

# Unit IV:

## Community/Public Policy Leadership Skills

### 4. Active Leadership

Why are some groups—committees, organizations, or communities—able to plan and complete one project after another? Others seem to get little accomplished except for doing a lot of complaining and bickering. Why are outsiders sometimes able to quickly help a group identify problems and suggest solutions that have perplexed local people for years? On the other hand, why do outside experts sometimes suggest solutions or goals that community members are unwilling to support?

Part of the answer lies in having a vision that is supported by everyone involved. Another part of the answer lies in knowing how to organize and what steps to follow. Still another part is the ability to communicate with legislators and local decision makers.

Active leadership means being able to manage what is under the group's or community's control, as well as influencing things that are outside local control. It includes being able to bring a group or groups together around a common goal or vision toward which the group works. There are many different models and processes for developing a common vision, planning, and action. Most include development of a vision and goals, an assessment of the existing situation, identification of strengths and weaknesses, formulation of an action plan, and, finally, implementation and evaluation of the plan. Involvement of all citizens or members in the process is a key factor in success. Enough resources must be obtained or created to make change possible.

Active leadership also means being able to make your voice heard in policy decision making that affects you. Good leaders know how (and when) to participate in policy discussions and how to make their concerns known to local leaders and government officials.

## Strategic Planning

Strategic planning provides a systematic approach to planning for future development and allocating needed resources for anticipated changes based on the possible future events and trends. Implementation strategies link to plans with resources and action.

The crux of strategic planning is “anticipated” change. The organization plans for the future by envisioning what the future will be like (Darling and Bittel 1991; Kolzow 1988). The questions asked are “How will the future be different?” and “What decisions can we make now based on this perception of the future?” How the group can move toward their desired vision for the future should also be considered.

Strategic planning should be viewed as a tool to help community-based organizations use their human and financial resources effectively. A well-thought-out strategic plan that is developed with input from internal and external stakeholders will help an organization identify and prioritize important goals, increase members’ involvement in the organization, and increase financial resources that are needed to attain the goals.

## Why Use Strategic Planning?

Strategic planning is for small groups, organizations, and communities as a whole.

The central focus of strategic planning is on dealing with change that affects these people or groups.

Implementation, as well as visioning and goal setting, are important components of strategic planning. Both the product (the actual plan) and the process of development have important benefits. Effective strategic planning encourages consensus building. The process enables people to work together more effectively for a common purpose.

A good plan attracts people and resources and identifies short-range and long-range goals that can be monitored for success. Communication among stakeholders is also made easier. Strategic planning helps people look at the big picture, rather than just parts or one issue in isolation, and consider how the parts fit or relate to the whole. The focus is on critical issues and actions, rather than overwhelming details.

Learning and experiencing a process that focuses on a holistic rather than fragmented approach helps build synergy and makes good use of resources. People are motivated when they determine where they want to go and develop the methods to get there.

## Benefits of Strategic Planning (Kelsey, Kowalski, Shuffstall, and Whitmer 2003)

- Defining a shared vision
- Learning about community, industry, and society trends
- Prioritizing critical issues
- Developing synergies between strategies so that all of the organization's efforts work together
- Enhancing accountability
- Helping to overcome crisis management
- Increasing motivation, commitment, and teamwork
- Hearing from key stakeholders
- Identifying organizational strengths and weaknesses
- Encouraging strategic thinking
- Adapting more effectively to changing circumstances
- Providing focus for people's energies
- Use in developing a solid fundraising plan
- Developing shared criteria for evaluating achievement

While the benefits of an effective strategic planning effort far outweigh the drawbacks, we should also recognize that some very real challenges exist as well.

## Challenges of Strategic Planning (Kelsey, Kowalski, Shuffstall, and Whitmer 2003)

- Resources such as commitment, time, and money are needed
- Individuals are less likely to be able to exclusively forward their personal agendas
- May expose some organizational weaknesses or conflicts
- Requires discipline on the part of many people over a long period of time
- Can be threatening—may call into question long-favored goals, strategies, and programs
- May require discussion of controversial issues that some may prefer to avoid

## What Type of Structure and Process Are Needed?

Strategic planning deals not only with the long term, but also the short term as well as the intermediate planning period. Thus, those involved should be working toward goals that address important issues for the next one to six months as well as issues that will take longer to resolve (Kolzow 1988; Woods and Sloggett 1988).

The process of strategic planning is inclusive rather than exclusive, and all interested citizens should be encouraged to participate. However, identifying people who have a large stake in the community and personally inviting them or their representatives to participate in the process is important. If these stakeholders are excluded, the strategic planning process will be weakened.

Having an outside facilitator (someone not directly involved with the community or organization) who understands the planning process is extremely helpful. This assists the group in keeping their focus, lets everyone express their opinions fully, and avoids bias.

Strategic planning has benefits whether an organization or collaborative group is newly formed, has been in existence for several years, has no plan in place, or is in need of reviewing and refining an existing plan. A variety of different models are available. Two examples available in Pennsylvania are described on the following pages.

## Strategic Planning for within Groups: *Choosing Our Direction*

*Choosing Our Direction* is a flexible strategic planning program designed to meet the decision-making needs of a wide range of nonprofit organizations, special interest groups, service agencies, and other local organizations. It is intended to help strengthen groups and organizations by providing a structured method of assessing their organizational structure; forces affecting their future; and strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. The program then helps groups use this assessment to develop goals, objectives, and implementation plans to achieve these goals. The *Choosing Our Direction* program is facilitated at the local level by trained facilitators (typically Penn State Cooperative Extension staff).

The *Choosing Our Direction* program uses a variety of exercises, discussion, brainstorming, and other processes that can be adapted for specific groups or foci. It includes four workbooks. Additional information is available through Penn State Cooperative Extension county offices, or through the *Choosing Our Direction* Web site at <http://visioning.aers.psu.edu/>.

## Strategic Planning for a Community: *Charting the Future of Our Community*

*Charting the Future of Our Community* is a strategic visioning process designed to help communities plan for and control their futures. It uses the broad diversity of viewpoints in a community to discover a common vision for the future and develop a plan of action to achieve that vision. The process can be used to develop a broad vision or to address specific issues (such as early childhood development and education). The *Charting* program is facilitated at the local level by trained facilitators (typically Penn State Cooperative Extension staff) and involves 25 to 50 participants in a series of four three-hour meetings.

For a community strategic planning process to be effective in developing, implementing, and sustaining a vision, it is essential that participants reflect the wide range of and often conflicting perspectives in the community. If some groups or perspectives are excluded from the process, they may not support the plan and may actively work to block or impede implementation. A better idea is to engage all groups at the outset of the strategic planning process so that conflicting perspectives can be dealt with constructively early on so more ideas can be considered in the process that truly reflect the plan of the broad community.

The *Charting* program relies heavily upon small-group discussion and nominal group process. It includes a series of four workbooks. For more information, contact the Penn State Cooperative Extension office in your county or visit the Penn State Cooperative Extension *Charting* Web site at <http://visioning.aers.psu.edu/>.

## Influencing Public Decisions

Citizens with skills and interests in the policy-making process will find themselves much needed in the coming years. Pressing social and economic conditions and conflicting ideas about what to do about many problems lead to growing demands for creative leadership. This makes it worthwhile to learn about ways to become involved in the policy-making process.

Communities need people who can:

- Define public problems and issues in a precise way.
- Obtain unbiased facts about issues and their impacts on people of different backgrounds.
- Come to agreement in conflict situations.
- Think through solutions to public problems that are in the majority interest but also protect the rights of the minority.

Citizens have a responsibility to make choices about how to solve problems—the government alone cannot solve them all. Citizens' views often differ from those of officeholders. Deliberation may reveal new possibilities for action that neither citizens nor officeholders previously saw.

Advocacy, in contrast to education, means personally working for a particular solution to a public problem. An advocate proposes and/or supports one position, action, or group in a policy debate. A person's advocacy position is based on emotions or personal values as well as facts.

## Public Deliberation

Democracy requires an ongoing deliberative dialogue about challenging public policy issues. Public deliberation occurs when people gather to talk about a community problem that is important to them. Participants deliberate with one another to explore options, weigh other views, and to consider the costs and consequences of public policy decisions. Public meetings or forums where people can both advance their own opinions and listen to those of others is a foundation for finding common ground (Barrows 1993; Stevens and Vance 1995).

Public deliberations enrich participants' thinking about public issues. The process helps people to see issues from different points of view. At their best, forums help participants move toward shared, stable, well-informed public judgments based on what is valuable to them about important issues. Through deliberation, participants move from making individual choices to making choices as a public. Deliberation involves discussion and an exchange of ideas, whereas debate occurs after opinions have polarized.

Often citizens are seen as clients or customers of government. However, public forums operate on the premise that citizens must take responsibility for and act on their problems. Citizens cannot act together until they decide together. Public deliberation is a precondition for public action. Forums result in defining the area between agreement and disagreement, called common ground for action. This provides a general direction in which to move.

## Citizen Participation

Individuals and groups are motivated to participate in community activities in response to some interest with which they identify. They may hope to protect a private or public resource, advance an agenda, or balance or block the influence of another group. Based on differences in roles, technical expertise, and willingness and ability to commit time and energy to a process, individuals will participate at very different levels. People tend to move from apathy to concern or active involvement when an issue directly affects them. One way to picture this is the pyramid or triangle model illustrated here (Erickson 1996).



Participation in consensus-building and collaborative decision-making processes should be thought of as dialogue between interested parties. Effective communication involves sharing and dialogue, getting information out to other citizens and interest groups, and collecting their ideas, issues, and concerns. Citizen leadership includes formulating one's own choice, sharing this opinion with others, and listening to the views of others. This often results in some modification of the original choice.

## Participation Techniques

There are many ways to involve interested parties in a consensus-building process. Several common techniques to involve citizens in a process and solicit feedback are listed here. Many other methods, or combinations of methods, can be tailored to the needs of a specific community or situation.

- **Public Meetings and Workshops:** Public meetings—whether town meetings, public hearings or workshops—are the most widely used public participation techniques.
- **Public Hearings:** Public hearings are usually formal meetings at which people present official statements of positions and assertions of fact. Such meetings do a good job of meeting legal requirements for the preparation of a formal record, but they are not well suited to bringing people together to solve difficult problems.
- **Problem-Solving Workshops:** Problem-solving workshops may include problem identification, goal determination, brainstorming, and priority setting as methods of building group consensus about an issue.
- **Electronic Town Meetings:** An increasing number of communities broadcast important meetings, such as city council meetings, over local television channels. Several have experimented with more participatory uses of television.
- **Focus Groups:** Focus groups have been used by market research experts for decades. They help to assess consumer reaction to particular products, services, or messages. More recently, this technique has been used to gain an

understanding of public opinion. In a focus group, a small number of people are brought together in a confidential setting to discuss an issue with the assistance of a skilled facilitator.

- **Interviews:**

People will often provide more information through conversation than in public forums. For this reason, interviews offer a good way to gather detailed information on specific issues. Interviews can be used as a quick way to learn how citizens view a particular problem or how they might be engaged in a public-involvement process.

## **Locating the Decision Makers**

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A variety of choices are available to citizens who want to participate in the decision-making process in their communities. Entering into the political arena is often accidental for many—they become involved because they are interested in a particular issue. Lacking experience, they succeed in a trial-and-error fashion.

Finding your way through the courthouse or city hall and locating the appropriate official or agency can be a challenge. By finding out “why you go where” in local government, contrasting the different levels, and determining what can be reasonably expected from each level, the system becomes more understandable. Understanding which level of government (county, municipal, school district) has responsibility for the issue is vital; many county commissioners in Pennsylvania, for example, say they get blamed for school taxes even though county governments have absolutely no control over or responsibility for local schools.

## **Express Your Opinion**

Letting government officials know your side of the story and how the proposed issue (action) affects you is important. Government officials cannot read your mind, nor can they listen in on your conversations with your family, friends, or neighbors—you must tell them. Do not think your message is unimportant and would impose on your representative. When making up their mind on an issue, government officials do consider information and opinions given to them by their constituents. Most appreciated are informative letters requesting action on a specific subject of real concern.

### **Personal Contact**

A common difficulty encountered by people just beginning to get involved is not knowing where to go within the governmental institutions. Take time to get acquainted. Ask questions and try to find out who the decision makers really are. In most policy-making processes, much of the work is done by staff, committees, and interested citizens before the decision comes up for a public vote. This is often the time when your opinion has the most impact.

Talk to many people as you explore the different parts of your government. In your own community, find the locations where informal discussion leads to important decisions, which is often in a restaurant or other place where community leaders tend to gather. Attend meetings of the city council, county commissioners, chamber of commerce, and boards and committees. Introduce yourself—don't just sit in the back row.

Making an appointment prior to the meeting is usually more convenient for everyone. When you call, identify yourself and the issue or topic you wish to discuss. You can ask to see either your official or one of his or

her top staff members. You might also schedule an appointment just to get acquainted—to tell your official that your organization is expanding its work on public citizenship or public issues or to indicate your interest in a particular problem or opportunity. Getting to know your representatives before you ask for something is a valuable strategy.

If you are visiting about a specific issue, you should plan to provide the official with a brief summary of your views.

Also important is understanding that citizens have a right to attend public meetings of their local elected officials and that public comment is allowed during parts of the meeting. This is a very useful way of making your voice heard. In general, few people attend their borough council or township supervisors' meeting except when there is a hot issue. Being present during the discussions before an issue hits the newspaper is often more effective than responding later once the decision has been made.

## Writing Letters

- Typed or legibly handwritten letters are acceptable.
- Provide your address and sign your name legibly.
- Use your own stationery (not company stationery and postage).

### Guidelines for Letter Content

1. Write on only one subject at a time.
2. First put your thoughts in draft form. Then, delete the nonessentials and organize the letter into a brief, clear message. If possible, the letter should be limited to one typewritten page.
3. Explain briefly who you are and why you are concerned. If you are writing for a group, give its name and membership (numbers are important).
4. Explain briefly what action you think should be taken and why.
5. If you are writing to several public officials on the same subject, do not send identical or photocopied letters. Individualize each, and use your own words.
6. If you are writing to a governmental official about a particular bill, identify it by number and name or content.
7. If you are writing about technical information, indicate your technical competence to do so.
8. Be courteous at all times, and personal when appropriate. Never threaten, either directly or by implication.
9. Consider proper timing. Write shortly before or when the particular subject (issue) is being discussed by the decision-making body.

10. Close with a statement of thanks and an expression of continued interest in future action.
11. Don't limit your letter to support or opposition to a particular action. Send a note of appreciation to members of the decision-making body when they have taken action of which you approve. They, too, like praise.

## Telephone Calls

A phone call to your governmental official can communicate as well as a letter. If there is a time deadline, a call can be even more effective.

Use the same guidelines for telephone communication that you would when writing a letter. Above all, be organized, well-informed on the subject, brief, and courteous.

Faxes and e-mails should also follow similar guidelines. Communication methods can be fast and effective. In general, brevity and clarity are even more important through these media.

A follow-up letter of thanks is appropriate and welcomed by governmental officials. In this letter, summarize the conversation (thus documenting the information) and thank the official for his or her time and interest.

## E-mail

E-mail can be a very effective method of contacting legislators. It has the speed of a telephone call, but, like a letter, leaves a lasting impression in your own words. Some congressional staffers have suggested that e-mail is more effective than telephone calls. Many of the suggestions about writing letters apply to sending e-mails.

One difficulty with e-mail, however, is that it isn't clear from the message whether the sender is a resident of the legislator's district; unlike with mail, the postmark doesn't give the town

from where it was sent. Legislators generally screen e-mail to weed out blanket e-mails sent to all legislators so they can focus on the messages from their own district. For this reason, it is important very early in your e-mail to identify yourself as someone from their district.

## Working through Groups

Public decisions are usually most effectively influenced by the actions of groups, although one person can be highly persuasive when acting alone to initiate action. As with other groups, teams, or organizations, attention to the stages of group development and goal setting are critical. When citizens work together as individuals and as groups, their power is multiplied. Synergy increases their effectiveness and expands the resource base.

## Types of Groups

Many ways are available to define community groups that engage in problem-solving and policy-influencing behavior (Clark 1992).

Some commonly used definitions are:

- **Alliance:** Individuals or organizations working together in a common effort for a common purpose to make more effective and efficient use of resources; a coalition.
- **Coalition:** Individuals or organizations working together in a common effort for a common purpose to make more effective and efficient use of resources; an alliance.
- **Collaboration:** The process of individuals or organizations sharing resources and responsibilities jointly to plan, implement, and evaluate programs to achieve common goals.
- **Cooperation:** Individuals or organizations associating to accomplish a common goal.

- **Coordination:** Individuals or organizations working together to accomplish a common goal.
- **Network:** Individuals or organizations who share information, ideas, resources, or goals to accomplish individual or group goals.
- **Partner:** An individual or organization working with others to accomplish a common goal with a shared sense of purpose and responsibility for the outcome.
- **Partnership:** Individuals or organizations working together in a side-by-side effort to accomplish a common goal with a shared sense of purpose and responsibility for the outcome.

## Cultivate Your Allies

There is hardly an issue that does not attract or repel a number of groups for widely different reasons. Your chances of succeeding in a lobbying campaign will be enormously enhanced if you join with other groups who share your aims. Allies don't just happen, they must be sought out and cultivated. In the nation's capital you are likely to find them in the most unlikely places—even among groups that have traditionally opposed you. In seeking allies, keep your eye on the ultimate objective of the lobbying campaign, not the positions of personalities of your allies. Few political objectives worth achieving can be gained without allies of some sort.

Merely gaining allies, however, is not enough. You must be sure they do their part. Specifically, make sure your friends keep their promises and abide by the same standards of credibility and integrity you set for yourself. In writing, announce specific goals and projects each group will be expected to perform. Make sure you keep your part of the deal and they keep theirs.

Two types of groups can be particularly useful for influencing public policy. These include networks and coalitions. Each will be described more fully in the following section.

## Networks

The ability to create and use networks is an important strategy for sharing ideas and gaining support. In the simplest terms, a network is a collection of people you know you can count on for some kind of help and whom you may be able to help.

Networks are informal and functional. They can help everyone by exchanging information, skills, and resources. Sometimes informal networks develop into more structured coalitions or other groups. The ability to create and use networks is an important strategy for personal success—on the job, in professional organizations, in volunteer work, and for political action. Networking helps us gain information, ideas, resources, and influence in order to accomplish goals.

When your group is planning to work on a community project or study an issue, taking time during a meeting to develop a network list is wise. Share ideas about individuals and other groups who might have some interest in linking with your group for information, resource sharing, or strategies to achieve a common goal. Also, make a list of members from your organization who could provide information, services, or access to other groups. You can make this information available to staff people, officials, or other policy makers or potential funders. These people often need information on issues and projects. Let these people know that you have referred others to them. Don't hesitate to list yourselves—  
informed citizens or consumers often are hard for decision makers to locate.

## Coalitions

Coalitions are alliances, usually between organized groups and individuals. They can be informal or formal. To develop a coalition, members of one group contact and join with other organizations that also support this goal. Coalitions can be very effective because they increase the number of people involved, bringing more power to your cause. Coalitions can sometimes be in name only, but they are far more effective if people and other resources of the organizations are committed to the cause. Coalitions are often formed to deal with one issue only, and they disband when the issue has been solved (Clark 1992).

### Steps to Organizing a Coalition

1. Consider all possible groups that might join a coalition. Recruit groups by soliciting them from members or by looking up social service agencies, chambers of commerce, and local social service directories in the yellow pages.
2. Classify by type of organization. Is it a service, special interest, social, or religious organization? Is one group predominant? If so, then that could provide a clue as to the makeup of the community.
3. Do some homework on each group. What does this organization do? Has it been involved in solving community problems before? Has it supported issues similar to yours? By gathering information on a group, you will learn its views, who its members are, how much power it has, and who controls it.
4. Evaluate which organizations you think would or would not support your issue. Knowing your opponents is important, and understanding how and what your opponents think (and why they think the way they do) can be invaluable to your cause.

5. Approach the groups. When you approach an organization to join your coalition, define the issue in a way that will appeal to their interest and benefit, as well as your own.

Only ask organizations to join your coalition if the organization will contribute more than it demands, and if that organization will not create problems that will weaken your organization or cause a split on the issue.

## Summary

Leaders make valuable contributions by helping people learn the methods to express their preferences most effectively. Special communication techniques, such as testifying, interviewing, or lobbying; planning and conducting public meetings; building networks, teams, and coalitions; and developing relationships with decision makers are skills that can be acquired. The educator leader also enlists the aid of those with technical knowledge to provide and interpret information and distinguish facts from myths.

As active citizens, people use a variety of techniques to clarify their opinions, consider the viewpoints of others, and convey these ideas to the relevant policy makers. The decision to become an advocate is an important one with several implications, as each person's advocacy stance incorporates personal values. Even in the same organization or profession, values are seldom held by everyone.

There are several effective strategies for influencing policy decisions, but it's most important that your voice and that of your organization are heard. Democracy requires an ongoing deliberative dialogue about challenging public policy. Public involvement by personal contact, lobbying, testifying, networking, and coalitions can all make a difference in the decisions affecting your community.

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1. *Setting Our Course: Charting the Future of Our Community Workbook 1*
2. *Where We Are: Charting the Future of Our Community Workbook 2*
3. *Where Do We Want to Be?: Charting the Future of Our Community Workbook 3*

4. *Making the Trip: Charting the Future of Our Community Workbook 4*

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*Setting the Stage: A Primer on Strategic Planning*

1. *What Do We Do Now?: Choosing Our Direction Workbook 1*
2. *What Shapes Our Future?: Choosing Our Direction Workbook 2*
3. *What Are We Going to Do?: Choosing Our Direction Workbook 3*
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One of the most critical needs in Pennsylvania is strong local leadership for the future well-being of communities. This includes leadership for civic and nonprofit organizations, youth, the business community, elected officials, and citizens.

The *Learning Today, Leading Tomorrow* leadership curriculum was developed to help individuals develop and strengthen their personal leadership skills so they can play active and constructive leadership roles in their communities. The program focuses on developing and strengthening personal and interpersonal leadership skills, group and organizational leadership skills, and community leadership skills.

The curriculum is designed for use as a comprehensive, multiple-session leadership training program, taught by trained Penn State Cooperative Extension educators. Individual modules can also be used for stand-alone training within existing groups or organizations who want training on specific leadership or group process issues.

The entire *Learning Today, Leading Tomorrow* curriculum includes:

**Unit I: Personal Leadership Skills**

- 1: The Leader within You
- 2: Values and Ethics
- 3: Understanding Your Leadership Style

**Unit II: Interpersonal Leadership Skills**

- 1: Communications Basics
- 2: Facilitation
- 3: Managing Conflict

**Unit III: Group/Organizational Leadership Skills**

- 1: Productive Groups
- 2: Effective Meetings
- 3: Group Decisions

**Unit IV: Community/Public Policy Leadership Skills**

- 1: Dealing with Change
- 2: Public Issues
- 3: Understanding Pennsylvania Local Government
- 4: Active Leadership

For more information about the *Learning Today, Leading Tomorrow* program, contact your local Penn State Cooperative Extension office, or visit [www.leadership.psu.edu](http://www.leadership.psu.edu).

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