# Practical Tips for Developing and Using Theories of Change and Logic Models

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# Learning Objectives

By the end of this presentation, you will understand:

- What a "theory of change" is and why it is important grantees invest in developing one

- How a theory of change is connected to a logic model

- How to identify and avoid common pitfalls in AmeriCorps grantees' theories of change

- Useful tips for helping grantees develop a strong theory of change and logic model

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# What is a theory of change?

- **A theory of change is how a grantee explains why they think their program will make a positive difference in the community.**

  - It presents the program's core <u>causal</u> hypothesis

  - It identifies the ultimate goal and explains <u>why</u> their specific AmeriCorps program can achieve this goal

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# Reasons to develop a theory of change

- **To obtain <u>consensus</u> about <u>what</u> the program is trying to achieve (i.e., program goals) and <u>how</u> the program can achieve them**

- **Developing a TOC is a good exercise for any organization because it forces the organization to articulate:**

  - The <u>assumptions</u> underlying your program, including why it exists

  - The <u>goals</u> the program is trying to achieve, and for whom

  - The unique <u>contribution</u> that its program makes to achieve these goals

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# Attributes of a good theory of change

- **Honest--**A TOC should be clear about what are facts and what are assumptions or hypotheses

- **Plausible--**A TOC should be achievable given a grantee's resources

- **Unambiguous--**A TOC should be direct and clear; it is not the place for vague or passive language

- **Consensus-driven--**A TOC should reflect input and agreement from all program stakeholders

- **Local--**A TOC should be about one particular program – Grantees can adapt from a national model, but it should be specific to their AmeriCorps program

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# How to write a good theory of change

1. Start with the goal you are trying to achieve or the problem you are trying to address

2. Explain what underlying aspect of your program enables it to address the problem or achieve the goal

3. Describe how your AmeriCorps program carries out this causal mechanism

4. Connect your causal chain back to the problem and/or goal you started with

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# ICF's Recommended Approach: PIT-B
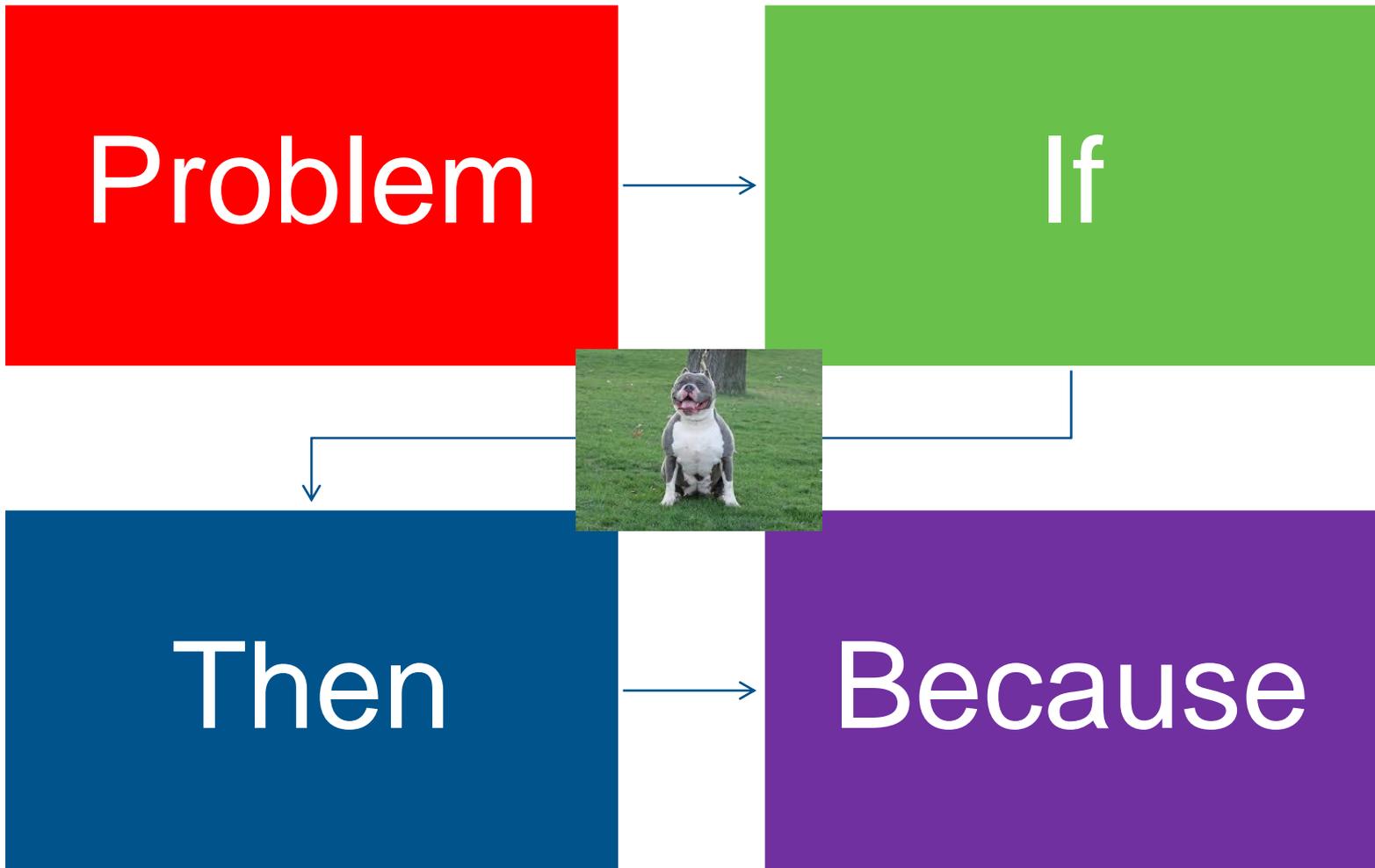
# Example theory of change

*Adolescents in our city suffer from high levels of obesity and related ailments. We believe this is because adolescents do not know how to make good food choices, and often do not understand the impacts that those choices can have on their health. Our theory is that if adolescents learn about healthy shopping and cooking, then those students will become healthier because they will learn about how to choose better food options and develop positive attitudes toward eating. Our AmeriCorps members help students learn about choosing and cooking healthy meals by delivering a fun and interactive after-school program. By providing adolescents with an age-appropriate nutrition curriculum, we will improve their knowledge and attitudes about healthy food. Ultimately, this will reduce adolescent obesity and related ailments.*

| Problem | → | If |
|---------|---|-----|

| Then | → | Because |
|------|---|---------|

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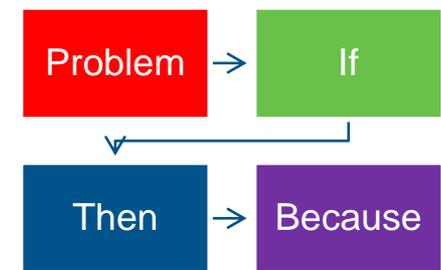
# Examples

**In the next few slides, we'll discuss some sample theories of change. We will use these to illustrate some common pitfalls, and then provide some ways to avoid these pitfalls.**

# Summary of common pitfalls

- **Literature Reviews:** Describe the results of research into similar programs, but do not address the underlying factor behind those programs

- **Process Focused:** Going into the weeds on the "how" of your program but forgetting to address the "why"

- **Program Histories:** Giving a detailed looked at every way your program has evolved, but forgetting to explain why it works the way it does

- **Circular logic:** Repeating the same statement in different words

# Example 1

*Our program seeks to reduce the drop-out rate by deploying AmeriCorps members to implement the ACME drop-out prevention program. We believe that if we implement our drop-out program, then we will encourage more students to stay in school and graduate because we will successfully decrease the drop out rate.*

- Discussion: Do you see any weaknesses with this TOC?

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# Pitfall 1: Circular logic

*Our program seeks to reduce the drop-out rate by deploying AmeriCorps members to implement the ACME drop-out prevention program. We believe that if we implement our drop-out program, then we will encourage more students to stay in school and graduate because we will successfully decrease the drop out rate.*

- Discussion: Do you see any weaknesses with this TOC?

The main problem with this example is that it uses <u>circular logic</u> to explain why it works. That is to say, it repeats itself using slightly different language, but never explains the underlying reason why its drop-out program works.

# A better example:

*Our community has a high drop out rate. Our program seeks to address this problem by connecting at-risk students with AmeriCorps members who have overcome challenges to graduate from high school. We believe that if we connect at-risk students with AmeriCorps members who share similar experiences, then they will form meaningful relationships over their shared experiences. We hypothesize that these relationships will help at-risk students envision a better future and see how earning their degree fits in that future, leading to improved attitudes toward school and eventually higher graduation rates.*

| Problem | → | If |
|---------|---|-----|

| Then | → | Because |
|------|---|---------|
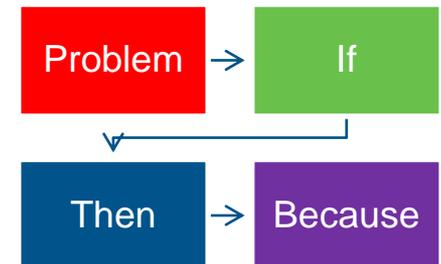
# Example 2

*Our program model seeks to help unemployed residents find stable jobs in our community. We achieve this through a two-step process. First, new clients complete a survey about their job skills and interests. Second, AmeriCorps members hold meetings with unemployed individuals to talk about possible options. After clients complete these meetings, we expect them to be able to find a job.*

- Discussion: Do you see any weaknesses with this theory of change?

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# Pitfall 2: Too process focused

*Our program model seeks to help unemployed residents find stable jobs in our community. We achieve this through a two-step process. First, new clients complete a survey about their job skills and interests. Second, AmeriCorps members hold meetings with unemployed individuals to talk about possible options. After clients complete these meetings, we expect them to be able to find a job.*

- Discussion: Do you see any weaknesses with this theory of change?

The main problem with this example is that it <u>focuses too much on the process</u>, but does not address the underlying reason why its employment program works.

# A better example 2

*The closure of the local paper mill has led to persistent unemployment in our community.* *Our program model is built on the assumption* *if unemployed persons focus on building skills in sectors they find interesting,* *they will be more enthusiastic and persistent at applying for jobs.* *Therefore, our program deploys AmeriCorps members to work closely with unemployed individuals to find out what their passion is, and then develop a skills development plan suited to their interests. Ultimately, we believe helping people find careers they like will create sustainable improvements in the local labor market.*

| Problem | → | If |
|---------|---|-----|

| Then | → | Because |
|------|---|---------|
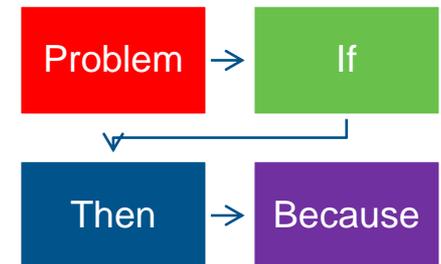
# Example 3

*In 1983, a group of idealistic recent college graduates started an afterschool club at an middle school in a low-income neighborhood. Once a week, they would lead lively discussions about their favorite books with students. After doing this informally for 10 years, in 1993 we incorporated as a nonprofit, which we know today as Storytime. With a headquarters in Dallas, Storytime now runs afterschool reading programs at 100 schools across Texas.*

- Discussion: Do you see any weaknesses with this theory of change?

# Pitfall 3: Giving a history lesson

*In 1983, a group of idealistic recent college graduates started an afterschool club at an middle school in a low-income neighborhood. Once a week, they would lead lively discussions about their favorite books with students. After doing this informally for 10 years, in 1993 we incorporated as a nonprofit, which we know today as Storytime. With a headquarters in Dallas, Storytime now runs afterschool reading programs at 100 schools across Texas.*

- Discussion: Do you see any weaknesses with this theory of change?

The problem with this example is that it provides unnecessary background information about the program, but does not explain how it works.

# A better example 3

*Teenagers in poor neighborhoods often have no access to books except those they are required to read in school, so it is no surprise reading scores are low in these communities.* Our theory *is that if children have more opportunities to read and discuss good books, then they will come to see reading as a fun hobby, and not just something they do for school. The Storytime program, which deploys AmeriCorps members to operate after-school "book clubs," promotes reading as a hobby by providing a setting, refreshments, and reading mentors to lead discussions about age appropriate books. We believe this will foster a life-long love of reading for its own sake, and thereby promote literacy and learning.*

| Problem | → | If |
|---------|---|-----|
| Then | → | Because |
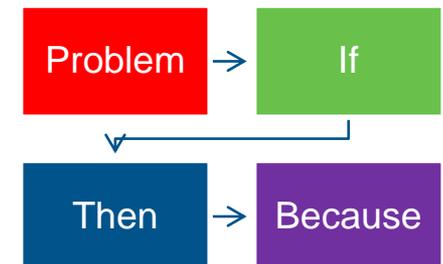
# Example 4

*Several recent studies show that Americans are less active than they were in the past. Our program deploys AmeriCorps members to run sports programming, such as youth and adult soccer and basketball clubs, at the local YMCA. Another organization in Atlanta operated a similar program, and found that participants increased their activity levels substantially. A similar study, published in 2010, showed that participants in organized sports leagues were less likely to develop diabetes over time.*

- Discussion: Do you see any weaknesses with this theory of change?

# Pitfall 4: Providing a literature review

*Several recent studies show that Americans are less active than they were in the past. Our program deploys AmeriCorps members to run sports programming, such as youth and adult soccer and basketball clubs, at the local YMCA. Another organization in Atlanta operated a similar program, and found that participants increased their activity levels substantially. A similar study, published in 2010, showed that participants in organized sports leagues were less likely to develop diabetes over time.*

- Discussion: Do you see any weaknesses with this theory of change?

The weakness with this example is that it describes the results of previous studies, but does not articulate how the program actually works.

# A Better Example 4

*The rate of obesity in our community has doubled over the past 20 years.* *We hypothesize that one factor driving this trend is the decline of organized sports leagues.* *Our program seeks to address this problem by deploying AmeriCorps members to establish youth and adult soccer leagues at local park facilities. We hypothesize that if we provide organized sports leagues,* *then more community members will become active* *because the leagues will make the games more fun and exciting.* *Ultimately, we believe that a more active community will be a healthier community.*

| Problem | → | If |
|---------|---|-----|
| Then | → | Because |
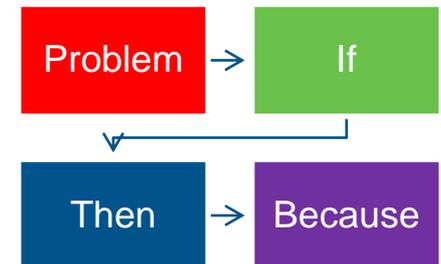
# Connection between a theory of change and a logic model

- **A theory of change is a narrative description of *why* the program works**

- **A logic model translates this *why* into a fleshed out *how***

- **A logic model is a visual representation of the theory of change**

# Reasons to develop a logic model

- **To visually represent the connections between program components**

  - A logic model can help grantees visualize the sequence of their program, i.e. how one thing leads to another

- **To communicate your program to stakeholders**

  - A logic model can be a quick guide to the program

- **To meet AmeriCorps requirements**

# The basic elements of a logic model

| Inputs | Activities | Outputs | Outcomes | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | Short-term | Intermediate | Long-term |
| what resources go into a program | what activities the program undertakes | what is produced through those activities | Changes or benefits that result from program in near-term | Changes or benefits that occur in longer time frame | Long term changes or benefits of program, often at social level |
| e.g. money, staff, equipment | e.g. deliver training programs; build or repair homes | e.g. number of booklets produced, workshops held, people trained | e.g., improved knowledge/skills/attitudes/behavior | e.g., jobs obtained; improved graduation rate. | e.g., reduced poverty; reduced homelessness |

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# Tabular Logic Model

| Inputs | Activities | Outputs | Outcomes |
|---|---|---|---|
| • AmeriCorps members (ASN members)<br><br>• Partner agencies (Department of Public Health and Department of Education)<br><br>• Partnerships with middle and high schools<br><br>• Grantee organizational staff and leadership<br><br>• Financial and programmatic support from CNCS and other organizations | • ASN members deliver after-school program focused on nutritional topics<br>• Training for ASN members on leadership and job search skills<br>• Job fairs for ASN members in field of adolescent health | • Number of hours of programming delivered<br>• Number of students participating in the program<br>• Number of ASN members receiving leadership and job search training<br>• Number of hours of training received<br>• Number of job fairs held<br>• Number of ASN members participating in job fairs<br>• Number of organizations participating in job fairs | • Improved knowledge about healthy shopping and cooking<br>• Improved understanding of importance of healthy food choices<br>• Improved attitudes toward eating<br>• Improved eating habits<br>• Decreased adolescent obesity<br>• Improved job search knowledge and skills among members<br>• Opportunities for members to network with health organizations<br>• Increased employment of ASN members<br>• Increased post-service financial stability for ASN members |

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# Visual Logic Model

**Problems/Needs:** Adolescents suffer from high levels of obesity and related ailments, at least in part because they do not know how to make good food choices and do not understand the impact that these choices can have on their health.

| Inputs | Activities and Outputs | Outcomes | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | **Short-Term** | **Intermediate-Term** | **Long-Term** |



- AmeriCorps members
- Partner agencies (Department of Public Health and Department of Education)
- Partnerships with middle and high schools
- Grantee organizational staff and leadership
- Financial and programmatic support from CNCS and other organizations

ASN members deliver after-school program focused on nutritional topics (*Outputs: # of hours of program delivered; # of students participating in program*)

Improved knowledge about healthy shopping and cooking

Improved understanding of importance of healthy food choices

More positive attitudes toward eating

Improved eating habits

Decreased adolescent obesity and related ailments

Training for ASN members on leadership and job search skills (*Outputs: # of members receiving training; # of hours of training received*)

Job fairs for ASN members in field of adolescent health (*Outputs: # of job fairs held; # of members participating in job fairs; # of organizations participating in job fairs*)

Improved job search knowledge and skills among members

Opportunities for members to network with respite care organizations

Increased number of members have stable employment after completing their ASN service

Increased post-service financial stability for ASN members

# Discussion

- **What are some advantages or disadvantages of the tabular or visual approach?**

# Benefits of visual representation

- **Using a visual representation clarifies how all elements of a logic model are related to each other**

  - You can follow parallel tracks, e.g., member and beneficiary outcomes

- **Some programs have distinct, if inter-related, elements, a visual representation can reflect this complexity**

  - Consider using arrows and/or color codes to draw out relationships within a program

- **A visual representation can help uncover whether parts of a program do not fit or need re-working**

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# Tips

- **If an AmeriCorps program is part of a larger national organization, or is implementing a model developed by another organization (e.g., Habitat for Humanity), it may be possible to borrow elements of their logic model**

  - Be sure to adapt it so it reflects your specific AmeriCorps program

- **Do not use a logic model to re-hash your performance measures. Focus on concepts, not quantitative targets**

  - That said, you may decide to create a separate document to track your performance measures or to set targets

# More tips

- **Think about how to translate If->Then->Because statement to a logic model**

  - The "If" can be the activities; then "Then" can be long-term outcomes, and "Because" can be outputs and short-term outcomes

- **A logic model is a living document—don't be afraid to adjust it as you learn through implementation**

- **Look around the web for examples**

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# Logic model resources

**CNCS Core Curriculum**

> https://www.nationalservice.gov/resources/evaluation/all-evaluation-resources

**W.K. Kellogg Foundation:**

> https://www.wkkf.org/resource-directory/resource/2006/02/wk-kellogg-foundation-logic-model-development-guide