



Theory of change

TOOL

Once you have an understanding of the type of power you need to build and have a SMARTIE goal in mind, you can develop your theory of change, which summarises your strategy.

A theory of change statement is a tool to understand your strategy and how (or if) it will work. Being able to articulate a clear theory of change statement is a prerequisite to an effective campaign. To put it bluntly, if you can't write your strategy out in a sentence that makes sense, then it probably won't work.

A theory of change statement uses this format:

IF... WE TAKE **THIS ACTION,**

THEN... WE'LL ACHIEVE **THIS GOAL,**

BECAUSE... **OF THESE REASONS.**

Theory of change forces you to get specific about how social change happens. You start with the long-term goal of your campaign, and then work backwards to what it will take to achieve that goal. Next, you can get specific about what actions you can take to create those conditions.

Developing a theory of change can be particularly helpful during the early stages of campaign planning. It guides you to choose the right strategic approach to most efficiently achieve your goal, and helps you avoid the common mistake of jumping immediately into action without connecting tactics to strategy.

A theory of change should be clear for both the big and small picture (e.g. federal and local levels). A single campaign may have many local theories of change nested within a broader campaign. For example, if your objective is to get a government Minister to make a decision, then the possible theories of change might be articulated as:

1. IF we generate sufficient public pressure on the Minister from their local constituents, THEN the Minister will make the decision, BECAUSE they are fearful of not being re-elected if they don't do what their constituents want.
2. IF we educate the Minister on the flaws in the current law, and the need for change, THEN the Minister will make the decision, BECAUSE they will make a decision based on the evidence and key policy considerations.
3. IF we mobilise political/industry/media pressure on the Minister, THEN the Minister will make the decision, BECAUSE the Minister wants to protect their public political reputation and end the negative media attention.

Where possible, it may increase your chances of success to pursue more than one theory simultaneously. However, given limited resources and organising capacity — as well as particular conditions in your local context — you'll need to commit to the theory (or theories) most likely to achieve your goals.

Once you choose a theory, you can then devise a campaign pathway to serve that particular theory of change.

Source: Adapted from <https://beautifultrouble.org/toolbox/tool/theory-of-change/> (retrieved June 7, 2022); Marshall Ganz (2014) Organizing: People, Power, Change | Page 35

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How to use this tool

- Divide the participants into three groups where groups will work on 'If' (campaign action), 'Then' (campaign goal), and 'Because' (reasons to attain goal) respectively (2 mins).
- Instruct participants to brainstorm campaign actions (for 'If' group), campaign goals (for 'Then') and potential reasons ('Because' group) for achieving goals on the paper, and ask them to write the points on large sheets or a flipchart (5–7 mins).
- After a few minutes, have people move to another sheet and add on to what is written on the paper, considering their previous points of their group work (5–7 mins).
- Ask to move to one more sheet and continue to brainstorm points (3 mins).
- Now instruct participants to keep 'If' sheet (first), 'Then' sheet (second) and 'Because' sheet (third) side by side. Alternatively, you can paste these sheets on the wall (1–2 mins).
- Do a gallery walk and then ask groups to construct a sentence as follows: IF...we take This Action (choose from 'If' sheet), THEN...we'll achieve This Goal (consider from 'Then' sheet), BECAUSE...of These Reasons (take from 'Because' sheet) (4–6 mins)
- Back in the big group, question the different propositions and discuss.
- Ask participants to share what stood out for them, which change theory will be considered for their campaigns, and other relevant reflections (4–6 mins).
- To conclude, summarize learnings or key points about the method. If you have time, ask participants to write down the top three learnings they may want to take forward from this exercise (3–5 mins).

