<u>Theory of Change Primer</u>

Overview
A theory of change is an intentional and strategic approach to defining an organization's intended impact. By design it does not look to address every step in the process that an organization must take to codify its work and become high performing. Rather, a theory of change creates a high level framework, which is used to test hypotheses and assumptions about what actions, interventions, and approaches will best produce desired outcomes. A theory of change acts as an accelerator, and creates a structure that allows an organization to systematically ask questions and use data to solidify its approach into a codified methodology for achieving outcomes and long-term impact. In doing so it helps an organization focus its decision-making, and prioritize its resources.

Process
While a theory of change can take several months to fully draft, the core element is a series of working sessions. The content generated in the sessions create a starting place for an organization to begin testing and iterating on its theory. The sessions are usually made up of staff and board, and intentionally elevate organizational strengths and challenges. In doing so, issues that are most salient to address rise to the surface and force a focused and direct conversation among the participants with the goal of forming a set of collective recommendations or theory, on how to codify approaches that show promising results, and eliminate those that are not effective.

What to Expect
The theory of change process is the first step in a much longer, more complex undertaking. Testing a theory of change requires data, patience, and a willingness on the part of an organization to adjust its approach and alter its hypotheses as assumptions are proved and disproved. A process such as this can take between four and six years depending on the size and complexity of an organization, as well as its culture of accountability and commitment to the process.

From the onset staff and board may have strong reactions to the recommendations that come out of the working sessions, and during the subsequent implementation. This is normal, and every organization must focus on being patient and open-minded. Inevitably, people will be challenged during the process. We naturally develop affinity to elements of an organization that we believe are the most effective, or speak to our personal values and experiences. A theory of change process simultaneously respects these moments, and purposefully and professionally challenges them. Organizations that are the most effective at developing, implementing and codifying their theory of change acknowledge and recognize the inherent tension that exists when long-held beliefs or standards are questioned, and are able to move forward with pace, focus and resolve. This can feel empowering for some and extremely challenging for others. Strong leadership from the chief executive and the board can ameliorate this tension, and keep the process on track. While there are many examples of what this type of leadership looks like two illustrations are shared here to provide context. First, it is essential for leaders to recognize the

difference between strategy and operational choices to carry out strategy. Being clear about the level of the conversation can help staff and board refine roles and expectations. Second, organizations that remain deliberate and intentional during implementation experience much better results. Specifically, it can be tempting to diverge from the hypotheses laid out in the theory of change before having a clear sense of what is working or not working. Leaders who consistently remind themselves, their peers, and their staff of the timeline for implementing and testing a theory of change are more effective in their efforts, but also develop a culture of accountability quicker than those organizations that prefer to be more opportunistic than thoughtful and disciplined.