map is complete it is important to define indicators that will tell the group going forward whether they have met their outcomes. Defining indicators is probably the most difficult part of Theory of Change. Experience has taught us that



using the original group of participants is probably not the best way to determine success measurements. This step should be done by a much smaller group of people, who are familiar with outcomes measurement and the types of data that are and are not available to use. If the group will be using a professional evaluator for monitoring and evaluation (which is typically required by any funder), it will be helpful to get him or her involved at this stage

of the project. They can help you choose indicators that will be meaningful to funders and feasibly measured.

### Which Outcomes should have Indicators?

Ideally, every outcome on the map (below the dashed accountability line) should have an indicator, but



available resources often make that difficult to do. At a minimum, every outcome for which initial interventions will be designed should have an indicator. In some cases it may be good to have an indicator for the long-term outcome as well: Are the group's actions making a difference? Many groups want to designate priority outcomes—that is, outcomes they know they need to measure if the theory is going to hold. These are the outcomes

which must be operationalized, which is to say they must have one or more indicators. It will then be the task of evaluators and organizational learning people to design measurements and tools and identify data sources for monitoring and evaluation purposes.



### What are the Characteristics of Indicators?

The following questions must be answered about each indicator:

1. *Who* will be impacted? (fifth graders in Harrison County)
2. *How many* will change? (fifth graders in the target schools)
3. *How much* will it change? (improve reading scores by 20% or more)
4. *When* will it change? (by December 2012)

## Writing the Narrative

The narrative is a summary of the group's theory that explains the pathways of change, highlights some of their major assumptions, rationales, and interventions, and presents a compelling case as to how and why their initiative expects to make a difference. The narrative may also contain some information that is additional to what is in their theory, such as their overall vision, the history of how their initiative came to be, and some community context. The purpose of the narrative is twofold: (1) to convey the major elements of the theory easily and quickly to others; (2) to better understand how the elements of the theory work as a whole. Narratives should be kept to one or two pages.

## Process

After you have completed all the elements of the ToC, have someone try to draft an executive summary, in plain English, that describes the highlights of the ToC. Then, have the group review it to see if it does capture key elements and explanations of the theory, that are enough to make a compelling case without all the details.

You may want to craft several narratives, each one highlighting elements of interest for a particular audience.

The narrative should be reviewed with your planning group and the entire map should be evaluated, including the articulation of any unspoken assumptions the group may have made.

## Visual Analysis/Quality Review

At your last meeting, you want to make sure that everyone agrees the theory is:

- **Plausible** – does the completed model tell a compelling story? Does it make sense? Are the outcomes in the right order? Are preconditions actually preconditions to the outcomes you've indicated? Are there big gaps in the logic?
- **Feasible** – how realistic it is that the program or initiative can achieve the long-term outcome? Do the group have the capacity and resources to implement all the interventions specified? Do they need to bring in additional partners? Do they need to adjust the scope, expectations or timeline of the theory?
- **Testable** – how well you have crafted the indicators? Have you identified solid, measurable indicators that can be evaluated in a timely manner? Will these indicators provide sufficient evidence to guide course-corrections going forward, and to evaluate fulfillment of the theory? Will they be convincing to necessary audiences?

## ToC Lite

You may infer from this guide that ToC continues over several months with several face-to-face meetings and committee work and/or phone calls, in between meetings, between the facilitator and the core group. This is in fact an ideal setup for a large-scale planning effort. However many groups have very small planning budgets and can only afford to have a facilitator present for one or at

most two meetings. This you might call "ToC Lite". The work done in front of the group should prioritize the outcomes framework, including the long-term outcome and basic pathways of preconditions. All the other work can be done outside of face-to-face meetings, and the level of detail on all components of the theory will be in proportion to the budget.

Whew! By now, you will probably agree that creating a Theory of Change is a lot of work. The process is not an easy one, and there is no absolutely right way to complete it. But, by definition, the rigorous critical thinking that takes place during a Theory of Change process will help to ensure your success.

Please let us know what has worked for you, or what has not worked. We would like to have more real-world examples to share with others as they embark upon their own Theory of Change. You can dialogue about the process on our Facebook page, Theory of Change for Planning and Evaluation. Please feel free to contact me directly at [hclark@actknowledge.org](mailto:hclark@actknowledge.org). We look forward to hearing from you.