

About “Causation”

Cause: something that produces an effect, result, or consequence.
(American Heritage Dictionary, 2nd College Edition, 1991)

The idea of causation is central to the logic model. The logic model depicts a program's assumed causal connections. Yet, cause-effect relationships are problematic in our world of community programming. Experience shows us that:

1. In most all cases, programs have only a partial influence over results. External factors beyond the program's control influence the flow of events. This applies particularly to longer-term outcomes.
2. The myriad of factors that affect the development and implementation of community initiatives make it difficult to tease out causal connections. Participants have their own characteristics and are embedded in a web of influences that affect participant outcomes (family relationships, experiences, economy, culture, etc.). The external environment affects and is affected by the program. Many factors may come into play before, during, and after program implementation in an almost constant dynamic of influences.
3. Seldom is there “one” cause. There are more likely multiple cause-effect chains that interact.
4. Short project time lines make it difficult to document the assumed causal connections.
5. Measuring causal relationships and controlling for contextual factors through experimental or quasi-experimental designs is often not feasible and expensive.
6. Data collected through various methods - quantitative and qualitative - often show different (and sometimes contradictory) causal associations. Seldom do we “prove” that a particular outcome is the result of a particular intervention.
7. Causal relationships are rarely as simple and clear as the mosquito example above or as the “if-then” relationships suggest. Rather, there are multiple and interacting relationships that affect change, often functioning as feedback loops with the possibility of delays (see Rogers, 2000; Funnell, 2000; and Williams, 2002).

Systems theory suggests a dynamic and circular approach to understanding causal relationships rather than a uni-dimensional, linear approach. Logic models can be created to depict these more iterative causal mechanisms and relationships by adding feedback loops and two-way arrows, narrative explanations, or a matrix. Limitations are imposed by the necessity of communicating on paper in a two-dimensional space.

Remember, the logic model is a “model” – not reality. It depicts assumed causal connections, not true cause-effect relationships. However, even simple models are very useful. They can help clarify expected linkages, tease out underlying assumptions, focus on principles to test, educate funders and policy makers, and move a program into action and learning.

DEVELOPING A LOGIC MODEL: TEACHING AND TRAINING GUIDE 2/29/2008 HANDOUT – 12
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