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Theories of Action as a Team Sport.
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Background

The Landscape Protection (LP) portfolio of the Victorian Department of Primary Industries (DPI) has a culture of structured project planning and delivery for complex natural resource management programs. All new invasive plant and animal management projects are required to develop detailed plans covering all aspects of project management: finance, deliverables, communications and stakeholder management, evaluation and risk management. Underpinning these plans is a Theory of Action which is used both as a project planning tool and an evaluation framework. In the past, DPI has used the Bennett's Hierarchy [1] Theory of Action (ToA) model which was developed for agricultural extension projects. This model was found to be less relevant for invasive plant and animal projects which needed to be increasingly innovative and targeted to match the rapidly changing socio-economic environment. A modified version of the University of Wisconsin's ToA [2] model was trialled and found to be a far more suitable tool for shifting the project development teams' paradigm away from their traditional activity-led project design towards outcome-led project design, Under the University of Wisconsin's model, the initial focus is on the desired outcomes and change actions, and then on the required participants, activities and products in order to achieve these outcomes. Linkages, influencing factors and assumptions between each step are made explicit and development of evaluation frameworks then flows naturally from the elements described in this ToA.

Historically in LP, project planning and development has been conducted by a small number of 'experts' who are usually not involved in the subsequent project implementation. This paper discusses a team approach to the design and development of projects utilising a 'design room' process based around the University of Wisconsin's ToA. The Design Room is a structured, facilitated project planning process which brings together a variety of stakeholders to effectively scope and plan the key elements of a program or project and its evaluation.

Implementation

In late 2007 and early 2008, two major invasive plant and animal programs comprising ten and eight projects respectively were planned and developed using the design room process. In the first round (2007), project leaders selected their design room team which included service delivery staff (most of whom had no project planning experience and participation in this process was an important professional development activity), key stakeholders (influencers and partner agencies) and key decision makers. In the second round (2008), an Expression of Interest process was used to elicit a broader range of people wanting to learn more about project design and development.

The process was as follows:

1. An 'Introduction to the design room' workshop was run for the teams to work through the components of a ToA and the process the design rooms would follow to develop the projects. In the second round, participants practised developing a ToA using a topic unrelated to their own projects but still familiar (weeds as biofuels), In the first round, the teams used their own project for this "practice ToA" but tended to get bogged down in working through project issues rather than developing an understanding of the mechanics of the ToA.

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[1] Bennett, C.F. 1979, Analysing Impacts of Extension programs. Washington D.C. U.S. Department of Agriculture
[2] University of Wisconsin- Extension, Program Development and Evaluation

2. Each project team then conducted their own design rooms in which they developed their project's ToA

3. A final two-day workshop was held to assist the teams in completing the required project documentation including Evaluation, Communication and Risk Plans.

4. A Governance group of experienced project development staff reviewed all project documentation developed by the design room teams before submission to the investor.

Aims

The aims of the design room process were:

1. To use a rigorous and consistent process to design projects and their evaluation frameworks

2. To involve a broad range of stakeholders in the project design and evaluation planning

3. To build the capacity of LP staff to undertake structured project design and evaluation planning

Results

1. A rigorous and consistent process to design projects and their evaluation frameworks.

Findings

The process:

- Applied an "outcome-led" rather than "activity-led" thinking framework which challenged traditional business practices

- Focussed on linkages, influencing factors and assumptions between each step of the ToA (which were then made explicit in project documentation)

- Was clear and logical and provided the opportunity for lateral thinking and new ideas

- Was used as both a project planning tool and an evaluation framework

- Enabled high quality project plans to be developed and submitted to project investors

- Articulated clear project objectives by which to evaluate success

The ToA model was clear, concise and flowed logically, making it a useful development and analysis tool.

This model is great, much easier to develop and follow the logic than Bennett's and provides a better communication tool to inform others about the project.

Creates scope for capturing non conventional ideas.

Made one think very much in terms of purpose and outcomes and what we are trying to achieve (not how we are going to do it).

Realised benefits of starting with outcomes and working backwards – will apply that to lots of other things.

Allowed us to capture and challenge assumptions.

Opportunity to work with early project development gave greater insight into currently operating projects.

2. Involvement of a broad range of stakeholders in the project design and evaluation planning.

Findings:

The inclusion of a broad range of stakeholders in the design rooms (including those with leverage or interest in the project and those with technical and service delivery expertise) enabled project teams to:

- Incorporate different perspectives into project development - leading to a richer outcome and challenging traditional paradigms

- Clarify the scope and expectations surrounding the project
- Build project ownership at all levels
- Gain equal input from all participants through strong facilitation
- Realise the value of having different expertise in the design room
- Understand the depth of knowledge available in their team

Opportunity to have a greater depth of knowledge and input into the projects by including a broad cross section of staff.
Benefit of seeing things from different levels in the organisation, eg policy view and field staff views

3. Building the capacity of staff to undertake structured project design and evaluation planning.
Findings:
Approximately 50% of LP staff gained project planning skills through participating in design rooms.

Participants rated their confidence in their ability to complete each component of the project documentation (as a result of participating in the design room process) as follows:

Project Component	Mean confidence rating
	1= not at all confident; 4 = Extremely confident
Theory of Action	2.8 *Pretty confident*
Project Summary	2.9 *Pretty confident*
Evaluation Plan	2.4 *A bit confident*
Communication Strategy	2.6 *Pretty confident*
Risk Plan	2.9 *Pretty confident*

The staff designing and facilitating the design room process expanded their experience in and facilitation of design rooms, and their understanding of the power of this technique as an inclusive and valuable tool for project scoping and development. They also developed the ability to customise project design and development processes to the requirements of individual projects as well as for clarificative review of existing programs.

Supported learning for staff taking on a task they may not have been required to do before / or may before done differently before (eg Bennetts).
We realised how much knowledge our group did have that may otherwise have gone unnoticed.

Improvements
The following suggestions for improvement have been incorporated into design rooms for other projects, demonstrating the value of using evaluation to inform continuous improvement:

- The design room process is now being used at the earliest possible stage in the project planning cycle – for preparation of funding submissions and business cases. This allows the full potential of the design room to be realised including the fostering of "blue sky" thinking which challenges traditional paradigms. While this process can be successfully used in

the later stages of project planning and documentation, it is limited by predetermined resource allocations, selection of policy tools and outcomes.

- Tools from Systemic Thinking theory, such as Root definitions, have been incorporated into the process. *"This project is a way to achieve <<Objective X>> by doing <<Activity A>> in order to contribute to <<Long term outcome Y>>"*. This was a powerful tool to ensure that Activities, Objectives and Outcomes were appropriately classified, as earlier experience showed that there was some confusion particularly between Activities and Objectives. For example, the objective of a compliance project is not to deliver a compliance program in area X (with Y landholders/properties inspected) rather, it is to increase the number of landholders managing pests and the outcome is to reduce the impact of pests on Victoria's productivity, biodiversity and environment.

- The design room process has been revised to improve clarity, improve participant interaction and increase participant understanding of the process

- More "subject matter experts" have been made available throughout the process to assist participants develop their ToA, Evaluation, Communications and Risk Plans. This was a two edged sword as it brought the added challenge of ensuring the "experts" are providing consistent advice and managing participants frustration with the fact that developing a ToA is sometimes more of an art than a science..

Common problems seen in ToA development

Issue	Solution
1. Far too much detail, particularly in activities. The way in which the design room was facilitated resulted in very detailed lists of project activities, more relevant for an implementation plan then a ToA. Having done this work, participants had trouble synthesising and summarising into a 'helicopter view' which is necessary for the ToA to fulfil its function of providing a high level snapshot of the logic of the project. (One ToA was nine pages long and almost impossible to read).	Moved the detail to the implementation plan and only retained headings in the ToA
2. ToAs tended to be developed vertically and the all important horizontal linkages which explained the logic (*If this, then that*....) were often forgotten	Once the activities were summarised, the horizontal linkages became much clearer
3. Lists of project participants tended to include all stakeholders (eg up to and including the Dept Minister) rather than only those to whom the project was delivered. Frequently the participant was a member of the project team responsible for the activity (eg developing an engagement plan rather than the audience for whom the activity was targeted)	During the brainstorm phase, project participants were segmented into: • Direct/target participant or audience • Indirect (who might be impacted) • Project Owner (eg investor) • Project team

Conclusion

Integrating the design room process and ToA framework as the basis for project development, has led to significant improvements in the thinking and project design skills held within LP. It has enabled specialist input into project development and increased the rigour and logic of the planning process. In particular it has proven to be a valuable staff capacity building tool which encourages people to think outside the square and challenge traditional service delivery approaches.

Project planning and development in LP is no longer seen as a "necessary evil" to be carried out by expert individuals, to be summarily completed before getting on with the 'real' work, but rather a rewarding and effective team driven activity resulting in improved project design, delivery and outcomes.

Figure 1: Modified University of Wisconsin Theory of Action

Theory of Action – Invasive plants program

Situation/ Context	Inputs	Outputs		Objectives	Outcome/Impact
	What we invest	Participants	Activities/Processes/ Engagement strategies		
Invasive plants and animals are key biosecurity threats to industry, community and natural environment at an estimated $1 billion pa.	$, FTE, prior knowledge, etc	Land holders	Risk assessment	New high-risk invasive plants and animals are prevented from establishing (PREPAREDNESS, PREVENTION)	Victoria is protected from the impact of invasive plants and animals
		General community	Surveillance by community and industry		
			Incursion planning		
This project will address gaps in existing government invasive pest plant and animal programs.		Industries (at risk of spreading/ introducing pests).	Rapid response to eradicate pests before becoming widely established	High-risk invasive plants and animals in the early stage of establishment are eradicated (ERADICATION)	
			Projects to prevent spread of pests beyond existing infestations and mitigating risk of pathways of spread	High-risk established invasive plants and animals are contained (CONTAINMENT)	

Assumptions

Community and industries are willing participants in invasive pest management	Prevention, eradication and containment of priority pests is feasible	Prevention, eradication and containment is effective

External factors

Climate change and socio-demographic change impact on participants' ability to do pest control	Lack of international information to prioritise potential pests for Victoria	Many!

Key Evaluation Questions

▪ To what extent were participants involved and reasons?	▪ How effective were the: - Prevention - Eradication - Containment programs? ▪ Lessons learnt?	▪ Ongoing measurement of reduction in new invasions and existing infestations