



YOUR EVALUATOR
TOLD YOU

You need a

theory of change

What is it? Why should you care?

A FLOWERY EXAMPLE
FROM THE CENTER FOR
RESEARCH EVALUATION



EXAMPLE

LET'S SAY I BELIEVE
PLANTING FLOWERS
LEADS TO GREATER
HAPPINESS.



I GET FUNDING FOR A
PROGRAM THAT
DISTRIBUTES ZINNIA
SEEDS TO MEMBERS OF MY
COMMUNITY.



MY (SIMPLE) THEORY OF
CHANGE IS AS FOLLOWS:

EXAMPLE: ZINNIA JOY

If community members...



Then I expect that...



Thereby contributing to...

Plant the
zinnia
seeds



Water
them
regularly



Make sure
the seeds
have sun

The seeds
will grow
& flower



People will
spend time
outside &
relax



They will
see & enjoy
the flowers



Higher
levels of
happiness



EVALUATORS WILL COLLECT DATA ON EACH PART OF THE THEORY OF CHANGE:

We'll collect data on...

Did the seeds get planted?

+

How often were they watered?

+

Did the seeds get enough sun?

And...

Did the seeds grow & flower?

+

Did people spend time outside? Did they relax?

+

Did anyone see & enjoy the flowers?

And ultimately...

Do people report higher levels of happiness?

WITH THESE DATA, WE'LL EXPLORE: (1) WERE THERE POSITIVE OUTCOMES? AND (2) DOES THE DATA SUPPORT YOUR THEORY ABOUT THE PROGRAM DESIGN?



FOR EXAMPLE:

If we find that...

The seeds were
planted

+

They were watered
every second day

+

They got plenty of
sun

And...

The seeds flowered
beautifully

+

People spent more
time outside,
relaxing

+

People saw & enjoyed
the flowers

BUT...

People were no
happier than before...

WE'LL KNOW THERE WAS A PROBLEM WITH
THE PROGRAM DESIGN.

Maybe the world is more complex than we think? Maybe there are other things that also need to change to influence overall happiness. The results tell us the program design needs a re-think.



ON THE OTHER HAND:

If we find that...

The seeds weren't
planted

+

Or they didn't get
watered

+

Or they didn't get any
sun

So...

The seeds didn't
flower

+

No one spent time
outside

+

And they didn't get to
see the flowers

And...

People were no
happier than before...

WE'LL KNOW THERE WAS A PROBLEM WITH
PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION.

We'll need to look at strategies for re-jigging the program roll-out. Maybe people don't have time to plant the seeds? Maybe they need better instructions? These results tell us the theory behind the program design *might still work* but we need to improve implementation.



ALTERNATIVELY:

If we find that...

The seeds were
planted

+

They were watered
every second day

+

They got plenty of
sun

But...

The seeds didn't
flower

+

People spent more
time outside,
relaxing

+

People didn't get to
see the flowers

HOWEVER...

People DID report
higher levels of
happiness

WE'LL NEED TO RE-THINK OUR VIEWS
ABOUT WHAT MAKES PEOPLE HAPPY.

We got the outcome we wanted, but not for the reasons we expected. Maybe the flowers have nothing to do with happiness...maybe it's just time spent outside? These results tell us we might need to tweak our program design to remove unnecessary components.





THESE ARE JUST THREE
POSSIBLE OUTCOME
CONFIGURATIONS.



EACH DIFFERENT
CONFIGURATION HELPS US
PINPOINT: WHAT'S WORKING?
WHAT'S NOT? WHERE DO WE
NEED TO FOCUS OUR
ATTENTION?



IT'S THIS DIAGNOSTIC
CAPABILITY THAT KEEPS US
EVALUATORS COMING BACK TO
THE PHRASE:

You need a theory of change.

Developed by the Center for Research Evaluation at the University of Mississippi
cere.olemiss.edu