



CQI Quick Sheet

Developing a Theory of Change

The CQI Quick Sheet series is meant to assist Court Improvement Programs plan for evaluating an area of focus. It includes some specific questions to ask, as well as some useful tips on methodologies to help achieve goals to improve in this area.

What Is a Theory of Change?

“A theory of change is a summary of hypotheses for a project or initiative that explains why and how (i.e., how the actions chosen will lead to the desired change) a change is sought.” A theory of change explains why and how an intervention will lead to outcomes.

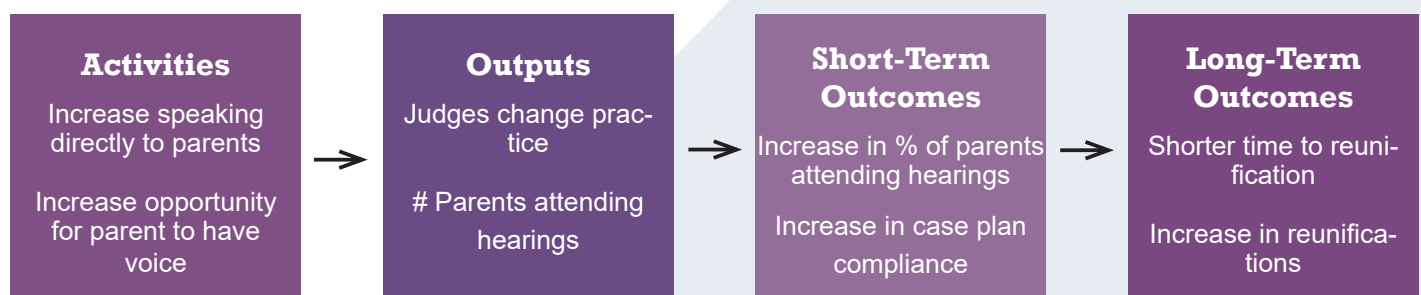
Example theory of change: The CIP will enhance engagement of parents in dependency court hearings *so that* parents will feel they have a voice in the process *so that* parents will be more likely to attend future hearings and will be more likely to comply with their case plans *so that* families will be reunified more quickly.

How Do I Develop a Theory of Change?

Theories of change can be developed in multiple ways. Some people like to start with the beginning and work their way to outcomes, while others are more comfortable starting with outcomes and working backwards.

Working Forward

- 1. Start with identification of possible causes of the outcome of interest.**
What is the problem you would like to address? What are the root causes of this problem?
What data indicate that this may be the root cause? What data do you have? What is the quality of the data?
Do multiple sources confirm this?
- 2. Categorize, prioritize, and select root causes.**
Of the root causes identified, which will have the greatest impact on addressing the desired outcome?
What resources are available to address the root cause?
Consider potential constraints (time, budget, legislation).
- 3. Verify and vet root causes with your team.**
Have all potential root causes been considered? What are the most probable root causes?
- 4. Develop a theory of change.**
What are the short-term outcomes or indicators associated with the theory of change?
What are the long-term outcomes you hope to achieve to address your identified problem? What are some strategies to help achieve these outcomes?
How are outcomes measured/tracked?
- 5. Develop a logic model.**
Logic models don't have to be complex, they just have to illustrate your change process.



Tip: *If you cannot articulate why an intervention/practice should/could lead to a positive outcome, why would you do it?*

Working Backward

You can also develop a theory of change by starting with what you know about the need. Use outcome data to start thinking about the problem and considering root causes.

For example, if you know that placement with relatives are low, you can start thinking about why youth in foster care are not being placed with their parents. Keep thinking of whys until you have exhausted your team's ideas. It may be that relatives are not identified (why not?); it may be that background checks are not timely (why not?); or it may be that parents are not attending hearings to discuss potential relatives (why not?). *Digging deeper into the issue helps you to start thinking about root causes and ideas for activities or interventions that will address the issue. Start with what you know.*

Working from the Middle

It may also be that you are starting from somewhere in the middle. You have identified an indicator of good practice and you want to think about (1) how to improve it and (2) how it will affect outcomes.

For example, in quality legal representation, you may think that frequent communication with the parent outside of court is important. Thus, enhanced communication is your immediate outcome. Ask yourself:

1. What interventions/strategies could increase out of court communication?
2. What does that matter? *So what?* (This will lead to the short and long-term outcomes.)

Thinking About Your Theory of Change

The two most common concerns with theories of change are that they (1) are **too broad** (e.g., my program is going to lead to improved outcomes for children and families) and (2) they do not include **causal links** for each activity/program/intervention.

Tip: *If you want a good theory of change, it is important to be specific and spell out all the steps in your process, which includes intermediate goals. X may lead to Z, but it is important to think about how -- X may lead to Y which leads to Z.*

Do I Have a “Good” Theory of Change?

Consider the following:

Plausible - Is it plausible? Does the logic of your pathway of change seem correct? If the causal links are completed, will you get the results you want?

Feasible - Do you have the human, political, and economic resources sufficient to complete the causal links?

Specific - Is it specific enough that you can identify each step and the outcome that should be associated with it?

Testable - Are there credible ways to measure whether the progress is happening as expected? Each immediate, short-term, and long-term outcome should be able to be measured in some way.

Meaningful - Is the desired outcome important? Is the magnitude of change worth the effort?

Note: You need not know all the answers when you begin this process. The theory of change and loci model can be used to identify what outstanding questions exist. They are both meant to evolve as the project evolves.