
II. A. LAYING OUT YOUR ASSUMPTIONS: UNDERSTANDING YOUR THEORY OF CHANGE

Groups working on racial equity goals sometimes come together around a shared vision, and even more frequently, around a shared sense that something is wrong and can be improved. For example, they agree that all students should graduate from high school prepared for college without remediation and for careers that pay a living wage. Or maybe everyone agrees that Native American and Hispanic students in their school district are less likely than African American and white students to be encouraged to enroll in the kinds of math classes in middle school that would put them on a path to Advanced Placement classes in high school. Or maybe a group has a very broad vision of an equitable and socially just community – one in which every resident has decent and safe housing, a reasonable standard of living and where one’s racial identity is no longer a predictor, in a statistical sense, of how one fares in life. These shared goals can be the driving force behind a group’s racial equity work.

At the same time, most groups usually do not invest time early in their work to surface their common and separate assumptions about what it will take to achieve those goals. A group’s “theory of change” is the articulation of a group’s planned strategies, tactics and actions and how those strategies, tactics and actions are expected to lead to the intended results – that is, how the group expects change to happen.

People’s assumptions about how the world works are based in large part on their life experiences, which are often greatly shaped by their experiences of privilege and racism. Groups need to take these different perspectives and world views into account when laying out their collective work.

In addition, they need to do it as a group – to share their assumptions with each other. One important question to ask is – which ways of viewing the world are we privileging in our plan? That is, what do we assume is true and how much weight are we giving to different experiences in making that decision?

Story:

For example, a community anti-racism group was working towards racial equity in lending. Their goal was to change policies within banks that had the effect of steering people of color to sub-prime loans, and white people to conventional loans.

- Some people wanted to begin the work with anti-racism training for bank executives and loan officers, because they believed that institutional change generally follows changes in the “hearts and minds” of those in positions to change institutional policies or practices from the top and from within the institutions. They believed this in part because many were in similar positions in other institutions, and had seen this happen or made changes based on transformative experiences of this kind;
- Some people wanted to begin the work with strategies to enforce the Community Reinvestment Act (the CRA). The CRA required lending institutions to demonstrate to bank regulators how they benefit their communities. Failure to provide evidence of community benefit could hold up mergers among lending institutions – and the community was experiencing several such mergers at that time. People who were promoting this strategy did so because their experience in life suggested that changes in “hearts and minds” of the people at the top and within institutions can

be achieved through high quality training, but that those individual changes do not necessarily translate to changes in institutional policies and practices without additional leverage or power strategies.

- In addition, some people wanted the end result to be more standardized lending policies so that individual loan officers could not apply any race bias they might have (and might not know they have) to their decisions about what kind of loan to offer. Others wanted more discretion for individual loan officers to take into account personal knowledge of a loan applicant when making a loan. Those taking each position had different assumptions about the good-will of loan officers. They also made different assessments of whether current ways of measuring “credit-worthiness” were fair or good predictors of whether or not people would pay back a loan. These differences influenced their beliefs about the value of personal relationships in business. Differences were based in part on their different life experiences as people with different racial identities in the same community.

Questions for reflection

Once a group has surfaced its assumptions about how the world works, it can begin to lay out its theory of change. The following questions can help:

- How do we plan to reach our goals?
- What evidence do we have that our strategies, even if they are very well implemented, will move us toward our goals?
 - Have we looked at research in this area? Best practices?
 - When reviewing research and practice, have we looked at the racial identity of the groups on which findings are based?
 - Are we experimenting where research and best practice do not suggest answers?
- Are we anticipating what our collective experience suggests is most likely to happen as we do our work?
 - Are we prepared for resistance and retrenchment – push back and loss of progress on our goals -- when our work begins to upset the status quo?
 - Are we prepared to sustain our work for as long as research and practice suggests it might take to achieve our goal?
 - Do we have leadership in place? Do we have strategies to support new leadership and to allow leaders to leave when it is appropriate for them to do so?
- Have we done a power analysis to see how change works in our community, particularly on the issues we are working on? Do our strategies map well against that analysis? Have we looked both at how power works now, and how it might work if we are successful?
- Are we working at multiple levels – individual, institutional, system, community-wide – as our analysis suggests is necessary?
- What are we assuming about which changes are in our direct control? Who needs to be part of our work to make sure those changes happen?
- What are we assuming about which changes are not in our direct control? Are we planning to influence others who control those changes? What are we assuming about how to do that?
- What would be the success of our work?
 - Who says so?

- Whose perspectives will we value to see if we are making progress?
- What processes will we put in place to make decisions about these things?
- What processes will we put in place to increase our ability to address these kinds of issues deeply and productively?

Please review the following tip sheet:

- [Understanding Strategies: Three Pathways of Race Relations and Racial Justice Work](#)

Please review the following tip sheets from <http://www.evaluationtoolsforracialequity.org/>:

- [Is the group developing a common understanding of the ways racism, power and privilege affect issues on which it is working?](#)
- [Is the group developing a process to work together that includes people who are affected by the issue, is reflective of different cultures and different perspectives and has inclusive decision-making and leadership?](#)
- [Is the group identifying other organizations doing work on this issue? Is the group collaborating with others in the community?](#)
- [What is a theory of change and what is a logic model?](#)
- [What are strategies and how are they related to activities or programs?](#)
- [How can we tell if our strategies are powerful enough for the changes we want?](#)