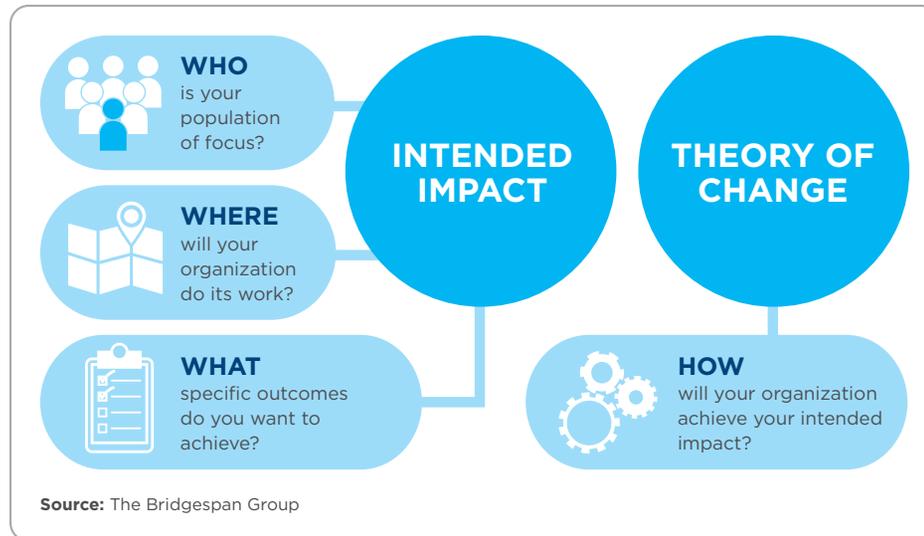


How to Develop Your Intended Impact and Theory of Change

What are intended impact and theory of change?

Intended impact and theory of change are two concepts that can help pave the way to a clear, effective, mission-based strategy and help nonprofit leaders get critical decisions right.



Intended impact defines the specific outcome or outcomes that your organization will hold itself accountable for achieving within a reasonable timeframe (e.g., 5-10 years). It defines the **WHO**, **WHERE**, and **WHAT** of your organization’s impact goals.

Theory of change explains **HOW** your organization will achieve that impact—the approaches you will undertake and the other actors you will work with or alongside.

Together, intended impact and theory of change serve as an anchor for your nonprofit’s strategy and help guide the work of your leadership team. For more details on intended impact and theory of change, see “[What Are Intended Impact and Theory of Change and How Can Nonprofits Use Them?](#)”

Is it time to develop or refresh your intended impact and theory of change?

A number of different circumstances or events can trigger a refresh of your intended impact and theory of change. Often, it is a first step in undertaking a strategic planning process. Sometimes there are specific triggers that will prompt this work such as a change in leadership, a major shift in the external environment, or an increased organizational focus on equity.

How should my nonprofit organization get started?

The following templates are designed to help your organization develop or refresh your intended impact and theory of change. Below are a few practical steps to help you get started:

- Ask each member of your leadership team to complete a rough draft your organization’s intended impact and theory of change using **templates 1a and 1b**.
- As a team, review your work, identify areas of consensus, prioritize open questions, and develop a collective draft using **template 1c**.
- Use the questions in **templates 2a and 2b** to begin pressure testing your collective draft through research and conversations with critical stakeholders.

Are you finding this toolkit useful? We’d value your feedback. [Click to let us know what you think.](#)

TEMPLATE 1a:

Develop your intended impact

What change would you like to see in the world as a result of your organization's work? Outline your hypothesis on the **WHO**, **WHERE**, and **WHAT** below. Consider a 5-10 year time horizon when defining your intended impact.

WHO	WHERE	WHAT
Who is your population of focus?	Where will your organization do its work?	What specific outcomes do you want to achieve?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The WHO describes the population your organization seeks to impact through its work; it is often your reason for being. • Most organizations should aim to identify one priority population. For some organizations, such as human service organizations, being accountable for change across multiple populations makes sense. If this is the case for your organization, complete a separate row (filling out the WHO, WHERE and WHAT) for each unique population. • Not every organization will have a targeted WHERE. Some may focus at the regional or country level. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • These outcomes will be the changes or results your organization will hold itself accountable for achieving. They should be ambitious, measurable, and achievable. • Avoid focusing exclusively on outputs, which measure activities (e.g., number of people served).

What additional actors might you work with to achieve your intended impact?

These are **groups outside of your population of focus (your WHO)** that your organization might work with in order to achieve your intended impact. Some organizations may engage many actors (e.g., those focused on influence or advocacy); others may engage few to none.

By choosing the areas of focus you described above, what might you **NOT** prioritize?

TEMPLATE 1b:

Develop your theory of change

Describe the elements (skills, capabilities, or expertise) that make your organization distinctly good at what it does.

These elements may exist at the **organization level** (e.g., our work is informed by a deep understanding of the communities we serve) or **program level** (e.g., our programs are based on rigorous evidence). They may also be about **how you integrate your various efforts** (e.g., we support our clients via a continuum of services).

HOW will you achieve your intended impact?

Approaches	Linkages	Essential activities	Contribution to intended impact	Allocation
<p>What approaches or types of work are critical to achieve your intended impact?</p>	<p>How do your approaches link to and reinforce each other?</p>	<p>What aspects of each approach are particularly essential for impact?</p>	<p>How does each approach contribute to your intended impact?</p>	<p>What percent of your organization's time and resources would you spend on each approach?</p>
<p>The approaches you identify should be critical to achieving the WHAT of your intended impact. List them here at a fairly high level and avoid creating a list of your individual programs.</p>	<p>Describe the ways in which your approaches connect to or reinforce each other to create greater impact. This may help explain why you are choosing this set of approaches together versus a subset.</p>	<p>Highlight specific activities within each approach that are particularly essential for impact. This may be about how you deliver your work or what characteristics are critical to success (e.g., dosage or duration).</p>	<p>Describe how each approach contributes to achieving the WHAT of your intended impact. Each approach may represent a first step (or intermediate outcome) toward achieving your intended impact.</p>	<p>This section allows teams to discuss the relative energy and resources required by different approaches. Estimate the percent share of resources for each approach. The rows should add up to 100%.</p>

TEMPLATE 1a:

Develop your intended impact

What change would you like to see in the world as a result of your organization's work? Outline your hypothesis on the **WHO**, **WHERE**, and **WHAT** below. Consider a 5-10 year time horizon when defining your intended impact.

WHO	WHERE	WHAT
Who is your population of focus?	Where will your organization do its work?	What specific outcomes do you want to achieve?

What additional actors might you work with to achieve your intended impact?

By choosing the areas of focus you described above, what might you **NOT** prioritize?

TEMPLATE 1b:

Develop your theory of change

Describe the elements (skills, capabilities, or expertise) that make your organization distinctly good at what it does.

HOW will you achieve your intended impact?

Approaches	Linkages	Essential activities	Contribution to intended impact	Allocation
What approaches or types of work are critical to achieve your intended impact?	How do your approaches link to and reinforce each other?	What aspects of each approach are particularly essential for impact?	How does each approach contribute to your intended impact?	What percent of your organization's time and resources would you spend on each approach?

Note: While this template only has space for three approaches, it's possible your organization has fewer or more approaches to pursuing its intended impact.

TEMPLATE 1c:

Combine your intended impact and theory of change

Intended Impact Theory of Change

The elements (skills, capabilities, expertise) that make your organization's work uniquely impactful.

Your organization's population of focus, key approaches and activities, and the outcomes for which it will hold itself accountable.

WHO and WHERE	HOW				WHAT
	Approaches	Linkages	Essential activities	Contribution to intended impact	

Note: While this template only has space for three approaches, it's possible your organization has fewer or more approaches to pursuing its intended impact.

TEMPLATE 2a:

Pressure test your intended impact

Overview: Many nonprofits find it valuable to pressure test their intended impact and theory of change once they have developed a solid first draft. Pressure testing is all about identifying areas where there are gaps in logic, where you feel less confident, and where further near-term learning and research is required. This is an opportunity to take on the mindset of a skeptic. The questions below can help jump-start important conversations with your leadership team and other key stakeholders whose perspectives and experiences are critical to incorporate.

Instructions: Review the questions below and indicate where you have a high level of confidence versus where further research or analysis may be required. Capture any open questions or next steps in the space provided, as needed.

Criteria	Key questions	Considerations	High confidence	Further work required	Open questions / next steps
Intended impact					
Need	Have you prioritized the population where need is greatest?	Your intended impact should address a need that is not currently being addressed in the community. Unmet needs may exist because your population of focus is not being served at all, or it is being served by others in different or inadequate ways. In clarifying where need is greatest, consider disaggregating data by race, gender, and other subgroups.			
Fit	Are you better equipped than others to address the needs of this population?	An effective intended impact accounts for whether your organization is better equipped than others to address the needs of your population of focus. Consider reasons related to your experience, capabilities, or relationships that may make you a stronger “go to” for this intended impact.			
Feasibility	Can your organization realistically be accountable for achieving these outcomes?	An intended impact may not be feasible if the outcomes are vague or difficult to measure, or if they are too ambitious given the resources you have access to.			

TEMPLATE 2b:

Pressure test your theory of change

Overview: Many nonprofits find it valuable to pressure test their intended impact and theory of change once they have developed a solid first draft. Pressure testing is all about identifying areas where there are gaps in logic, where you feel less confident, and where further near-term learning and research is required. This is an opportunity to take on the mindset of a skeptic. The questions below can help jump-start important conversations with your leadership team and other key stakeholders whose perspectives and experiences are critical to incorporate.

Instructions: Review the questions below and indicate where you have a high level of confidence versus where further research or analysis may be required. Capture any open questions or next steps in the space provided, as needed.

Criteria	Key questions	Considerations	High confidence	Further work required	Open questions / next steps
Theory of change					
Effectiveness	Are you using the most effective approaches possible to achieve your intended impact?	Your organization's approach has likely evolved over time. The theory of change you develop should reflect your programmatic learnings and current perspectives on best practices, embracing the approaches that are known to be most effective in your context.			
Efficiency	Have you allocated the right amount of energy and resources to different approaches?	Each component of your theory of change should contribute in an important way to your intended impact. Organizational time and resources should be focused on activities that disproportionately drive impact.			
Feasibility	Can you feasibly deliver on your theory of change and will it lead to your intended impact?	It is important that you have or can build the critical capabilities—including talent, systems, and relationships—that you need to do this work. In addition, your theory of change should be able to realistically achieve your intended impact.			

EXAMPLE—WORKSHEET 1a: Develop your intended impact

What change would you like to see in the world as a result of your organization’s work? Outline your hypothesis on the **WHO**, **WHERE**, and **WHAT** below. Consider a 5-10 year time horizon when defining your intended impact.

WHO	WHERE	WHAT
Who is your population of focus?	Where will your organization do its work?	What specific outcomes do you want to achieve?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women of color in the workforce 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Boston, Massachusetts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An increase in the number of women of color in leadership positions in Boston • Shifts in the demographic and cultural structure of partner organizations and institutions toward greater diversity and inclusion

What additional actors might you work with to achieve your intended impact?

- Partner organizations and institutions that enroll in YW Boston’s consulting and capacity building programs
- Individual participants in YW Boston’s leadership development programs
- Schools and out-of-school-time partners that host YW Boston’s leadership and empowerment programs for girls of color
- State and local policy makers, coalition partners

EXAMPLE—WORKSHEET 1b:

Develop your theory of change

Describe the elements (skills, capabilities, or expertise) that make your organization distinctly good at what it does.

- A long history as a leader in the causes of eliminating racism and empowering women
- A tailored approach designed to meet individuals and organizations where they are in their diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) journey
- A diverse staff with the cultural competency, fluency on issues of DEI, and facilitation skills required to navigate difficult conversations and promote active participation and discussion among the individuals and organizations with whom we work

HOW will you achieve your intended impact?

Approaches	Linkages	Essential activities	Contribution to intended impact	Allocation
What approaches or types of work are critical to achieve your intended impact?	How do your approaches link to and reinforce each other?	What aspects of each approach are particularly essential for impact?	How does each approach contribute to your intended impact?	What percent of your organization's time and resources would you spend on each approach?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build a pipeline of leaders responsive to increased demands for racial equity and fluent in issues of DEI 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leadership programs educate and empower <i>individuals</i> to act on issues of DEI within their organizations • DEI services promote greater inclusion within <i>organizations</i>, creating environments that allow women of color to attain and thrive in positions of leadership • Advocacy helps advance policies to support DEI within the <i>systems</i> that govern organizations and support individuals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social justice education • Positive identity development • Experiential learning • Commitment and support to act 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prepare current and future leaders to address root causes of DEI challenges in their organizations and communities 	~20%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide DEI services to organizations (institutional assessment, training, capacity building) 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organizational assessment • Dialogue-based sessions • Pre- and post-evaluations to ensure action takes place 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help organizations to create inclusive environments where women, people of color, and women of color can succeed 	~65%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engage in coalition building, solidarity building, and advocacy at the state, city and local levels 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legislative advocacy • Coalition participation • Mobilization of public support and action 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advance policies that dismantle barriers preventing women, people of color, and women of color from positions of leadership 	~15%

EXAMPLE—WORKSHEET 1c:

Combine your intended impact and theory of change

Intended Impact Theory of Change

The elements (skills, capabilities, expertise) that make your organization’s work uniquely impactful.

- A long history as a leader in the causes of eliminating racism and empowering women
- A tailored approach designed to meet individuals and organizations where they are in their diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) journey
- A diverse staff with the cultural competency, fluency on issues of DEI, and facilitation skills required to navigate difficult conversations and promote active participation and discussion among the individuals and organizations with whom we work

Your organization’s population of focus, key approaches and activities, and the outcomes for which it will hold itself accountable.

WHO and WHERE	HOW				WHAT
	Approaches	Linkages	Essential activities	Contribution to intended impact	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women of color in the workforce • Boston, MA 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build a pipeline of leaders responsive to increased demands for racial equity and fluent in issues of DEI • Provide DEI services to organizations (institutional assessment, training, capacity building) • Engage in coalition building, solidarity building, and advocacy at the state, city and local levels 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leadership programs educate and empower <i>individuals</i> to act on issues of DEI within their organizations • DEI services promote greater inclusion within <i>organizations</i>, creating environments that allow women of color to attain and thrive in positions of leadership • Advocacy helps advance policies to support DEI within the <i>systems</i> that govern organizations and support individuals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social justice education • Positive identity development • Experiential learning • Commitment and support to act • Organizational assessment • Dialogue-based sessions • Pre- and post-evaluations to ensure action takes place • Legislative advocacy • Coalition participation • Mobilization of public support and action 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prepare current and future leaders to address root causes of DEI challenges in their organizations and communities • Help organizations to create inclusive environments where women, people of color, and women of color can succeed • Advance policies that dismantle barriers preventing women, people of color, and women of color from positions of leadership 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An increase in the number of women of color in leadership positions in Boston • Shifts in the demographic and cultural structure of partner organizations toward greater diversity and inclusion