LOGIC MODELS ARE FRACKING AMAZING!

Q: How long is the coast of Britain?

–Benoit Mandelbrot, who coined the word "fractal"

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It must have been 1992 or 1993. I was working as a program director for the YMCA of Metropolitan Milwaukee when the organization was selected to participate in a pilot project. The local United Way was bringing together ten of the top youth-serving nonprofits in the city to see if we could agree on a set of common measures for our youth programs. I was selected to represent the YMCA on the year-long project.

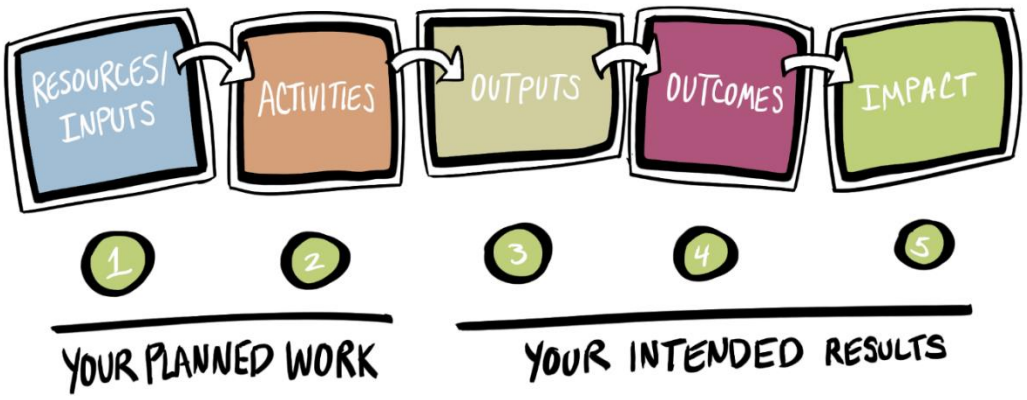
It was a daunting task, and as far as I know, the Milwaukee United Way was the first in the nation to attempt it. The United Way staffer who led the effort was part teacher, part coach and part Mistress of Dragons. It's not that we were unwilling to follow where she was leading, but sometimes we needed a bit of fire to get us to leave behind our comfortable ways of doing things and try the new techniques she was bringing to us.

Back then, the main way that nonprofits reported on their effectiveness was simply counting. How many people came to our program? How many summer lunches did we distribute? How many hours of homework help did we provide? The United Way wanted us to realize that we could go on counting things like that forever, we could refine our counting methods and look at ever smaller levels of detail, yet never really know if our programs were truly making a difference.

LOGIC MODELS TO THE RESCUE

We were aided in our quest to better understand the effectiveness of our programs by a tool called a logic model. At the time, this was a relatively new and little-known tool being used mostly in government and university circles to conceptualize program frameworks.

Over the course of the year, we learned to use logic models to think about whether the results we hoped to see in program participants were realistic, given the activities we were providing and the intensity of engagement in those activities. The tool forced us to go beyond merely counting the number of kids in our programs to consider whether and how the kids were being *changed* by our programs.



COUNTING NUMBERS ISN'T GOOD ENOUGH

I have since come to realize that one of the reasons simply counting activity numbers is not good enough is that this type of measurement fails to capture the complexity of the system, how it changes and how it relates to other systems. Logic models help us better understand the shape and motion of an organization or program, not just the quantities involved.

Once we were able to shift our mindset to accommodate this new point of view, we realized many of us were working toward similar results for our youth. That breakthrough allowed us to construct a common tool that we all agreed to use to measure the results of our programs on an annual basis. It would be the first time a group of organizations or nonprofits would collectively measure their impact, decades before "collective impact" would become a ubiquitous phrase in nonprofit circles.

THE MANY USES OF LOGIC MODELS

I have never forgotten the lessons learned in that United Way pilot project. Over the years, I have created dozens of logic models for nonprofits large and small. In my experience, when a logic model is done right, nonprofit staff and volunteers experience an "ah-ha!" moment. They recognize the model has captured something that was perhaps unspoken yet understood by everyone involved as the "way our program works." I use logic models to:

- Help program staff understand the outcomes their programs are designed to achieve;
- Facilitate organizational strategic planning processes;
- Help nonprofits market their programs;
- Write grant proposals;
- Train new staff; and
- Evaluate program impact.

The best organizations use the results of the evaluation to revisit their logic model, revise it, tweak the program, and start the process all over again.

It's been more than 25 years and I still think logic models are amazing. Clients tell me logic models help them step back, gain perspective on their programs, and see the themes and patterns that are inherent in the work they do every day.

Oh, and the answer to Mandelbrot's question is "it depends." It's all about perspective.

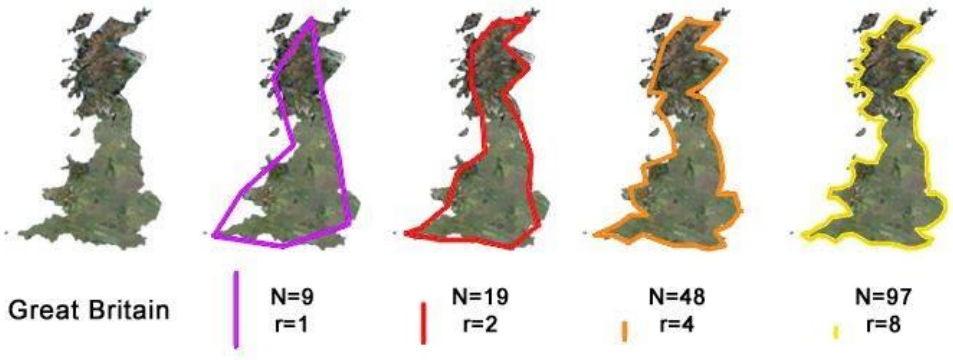


Photo by the Fractal Foundation