

Making your campaign happen

How to use a theory of change or a future story for your campaigning

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Introduction

When campaigning effectively, it is vital to be clear on your problem and your solution, but also to know who has the power to make the change you want to see and who influences them.

In addition to clarity on your problem and solution, and knowing who has the power, you also need to have a clear view about what needs to happen for change to occur on your issue. This is your theory of change, or it can be described as your future story, for your campaign. What is the chain of events that will, in your opinion, lead to change on your issue? None of us can predict the future, but if you can't see how change will happen, how do you think that change will actually happen?

Campaigning is not the same as running a project. Campaigning is seeking to influence people with power (who have their own agendas) in a fast-moving dynamic environment. And your campaign planning needs to be able to keep pace.

In my recent book [*Campaigning for Change: an Essential Guide for Campaigning around the World*](#), I set out the 12 questions, which I believe you need to be able to answer before you can run an effective campaign.

Since publishing this book, I have had the opportunity to continue to share this simple approach to campaigning with people in different countries and different languages around the world. And despite cultural, social and political differences, I have been energised to witness how this approach has resonated with people and encouraged them to think about how they want to campaign for change.

Yet one of my reflections having written my book, and then spent time with people around the world working on this approach to campaigning, is that I should have devoted more space in the book to explaining how a theory of change can help you in campaigning. I have seen people understand the concept but then struggle to apply this concept to their own campaigning.

This is why I have decided to write this short pamphlet setting out in a bit more detail, by using the practical approach that I have used with different groups, to seek to show how this concept can help guide and energise your campaigning.

The approach

I was initially very taken by a simple approach to using a theory of change for campaigning of asking yourself: how is your campaign going to take off and build momentum?

So that?

In seeking to answer this question, you will find using two words '*so that*' useful to be able to link one activity to the next to show how your campaign is going to take off. I like to talk about a 'so that' chain' in campaigning. Campaigning is not about an isolated activity, but a sequence of activities; in essence, you do something *so that* something else happens *so that* *so that* .. *so that*...

In my training around the world, I have used the following example:

- We are going to do some research
- **So that** we can brief politicians
- **So that** they can raise the issue
- **So that** we can get some media coverage
- **So that** the government responds
- **So that** **so that** ... **so that** ...

It is very simple but seeks to show the logic between each activity, which in turn builds momentum for the campaign.

In addition, I have also suggested in my training it can be helpful to distinguish between big steps and small steps in your theory of change. So, reflecting on the example above, the big steps for this theory of change might be:

- We are going to do some research, **so that** we can use this evidence to build allies, **so that** we all promote our issue to government, **so that** they respond, **so that** we can show them how our change will help them, **so that** the policy is changed ...

But to get started with your campaigning, you will also need to think about your immediate small steps for the theory of change:

- We are going to develop a terms of reference, **so that** we can commission a researcher, **so that** we can plan a research plan, **so that**....

But there is a real risk in this approach to campaigning that you develop a fantasy campaign. Your theory of change looks great, has a real logic flow but has absolutely no connection with reality. It is a fantasy campaign. Your theory of change needs to be grounded in your shared understanding of your external environment.

Your external environment

When I have done campaign training around the world, I have often spent a lot of time with groups encouraging them to share their own understanding of their external environment for their campaign. On many occasions I have found that they have never before discussed their different understanding and had just assumed that they all had the same perspective on their external environment.

I encourage people to think about where power lies in their society and about how change happens. I also encourage them to think about what approaches to achieving change have influenced them in the past (both positive and negative) and challenge them about how they are finding out and feeding their curiosity about power in their own society.

These discussions can sometimes become very heated as people challenge each other's perspectives. I remember a discussion by a group of Ethiopians about power and change in their country. They did not share the same views but this discussion showed them that they needed time to forge a common understanding as the foundation for their campaigning.

I have then encouraged people to draw on a flip chart their agreement about power and change in their society. I remember the flip chart from a group from Vietnam; it was a classical hierarchy structure of village, region, and national levels, but all surrounded by a red line. They explained how the levels related to each other, but then paused to explain that the red line was a heart, which represented the Communist Party and which enveloped all of society, and was where real power rested in society.

This analysis is vital and provides the foundation for building your theory of change. It is also an exercise that should not be a one-off. As you begin your campaigning you will learn more about your external environment and you should review your analysis on a regular basis. And if your campaigning is successful, you should also be changing the external environment yourself through your actions.

In my book and training, I then share a series of simple campaigning tools such as the influence tree and the opposition matrix. I then try to put everything together by setting

out how you develop a theory of change or future story. Increasingly I prefer the words future story to theory of change as being more accessible for people.

Your future story

In campaigning your story of your campaign is so important: *where have you come from, where are you now and where are you going?* I love this simple approach. When I have to report or talk about my campaign, I like to use this structure. Combining the past, the current position and your plan for the future.

This story telling is vital to help ensure that everyone is focussed on the purpose of the campaign and to help give a real sense of momentum to your campaign. It can also help to motivate others to join your campaign.

I once talked at a conference about how important it is for campaigners to be good story tellers. I was then challenged by a member of the audience, who remarked that they thought that the concept of story-telling was too passive for a campaigner. On reflection I agreed with them – as campaigners we are not just story-tellers, but we are active in the story, so we are story makers. I now make a point of telling campaigners to be a story maker not just a story teller!

You need to be courageous to use your knowledge of your issue (the problem and the solution), your potential allies, opposition arguments and of your external environment to write down your theory of change/ future story. But remember that this is a collective action and never one to be undertaken alone – and do seek opportunities to share your thinking with others, especially with partners and allies, and always be open to challenge on your thinking. If you can't defend your thinking, it is showing you that you will need to review your plans.

You develop your future story rooted in your understanding of the reality of your external environment. As you undertake actions, you reflect on these actions and use your learning both to modify your future story and, when necessary, also your understanding of the external environment. You will also need to review your understanding of the external environment in response to external changes such as an election or a government reshuffle resulting in a transfer of power.

It can be useful to review your future story at monthly intervals, to reflect on your progress and agree what changes, if any, need to be made to your future story. When your campaigning is more fast moving, you may want to consider reviewing your future story on a more frequent basis.

This is the most important point about using a future story: your thinking is never static and is always open to challenge and review based on your learning – it is a dynamic process!

It can be useful to keep a copy of each future story you develop, as this can help you in your monitoring and reporting on your campaigning. It will give a good sense of your historical progression.

I also like to use this quote in my training from the German military theorist, Helmuth von Moltke:

“No battle plan ever survives the first contact with the enemy”

Now, I realise that this is not a battle and your target is not your enemy, but nevertheless the sentiment behind this quote is important for campaigners. Each time you have contact with the outside world, you need to take stock of what you have learnt from this engagement and how, if at all, you need to change your theory of change. You also need to consider how your new knowledge affects your thinking about your campaign in terms of your understanding of your external environment, campaign messages, allies, and how you choose to respond to opposition arguments.

This is the theory of how you can use a future story or a theory of change to help you to drive your campaigning forward to build momentum for change. But what does it look like in practice to use a future story for campaigning?

The following example shows how a campaigning issue can be developed using a future story or theory of change approach:

A practical example

The problem

Parents in rural areas are unable to take their children into town to attend health clinics.

The solution

Convince the local authority/ municipality, and in particular the deputy mayor, to run regular clinics for children in the rural areas.

Target

The deputy mayor (DM) with responsibility for health services

Understanding of the context

The DM has shown himself to be unwilling to attend a meeting on this issue, and has shown no interest at all in this issue in the past. Yet he has shown himself to be highly susceptible in the past to pressure on him from local community leaders (LCLs).

Theory of change/ future story (the big steps)

- 1 Develop report highlighting the impact of the lack of these clinics and seek to meet LCLs
- 2 Encourage allies also to meet LCLs
- 3 Use this pressure on LCLs to get them to meet the DM on the issue
- 4 DM agrees to run the rural clinics

Having established the over-arching theory of change or future story for the campaigning, we need to establish our initial steps on our future story to get the campaigning going. Once we have completed some early actions, we will review our theory of change/ future story on our issue.

Our initial theory of change/ future story (the small steps)

- 1 Finalise report with key recommendations
- 2 Reach out to LCLs
- 3 Arrange meetings
- 4 Take stock of level of support

Month 1 action

- 1 Report finalised and published
- 2 Letters sent out to LCLS but no response received

Learning

The letters did not work with the LCLs, and we need to try other methods to contact the LCLs.

Revised future story 2

- 1 Reach out to LCLs by telephone and in person
- 2 Arrange meetings
- 3 Take stock of level of support

Month 2 action

- 1 Different methods of contact were used with the LCLs, but they remain unreceptive

Learning

Our direct approaches to the LCLs have failed; we now realise we need to explore using other messengers for our campaigning message

Revised future story 3

- 1 Develop an influence tree of potential allies with influence to contact the LCLs
- 2 Ask these allies to meet with the LCLs
- 3 Take stock of the level of support

Month 3 action

- 1 Meetings arranged with allies and they agree to contact LCLs
- 2 LCLs say to allies that they are not convinced by the report, which they consider to be too narrow and not representative of the community

Learning

Our initial report has not worked to convince our targets with influence on the DM, so we need to enhance the evidence and independence of our report.

Revised future story 4

- 1 Work with the local university alongside members of the community to expand the evidence base and enhance the independence of the report. Develop participatory videos to show the human impact of the current policy
- 2 Take stock of the level of support

Months 4-6 action

- 1 New report with videos completed with university with additional evidence of the need
- 2 Report shared with LCLs who remain unconvinced about the level of support for this change in the community.

Learning

We now see that our real obstacle with the LCLs is not our report but our failure so far to show the real support in the community for this change. We see now that we need to mobilise the support in the community to convince the LCLs that this is a real concern for them to put pressure on the DM

Revised future story 5

- 1 Show the LCLs that there is public support for this change through public screenings of the videos in all of the local areas
- 2 Encourage the LCLs to then meet the DM in the light of this public support

Months 7-8 action

- 1 Local community members are mobilised and there are large meetings across the rural areas to show the level of support for this change
- 2 LCLs are invited to these meetings

3 Meetings are speedily arranged with the LCLs at their request to discuss how they can communicate the need for rural clinics for children

4 We meet with the LCLs to brief them on the key arguments and they arrange to meet the DM

5 They meet with the DM and he agrees to run rural clinics for children but on a pilot basis

Learning

While we are delighted at this breakthrough as a result of our persistent campaigning, we realise that this success is only temporary. We realise that we need to work across our communities to ensure that this new service is used. We also see that we will need to ensure that there are monitoring systems in place to show the level of use of these new clinics to convince the DM that this initiative needs to be on a permanent basis. Our work continues....

Conclusion

This practical example shows that while it is important to have clarity on your problem and your solution and to know who your campaign target is, it is also vital to have a clear understanding of your external context and to develop a theory of change/ future story.

But that is just the start as this example shows! Remember no battle plan ever survives the first contact with the enemy. With this example, the first external actions showed that the initial future story was not going to work, so the future story needed to be revised based on their new and enhanced understanding of their external environment. And any assumptions you have made must be re-assessed and challenged. As additional activities are tried, and yet there is no breakthrough, the future story is revised again and again based on your new learning.

After each activity, there is space for reflection on the learning from this activity and a chance to consider what, if anything, needs to be changed with the future story.

And this dynamic process of plan, act, revise the plan, act and so on – is at the heart of effective campaigning. A readiness to change and to be challenged on your future story is so important.

At the start of the campaign, you can produce your future story grounded in your understanding of your external environment. But the one thing you will know for certain is that your plan will change many times before you succeed because campaigning is all about doing, learning, and then doing again based on this learning.

So, if you start a campaign, and someone asks you what your plan will be in 18 months' time, just smile. You can show them your current thinking on your future story, your understanding of the external environment, and maybe also some of your earlier future stories, but no more.

And remember: campaigning is not the same as running a project. Campaigning is seeking to influence people with power (who have their own agendas) in a fast-moving dynamic environment. And your campaign planning needs to be able to keep pace.

So be clear on your campaign message (problem and solution), know who your target is, be clear on the realities of the external environment and then develop your theory of change/ future story. But above all be ready and willing to learn from your actions, be open to be challenged in your thinking, and keep your future story under regular review.

Enjoy your campaigning!