



Rural and Economic Development Programs
Social and Economic Education for Development

A Critical Thinking Approach to Developing Effective Goal Statements

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Introduction

Developing effective goal statements for community or organizational action involves two important steps. The first step involves critically evaluating possible goals to assess the factors that may influence the probabilities of success. The second step is to write the designated goals in a way that insures everyone understands who will be doing what to accomplish the desired outcome.

Critical Thinking for Goal Setting

Critical thinking for goal setting begins with participants generating a set of possible goals for action. In some cases, the possible goals may be built on ideas generated in a community visioning process or, they may be generated by a working group. In a round robin fashion, participants should suggest goal statements. After each suggestion, the group should discuss and modify the goal so that the statement is understandable to all and there is a consensus that the goal reflects the community's hopes for the future or responds to current needs or concerns. The working group continues generating goal statements that are sufficiently different yet representative of the concerns and hopes of the group.

The goals should represent community interests, needs or concerns and build on community strengths (i.e., existing knowledge, resources, people, and organizations in the community). The goals should benefit as many members of the community as possible and any costs or burdens should be equitably shared by all segments of the community.

When a list of possible goals has been generated, it is time to analyze each goal. The critical analysis begins with a consideration of the forces pushing or driving the community towards success as well as the forces restraining the movement towards successfully achieving the goal.

Forces in the community that affect the possibility of achieving a goal include such things as: people, resources, attitudes, traditions, values, needs, desires, or opportunities. For example, one idea might be: *The community needs to have a coordinated effort between tourism and historical preservation. Presently these two areas don't seem to work together for common interests.*

Driving Forces:

Several well organized groups already operating in the community.
There are some state and federal grant monies available.
Some grant money has been received in the past.
An abandoned railroad station could be an opportunity for a joint project.

Restraining Forces: The groups involved in these areas have a poor history of working together.
Each group tends to work with a different state agency.
Tourism groups tend to emphasize recreation rather than history.
Historic preservation groups tend to overlook business opportunities.

This critical analysis helps a group take a hard look at potential goals. It involves considering the time and resources required to achieve potential goals, the actions the community might take to build on its strengths or to minimize its limitations, and leads to an assessment of each goal's potential for becoming a reality. As you move through this analysis, it is worth asking some of the following questions.

- Why would the community support this goal?
- Which groups in the community would support this goal? Work against it?
- What resources do we have in the county to make it work (existing groups, money, public support)?
- What resources are available outside the county to make this goal work (state agencies, grants, university support)?
- Who would benefit from achieving this goal? Who would lose? Are there more winners than losers?
- Is there leadership to implement this goal?
- Has this goal succeeded elsewhere? If so, why and how?
- Have we tried this goal before? What happened? What could be changed to lead to success this time?

Some of the answers will reflect positively or negatively on the goal, and will enter into your decision as to how likely it is that the community or organization will succeed or fail in achieving the goal. A goal that has more driving forces than restraining ones may represent an opportunity for successful change. If this is so, further examine how the driving forces may be strengthened or the restraining forces weakened to improve the chances of successfully achieving that goal.

For example: Planned efforts, such as education seminars or a conference, could help coordinate efforts between the tourism and historic preservation groups. The abandoned railroad station could make a good pilot project to bring these interests together. It would be a chance for both sides to work together on a common goal.

Repeat this analysis for all of the goals originally listed. After this discussion, ask people to summarize the general sense of the analyses. For example, given the understanding of the pluses and minuses, do any of the goals need to be modified? Would the modifications add to the strengths of the goals? Are there any goals for which there are so many negatives that there is little likelihood that they can be achieved? If so, can these goals be reformulated to make it more likely that they can be achieved? Or, should they be dropped? The final step in the critical analysis is to rank the goals listed according to their likelihood of success.

Writing Effective Goal Statements

The second task is to take the priority goals and transform them into effective goal statements. An effective goal statement is written as a concrete action that can be taken by individuals or groups within the community, or by the community as a whole, to achieve a purpose or meet an identified need or interest. Hence, an effective goal statement is one that identifies an **action** taken by a specific **actor** to produce a **desired outcome**.

For example: You realize that in your community there are a large number of artisans and craftsmen who handcraft a number of interesting and unique items for sale at flea markets, fairs, and festivals. There is a need in your community for more employment opportunities and there is a strong interest in building on the strengths already within your community to create new jobs and new wealth. A critical thinking process has led you to define the need as follows;

How can we help local artisans and craftsmen work together to increase sales of their products? And, how can this pool of local talent be organized to generate new wealth in our community?

Defining the need in this way points to several goals that people in the community might work on with a reasonable probability of success. Two possible goals are:

GOAL 1: The local Chamber of Commerce should work with the community college to develop a training program for local artisans and craftsmen on "How to develop business plans and define a market niche for arts and crafts."

The Action: Develop a training program for local artisans and craftsmen.

The Actor(s): The local Chamber of Commerce and the community college.

The Outcome: Local artisans and craftsmen will learn how to develop business plans and define a market niche for their products.

GOAL 2: The Chamber of Commerce, downtown merchants, and the county government will sponsor an arts and crafts market that would rent display areas to local artisans and craftsmen.

The Action: A retail space in the downtown area to rent display space to local artisans and craftsmen.

The Actor(s): The Chamber of Commerce, downtown merchants, and county government.

The Outcome: Local artisans and craftsmen have a central place to market their products.

Summary

Successful community planning begins with realistic goal statements that emerge from a critical thinking process. Communities that realistically reflect on their strengths and limitations, identify strategies for building on their strengths and minimizing their limitations, and clearly identify desired outcomes will be effective in mobilizing citizens and local organizations in working together to build a better tomorrow.