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Developing a Vision for the Community or Organization

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Developing a vision for a community and organization is an integral component of the strategic planning process. This NebGuide defines what a vision is and the role that the vision plays in helping participants work toward future goals. A visioning process for leading a community group also is outlined.

For many communities and organizations involved in a strategic planning process, developing a vision is an integral component that is often avoided or neglected. Yet without that vision and direction, clarity for the future of the community or organization is going to be lost. When direction is lost, hope for the future is less certain.

Therefore, developing a vision is critical for the success of the plans and decisions that a community or organization must make. Without it, future activities will be reduced in their potential to create positive change. This NebGuide provides a framework upon which a vision can be developed. Some of the concepts presented are based on the work of Burt Nanus in his 1992 book "Visionary Leadership".

Why is a Vision Important?

Proverbs 29:18 says: "Where there is no vision, the people perish." Communities and organizations may not perish, but they may not flourish. In a survey of 1,500 senior leaders from 20 countries, 98 percent of them said that the most important behavior trait needed of leaders was a strong "sense of vision" (Nanus, 1992).

When is a Vision Needed?

- When there is confusion about where the community/ organization is heading
- When there is lack of hope and the future looks dim
- When community activities have no meaning and commitment is difficult to obtain
- When the community is "losing ground" and needed changes are resisted
- When there is a decline in pride
- When risks are avoided and people are afraid to take chances
- When there is little trust in the leadership

What is Vision?

Vision means a coherent and powerful statement of what the community or organization can and should be in the future.

It is part emotional and part rational — emotional because it forces the members to dream and have a sense of imagination, and rational because analysis of issues that the organization faces is a necessary component of the vision process.

Vision articulates a view of a realistic, creditable and attractive future for the organization/community and is the foundation upon which to develop strategic plans. It helps community members articulate all of the possibilities that are available, resulting in a distinctive path that no other organization or community is likely to have. If it has an attraction, people will want to get involved. As an example, the community of Hartington, Neb., has developed a vision statement: "Dedicated to a high quality of life, prosperity and growth."

What Vision is Not

Vision is about establishing harmony among the many diverse ideas. It is not about people surrendering their individual dreams. It is not a prophecy for a specific community/ organization, but rather a futuristic design for its progression to accomplish goals and dreams. It is not a static statement, but relies on actions to bring the image of the future to fruition.

Key Elements of Powerful Visions

- Standards/ideals are set high
- The purpose and direction are clarified
- It inspires enthusiasm and encourages commitment
- It reflects uniqueness
- It is ambitious
- It is easily understood and can be remembered
- It is appropriate for the community and the times
- It provides the basis for a strategic plan
- It motivates individuals and facilitates the recruitment of talent
- It helps keep decision making in perspective
- It provides focus on what is important to the community
- It promotes change

The Development of a Vision

The community/organization must ask itself key questions when beginning the development of its vision. These questions should include:

- If you could invent the future, what future would you invent for yourself and this community?
- What mission in life absolutely obsesses you to want to take action?

- What is your dream for this community?
- What does your ideal community look like?
- What community activity do you find absorbing, involving, enthralling?

The process of developing a vision takes an organized group effort. During the visioning process, several important aspects should be addressed:

1) Analyze the current resources and capabilities of the community/organization. What do you have that is a foundation for the future?
2) Speculate on the future environment. What may happen that will affect the future?
3) Define the boundaries of the vision. For whom is the vision intended?
4) Know what the vision is to accomplish.
5) Know the critical issues the vision must address.
6) Identify strategic objectives and goals that may impact the vision.
7) Anticipate creative ways of dealing with future opportunities, threats, strengths and weaknesses.
8) Check to see if the vision is grounded in reality. Will it be believable by the majority?

There are many ways a group visioning session could be conducted. It can be very elaborate and lengthy or simple and concise, depending upon constraints. Quite often it starts with individuals responding to a critical vision question. A sample vision question is listed below:

"It is the year_____ (20-25 years in the future). You are a part of a group that has successfully created the ideal and desired _____ (name of community or organization). Describe it. This is not a description of the methods that were used but rather a description of what the community/organization has become."

After individual responses are completed, usually within five minutes, groups of six to eight people should be formed. The small groups compile individual lists, typically on flip-chart paper, making sure everyone's input is included. Ultimately the group lists are posted, shared and compiled again in an effort to generate overall common vision themes. Completion of the vision statement often happens when two or three individuals volunteer to develop the predominate themes into a coherent vision statement for the larger group. Sometimes this can be completed quickly with the group's help or done during a break in the session. Using this sequence of events, the visioning process may take approximately 60-90 minutes.

It is imperative at the conclusion of the visioning process that the members of the community/organization evaluate the aspirations that they have set. Questions that may contribute to this evaluation may include:

- Does the vision give us hope for the future? Or is it fantasy?
- How do we make use of our vision?
- Can we connect our vision with our daily tasks of decision making?
- What individuals understand the vision? Why some, but not others?
- How is the vision related to renewal or innovation?
- Is this vision our bottom line?
- Can this vision unite, inspire and give purpose?
- How does this vision relate to our potential?

Putting the Vision into Practice

While the responsibility of implementing the details of the vision rests on all the members of the community, the formal or official leader plays a significant role. Leaders must talk about the vision frequently — this is not something to frame and place on the wall! The leadership must become coaches for the vision, building support and helping others to understand why various components were built into it (see NebGuide: Using Coaching in Extension). When the vision is established, the leadership must coordinate the mission, strategies and resources to achieve the goals that the vision has developed. Communication of the vision by the leadership is crucial. It needs to be stated frequently. Questions need to be asked during decision making time, "How do the decisions we are planning fit with our vision for the community?" The ultimate goal is a shared purpose by the entire community/organization.

Why Go to All of This Work?

Visioning is not an easy process and not everyone gets motivated by planning. It takes time and requires intense thought by all community members. The end result, though, portrays an image of the future and sets a standard of excellence and an ideal for the organization. Martin Luther King Jr. was a master of the visioning process as he tapped the emotions of the people. He believed that individuals needed to tie their collective vision to a better tomorrow. Communities and organizations will prosper or die as result of the ability to create, embody and communicate a vision.

Vision Resources

1. Collins, James C. and Porras, J (1997). **Built to last, successful habits of visionary companies.** Harper Collins Publishers.
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4. Trudeau, D. and Wheeler, D. (2005). **Using Coaching in Extension**. NebGuide, Extension, Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources, University of Nebraska, Lincoln.
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6. Leuci, M., Wade, J., Hackman, D., McCall, J. and Littrell D. (1997). **Community futures.** Community Development Academy #1. University of Missouri, Columbia.