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WHAT'S WRONG WITH LOGIC MODELS?

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Introduction

Logic models are diagrams that explain how a program is supposed to work. A simple one page logic model can sometimes be a useful planning and communication tool. But many programs today are required to produce long complex logic models that explain program functioning in great detail. These logic models take a lot of time to produce and do not provide benefits commensurate with the effort. Many government and non-profit organizations are adopting the more useful tools emerging from the movement toward outcomes-based or results-based planning and management. These tools can do all the work of identifying performance measures and supporting program evaluation and continuous improvement without the need for logic model diagrams. The following discussion of logic model weaknesses is intended to help agencies assess their current use of logic models and decide if moving in another direction makes more sense.

Ten Reasons to Reconsider the Use of Logic Models

1. *Logic models start in the wrong place with means and not ends.*

Think of any successful human enterprise from business to sports to religious or political movements. They all start with ends and work backwards to means. Business is the poster child for working backward from the specific ends of profit and market share to means that will get there. Curiously, logic models do precisely the opposite, namely start with means and show how they lead to ends. If this sounds like the same thing, think again. Means to ends thinking is designed to justify the specified means. If we think a flashy ad campaign will increase sales, a logic model can show all the tortuous connections between placing ads and making sales, all spread out on one or more pieces of paper with colorful boxes, lines and arrows. But a display like that will never get you to think about anything more than an ad campaign to increase sales. In

other words, the means, ad campaign in this case, is fixed before the logic model is even started. What if you need more than an ad campaign to increase sales? You will need a different kind of process to generate ideas. Such a process would start with the ends and work backwards to the wide array of possible means. You could then pick the ones you think are most powerful and get started. Logic models don't do this because they start in the wrong place.

2.   Logic models are built on the belief that the world is a place of clear causal relationships.

In the logic model world one thing leads to another in predictable or highly probable ways that can be written down in the form of a flow chart. Most people know this isn't the way things actually work. Causality is sometimes clear in simple systems. You hit a ball with a bat and the ball flies through the air in a parabolic arc. Hitting the ball with the bat causes it to fly through the air in a predictable way. But what causes a young person to drop out of high school? What is the right sequence of events that goes from giving advice to a young person to that young person deciding to stay in school? Things start to get complicated. Dropping out of school has many causes that can't be easily untangled. Logic models to the rescue. A flow diagram will show how specific program actions address all the causes that lead to school success. A little thought shows that logic models are incapable of representing the real world of uncertain causal relationships.

3.   Logic models are complicated and hard to understand.

For all that logic models try to simplify things, they end up making it a lot more complicated. Let's take an example from everyday life. Let's do a logic model for making dinner. Anyone will admit that making dinner is easier than any social program you can think of. The logic model will provide a set of flow diagrams that show the exact sequence from making a list, to starting the car, driving to the store, buying the things on the list, bringing them home, turning on the stove, mixing the ingredients etc. etc. Do you need a logic model to make dinner? Of course not.

Try this experiment. Get out the last logic model you prepared and show it to your grandmother or grandfather or any other person who is not a professional planner. Without any prior explanation, ask them what the diagram means. Then after they fail to get what it means, try explaining it to them. After that doesn't work, try telling them, in plain English, what you do, why you do it, and why you think it works. Chances are they will actually understand this last explanation and this is the simple alternative to the logic model. The reasons why you think something will work is your theory of change, one of the key components of any outcomes approach.

4. *Logic models are very time consuming to produce.*

Stories of wasted time and frustration are very common. One executive reported that his organization had been working on their logic model for three years. Another executive reported that her team had a three hour meeting with the staff to work on their logic model at the end of which everyone was tired, frustrated, and still far from finished. In another example, a group of consultants took a committee of 5 or 6 people through a three month development process, at the end of which they had about 20 printed pages that had to be taped together and read with a magnifying glass. Does any of this sound familiar?

Even if you could produce a viable logic model for one program, what about agencies that have dozens of programs? Do they all need logic models? Does the agency as a whole need a logic model? What happens when programs change? Do you have to re-do your logic models? How many hours must be devoted to feeding this process?

5. *Logic models are not useful.*

And this is the clincher. After everything that's wrong with logic models, you might be able to put up with them if they were actually useful for something. But logic models are not useful and <u>they are not used</u>. It is not possible to find a program person who refers to their logic model every day, every week, ever.

If you're not sure about the usefulness of logic models, ask the people who advocate doing logic models (funders, consultants etc.) if they have ever done a logic model for their own work. It is almost certain that they have not. Ask them why, and, if they're honest, they'll tell you that they already know how their program is supposed to work. And that's the point. Logic models don't tell you anything you don't already know. If by some remote chance they have a logic model to show you, ask them what they use it for. The answer, again if they're honest, will be "not much." If logic models are such a good idea, why don't the people who advocate logic models create them for their own work, and keep them up to date as their work changes? Beware of people who refuse to take their own medicine.

6. *Logic models restrict rather than expand thinking about solutions.*

Look at the left column of any logic model. Notice that there are no no-cost or low-cost ideas. Notice that there are often no ideas about the actions of other partners. There are two reasons why logic models restrict thinking. The first is simply the physical space required to display a logic model. Completing a logic model means putting a drawing on a piece of paper, usually starting on the left and moving to the right. When you must

put a lot of information in a drawing, you must first decide how much space you have to work with. Is the drawing restricted to one page? If not, how many pages down can the drawing go? If you can go more pages to the right, how many? People either print very small, restrict the information they display or go for so many pages that the picture becomes incomprehensible.

The second reason has to do with the psychology of how logic models have come to be required. Logic models are usually done for the sole purpose of justifying the funding of a program or project. Usually, someone tells the program manager that they have to do a logic model to justify a grant. Most managers would never voluntarily do a logic model, because they don't need it. So right from the start, the logic model is off on the wrong track. If the program manager is doing the logic model for someone else, the funder or the evaluator, then what incentive do they have to stretch their thinking? Logic models do not challenge managers to think broadly and creatively about their programs. Rather they challenge the manager to do as good a job as is necessary to satisfy the requirements.

7.   *Logic models are not action oriented.*

The action most commonly associated with logic models is putting them in the filing cabinet. Logic models are complex depictions of a theory of how something is supposed to work. It is unlikely that you will come upon ideas for improvement in the course of preparing a logic model, because logic models are not designed to come up with new ideas. They are designed to sell an idea that you already think works. You will need an entirely separate process to do the day to day and month to month continuous improvement work of managing programs well. This lack of action orientation means that logic models by themselves are almost entirely useless as tools for continuous improvement.

8.   *Logic models do not promote inclusive planning.*

Imagine inviting the person you talked to in point 3 above to a planning meeting to develop a logic model. Don't actually invite them. Just imagine what it would be like. Logic models need experts to produce them, and they are not understandable or accessible to most of your customers and stakeholders. Logic models are the opaque opposite of transparent, inclusive decision-making. And inclusive planning is very important. You need community partners, customers, young people and many others at the table because you need their knowledge about what's working and not working, and their ideas about what could work better. If your main planning process excludes these people or drives them away, you lose these benefits. And inclusive processes are not just about producing good plans. They are about building relationships. Building

relationships is ultimately what makes programs work. And behind all the smoke and mirrors of government and nongovernment budget processes, relationships are also what get programs funded. Because of their technical complexity, logic models promote exclusivity, not inclusion, and do nothing to build relationships.

9.   Logic models fail to account for the complex connection between programs and communities.

As we have already discussed, logic models are linear thinking in a world that is not linear. Causes have many effects. Effects have many causes. We have already seen how this problem plays out inside programs. It gets worse when logic models attempt to make the jump from programs to communities. Take a simple example. A logic model for a job training program will take you from the activities of the program through some number of intermediate effects leading eventually to some clients getting jobs. But many logic models don't stop there. They go on to link customers getting jobs to a quality of life condition like "Self-sufficient families" and an indicator like the unemployment rate. There are two problems with articulating these as linear connections. The first is that getting people jobs contributes to many community conditions, not just the unemployment rate. Having a job will contribute to health, promote school success of the children in the wage earners' families, improve housing, reduce homelessness, etc. etc. Many logic models usually show only one of these many connections.

The more important problem is that connecting customer outcomes to community outcomes is treated as just the next link in the causal chain. This creates the impression, belief and eventually expectation that the program is somehow responsible for impacting the community in a direct and measurable way. It is unfair to expect a job training program to demonstrate how it has caused the unemployment rate to go down. Programs can and should show the effect they have on their customers. The effect on customers is the program's contribution to the community. But it is patently unfair to expect most programs, by themselves, to change social conditions and their associated measures. The program's effect is almost always too small to show up on community indicator trend lines. And these trend lines are subject to forces that can easily wash out the effects of even the largest programs. The challenge of changing community trend lines requires the work of many partners across the community. Programs should be held responsible for what they do for their customers, not how they measurably change community indicators.

An important clarification is necessary here. Many United Ways and some other funders have moved to organize their strategic planning and funding around the idea of community impact, and this is a good thing. When it is done right, community

impact is about creating broad partnerships and developing multi-party strategies, not just imposing proof-of-impact requirements on grantees.

10.   Logic models are (sometimes deliberately) intimidating.

The intimidation factor of logic models serves a purpose. It makes some people look smarter than other people. This is no small matter in the vortex of competition for jobs, status and money. If people could do the work themselves using simpler methods, then they wouldn't need "smarter" people to help them. Sometimes special interests don't want to see logic model approaches questioned. Complicated processes create a demand for technical assistance, and there are plenty of high priced consultants ready to meet the need.

Logic model consulting is big business. Millions of dollars are spent every year on specialists who help people produce logic models. And many companies would feel threatened by any serious movement away from logic models. For the most part, logic model consultants are smart, well-intentioned people, and the world still needs their talents. They will simply be more valuable if they switch to practices that are more useful to their customers.

Conclusion

The people who first created logic models were no doubt well intentioned. At the time, logic models may have provided a superior way to create plans and evaluate programs. But this is no longer the case. Alternatives to logic models have emerged from the outcomes movement that are gaining broad acceptance in both funding and management circles around the world. Program managers and funders, need to take the time to understand what these new choices mean. Those who have been struggling with the burden of logic models will quickly discover that there is a better way.

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