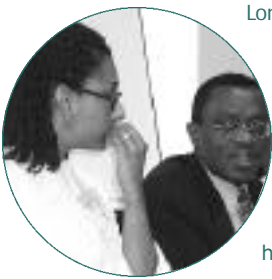

Using Learning Tools to Promote COMMUNITY CHANGE

By Lisa J. Nutter



Long underpinning OMG's work in evaluation and planning is developing a *theory of change*, which we believe is rich in learning opportunities. The basic premise is that every initiative or program should be undergirded by a logical theory about how change will be achieved. Don Schon,

Chris Argyris, Peter Senge and others who have

written extensively about organizational learning and group dynamics, as well as social scientists working from the Kurt Lewin school of thought, have long advocated the importance of integrating action, training and research, with research and evaluation as part of what has been referred to

as a learning spiral. These ideas are also found in Carol Hirschon Weiss' seminal article, "Nothing as Practical as Good Theory: Exploring Theory-Based Evaluation for Comprehensive Community Initiatives for Children and Families," which helped introduce theory-of-change methodology into the field of evaluation.

If applied thoughtfully and with the goals of helping practitioners learn, using a theory of change can stimulate reflective thinking about desired outcomes and how those outcomes will be accomplished. OMG's Tools for Change were designed to be an accessible approach to eliciting and articulating an organization's theory of change and linking it to program interventions and outcomes.

Sometimes helping organizations learn means encouraging them to stretch beyond the ways they have historically operated and conceptualized their work. Since OMG sees a large part of our role as transferring knowledge and skills, we look for ways to provide communities with new tools to increase their chances for success. But to us, the knowledge transfer goes both ways – at the same time that community organizations are learning from us and using these tools, we are learning from them, gaining new and deeper insights on the difficult issues communities face.

OMG's interest in creating and providing tools for community-based organizations (CBOs) has been predicated on: 1) the observation that *healthy communities are often supported by a healthy organizational infrastructure*;

2) our belief that *organizations are living organisms that have varying developmental needs over time*; and 3) an understanding that *CBOs are the primary vehicles through which foundations, other donors and lenders invest in communities*.

Through these observations and through our involvement in a number of multi-year community change initiatives, we felt motivated to develop a set of tools that would better assist in capacity building efforts. Our involvement in comprehensive community initiatives (CCIs) as evaluators and through program development support has provided additional fertile ground for these experiences. Through this work, we have been part of a capacity building process that has focused on strengthening the planning and evaluation skills of CBO staff and the broader organizational

infrastructure in their communities. These efforts have been particularly important in CCIs as people and organizations learn how to take on the larger roles expected of them in these complex initiatives and as they work toward the complex outcomes that they and their investors seek in their neighborhoods.

FINDING BETTER WAYS TO TRANSFER KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS

Our relationships with communities and organizations across a variety of engagements have helped push us to refine our thinking around capacity building approaches that work best for community organizations. Two in particular – the evaluation of the Annie E. Casey Foundation's *Rebuilding Communities Initiative* (RCI) and a capacity building

This process really helped me strengthen my knowledge of outcomes and measures. We already felt good about the work we do day to day, but now we know why, and we feel even better.

—Lu Mauro, Program Director, Wellspring Clubhouse (a grantee of the Pew Fund)

engagement with the Southern Rural Development Initiative (SRDI) that focused on self-evaluation strategies – are good examples of projects that led to our creating what we call *Tools for Change*. The tools are designed to be used by practitioners and consultants to engage people in learning from their own experiences. As a set, they integrate planning, training, action, and evaluation in a way that provides the best environment for organizational learning to occur.

The pathway mapping process we did was important for us. I'll never do strategic planning again without putting in that last column—outcomes and how we measure them. We got a real appreciation for getting clear about what outcomes we wanted and then using them to guide our strategic planning and program decisions.

—Debby Warren, Executive Director, Southern Rural Development Initiative

Through our work with RCI and SRDI, we developed an initial set of tools that are focused on connecting evaluation to planning, program design and reflective practice. The tools are based in part on theory-of-change methodology and the process of getting clear about what changes are desired, how these changes will occur (i.e., what interventions will lead to change) and why we believe those changes will occur. Known as a theory of change, this process is illustrated in what is called a pathway map; the process itself is often called “pathway mapping.”

HOW IT'S WORKED SO FAR

Our experience tells us that the learning we are looking for happens best when we introduce these concepts in an initiative or program very early on. This not only helps get the initiative on the right track, but also benefits the community organizations because they can start thinking almost from the start about program outcomes, the steps needed to achieve them, and how they can use information that they gather about their progress toward those outcomes as a way to learn and make necessary mid-course corrections.

Even when used much later in an initiative, we have found that introducing concepts that make practical linkages between program planning and outcomes-thinking is an effective way to help organizational teams build a shared understanding of what they hope to accomplish and develop logical connections or “pathways” toward achieving positive change. Using the tools, we have helped teams bring out their underlying assumptions about what their program or initiative is meant to achieve and then link these to shorter and longer range outcomes and performance measures. For example, in our work with SRDI, OMG used pathway mapping to support the organization's efforts to build an understanding of evaluation, and a deeper buy-in of it, among some of their

member agencies. The process was used to demonstrate the utility of evaluation and reinforce messages about it as an integral part of good practical planning.

In another instance, we have used pathway mapping to help focus our evaluation work with the Ford Foundation's Leadership for a Changing World initiative. Here we are helping the three partner organizations (the Foundation, the Wagner Institute at New York University, and the Advocacy Institute) identify and discuss their own assumptions and goals for the evaluation. The process has teased out the partners' different assumptions and viewpoints, and is creating a forum in which to build consensus on these as the initiative moves forward.

MORE TOOLS TO COME

The Annie E. Casey Foundation has provided some initial research and development resources to codify what we had been doing, and OMG continues to use and refine these tools. Further tool development and new ideas emerge with each interaction with CBOs. We have already begun exploring the potential of several new ways to deliver the material, including a CD-ROM and web-based approaches, that might be used alongside group facilitation. We expect these new formats to be a cost-effective way to promote organizational learning and assist more community groups to focus on their change agendas. ■

RCI was a big neighborhood initiative for the foundation and target neighborhoods because it was Casey's first attempt to marry its systems reform agenda with community rebuilding. So it was really necessary to make a number of capacity building resources available, including OMG's collection of planning and self-assessment tools that the lead organizations could use to refine their thinking and reflect on their experiences. We got good feedback from them about how it allowed them to think in different ways about what they were doing.—Sherece West, Program Associate, Annie E. Casey Foundation

WHAT ARE THESE TOOLS ALL ABOUT?

OMG'S TOOLS FOR CHANGE are designed to be a learning-while-doing, hands-on approach using actual programs, activities and community issues as the basis for the exercises. We employ a mix of processes and exercises that reinforce concepts and stimulate peer exchange, and are tailored to meet the needs of CBOs and participants.

Although we anticipate that the tools will continue to evolve as we discover new ways to use them, the content engages practitioners in:

- Understanding that evaluation is part of the learning process
- Identifying evaluation skills that participants already possess
- Demystifying the jargon that the experts use
- Using pathway mapping as a means to bring forward what they want to achieve (outcomes) and how they plan to achieve it (programs and activities)
- Identifying outcome measures
- Deciding what types of data to collect and what methodologies make sense
- Developing a sound evaluation and data collection plan
- Understanding what all the data really mean.

tool n.: 1. something (an instrument or apparatus) used in performing an operation or necessary in the practice of a vocation or profession 2. a means to an end

The Linkages We Help CBOs Make Along the Way

CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Identifying the problems and assets; understanding the role of various stakeholders and partners; and assessing the environment in which the initiative is taking place.

STRATEGIC FOCUS

The direction that you have chosen based on your experiences and understanding of the problems/issues.

ACTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

Activities or steps that you will take to make your strategy a reality and to move you toward achieving the changes desired.

SHORT-TERM IMPROVEMENTS

A level of achievement that you are committed to reaching within 3 years and that will lead to the longer-term improvements that you hope to make.

LONG-TERM IMPROVEMENTS

Positive changes or outcomes that you hope to achieve in the long-run.

MILESTONES

Significant events that must be reached in order to stay on track and achieve improvements.

Lisa Nutter is a Project Director who joined OMG in 1992. A planner and community development specialist with an extensive background consulting with community-based and non-profit organizations, she conducts project work in research and evaluation, program design, and organizational development. Her particular interest in community capacity building efforts has led to the development of OMG's *Tools for Change*.

CHANGES at OMG

OMG is about to enter a new phase in its own development with a change in leadership. Co-Founder and Director Tom Burns will be moving into a new part-time role as Senior Fellow this January, and Gerri Spilka and Manuel Gutiérrez will assume the leadership as Co-Directors. Well prepared for this new phase, Gerri, who also co-founded the organization, and Manuel have been deeply involved in managing OMG along with Tom for the last four years.

Tom's contributions to OMG have been many. Under his leadership, OMG's national practice has become firmly established in and recognized for organizational development and learning theories. Whether clients have come to know the organization through their work in community development, arts and culture, human services, or programs for children, youth and families, this rich and practical perspective underpinned and linked our work as evaluators, capacity builders, data and trend analysts, and intermediaries. In addition, Tom's commitment to improving urban communities, nurturing young professionals, and his wisdom, kindness and sense of fairness are among his many legacies to OMG.

THE CO-DIRECTORS

Over the last few years as Gerri and Manuel have worked together in their management roles, each has come to value their complementary skills and points of view. Both share OMG's foundational ideals, perspectives and ongoing commitment to improving the quality of life for all in communities. Before OMG's inception,

Gerri practiced as a family therapist and was trained as an architect—an unusual background that she has drawn upon and integrated into organizational development and learning, and in the dynamics of urban change and regeneration. Over the last fourteen years, she has helped guide the direction of OMG's work in program development, evaluation, and planning across diverse areas including arts and culture, community development, urban parks and open space, and human services. Manuel, whose background is in clinical psychology and, like Gerri, family therapy, brings keen experience in children and family research that began at St. Christopher's Hospital for Children. He continued his work in this area in subsequent positions at ASPIRA Inc. of Pennsylvania, the Academy for Educational Development, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, and since 1998, as OMG's Director of Research. Much of his recent attention has focused on evaluations of national community-based initiatives aimed at improving the futures of children, youth and their families.

Together with OMG's talented, lively and diverse staff, the two leaders will continue to be guided by the organization's mission: To support innovative solutions to challenges facing neighborhoods, cities and regional communities, relying on a collaborative action research approach that builds new learning and problem solving capacities with our clients and that also contributes to the fields in which we work.

LOOKING AHEAD

In planning for these changes, Gerri and Manuel have recognized that OMG's strong growth in the last ten years can be attributed in part to an unprecedented growth of philanthropic sector resources. "We have been very fortunate to have been the beneficiary of an extraordinarily resource-rich environment," says Gerri. "As we look to the current economic uncertainty as well as ongoing community issues of the next decade, we must build from our deep experiences while also being more resourceful in how we approach our work." Manuel adds, "Our intentions are to continue to build on our strengths, be very strategic about our organizational growth, and continue to look for opportunities to influence the fields in which we work." These ideas will be refined this Fall as the OMG board and staff are involved in

identifying strategic priorities and setting organizational goals for the next two years.

Another focus area that will be further developed as this next phase proceeds is OMG's recent emphasis on communications. Over the last several years, Tom, Gerri and Manuel have been mindful of the importance of sharing what staff have learned with a broader audience, prompting OMG to produce a number of accessible publications focused on cross-cutting lessons and observations. Gerri and Manuel will continue leading these efforts.

Manuel and Gerri are grateful to OMG's clients and colleagues for providing wonderful opportunities to participate in complex and sustained community change initiatives. "We have met many astonishing people and witnessed how undaunted will can move mountains never imagined," notes Gerri. They look forward with much enthusiasm to OMG's next phase. ■

Collaborative action
research approach

Supporting
innovative solutions

WE'VE REVAMPED OUR
WEBSITE.



Please come and visit:



www.omgcenter.org



and let us know what you think!



OMG Projects and People

OMG is very pleased to announce publication of **Old Cities/ Green Cities: Communities Transform Unmanaged Land**, published this spring by the American Planning Association. Written by **Gerri Spilka**, Blaine Bonham of the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society – Philadelphia Green, and Darl Rastorfer, the book presents a green vision for rebuilding older cities in the context of smarter exurban growth. The book illustrates national and Philadelphia examples that restore and reintegrate large and small scale recreational and natural green spaces into new urban fabrics. It also tells Philadelphia Green's story as an urban greening advocate and renewer, and of the role they are currently playing leading Philadelphia's Green City strategy.

OMG is conducting a multi-year formative evaluation of the **Leadership for a Changing World (LCW)** initiative for the **Ford Foundation**. LCW recognizes the achievements of outstanding leaders not yet well known outside their immediate communities or fields; provides financial support for their work; conducts research that will explore how leadership is perceived, created, and sustained; and encourages a public conversation about community leadership. OMG has been working with the program partners — the Foundation, the Advocacy Institute, and the Robert Wagner Graduate School of Public Service at New York University — to help articulate the program's theory of change and develop indicators to assess its impact.

OMG has been awarded a grant by **The Pew Charitable Trusts** to manage its **Programs Adjusting to a Changing Environment (PACE)**, a lecture forum for the leaders of nonprofit human service agencies currently funded within the Pew Fund to support programs for vulnerable adults, the elderly, and children, youth and their families. PACE lectures are given by national experts who discuss timely topics of interest to the Philadelphia nonprofit community. For this work, OMG recommends subject areas, identifies speakers, develops session formats, writes post-lecture summaries, and evaluates the program's overall effectiveness.

For the **Lilly Endowment**, OMG is conducting a new assessment of the **Indianapolis Neighborhood Housing Partnership** and the city's affordable housing system. The analysis focuses on the impact of INHP's homeowner development program and improvements in community development corporation capacity and productivity.

For the **Annie E. Casey Foundation**, OMG conducted two roundtable discussions on **Family-Strengthening Youth Development**. Drawing together researchers and practitioners from a range of geographic and professional backgrounds, OMG facilitated discussion on the intersections between the fields of community development, family development, and youth development. These discussions informed the Foundation's emerging interests in family-strengthening youth development strategies. OMG's report synthesizing the themes from the roundtables will help inform the Foundation in its efforts to foster linkages among outcomes for individual youth, their families, and their communities.

For the **YouthBuild Philadelphia Charter School**, OMG is conducting a strategic planning process. YouthBuild, an affiliate of the national program of the same name, provides basic education and training in the construction trades for young people who come from disadvantaged backgrounds. After increasing its student body tenfold since its inception in 1992, YouthBuild's board and staff recognized the need to assess its capacity and position itself for the future through a collaborative planning process.

Earlier this year, OMG concluded an evaluation of the **National Association of Child Advocates' (NACA's)** Community Mobilization Project, funded by the **W.K. Kellogg Foundation** to increase input from local, low-income and minority communities in state policy discussions to improve services for children. OMG assessed community mobilization activities in Wisconsin and Washington — states where the efforts of the NACA affiliates appear to have led to the significant engagement of "new voices" into their advocacy work around the health and human services policies being developed by states under the federal devolution process.

OMG staff have completed a three-year evaluation of **Equipo Familiar del Barrio** (Neighborhood Family Team), an initiative that teams professionals and community members in the East Little Havana section of Miami to help families in need. The Equipo program, which arose from the **Annie E. Casey Foundation's Mental Health Initiative for Urban Children**, uses informal or "natural" helpers to develop relationships between potential service recipients and human service professionals with whom they would not otherwise connect. OMG's evaluation focused on

outcomes of the families receiving Equipo services, an analysis of the new neighborhood networks resulting from program participation, and the impact of participation on team members. In addition, OMG explored ways to further increase social capital development in East Little Havana.

The Equipo evaluation was conducted by OMG program manager **Marcela Gutiérrez-Mayka**, who was first involved in the project while on the staff of the University of South Florida. Marcela is a researcher and program evaluator who joined OMG with a background in human services to children and families, and a particular emphasis on mental health issues and minority populations. Her work has focused on social service delivery issues, at-risk children in rural and urban settings, and children's mental health services and system reform.

OMG welcomes back project manager **Joel Fontane**, a former colleague who brings spatial and demographic analysis skills which were most recently honed through his work at the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission. He has helped manage several projects here since his return, including a market study for Appel Farm Arts and Music Center, and trend analysis and GIS mapping for an assessment of Neighborhood Progress, Inc. in Cleveland. The proud new father of a baby girl, Joel has shown particular interest lately in urban population studies.

Project assistant **Lee Alford** joined OMG last year following his graduation from the University of Miami to assist the senior directors with special assignments. In addition to moving along a number of critical internal projects, Lee has also applied his expertise in data collection and analysis to several research assignments for clients. A true multi-tasker, he holds BBAs in Political Science and Finance with a minor in Architecture.

Sheetal Matani, a project associate, recently came to OMG from Washington, DC, where she worked in health and human service positions as a researcher. A published author of two works on immigrants' access to health care and insurance, Sheetal is part of OMG's project team conducting an evaluation of the State Fiscal Analysis Initiative (SFAI), designed to support state-level nonprofit organizations in improving their understanding of how vulnerable, low-income populations are affected by budgetary and tax issues, and contributing to the fiscal debate on those issues.



Plan drawn by Wang Xu for OMG Center

Courtesy of New Kensington Community Development Corporation

Photo by Jane Whitehouse for the City of Philadelphia Office of Housing and Community Development



Courtesy of The Pennsylvania Horticultural Society



The OMG Center for Collaborative Learning provides a range of consulting services to national philanthropic institutions and nonprofit organizations that address quality of life issues in mostly urban communities. Established in Philadelphia in 1988, OMG works with foundations, organizations and the public sector throughout the country to develop innovative solutions to difficult challenges through program evaluation, strategic planning, organizational development and other supports. We rely on a collaborative action research approach that builds new learning and problem solving capacities with our clients and also contributes knowledge to the fields in which we work. Areas of established expertise include community development and community building, urban open space policy, education reform, arts and culture programming, and initiatives for children, youth and families. For more information about OMG, please visit our website at www.omgcenter.org.

OMG Center for Collaborative Learning
1528 Walnut Street, Suite 805, Philadelphia PA 19102
phone 215.732.2200 fax 215.732.8123 www.omgcenter.org

OMG