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Drawing Upon the Wisdom of Merlyn: Using the Logic Chain to Guide Vision-Based Community Planning

Myra Moss

Assistant Professor and State Specialist
Community Development
Licking County Extension
Newark, Ohio
moss.63@osu.edu

Cindy Bond-Zielinski

Assistant Professor and Extension Educator
Community Development
Family and Consumer Sciences
bond-zielinski.1@osu.edu

Ohio State University Extension

Abstract: A multidisciplinary Ohio State University Extension team and three counties of Appalachian Ohio Family and Children First Council conducted a 10-month planning project working backwards from a shared vision through a logic chain. The logic chain was used to guide the steps in the planning process to build consensus among council members. The article outlines the process and presents a model of strategic planning applicable to any Extension strategic planning process.

Introduction

As depicted in *The Once and Future King* by T. H. White, Merlyn the Magician had an uncanny ability to know the future. Occasionally he would give Arthur some insight into what was going to happen before it did happen. On one such occasion, after anticipating an important event, he explained his abilities to King Arthur, "Ah yes," Merlyn said, "now ordinary people are born forward in Time . . . and nearly everything in the world goes forward, too. This makes it quite easy for ordinary people to live. But unfortunately I was born at the wrong end of time, and I live backwards from in front . . ." (White, 1958).

Merlyn's wisdom in knowing the future allowed the wizard to take steps to ensure that his desired outcomes could be reached effectively. Merlyn's approach of imagining the outcome was applied to a process adopted and implemented by an interdisciplinary team of Ohio State University Extension Specialists and Educators with Family and Children First Councils in three counties of Appalachian Ohio. Although not magical in nature, Merlyn's concept of visioning an ideal future then working backwards through contributing outcomes, strategies, and measures of success, provides an effective approach to community and organizational planning

that begins with the end in mind.

The Program

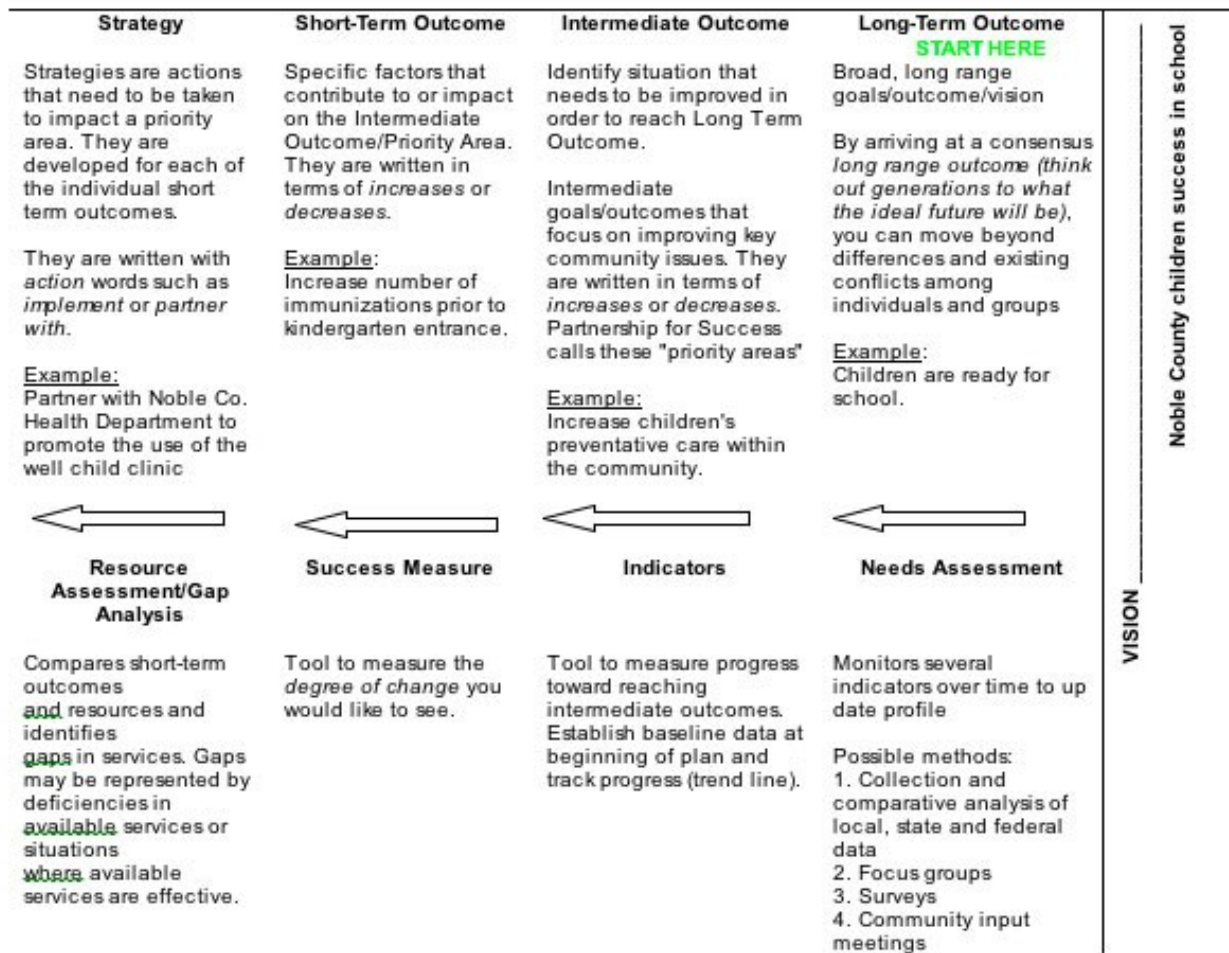
On May 16, 2006, The Governor of Ohio, Bob Taft, signed into law H.B. 289. The purpose of this law was to promote increased accountability among Ohio's 88 county-based Family and Children First Councils. This legislation required the completion of an annual plan designed to increase child wellbeing and identify and promote interagency efforts to accomplish this goal. The Family and Children First Council's membership included local elected officials, non-profit agencies, public services, schools, and child care and parent representatives. Overall guidance for the planning process was provided by the Ohio Family and Children First Council Partnerships for Success (PFS) Academy produced by the Center on Education and Training for Employment (Ohio Family and Children First, 2007).

OSU Extension, because of its knowledge of community development and expertise in designing and facilitating community planning initiatives, was identified to serve as the planning and facilitating consultant. OSU Extension used a community-based process designed to build capacity to plan, implement, and make decisions about investments in interventions serving children and families. The focus was on the management of community efforts to address significant local issues. The process included a series of tools and procedures used by community members to build collaborations to address a variety of concerns related to community wellbeing.

Using the Logic Chain in Community Planning

There are a number of different models used in community and strategic planning. The one used by the Ohio Family and Children First Councils is based on a federally funded project, Comprehensive Strategies for Serious, Violent and Chronic Juvenile Offenders (Wilson & Howell, 1993). Comprehensive Strategies provided communities with a structured process for defining needs and planning relevant interventions. The successes documented by this comprehensive strategy led to the development of a new planning model, known as the "logic chain," for Ohio Family and Children First Councils, as illustrated in Figure 1. OSU Extension's contribution to this model was the incorporation of visioning at the very beginning of the logic chain process. By envisioning an ideal future and then articulating this vision as broad long-range goals (outcomes), FCF Councils were able to move beyond their immediate concerns and reach collaborative, long-range solutions.

Figure 1.
Framework for Logic Chain



Note: Key terms appear in bold

A logic chain is a graphic representation of how a program or intervention is intended to work (Hernandez & Hodges, 2003; Julian, Jones & Deyo, 1995; Julian, 1997; W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 2001). As indicated in Figure 1, the application of the logic chain sequence is meant to enhance capacity and consensus building among the members of the group engaging in the process. This enhanced consensus leads to formal plans resulting in the implementation of programs that produce desired short-term outcomes. In this logic chain model, positive changes in short-term outcomes will lead to changes in success measures and indicators reflecting improvements in the wellbeing of community residents.

Common Language

The logic chain strategic planning process and implementation was guided by a specific language. This language was created so the implementers and facilitators could develop a common understanding of specific terminology, discuss common concerns, and understand key causal relationships among the steps in the logic chain. The key terms that formed the basis of the planning and implementation process included vision, long-term outcomes, needs assessment, intermediate outcomes, indicators, short-term outcomes, success measures, strategy selection, and resource assessment/gaps analysis. These key terms appear in Figure 1 in bold.

The logic chain sequence and causality is as follows: a strategy produces change in the short-term outcome. As short-term outcomes change, intermediate-term outcomes are resolved, and as intermediate-term outcomes are resolved, members of the community might experience significant social change in the long-term outcome, moving toward their vision.

A shared vision is a description of a desired future. A long-term outcome is a broad, measurable goal that provides a detailed description of desired change that will help to achieve the vision. The long-term outcome explained a clear linkage between the commitment to child wellbeing and the outcome the community intends to achieve. Specific, measureable outcomes can be expressed for short-term outcomes, intermediate-term outcomes, and long-term outcomes. An indicator provides an evaluative tool to support measureable outcomes. It provides data that observers can use to track evaluate and make judgments about the effectiveness of intermediate and long-term outcomes. Resource assessment/gaps analysis described how resources were determined and what criteria were used to determine gaps with data and rationale provided to support the selection of the gaps that emerged. The strategy selection described the programs and infrastructural changes the county implemented in order to move the selected indicators in an intended direction. It also described program-level data collection or evaluation implemented to determine the effectiveness of the strategy and the actions steps to be taken to implement the strategy. Success measures are a similar evaluation tool applied to short-term outcomes, helping to evaluate movement in the direction of the intermediate outcomes.

Designing the Process

Combining the logic chain, strategic planning, and visioning offered a process that proved to be effective in bringing about consensus among the diverse membership of Ohio Family and Children First Councils. Many community and organizational planning efforts begin with an analysis of "Where are we now?" by examining present conditions, assets, and historical trends that led to the community's or organization's current status. Bryson's model of creating and implementing strategic plans uses this approach to conduct internal and external environmental assessment as one of the initial strategic planning steps. The development of a vision of success is near the end of the planning process and is an optional step (Bryson & Alston, 1996).

Faculty of Ohio State University Extension have found from their applied experience that by first asking "Where do you want to be?" as opposed to "Where are we now?" a more robust strategic plan results. "Imagining the outcome" prevents communities and organizations from limiting their imagination of the future and encourages them to get beyond perceived limitations and constraints imposed by current resources and conditions. Beginning with a program's desired outcomes then working backwards through the logic chain sequence is important in realizing this planning model's usefulness (Israel, 2001).

OSU Extension's team drew upon their experience in community and organizational strategic planning and visioning to develop a model of strategic planning using the logic chain and integrating these approaches. The importance of vision-based planning is that it brings diverse groups to consensus. "Because development ideas so rarely arise from a shared vision of what the community wants and needs, nearly every development decision results in conflict" (Goldberg, 2005, p.1).

Once a consensus vision was identified, long-term outcomes were then formulated. These outcomes became goals that supported the vision. The team then worked backwards through the logic chain format to identify existing resources, establish intermediate and short-term outcomes, and targeted strategies. The full membership of each county Family and Children First Council was oriented in the strategic planning process. Planning subcommittees of the council were then created. The subcommittee's roles were to undertake each step in the community plan, present their findings to the council, and make key recommendations to the full council at each step of the planning process.

Developing a Shared Vision

According to Himmelman (2001), true collaboration requires exchanging information, altering activities, sharing resources, and enhancing the capacity of another to achieve a common goal. In this process, collaboration and consensus building required the council members to set aside individual goals and focus on one or more of the long-term outcomes. This process provided a formal means of defining and prioritizing community goals and aspirations. In many cases, the long-term outcomes required council members to collaborate in order to be successful at achieving their long-term outcome.

The Noble County Family and Children First Council

For 10 months, the OSU Extension team guided the Noble County FCF Council through a vision-based strategic planning process using the logic chain. Noble's 21-member Council included broad-based representation (from education, health services, public entities, social services agencies, community and economic development/workforce organizations, youth services, mental health providers, and family representatives.)

OSU Extension explained the process as like peeling an onion: starting large with a shared vision, then peeling back the various layers one at a time until strategies and actions were formulated that would lead, through outcomes and analysis, to the guiding vision. The process was made manageable by creating a planning subcommittee to make recommendations to the full Council for their consideration and adoption. The process used an "accordion model" approach, using smaller groups to develop parts to the plan and then going back and forth among the subcommittee, the community, and the Council to verify that the plan was on track. Modifications were made until a final product that gained widespread acceptance was produced.

The Council's first task was the formulation of a consensus vision, then to reach agreement on one or two long-term outcomes/goals that would support this vision. It was important that this vision align with community values and be consistent with the Ohio PfS agency's vision statement, i.e., that families and children thrive. Six commitment statements provided by Ohio PfS proved useful to the articulation of goals for the local strategic planning sequence. Both the vision and long-term outcomes/goals would enable the Council to begin the planning process with a clear end in mind.

The following steps were taken while working the Noble County FCF Council through the logic chain community planning process.

1. Brainstorming Sessions to Determine Vision and Goals

The OSU Extension team began by leading the Noble County FCF Council and stakeholders through a series of brainstorming sessions to help verify the concurrence of these long-term outcomes with widely held values among the Council and stakeholder groups. The brainstorming sessions were conducted with the entire 21-member Council, allowing Council members to use their experience and insights to identify what they believed to be the vision of an ideal community for Noble County children and families. The Council also determined Noble County's greatest needs, identified where combined existing programs were the most effective in meeting these needs, and concluded where gaps in services existed. Consensus on one or two long-term outcomes that would directly address community needs became the desired long-term outcome that emerged for the Noble County Council. These long-term outcomes/goals were:

- Children are ready for school, and

- Children and youth engage in healthy behaviors

2. Community Surveys and Focus Groups

Widely held community values that would help to form the shared vision and goals were identified through a series of techniques, including stakeholder input meetings and community surveys. Stakeholder focus groups were held with key community leaders and professionals. The survey was distributed through six social service agencies and three schools. These sites were chosen because they represented a cross-section of agencies and entities representing all socioeconomic sectors of the county. Over 129 surveys were completed. Residents were asked to identify which of the six PfS commitments they believed to be the most important. Under each commitment, concerns that mirrored indicators related to each commitment were also ranked by importance (see Figure 1: Framework of the Logic Chain).

3. Data Collection and Analysis

The Noble County Council was assisted by the OSU Extension team in making data-informed decisions through a process of gathering data, evaluating needs, and choosing appropriate actions to address these needs. Quantitative and qualitative data was collected by Extension and the Council from national, state, and local sources. The data was assembled and presented by Extension, and the Council was guided in defining and prioritizing outcomes for action. Community input from the values survey was also used to verify and determine intermediate outcomes. A compilation of the data created a baseline profile of the county that will be used to track and evaluate progress toward meeting plan goals.

4. Following the Logic Chain

Once the shared vision and long-term outcomes were established, the Noble County Council planning subcommittee determined intermediate and short-term outcomes that would lead to the successful accomplishment of the long-term outcome. For each intermediate outcome a series of specific indicators, or metrics, were developed to use in evaluating the continued effectiveness of the plan during its implementation. After each step in the logic chain, the planning subcommittee would present their thoughts to the total Council membership to make changes, add additional insights, and either approve the results or refer it back to the subcommittee for further work and recommendations. The same process was carried out with the development of short-term outcomes and related, more targeted metrics known as "measurements of success." Finally, specific strategies were formulated with an identification of needed partnerships, initiatives, and programs. These specific strategies and needed resources formed the basis of action plans.

5. Existing Resource Assessment

An inventory of existing programs and organizations, and research into the services they provide for county residents that would help to achieve the Council plan, was conducted by the Council before strategies were finalized. Recognized gaps in specific programs and services identified new initiatives to undertake, and the existence of current services and resource providers helped to determine needed partnerships.

Indicators and success measures played a critical role beyond evaluation. By identifying through brainstorming a small number of key indicators for each of the intermediate outcomes, the factors contributing to an identified problem in the community were more clearly assessed by the planning subcommittee and council. This assessment then led to the identification of short-term outcomes that were component parts of an intermediate-term outcome. Each short-term outcome was evaluated by a success measure articulated in measurable terms such as "percent of" or "number of." Specification of short-term outcomes and analysis of

available resources defined through the resource assessment process allowed for the final step in the logic chain.

The final step in this process was to identify resources or gaps by prioritizing the short-term outcomes. The central purpose of the gap analysis was to determine discrepancies between community needs and available resources. There were several ways to think about gaps in services in the community. The initial focus was on types of services and sufficient prevention, early intervention, and services for the indicated clientele in the county. Detailed identification of these factors offered the opportunity to develop specific programmatic responses accountable for specific outcomes.

Impact and Lessons Learned

It is important to note that in FCF Council's planning, the logic chain was meant to be employed at the community level. Subsequently, this process has been used effectively by the OSU Extension team with organizations. Each FCF Council used the logic chain to design a plan beginning from a consensus vision to long-term outcomes/goals, verifying these goals through quantitative and qualitative data and then working backwards in a logical stepwise manner to strategies. As in Merlyn the Magician's approach, the effectiveness of the planning process began by imagining the desired future and working backwards in logic chain sequence through the steps needed to accomplish long-term outcomes.

As a result of successful completion of this process, the Noble County FCF Council received approval as a Partnership for Success recipient, a state grant program that will provide substantial multi-year support for plan implementation.

Commitment to the completion of several cycles of this process leads to the development of a comprehensive and coordinated strategic plan designed to enhance the wellbeing of a community. By identifying a strategic direction, organizations and agencies partnered to invest in programs for long-term achievable outcomes. This process is parallel to OSU Extension's program evaluation plan. The mission of OSU Extension is to improve the lives of people. This tool furthers the same goal by providing ongoing, systematic information that strengthens projects during their life cycle, and, whenever possible, utilizes outcome data to assess the extent of change.

This logic chain evaluation tool benefits Extension by encouraging multidisciplinary approaches to problem solving, including a range of techniques to address project questions. Similar to the Extension process of utilizing grassroots input, this tool used a community-based and contextual evaluation. This allowed evaluators to identify problems and opportunities in the community and provide staff and stakeholders with reliable information from which to address problems and build on strengths and opportunities. The evaluation was used to improve service delivery and project management, help project directors see problems more clearly, and discover new avenues for growth.

OSU Extension strongly encourages evaluations not only to demonstrate that a project worked, but also to improve the way it works. The evaluation tool used in this case study can be used by faculty and practitioners to determine the worth of a program and to guide the program implementation and management. Although evaluation is useful to document impact and demonstrate accountability, it also leads to a more effective program, greater learning opportunity, and better knowledge of what works. At the very least, this can provide a solid base for Extension from which to make decisions that ultimately lead to stronger programs and more effective services.

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