

Community-Wide Visioning

Description

This is probably the first tool that a community could use when it begins to address systematically its social and economic future. In fact, visioning is an effort to describe a positive future and the path to that future. Thus, community-wide visioning is both the means to get to the vision and the final result, the vision itself. The vision, however, is not merely a dream; it is also based upon real facts and an analysis of where the community is today. The vision is a positive view of the future, but it recognizes the problems that must be surmounted to get to that future.

Everyone in a community naturally has a stake in the future, so with this tool, everyone must feel that, if not they themselves, then people like themselves are helping to shape that future. “Community-wide” visioning means that all sectors of the community are engaged in the process of assessing the current situation and figuring how to move into a better future. That does not mean that every single individual gets involved, but that everyone will, at least, feel that s/he could have been involved and that her or his general interests and needs have somehow been considered along the way.

Community-wide participation (see also [Building Citizen Participation](#)) is absolutely essential for practical reasons, not just because it is good to get people involved. It is essential because the task involves very complex issues and no one organization or government unit has the jurisdiction or the capacity to accomplish all that is needed for a positive future. It is essential also because so many interests are involved and because the resources to achieve a good future are always very limited and so must be used with broad-based carefulness.

Benefits

A vision of the future provides the community with an overall guide for its approach to resilience. The chosen tools have a greater chance of success because all sectors of the community have helped to portray the vision. Full participation lends credibility to the effort, so that all sectors will be behind it. With a common vision that every group shares, a community can field a team that really has a chance to get all the way to the final goal. However, just achieving a common vision in itself can be exhilarating for a community. In fact, it can be a cause for local celebration, before taking the next steps of more concrete strategic planning and action.

Major challenges

The greatest challenge is to make the visioning process truly a community-wide affair. It is usually difficult to enlist the full range of community sectors, because in the past certain groups have felt left out of important decisions and they wonder whether they truly will have a chance this time to participate substantially. So they hold back. Or there are traditions of rivalry that make a particular group wary of entering a collaborative process with an old rival. Finally, some citizens may have transportation or other challenges that prevent participation.

A long-standing national community improvement association in the U.S. (National Civic League) has found that a successful process of visioning will require, among other conditions:

- strong leadership from all sectors and interests;
- traditional power brokers genuinely seeking peer relationships with all participants;
- trust, understanding, and respect to break down the old economic and ethnic and sectoral barriers;
- and continuing commitment and participation of all sectors despite times of frustration.

All these make a tall order, but the fact is that successful communities achieve those conditions for visioning and planning and implementation.

Some practical steps

1. Create a start-up committee of a few enough people to work practically together but large enough to reflect important community diversities and to be credible.
2. This committee will probably have to work for three months or so just to get a working group in place that will represent all the stakeholders in the community.
3. They need to assemble commitments for membership in a wide-ranging stakeholder working group of perhaps 50 or so people that would include those who vary in key ways:
 - pro-growth/no growth;
 - old/new residents;
 - various income and educational levels;
 - elected leaders/grassroots spokespeople;
 - different geographic locations;
 - different political orientations;
 - different business sizes;
 - and a wide range of representatives from local institutions, like schools, churches, civic groups, etc.

Tools & Techniques

In order to encourage this diverse group of participants to be committed to the common task, as opposed to representing their group viewpoints, it may be useful to recruit people with multiple community interests (a union member who is also a church leader and volunteer tutor, or a business owner who is also a school board member and a Little League coach, etc.).

4. The stakeholder group has to be recognized as having real decision-making authority, not just advising the old guard. That means that they will do more than just make a statement; they will be engaged in follow-up strategizing and action.
5. Of course, the stakeholder group has to give itself and the vision process a recognizable name, and organize itself, with an able chairperson and specialized committees - for example, for overall co-ordination (an executive committee), for outreach, and for fact gathering.
6. A community event might be held to begin the visioning process.
7. Others besides the representative stakeholders group must be reached for brainstorming sessions - or through surveys, focus groups, town meetings, presentations at churches, etc. - to both test out ideas and get new ones. (These "outreach" techniques are particularly important as a means to include the participation of those with transportation, daycare or health barriers.)
8. Finally, a vision statement is produced (perhaps no more than a page or so) of where people see they are and where they want to go. The exact process of getting to this statement will vary from locale to locale, but good tips exist in the publications recommended.

There are always costs to everything, but sometimes they will be hidden and unobtrusively met, by in-kind allocations, for example. However, to avoid any feeling that any particular organization is in charge, it may be useful to set up a real budget. The community itself will probably have to be the source of whatever funds are necessary. This includes the municipalities involved, as well as private and philanthropic sources.

Resource organizations & contacts

- An experienced group is the Imagine Program, part of the Canadian Centre for Philanthropy. It is run by Chris Pinney (tel.: 416-597-2293, ext. 228).
- The National Civic League has a Community Assistance Team (tel.: 303-571-4343).
- Of course, the Enterprise Centre in Revelstoke is a potential resource (250-837-5345).

Publications

- ***Case Study:** “The Birth of the North End Development Corporation.” An example of how visioning contributed to the formation of a community development corporation in a poor urban neighbourhood.
- Derek Okubo, *The Community Visioning and Strategic Planning Handbook* (published by the National Civic League, identified just above).
- Contact the Imagine Program for their own publications. They offer a detailed description of the entire process.
- *The Economic Renewal Guide* (Snowmass, CO: Rocky Mountain Institute, tel. 970-927-3851).