EvaluATE

Getting the most out of your
LOGIC MODEL

Lori Wingate

I recently led two workshops at the American Evaluation Association's Summer Evaluation Institute. To get a sense of the types of projects that the participants were working on, I asked them to send me a brief project description or logic model in advance of the Institute. I received more than 50 responses, representing a diverse array of projects in the areas of health, human rights, education, and community development. While I have long advocated for logic models as a succinct way to communicae the nature and purpose of projects, it wasn't until I received these responses that I realized how efficient logic models really are in terms of conveying what a project does, whom it serves, and how it is intended to bring about change.

In reviewing the logic models, I was able to quickly understand the main project activities and outcomes. My workshops were on developing evaluation questions, and I was amazed how quickly I could frame evaluation questions and indicators based on what was presented in the models. It wasn't as straight forward with the narrative project descriptions, which were much less consistent in terms of the types of information conveyed and the degree to which the elements were linked conceptually. When participants would show me their models in the workshop, I quickly remembered their projects and could give them specific feedback based on my previous review of their models.

Think of NSF proposal reviewers who have to read numerous 15-page project descriptions. It's not easy to keep straight all the details of a single project, let alone that of 10 or more 15-page proposals. In a logic model, all the key information about a project's activities, products, and outcomes is presented in one graphic. This helps reviewers consume the project information as a "package." For reviewers who are especially interested in the quality of the evaluation plan, a quick comparison of the evaluation plan against the model will reveal how well the plan is aligned to the project's activities, scope, and purpose. Specifically, mentally mapping the evaluation questions and indicators onto the logic model provides a good sense of whether the evaluation will adequately address both project implementation and outcomes.

One of the main reasons for creating a logic model—other than the fact it may be required by a funding agency—is to illustrate how key project elements logically relate to one another. I have found that representing a project's planned activities, products, and outcomes in a logic model format can reveal weaknesses in the project's plan. For example, there may be an activity that doesn't seem to lead anywhere or ambitious outcomes that aren't adequately supported by activities or outputs. It is much better if you, as a project proposer, spot those weaknesses before an NSF reviewer does. A strong logic model can then serve as a blueprint for the narrative project description—all key elements of the model should be apparent in the project description and vice versa.

I don't think there is such a thing as the perfect logic model. The trick is to recognize when it is good enough. Check to make sure the elements are located in the appropriate sections of the model, that all main project activities (or activity areas) and outcomes are included, and that they are logically linked. Ask someone from outside your team to review it; revise if they see problems or opportunities to increase clarity. But don't overwork it—treat it as a living document that you can update when and if necessary.

To get started with your ATE project logic model, use EvaluATE's logic model template – see p. 3.

THE FUTURE OF EVALUATE

EvaluATE is in the last month of our second four-year grant and entering a one-year no-cost extension. We are optimistic about our prospects for a new award. However, if/when that new award is made, it will be for about one-third less than our current grant. As such, we faced difficult choices about where and how to reduce costs. We decided to discontinue the print version of our quarterly newsletters and rely solely on electronic dissemination. On the bright side, this presents an opportunity to reimagine and improve our outreach.

If you would like to share your preferences about the nature and frequency of information you receive from EvaluATE in the future, please complete a short survey at http://bit.ly/news-input.

Theory of Change

"A theory of change defines all building blocks required to bring about a given long-term goal. This set of connected building blocks—interchangeably referred to as outcomes, results, accomplishments, or preconditions—is depicted on a map known as a pathway of change/change framework, which is a graphic representation of the change process."[1]

While this sounds a lot like a logic model, a theory of change typically includes much more detail about how and why change is expected to happen. For example, a theory of change may describe necessary conditions that must be achieved in order to reach each level of outcomes and include justifications for hypotheses. While logic models are essentially descriptive—communicating what a project will do and the outcomes it will produce—theories of change are more explanatory. An arrow from one box in a logic model to another indicates, "if we do this, then this will happen." In contrast, a theory of change explains what that arrow represents, i.e., the specific mechanisms by which change occurs.

Some funding programs, such as NSF's Improving Undergraduate STEM Education program, call for proposals to include a theory of change. Developing and communicating a theory of change pushes proposers to get specific about how change will occur and include strong justification for planned actions and expected results.

To learn more, see "An Introduction to Theory of Change" in Evaluation Exchange at http://bit.ly/toc-lm, which includes links to helpful resources from the Center for Theory of Change (http://www.theoryofchange.org/).

[1] http://www.theoryofchange.org > Glossary

What's the difference between outputs, outcomes, and impacts?

Activities → Outputs → Short-Term Outcomes → Mid-Term Outcomes → Long-Term Outcomes

A common source of confusion among individuals who are learning about logic models is the difference between outputs, outcomes, and impacts. While most people generally understand that project activities are the things that a project does, the other terms may be less straightforward.

Outputs are the tangible products of project activities. I think of outputs as things whose existence can be observed directly, such as websites, videos, curricula, labs, tools, software, training materials, journal articles, and books. They tend to be the things that remain after a project ends or goes away.

Outcomes are the changes brought about through project activities and outputs/products. Outcomes may include changes in individual knowledge, skills, attitudes, awareness, or behaviors; organizational practices; and broader social/economic conditions. In her blog post "Outputs are for programs, outcomes are for people" (http://bit.ly/srob0314), Sheila Robinson offers this guidance: "**OUTCOMES** are changes in program participants or recipients (aka the target population). They can be identified by answering the question: How will program participants change as a result of their participation in the program?" This is a great way to check to see if your logic model elements are located in the right place. If the outcomes in your logic model include things that don't sound like an appropriate answer to that question, then you may need to move things around.

The term *impact* is usually used to refer to outcomes that are especially large in scope or the ultimate outcomes a project is seeking to bring about. Sometimes the terms impacts and long-term outcomes are used interchangeably.

For example, one of EvaluATE's main activities are webinars. Outputs of these webinars include resource materials, presentation slides, and recordings. Short-term outcomes for webinar participants are expected to include increased knowledge of evaluation. Mid-term outcomes include modifications or changes in their evaluation practice. Long-term outcomes are improved quality and utility of ATE project evaluations. The ultimate intended impact is for ATE projects to achieve better outcomes through strategic use of high-quality evaluations.

Keep in mind that not all logic models use these specific terms, and not everyone adheres to these particular definitions. That's OK! The important thing to remember when developing a logic model is to understand what YOU mean in using these terms and to use and apply them consistently in your model and elsewhere. And regardless of how you define them, each column in your model should present new information, not a reiteration of something already communicated.

Lori Wingate

ATE Logic Model Template

A logic model is a graphic depiction of how a project translates its resources into activities and outcomes. The ATE Project Logic Model Template presents the basic format for a logic model with question prompts and examples to guide users in distilling their project plans into succinct statements about planned activities and products and desired outcomes. Paying attention to the prompts and ATE-specific examples will help users avoid common logic model mistakes, like placing outputs (tangible products) under outcomes (changes in people, organizations or conditions brought about through project activities and outputs).

The template is in PowerPoint so you may use the existing elements and start creating your own logic model right away—just delete the instructional parts of the document and input your project's information. We have found that when a document has several graphic elements, PowerPoint is easier to work in than Word. Alternatively, you could create a simple table in Word that mirrors the layout in the template.

Formatting tips:

- If you find you need special paper to print the logic model and maintain its legibility, it's too complicated. It should be readable on a 8.5" x 11" sheet of paper. If you simply have too much information to include in a single page, include general summary statements/categories, and include detailed explanations in a proposal narrative or other project planning document.

- You may wish to add arrows to connect specific activities to specific outputs or outcomes. However, if you find that all activities are leading to all outcomes (and that is actually how the project is intended to work), there is no need to clutter your model with arrows leading everywhere.

- Use a consistent font and font size.

- Align, align, align! Alignment is one of the most important design principles. When logic model elements are out of alignment, it can make it seem messy and unprofessional.

Don't worry if your logic model doesn't capture all the subtle nuances of your project. It should provide an overview of what a project does and is intended to accomplish and convey a clear logic as to how the pieces are connected. Your proposal narrative or project plan is where the details go.

Download the template from http://bit.ly/lm-temp.

PROJECT SPOTLIGHT

Geospatial Technician Education–Unmanned Aircraft Systems

Expanding Geospatial Technician Education through Virginia's Community Colleges

Chris Carter is the Deputy Director of the Virginia Space Grant Consortium, where he leads two ATE projects

How do you use logic models in your ATE projects?

Our team recently received our fourth ATE award, which will support the development of academic pathways and faculty training in unmanned aircraft systems (UAS). UAS, when combined with geospatial technologies, will revolutionize spatial data collection and analysis.

Visualizing desired impacts and outcomes is an important first step to effective project management. Logic models are wonderful tools for creating a roadmap of key project components. As a principal investigator on two ATE projects, I have used logic models to conceptualize project outcomes and the change that our team desires to create. Logic models are also effective tools for articulating the inputs and resources that are leveraged to offer the activities that bring about this change.

With facilitation and guidance from our partner and external evaluator, our team developed several project logic models. We developed one overarching project logic model to conceptualize the intended outcomes and desired change of the regional project. Each community college partner also developed a logic model to capture its unique goals and theory of change while also articulating how it contributes to the larger effort. These complementary logic models allowed the team members to visualize and understand their contributions while ensuring everyone was on the same path.

Faculty partners used these logic models to inform their administrations, business partners, and employers about their work. They are great tools for sharing the vision of change and building consensus among key stakeholders.

Our ATE projects are focused on creating career pathways and building faculty competencies to prepare technicians. The geospatial and UAS workforce is a very dynamic employment sector that is constantly evolving. We find logic models helpful tools for keeping the team and partners focused on the desired outputs and outcomes. The models remind us of our goals and help us understand how the components fit together. It is crucial to identify the project inputs and understand that as these evolve, project activities also need to evolve. Constantly updating a logic model and understanding the relationships between the various sections are key pieces of project management.

I encourage all ATE project leaders to work closely with their project evaluators and integrate logic models. Our external evaluator was instrumental in influencing our team to adopt these models. Project evaluators must be viewed as team members and partners from the beginning. I cannot imagine effectively managing a project without the aid of this project blueprint.

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Events

Did you miss EvaluATE and CCTA's May webinar on the role of evaluation in federal grants?

We revisited some evaluation fundamentals; reviewed evaluation requirements and expectations of various federal funding programs; and gave tips on evaluation staffing, budgeting, and utilization.

Check out the recording, slides, and resource handout at
http://www.evalu-ate.org/webinars/2016-may/

Join us for our next webinar on August 17, 2016 at 1-2:00 p.m. EDT:

Logic Models: Getting Them Right and Using Them Well

A logic model is a succinct graphic depiction of how a project translates its resources and activities into outcomes. A good logic model efficiently communicates the overall logic and purpose of a project and serves as a foundation for evaluation planning. A logic model can be a powerful addition to your funding proposal, but only if it is well aligned to your project's narrative description. In this session, participants will learn (a) how to create a project logic model, while avoiding common mistakes (like confusing outcomes with activities or outputs and providing too many or too few details), and (b) how to effectively integrate a logic model into a funding proposal.

Register at http://www.evalu-ate.org/webinars/2016-aug/