



From Good Intentions to Real Change: Using the Theory of Change to Measure Your Impact

Ivy Walker

Serial Entrepreneur, Author & Risk Management Expert
Treasurer, S.H.A.U.N. Foundation for Girls

You're doing the work, running programs, serving girls, and pouring your heart into your mission. But when a funder asks, "What impact are you having?", do you have a clear, confident answer?

If that question makes you pause, you're not alone. Many small nonprofits are excellent at doing the work but struggle to measure it in a way that tells a compelling story. The Theory of Change is one of the most powerful tools for bridging that gap.

What is a Theory of Change?

A Theory of Change (ToC) is a logical roadmap that explains how and why your work leads to the outcomes you care about. It connects the dots between what you do (activities), what you produce (outputs), what changes as a result (outcomes), and the bigger difference you're ultimately working toward (impact).

Think of it less like a research methodology and more like a clear story with a logical throughline: "If we do X, then Y will happen and here's why we believe that."

There are five core elements:

Inputs — your resources: staff, funding, volunteers, time

Activities — what you actually do: mentoring sessions, coding workshops, leadership retreats

Outputs — the direct, countable results: 40 girls completed the program, 12 workshops held

Outcomes — the changes in knowledge, behavior, or confidence you see in participants

Impact — the long-term, lasting difference in their lives and communities

Why this matters for girl-centered organizations

The work of building confidence, expanding possibility, and shifting identity in girls is profound, but it's also easy to undersell when you're only reporting headcounts. A Theory of Change helps you articulate what you believe happens when a girl goes through your program and then measure whether that belief holds true.

It also surfaces your assumptions. Maybe you believe that girls who see adult women mentors in STEM will be more likely to pursue those fields. Naming that assumption helps you test it and helps funders understand the logic of your work.

What this looks like in practice

Let's say you run after-school leadership programming for middle school girls. Your ToC might look like this:

Inputs: Two part-time staff, volunteer facilitators, \$80K budget

Activities: Weekly 90-minute leadership circles, a summer intensive, one-on-one goal coaching

Outputs: 50 girls complete the year-long program; 6 facilitators trained

Outcomes: Girls report increased confidence in speaking up; girls set and achieve a personal goal by year's end; girls show up differently in school, teachers notice

Impact: Girls in underserved communities grow into civic and professional leaders who give back to their communities

To measure these outcomes, you'd pair pre/post surveys (self-reported confidence), facilitator observation notes, and short check-ins at 6 and 12 months post-program. You don't need a PhD to do this. You need consistency and intentionality.

Getting started

Start by writing down what you believe your program does. Ask your staff and, importantly, ask the girls themselves. Then trace the logic backward: what would have to be true for your impact to happen?

Your ToC doesn't need to be perfect or complicated. Even a simple one-page logic model is infinitely more useful than none at all.

The most powerful thing a small nonprofit leader can say is: "Here's what we believe, here's what we measure, and here's what we're learning." That's what separates good intentions from demonstrable change.

