Six Models for Understanding Impact

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We often default to the assumption that our programs will lead to greater positive change over time. The rate of change may be incremental, exponential, or something else, *but it's always positive*.

The reality of what change looks like, however, depends on the status of the system in which we're intervening. Is the system already in decline? If it is, then we may only avoid causing more damage. Is the system already improving? If so, then perhaps our interventions are just meant to speed that improvement up.

As a result, not every program or intervention is actually achieving transformative impact, and that's OK. The point of this exercise is to come to a shared understanding of the system we're intervening in and the impact we intend to have over the course of this 5-year strategy. This will help us:
- Validate that the results we've articulated are realistic
- Ensure that teams have the same understanding of the system they're working in and their intended impact
- Help us uncover some assumptions about our work that we'll get to in the next session

The six models of impact below—whether that's transforming a system, stabilizing a system, or something else—each reflect a particular type of status quo and potential trajectories. Review the models and determine which best fits the results you're trying to achieve at the IR or DO level.

Transformative Impact

This is "impact" the way its most commonly thought of. With transformative impact, we expect a positive change in the system over time compared to the static rate of the counterfactual. The rate of change may be gradual/incremental, exponential, or somewhere in between.

For example: we might expect a **Get Out the Vote initiative** to be transformative, with a positive change on voter turnout over the course of the activity or project.
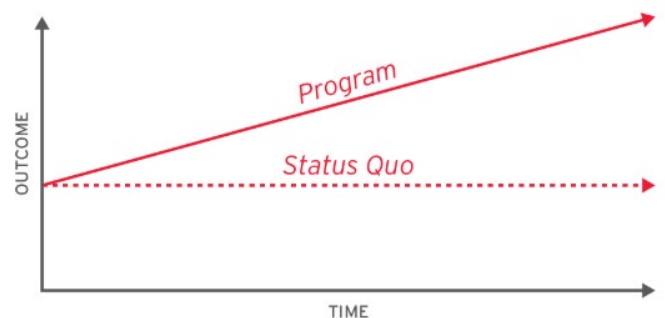
Proactive Impact

Some systems may already be moving in a positive direction, but an intervention can help accelerate that change. In this case, the ultimate change in outcomes is the same, but the accelerated pace and steeper rate of change is meaningful. We might facilitate these programs if the impact then allows us to pursue further opportunities that we are otherwise waiting to implement.

For example, **a public awareness campaign** can help shift public attitudes toward a particular issue more quickly than they might otherwise have done.
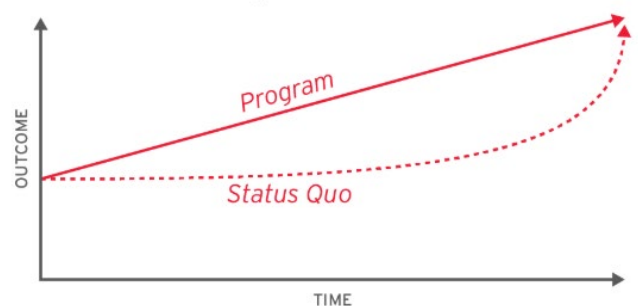
Opportunistic Impact

In the opportunistic model, the program lays the groundwork for change, but the outcomes will be entirely constrained by the context. There may be little perceivable difference in the treatment vs. control scenarios until there is a change in the context that creates an opportunity or removes an obstacle to change. If and when that happens, we expect to see a jump in the value of the outcome in the treatment scenarios compared to the counterfactual. The rate of change therefore looks like a "stair step," with long periods of stasis interrupted by sudden increases.

For example: public advocacy campaigns often follow an opportunistic model, where ongoing advocacy work lays the groundwork for a trigger event that creates a groundswell of public interest and an opportunity for reform.
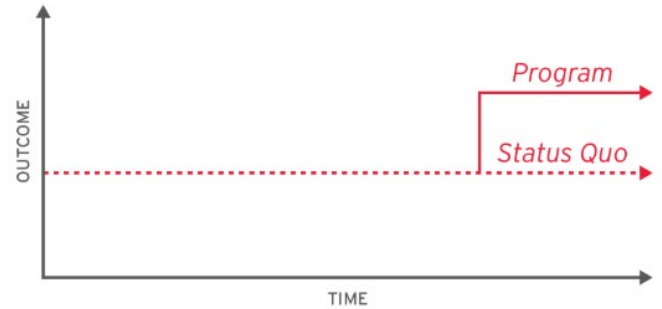
Stabilizing Impact

In some situations, we are working to prevent further decline within the system, to disrupt a "vicious cycle," and/or to hold the system steady until the opportunity arises for positive change. In the stabilizing model, there is no measurable change to the outcome value throughout the course of the program. The program thus appears to have no impact unless you consider the counterfactual and/or the negative historical trendline.

For example: a civil liberties protection program may follow a stabilizing model: while we may not expect to see substantive expansions of legal protections for marginalized populations, we may be able to maintain the protections that currently exist and ensure their continued enforcement.
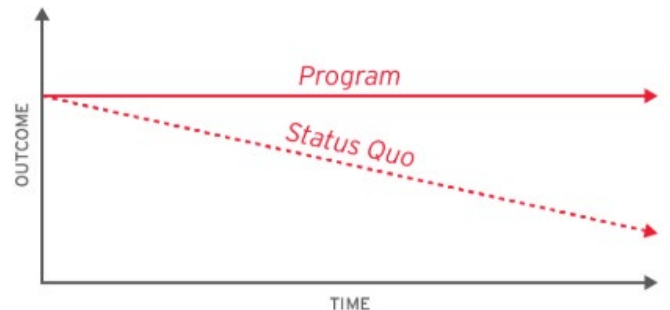
Preventative Impact

Perhaps the opposite of an opportunistic model, in this model the program lays the groundwork to strengthen the status quo and prevent certain events with the goal of having no change in the outcome. In this model, we recognize that there are vulnerabilities in the system that could lead a seemingly healthy system to accelerate suddenly in a negative direction.

For example: crisis communications work, in which a crisis event could lead to sudden negative shift in public perceptions/behaviors.
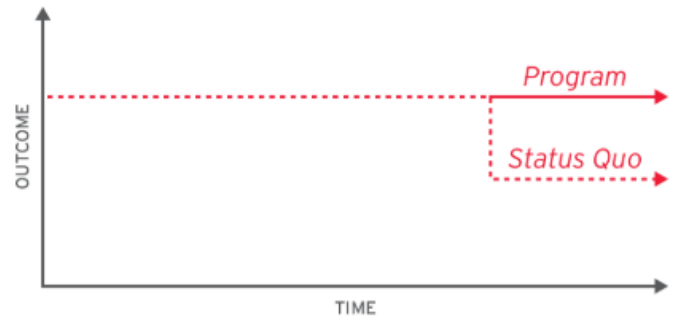
Palliative Impact

One of the realities of working within a systems context is that, occasionally, systems fail with no recourse. The intervention, in these cases, may be focused on slowing the decline of the system in order to mitigate the effects of the eventual collapse, or to buy time for alternatives to emerge or evolve.

For example: providing direct financial support to a struggling organization or sector until a new, more sustainable business or service model emerges.