A major role of community leaders is to set priorities and guide others in identifying the most important needs in a community. This is typically done in a process called strategic planning. Strategic planning is used to determine the mission, values and goals of community organizations. A strategic plan also describes the objectives required to meet the goals, the roles and responsibilities of the people involved, and the timelines for accomplishing goals. Quite simply, strategic planning is a management tool.

**Inside-Out Planning vs. Outside-In Planning**

Inside-out planning and outside-in planning are important concepts in connecting strategic planning to internal and external accountability measures (Kaufman and Herman, 1991). Accountability measures are prevalent in county governments, school districts and local businesses such as banks, insurance companies, etc.

**Inside-out planning** focuses on the organization as the primary client. It allows a group to look from within the organization outside into the operational world. Inside-out planning usually focuses on the mission, goals and purposes of the organization. It studies what’s best for the organization and is typically reactive in nature.

**Example:** In Texas Cooperative Extension, a group of employees might evaluate the current situation, discuss priorities, and make recommendations to the agency as a whole.

**Outside-in planning** focuses on society as the primary client. It looks into the organization from the outside. It typically challenges the status quo and sometimes causes discomfort to current employees because it suggests change. Outside-in planning is usually proactive in nature.

**Example:** An external group would help set priorities for Texas Cooperative Extension. This is what happens during the Texas Community Futures Forum (TCFF) process, when people from outside the agency come together to help identify issues the agency should address and give future direction for the agency.

Integrating both the outside-in and inside-out approaches makes organizations most effective in planning strategically. This works best when the outside-in approach is conducted first because it gives a more global perspective. Then, the planners can use the inside-out approach to ask “what is” vs. “what should be.” An organization can see where the two approaches overlap and use the strengths of both methods to set the most effective strategy.
Techniques for Setting Priorities

Two techniques are often used to help groups determine priorities as a part of the decision-making process. Brainstorming provides the means for groups to generate ideas in a short period of time and encourages creativity as a part of the process. One common process for narrowing the ideas into manageable numbers and allowing groups to seek additional information before final decisions are made is called Nominal Group Technique.

Brainstorming is the foundation for many other techniques and the basis for creative problem-solving. It is a way for groups to generate ideas quickly. In brainstorming, people in the group freely exchange ideas and generate lists in response to an open-ended question. An example of a question that might be used in brainstorming is, “What are some ways we might raise money to support the 4-H awards program?” Participants try to generate as many ideas as possible, often building or piggybacking on each other’s comments or ideas. This is a fast way of getting ideas on the table (or flip chart) in a short period of time.

You should use brainstorming when you want to generate a large number of ideas or gather a lot of information for decision-making, priority setting or planning; when you want all participants to contribute freely; and when you want to inspire creativity.

Guidelines for brainstorming (Osborn, 1963):
1. Clearly frame an open-ended question.
2. Do not censure or make judgments about any ideas.
3. List all ideas generated on a flip chart.
4. Encourage hitchhiking.
5. Focus on quantity.
7. The best comes last.

Nominal group technique. All groups find that many of their responsibilities involve exploring options for the organization and making decisions that provide direction for the group. Generating ideas, understanding each option and the impact it would have, making choices, and setting priorities are group activities that require a skilled leader. The Nominal Group Technique is an effective way to make judgments or decisions in groups that meet face-to-face.

This technique can generate lots of creative, new ideas. It allows members of the group to express their ideas and it minimizes the influence of other participants. You should use nominal group technique when you want to generate lots of ideas, when you want to ensure that all members participate freely without influence from other participants, and when you want to identify priorities or select a few alternatives for further examination.

Guidelines for conducting the nominal group technique (Delbecq, Van de Ven and Gustafson, 1975):
1. Have participants sit at tables.
2. Develop the focus question.
3. Silently brainstorm ideas.
4. Have a round-robin sharing of ideas.
5. Discuss and clarify all ideas on the flip chart.
6. Rank alternatives.
7. Discuss ranked items.
8. Rank items a second time.
9. Discuss the final rankings.
10. Organize the results into a format that can be shared.

Conclusion. To be a leader, you must be able to think futuristically and be an agent of change. Strategic planning is a way for a group to do this in a systematic way. These activities allow clients to be heard and to be involved in the change process. This is an essential element of leadership.

References