



Learning to Action Log: An Accessible Tool For Organizational Reflection and Improvement

Multi-sector community coalitions and other teams¹ working to improve social determinants of health (SDOH) frequently operate in environments of dynamic complexity and limited resources. Dynamic complexity requires teams to be adaptable and learn from their experiences so that they can be more effective; limited resources mean they have to do this efficiently, and usually without external support.

We created this Learning to Action Log (Log) to help SDOH teams navigate these challenges. It is a continuous quality improvement tool that can be implemented by any SDOH team in any setting and includes a simple decision tree that helps teams quickly identify actionable improvements to their operations. We hope it will help you develop a culture of learning that supports your SDOH goals and advances health equity.

What is the Learning to Action Log?

The Learning to Action Log (Figure 1) is a simple, straightforward table for documenting activities, reflecting on experience, and considering how to adapt, pivot, and learn more. It is premised on the belief that you will be most effective by explicitly connecting the larger impact you're trying to make with your short- and intermediate-term goals, and your planned activities. Ideally you will have good reasons—or a theory—to believe that your planned activities will help you accomplish your goals and good reasons to believe that accomplishing your goals will help you make that larger impact. Inevitably, however, those beliefs will not always be correct. One way to think about the Log is as a tool for revising your beliefs and improving your understanding of those connections at each level, from the granular activities you engage in on a day-to-day basis to your overarching beliefs about how your environment functions, so that you can be a more effective changemaker.

Spotlight: An SDOH team wants to increase food and nutrition security in their county. Their short- and intermediate-term goals are to assess healthy food sources available in the community, increase access to healthy food, and raise awareness of the problem among policymakers. One planned activity is contacting county government about using a municipal park as a location for a farmers' market. Another planned activity is researching potential vendors to participate in the farmers' market. The Learning to Action Log helps the team describe what happens from those activities, what they learned from it, and how to do better in the future.

The Log has four columns:

Column 1. Short- or intermediate-term goal. This is meant to describe a desired change that contributes to the larger impact that you are trying to make. The larger impact is the reason your SDOH team exists. Most SDOH teams will be pursuing multiple short- and intermediate-term goals at the same time in pursuit of that larger impact.

Column 2. Planned activities. These are the specific, immediate steps you plan to take to make progress towards your short- and intermediate-term goals. Most short- and intermediate-term goals require multiple planned activities to achieve them.

¹ "Team" refers to any person, partnership, coalition, or other group of people working to improve SDOH. The Log can be used by any individual or group, within or across organizations.

Column 3. What happened? Here you describe what happened when you executed your planned activity, your results, and how these results differed from your plan.

Column 4. Action-oriented learnings. This is the most important column in the Log. However, it is often hard to identify the most important learnings from an experience. One way to do so is to reflect systematically on that experience and ask yourself and your team targeted learning questions. The decision tree in Figure 2 below is intended to help you do just that, so that you can focus your learning energy where it is most valuable. But these questions are just a guide and you should adapt them for your context, using all, some, or none of them as they prove useful or not. You may also have other ways to identify learnings that work for you and your team, or the learnings from specific experiences may be self-evident.

You probably won't fill in all the columns in all cases. For example, you may engage in unplanned activities that emerge unexpectedly, in which case the second column would be blank. In other cases, you may not have a well-articulated short- or intermediate-term goal that you can connect to your activities. Don't let these gaps stop you from reflecting and learning in the final two columns!

There are many examples of completed Log entries in Figure 3.

One final note

Reflecting and learning is *hard*, it takes *time*, and it's a *process*. No organization operates within a perfect culture of learning. At the same time, learning will be limited unless it is prioritized. For some organizations, that may be a 30-minute monthly meeting. For others, it may be a regular 5-minute practice. Some may want to use the Log at the individual level, others at the organizational or partnership levels. We hope the Log will help you do better, one step at a time.

How should I use the Learning to Action Log?

In whatever way serves you and your team best! You should use and adapt it in whatever way helps you learn and grow as an individual, organization, or partnership.

The Learning to Action Log is not a formal project planning or project management tool. There is not enough space in the Log to record your plans in detail, and most teams will probably not want to enter all their planned activities in the Log. The structure of the Log will encourage you to be concise about your goals, plans, record of activities, and learnings. This is by design, so that it is not onerous to use and will spur focus on what really matters.

As such, in most cases, you will not want to record all goals and all planned activities in the Learning to Action Log as you would in a project planning tool, but rather focus on the particular goals that facilitate your learning. It may take some practice to determine what those are, but a good place to start may be with goals and activities that are new for you or your team, are particularly challenging, or where you are feeling more uncertain or unsure about how to achieve your goals.

Figure 1. Learning to Action Log

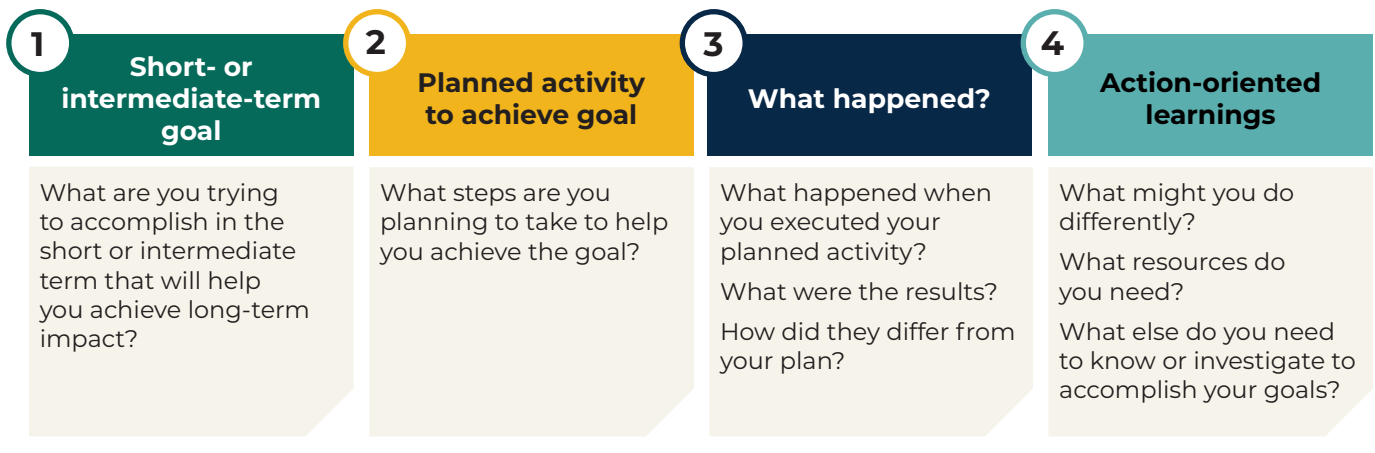


Figure 2. Decision tree to identify targeted learning questions

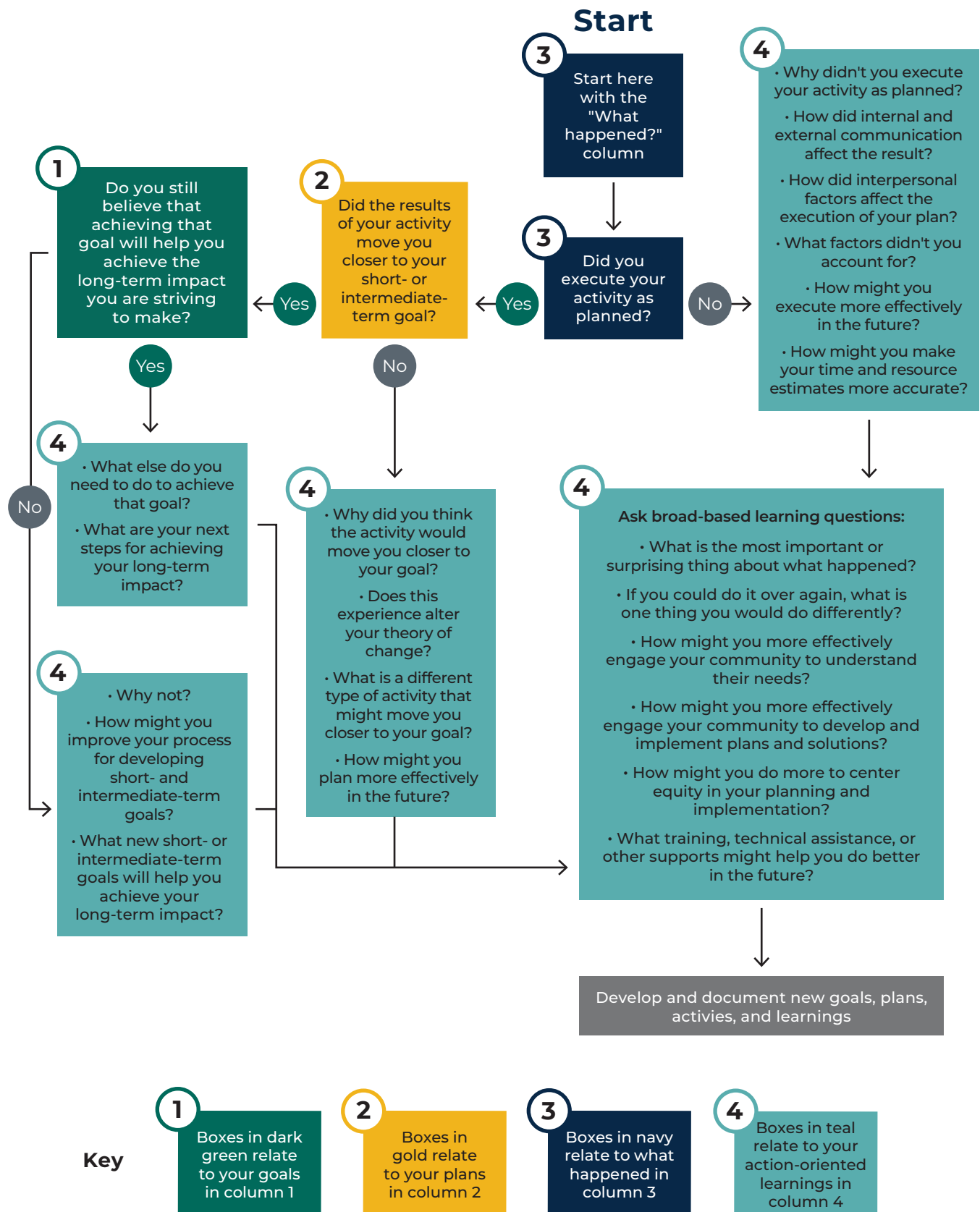


Figure 3. Learning to Action Log examples

1 Short- or intermediate-term goal	2 Planned activity to achieve goal	3 What happened?	4 Action-oriented learnings
<p>What are you trying to accomplish in the short or intermediate term that will help you achieve long-term impact?</p>	<p>What steps are you planning to take to help you achieve the goal?</p>	<p>What happened when you executed your planned activity? What were the results? How did they differ from your plan?</p>	<p>What might you do differently? What resources do you need? What else do you need to know or investigate to accomplish your goals? Reference the decision tree.</p>
<p>Establish governmental partner</p>	<p>Invite Councilperson Smith to join the coalition</p>	<p>Could not get past staff, they kept asking how coalition connected to Councilperson Smith's legislative priorities</p>	<p>Need to do more research before contacting critical stakeholders so that message can be targeted</p>
<p>Create healthy corner markets in urban communities</p>	<p>Educate corner market store owners</p>	<p>Educated them but they explained that no one buys healthy options, so they lose money</p>	<p>Need better understanding of the fruits and vegetables that community members value; assure that WIC farmers market or other financial supports supplement cost; consider to what extent community members advocated for this change and whether their voice needs to be amplified</p>
<p>Develop and use integrated community referral platforms</p>	<p>Purchase and develop protocols for use of platform</p>	<p>Community-based social services organizations do not use the platform</p>	<p>Even though the platform is free for the organization, did not consider the cost of training staff to use it and partners did not see the benefit; need to co-create specific functionalities and resource directory</p>
<p>Develop Active Transportation Report</p>	<p>Work with community members to define the issues</p>	<p>Some voices were louder than others; hard to measure a lot of what community members want measured</p>	<p>Need to consider alternative forms of data collection like Photovoice that shows dangers to bikers; need help facilitating priority setting process</p>
<p>Increase awareness of SDOH among clinic providers</p>	<p>Meet with local AMA group to obtain guidance on messaging strategy</p>	<p>Received a cold call from county health system regarding a potential partnership</p>	<p>Was flustered and not prepared. Need to get better at listening and learning first and putting off a decision until we've had time to contemplate.</p>
<p>Create mobile food fairs</p>	<p>Run mobile food fair pilots in three neighborhoods</p>	<p>Very effective meeting. AMA provided actionable, feasible strategies for outreach.</p>	<p>AMA is an effective partner. Need to implement their communication strategies.</p>
<p></p>	<p></p>	<p>Mobile food fairs were very well-attended, but community showed very little interest in purchasing healthy food on offer.</p>	<p>Mobile food fairs may not be the best way to improve food and nutrition security. Consider other options.</p>

Figure 4. Learning to Action Log template

You can download a clean copy of Figure 4 for use and distribution by clicking [here](#).

1 Short- or intermediate-term goal	2 Planned activity to achieve goal	3 What happened?	4 Action-oriented learnings
<p>What are you trying to accomplish in the short or intermediate term that will help you achieve long-term impact?</p>	<p>What steps are you planning to take to help you achieve the goal? One planned activity per row. Note: You may have more than one planned activity per goal.</p>	<p>What happened when you executed your planned activity? What were the results? How did they differ from your plan?</p>	<p>What might you do differently? What resources do you need? What else do you need to know or investigate to accomplish your goals? Reference the decision tree.</p>

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Let's Progress Together. For questions or comments regarding the Learning to Action Log or to discuss how Mathematica might support your SDOH journey, contact Ben Fischer (BFischer@mathematica-mpr.com) or Jodi Anthony (JAnthony@mathematica-mpr.com).

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