




COMMUNITY TOOL BOX

CONSENSUS

WHAT WE'VE FOUND

It goes without saying that a community's views and ties to a resource can be strong. Introduce a threat to that resource or a proposal for change in its use or boundaries and tempers flare between polarized interest groups. In our work with communities we often encounter individuals who have deeply held and differing values and contradictory assessments of political and economic impacts. In response to this complexity that surrounds most projects, we open the floodgates to try and make sure all points of view are heard. It can be difficult, and it does take time, but the outcome is worth it. People feel ownership of the process, have a stake in the decisions, and are committed to seeing work finished.



Consensus Building:
Bringing people together to express their ideas, clarify areas of agreement and disagreement, and develop shared resolutions.

JUST THE FACTS

Consensus building is a decision-making process that is vital to any community planning effort or other process requiring public participation. With the assistance of an unbiased mediator or facilitator, participants can raise issues, seek to understand each other's views, and then cooperatively, often through compromise, develop an agreed upon resolution such as goals for a resource or actions for land use planning.

Consensus building involves a longer timeframe than most other forms of decision-making. Difficult decisions on significant issues require patience, time and participation. It may be necessary to break down big decisions into "mini-agreements" to help build group trust and lay the foundation for major decisions that can be supported and implemented.

In certain situations, consensus building will not be effective or will fail entirely, such as when the issues involve deep-rooted value differences, very high stakes, or win-lose confrontations. These characteristics occur in many environmental disputes that involve allocation or alteration of scarce resources. In these cases, other decision-making mechanisms may be necessary, such as formal arbitration or mediation.

An important reminder: Consensus building does not mean everyone agrees that a decision is optimal. It means a decision is reached that everyone can live with; in other words, the decision addresses stakeholders' most important issues.



How to Do it

1. Pre-meeting legwork

Prior to beginning the process, it may be necessary to do some research to identify stakeholders and/or to convince different interest groups to participate. Take into account the history these groups may have with each other; they may need compelling reasons and assurances as to the validity of the process and what will happen with the outcomes. Meet with key stakeholders one-on-one to make clear the scope and goals of the consensus building process, the groups' level of decision-making authority, and what they can realistically hope to accomplish. Participants should have a say in the agenda, selecting their representatives, defining the issues, and developing appropriate ground rules. This is one way to build trust into the process, which is critical to a successful outcome. Take this step of meeting separately with key stakeholders even if the meeting is going to be open to the public at large.

2. Set up the meeting

This event can be any size. It can be a large, well-advertised public workshop, a small meeting of a committee or task force, or a special convocation of stakeholders. What is most important is that the group represents diverse interests such as government, business, non-profits, and citizens. There may be one or several meetings depending upon the objectives. The meeting place should be in a "safe" neutral space and held at a convenient time and date that does not conflict most schedules, which means not during a workday or on school or religious holidays. Depending upon the size of the event, invite participants by phoning, mailing invitations, and/or placing notices in newspapers and newsletters.

3. Assign a facilitator

Particularly in high stakes situations, a highly skilled facilitator who is viewed by all interests as fair and competent will greatly improve the chance for success. The facilitator can maintain group momentum and keep discussions on track by guiding for compromise and

common ground in conflicting opinions.

4. Let the process begin!

Follow the agreed upon agenda and post the meeting objectives for all to see. These should be referred back to if participants get off track. The key to reaching a successful consensus is for everyone to have an opportunity to speak and be heard. Be sure to record statements verbatim. Capture thoughts on flip charts, whiteboards or overhead projectors so that everyone can see them and be able to view them as the meeting continues.

5. Follow up

After the meeting, mail meeting notes. This may include a summary of what happened, the actual quotes of participants, any agreed upon decisions, and any requested information and data. If there will be additional meetings, give a large, clear reminder of the date, time, place and objective.

Use It If...

- You want to build a strong public involvement program because the impact of a project or land use decision will be relatively broad.
- You want a forum that will build trust and bridge stakeholder differences by allowing diverse interests to work together, feel free to express their opinions and find mutually acceptable solutions based on common interests.
- You are seeking to build partnerships among stakeholders in order to bring more resources and expertise to develop solutions.
- The community will be ultimately responsible for implementation and ongoing management decisions. Stakeholders are less likely to block implementation if they understand that a plan or policy reflects their input and is crafted to meet their basic interests.

Forget It If...

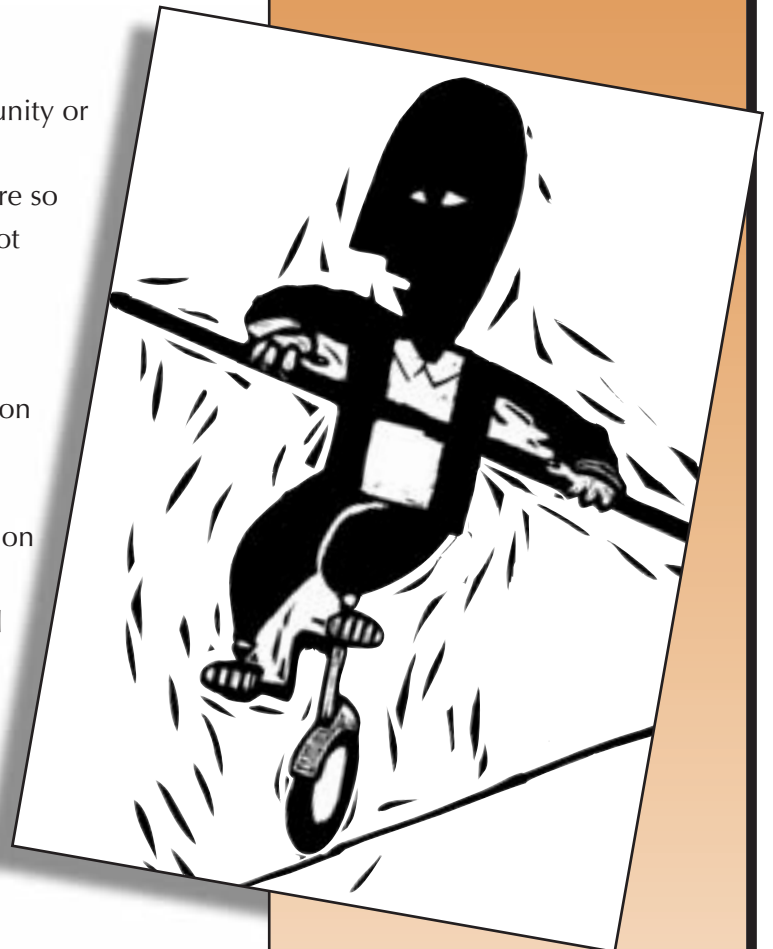
- You need a quick solution because a community or organization faces an emergency situation.
- You find that a community or stakeholders are so polarized that face-to-face discussions are not possible, or likewise, there is overwhelming ambivalence.
- You are using the process only to create the appearance of openness and have no intention of using the outcomes. If this happens, significant sense of distrust can emerge eliminating any chances of reaching a decision that participants can accept.
- A particular issue is best settled in a political or legal forum.

Timing is Everything

Consensus building can be used anytime depending upon a project's issues and goals.



National Park Service
*Rivers, Trails and Conservation
Assistance Program*
1849 C Street, NW
Mail Stop 1010
Washington, DC 20240
www.nps.gov/rtca





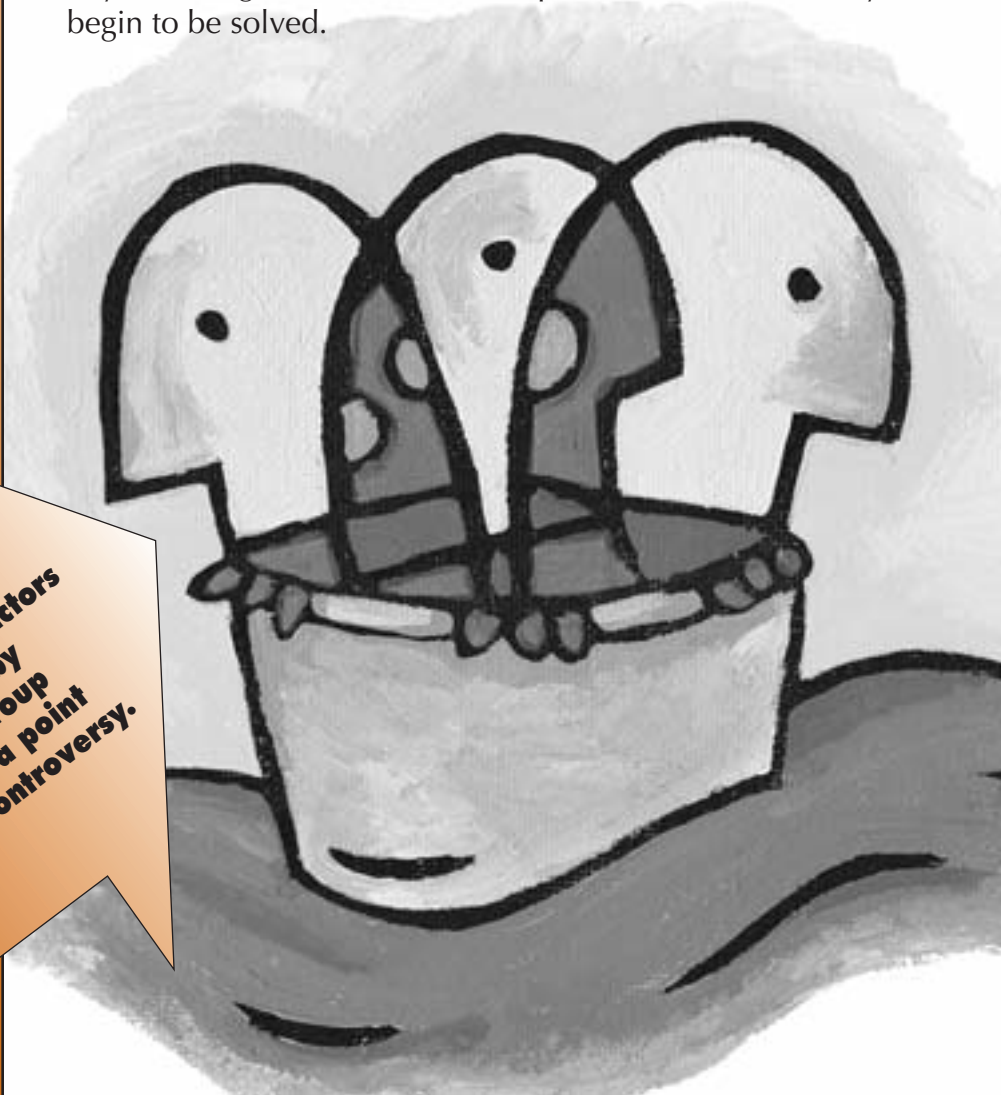
COMMUNITY TOOL BOX

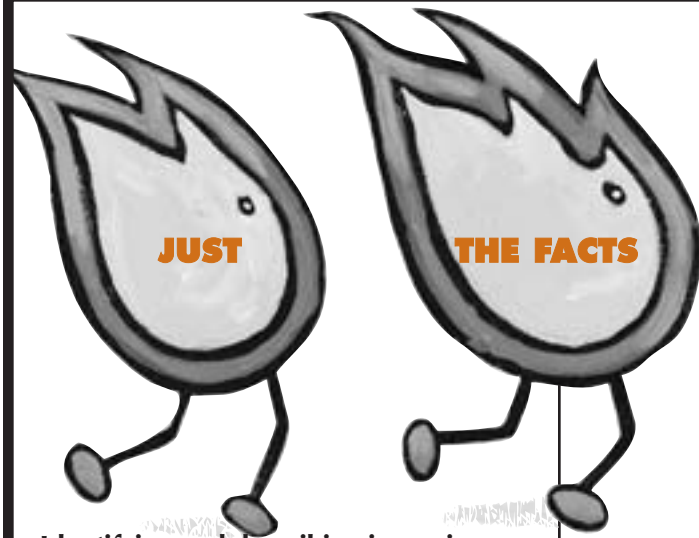
DEFINING ISSUES

WHAT WE'VE FOUND

Successful projects are those that respond to community needs and resolve community-identified problems. As “experts,” we may have the tendency to quickly identify what we think the problems are, but unless we ask, most likely we will miss some or fail to understand which are the most important to a community. You’ve got to know what the problems are before they can begin to be solved.

ISSUES:
Environmental, social,
economic, recreational,
political, and other factors
that are perceived by
a community or group
of people to be a point
of debate or controversy.





Identifying and describing issues is a systematic collection of information about opportunities, threats, and challenges that currently face a resource or most likely will in the future. Issues can be things such as point-source pollution, use and access on private lands, loss of jobs through transfer of development rights, increased dollars from tourism, endangered wildlife habitat, etc.

To comprehensively identify issues requires knowledge of a community and its economy. It also requires bringing together a diverse group of people including landowners, elected officials, special interest groups, recreationists, resource experts, and citizens. The process of defining issues is both an excellent consensus-building activity and an important element of decision-making.

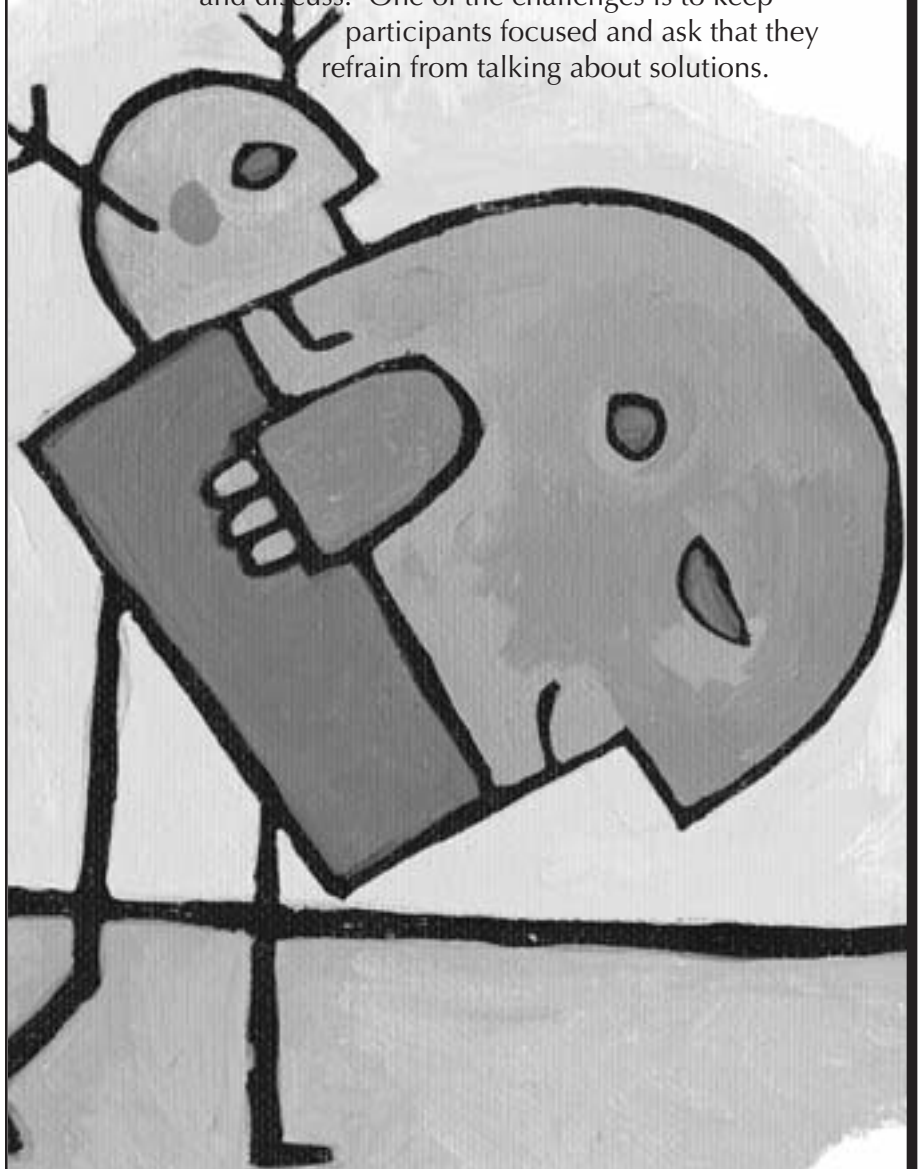
Remember, a group needs to have a clear understanding of their purpose or mission in order to better define what types of problems will or will not be addressed.

HOW TO DO IT

1. Gather the information.

There are many tools and techniques that can be used to help identify issues including group brainstorming, key informant interviews, and newspaper article analysis. Getting on the agenda of pre-established meeting schedules for local governments, civic or community groups is another idea. Surveys and focus groups can be used to elicit targeted information on issues.

If a group brainstorming activity is organized with a facilitator guiding the process, be sure that all of the participants' needs and concerns are recorded exactly as intended and posted for all to read and discuss. One of the challenges is to keep participants focused and ask that they refrain from talking about solutions.



2. Categorize the list

Look at the list of issues and group those that are similar. Be sure to systematically mark or label each issue so that no one's ideas are dropped. Initially, related issues should be grouped together to construct the broadest possible set of concerns, encompassing all points raised by project participants. If an issue does not fit under any particular theme, the group must decide if it is important enough to become its own category. Checking back with the originator to further discuss the concern and making sure he/she agrees with the group decision is important to gaining group buy-in to the process.

3. Capture the category

For each topic heading, now have the group create statements that capture the essence of the issues. Similar issues are combined into one statement. The issues statements should describe current conditions that the group wants to change. For example, "Inadequate historic site protection is leading to the destruction of a number of nationally significant historic structures and landscapes." Depending upon how many categories there are, and the size of the group doing the work, it may be advantageous to break up into smaller teams with each team assigned a category. When the work is done, review the statements together altering words and phrases as needed to that everyone agrees with what is stated and how it is stated.

4. Do further research

Issues must be thoroughly understood if they are to be used to effectively to resolve problems. Examining the causes and effects of a problem, its immediacy, and its major elements are part of this process. Find out who is concerned and how they are involved, the scope of any plans that may affect a project, roots of the problem, what geographic areas or resources may be affected, and the timetable for any actions relating to the problem.

5. Decide which issues to resolve

Now knowing more about each issue, prioritize or rank the issues in the order in which they can be feasibly and realistically addressed. Other groups may best address some issues, some issues may be too controversial or problematic, and some may relate to ongoing, long-term problems that are difficult to resolve. To help make these determinations, consider these three factors: magnitude, attitude and timeframe.

MAGNITUDE: Issues that are perceived to have the greatest impact on the resource or community will garner the most public attention and support for action. Issues such as dams and clear cutting forest lands will have immediately visible impacts on resources, while issues such as non-point sources of pollution and recreation use may appear to be less dramatic issues although they may have a more pervasive impact over time.

ATTITUDE: Attitudes toward the use of resources and concerns about the environment differ. If the public does not readily respond to a problem, an educational effort may be necessary. This approach can build support and a constituency for resolving the issue.

TIMEFRAME: Which issues are imminent or have already had impacts on the resources or community? If surveys or focus groups are used as part of the information gathering process, people can be asked to rank the original list of issues according to which are more important or should be addressed first.

Use It If...

- You want to form a consensus among a number of people about what problems or challenges are facing a community and its resources.
- You plan on building a strong public involvement campaign. Identifying issues launches setting goals and developing action agendas.
- You need to better understand relationships among problems.
- You want the group to focus on its purpose.

Forget It If...

- You need a quick action in response to a clear, single threat.
- You cannot find a broad based constituency to present different views.



National Park Service
Rivers, Trails and Conservation

Assistance Program
1849 C Street, NW
Mail Stop 1010
Washington, DC 20240
www.nps.gov/rtca



Timing is Everything
Define issues in the beginning
stage of a planning process.
Revisit them as the project
progresses to verify validity
and prioritization.



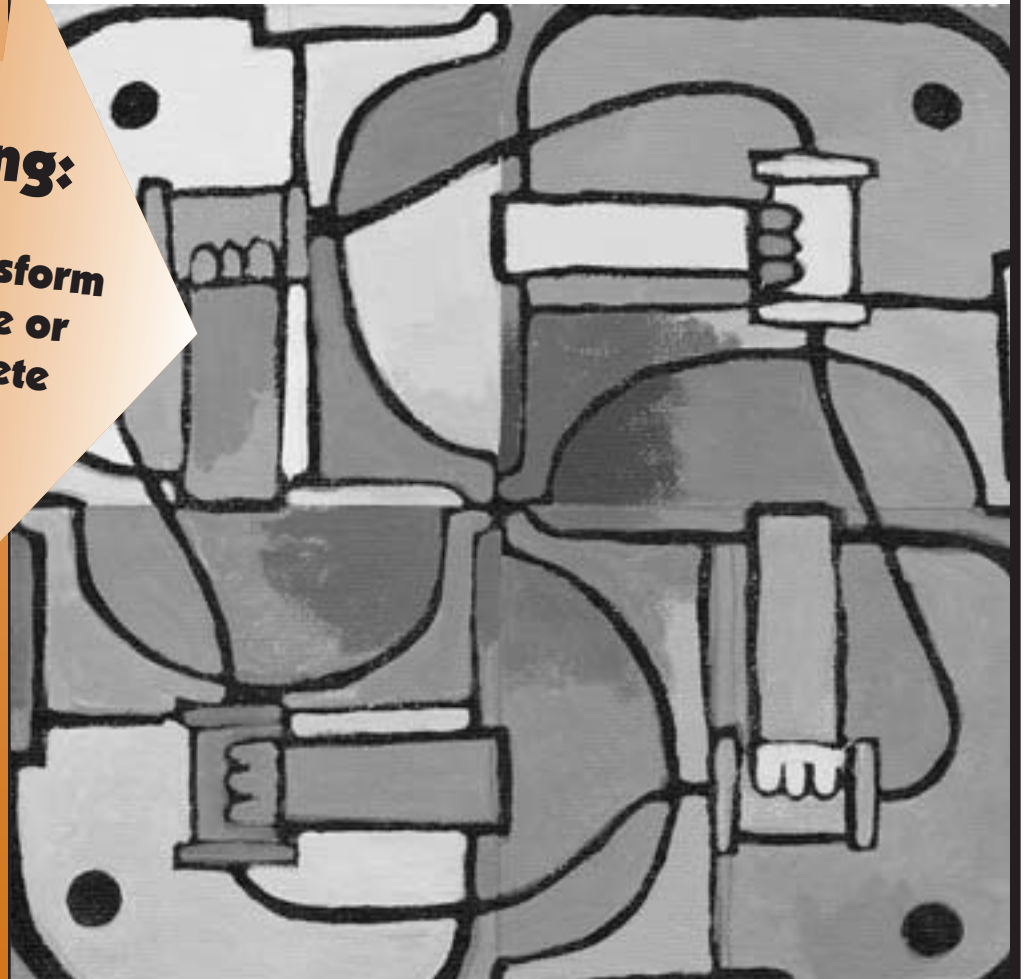
COMMUNITY
TOOL BOX

Goal Setting

What We've Found

Setting goals can be an excellent consensus-building activity. It is energizing to watch a group of people who may start with very different opinions and visions work together and listen to each other to develop one set of goals. These goals set the stage for action, and defining what tasks will be considered and embraced. By sharing together in the decision making process to develop goals that everyone agrees upon, we find this process generates commitment to follow through and get the work done.

Goal Setting:
People working
together to transform
a vision, purpose or
desire into discrete
statements of
direction.



JUST THE FACTS

Goals are brief, positive, written statements about what a group wants to accomplish. Goal statements also serve as means of helping everyone stay on track: How is this action going to help accomplish the goal? Is this work tangential to what everyone agreed to accomplish?

Goals should be based on reality. That means before setting goals, issues such as threats to a resource, concerns about the future or pressures related to use, growth or access all need to be identified. Plus there should be a general understanding of the effected natural, cultural or recreational resources. In short, know what is trying to be accomplished and why it is important to do it.

Goals can be short-term or long-term. They can be revised and updated to reflect changing environments, accomplished actions and broadening efforts.

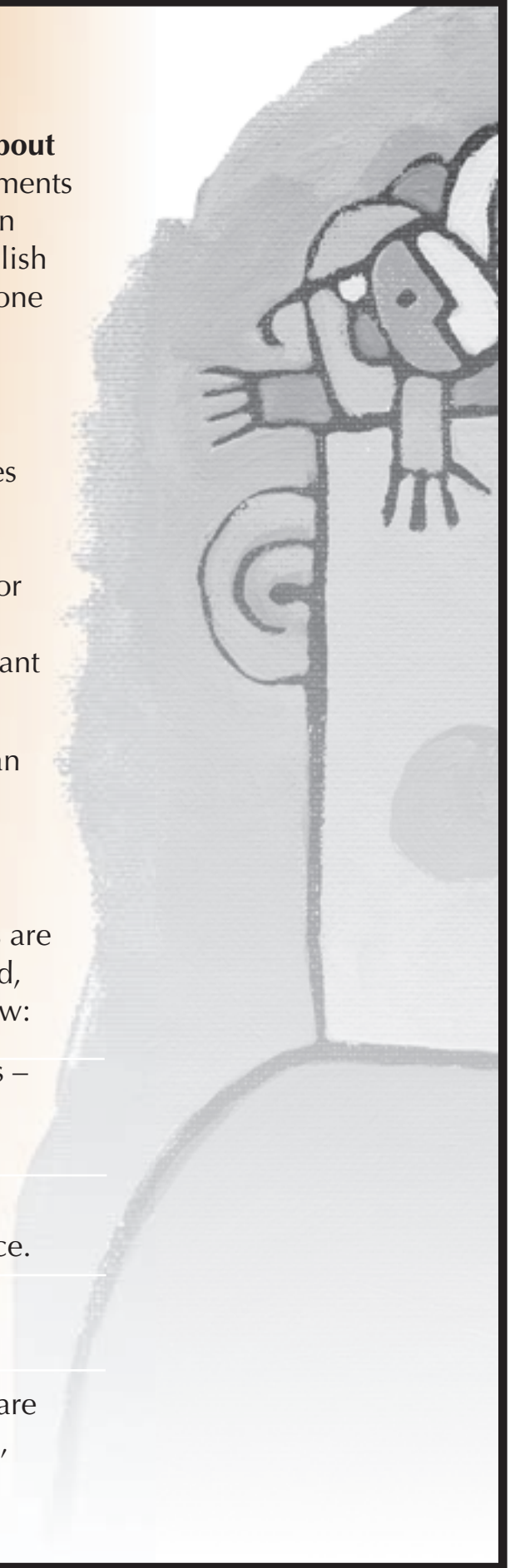
The terms vision, mission, goals and objectives are often used interchangeably. They are all related, but very distinct parts of the puzzle. Here's how:

Mission: answers why an organization exists – or why a project is starting – and its purpose.

Vision: summarizes the ideal state of an organization – or project or resource.

Goal: transforms a vision into a discrete statement of direction.

Objective: breaks down a goal into tasks that are measurable and time-oriented (e.g., all maps for the project will be completed by February 1).





How to Do it

1. BRAINSTORM AND DOCUMENT

With a group of people and a facilitator, such as in a workshop, record participants' needs, desires and even concerns. If a lot of issues and problems are listed, work on turning the negative statements into positive ones. Be sure everything is recorded exactly as the speaker intended and is posted for all to see and read.

2. REFINE, REFINE, REFINE

Work with the group to sort through and focus the ideas, i.e., group ideas that are similar under one theme. Systematically mark or label each idea so that no one's thoughts appear to be disregarded. If one idea or issue does not fit into any of the themes, and the group decides it is not viable enough to become its own category, check back with the original speaker to further discuss the idea or to make sure he or she agrees with the group's decision.

For each summary heading, begin creating statements that capture the ideas. The statements should be in terms of directions and destinations: what do you hope to achieve? Remember, goals are not visions; they should be statements of what can realistically be accomplished.

To accomplish this step, depending upon the size of the group, it may be easier and more productive to divide into smaller groups having one small group per theme.

3. DEVELOP A CONSENSUS

Once there are goals written for all of the themes, review them together as a group. Each statement should embrace the direction and potential actions that the entire group desires to take. There may be a lot of focus on single words, or making subtle changes, but this is important to the process. Everyone should be comfortable with what is said and how it is said.

Depending on the situation and the developed goals, you may want to prioritize goals based on resources (human, environmental, or financial), external threats or pressures such as pending legislation or an upcoming planning meeting or timing if some goals are long-term and others are short-term.

Use It If...

- You desire to form consensus among a number of people about what they share in common and what they want to do.
- You want to clarify tasks, calculate timetables and decide on actions.

Forget It If...

- You need action. There's a clear, single threat that needs to be fought against and goal setting could be a distraction or use up needed resources.
- You are in the preliminary stages of a project or a group is just forming. Prior to documenting goals, a group needs to have defined its mission and vision, or, in other words, have a sense of itself and why it has come together.

Timing is Everything

Setting goals should happen in the beginning stages of a project or formation of a group. Goals can be reset on an annual basis or as work is done to achieve goals.

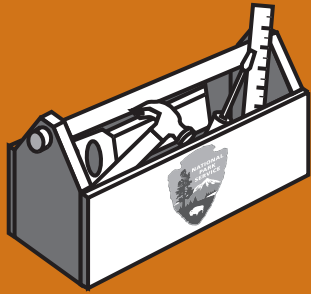
-
1. **Single purpose approach:** addresses a specific need, like creating a park, stopping construction of a waste facility or planting flowers on a highway.
 2. **Multi-purpose approach:** works simultaneously to meet several needs; for example creating a park that includes a visitors' center, interpretative trails and preservation of important habitat.
 3. **Comprehensive approach:** views a resource in its entirety as an interrelated environment. This approach attempts to satisfy numerous needs while utilizing a long-range planning philosophy.



National Park Service
*Rivers, Trails and Conservation
Assistance Program*
1849 C Street, NW
Mail Stop 1010
Washington, DC 20240
www.nps.gov/rtca

Choose an Approach

SETTING PRIORITIES

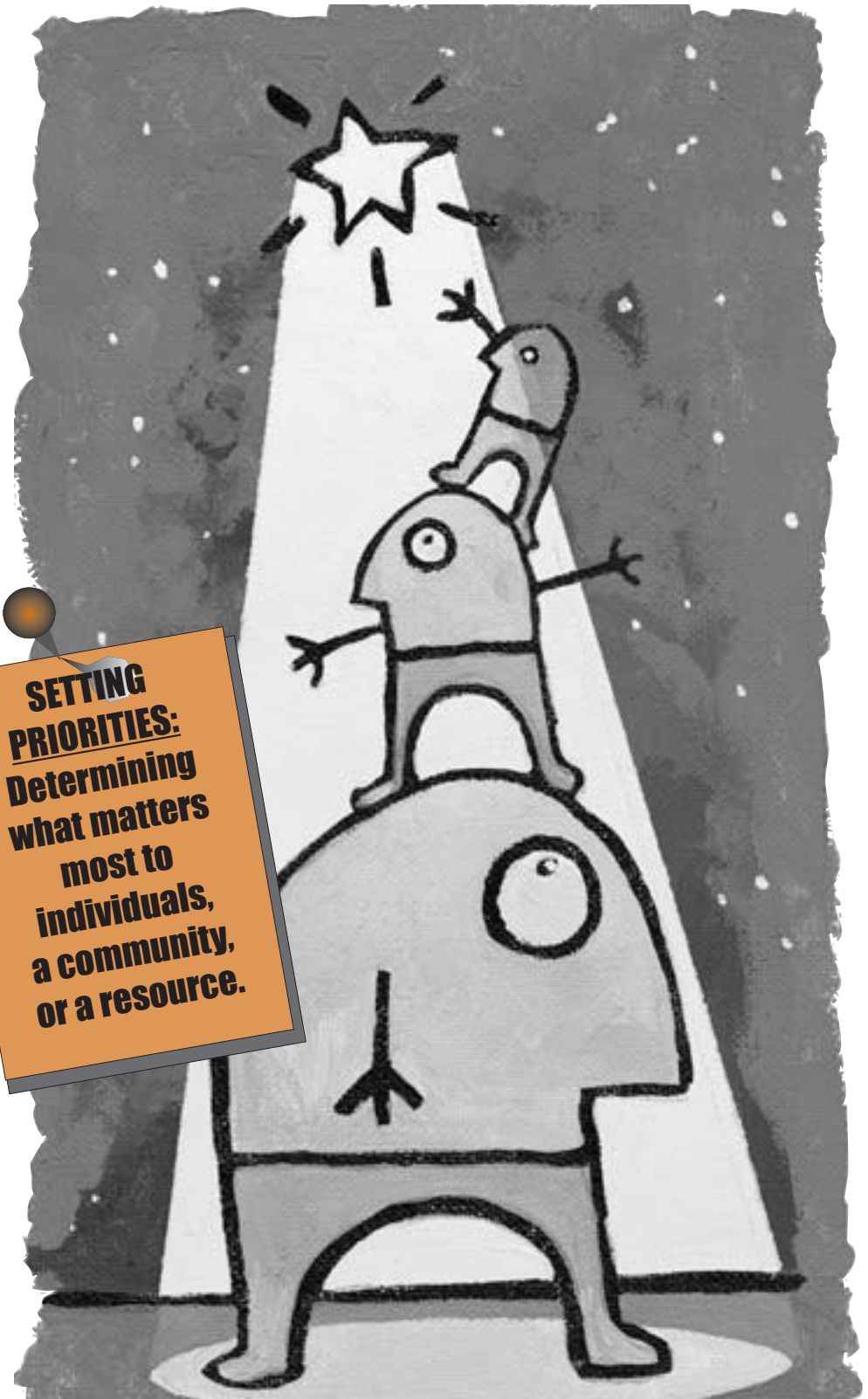


COMMUNITY TOOL BOX

WHAT WE'VE FOUND

When a coalition or a community first contacts us, it is not uncommon to find the group either overwhelmed by where to begin or with a vision so large that it encompasses activities well beyond their scope. Sometimes groups have a combination of the two: a huge dream but feeling powerless to realize it. Setting priorities can help. It is an important step to better understand the issues of an area and to identify what goals are achievable. The process opens dialog, builds consensus, and teaches people how to work together.

**SETTING
PRIORITIES:
Determining
what matters
most to
individuals,
a community,
or a resource.**

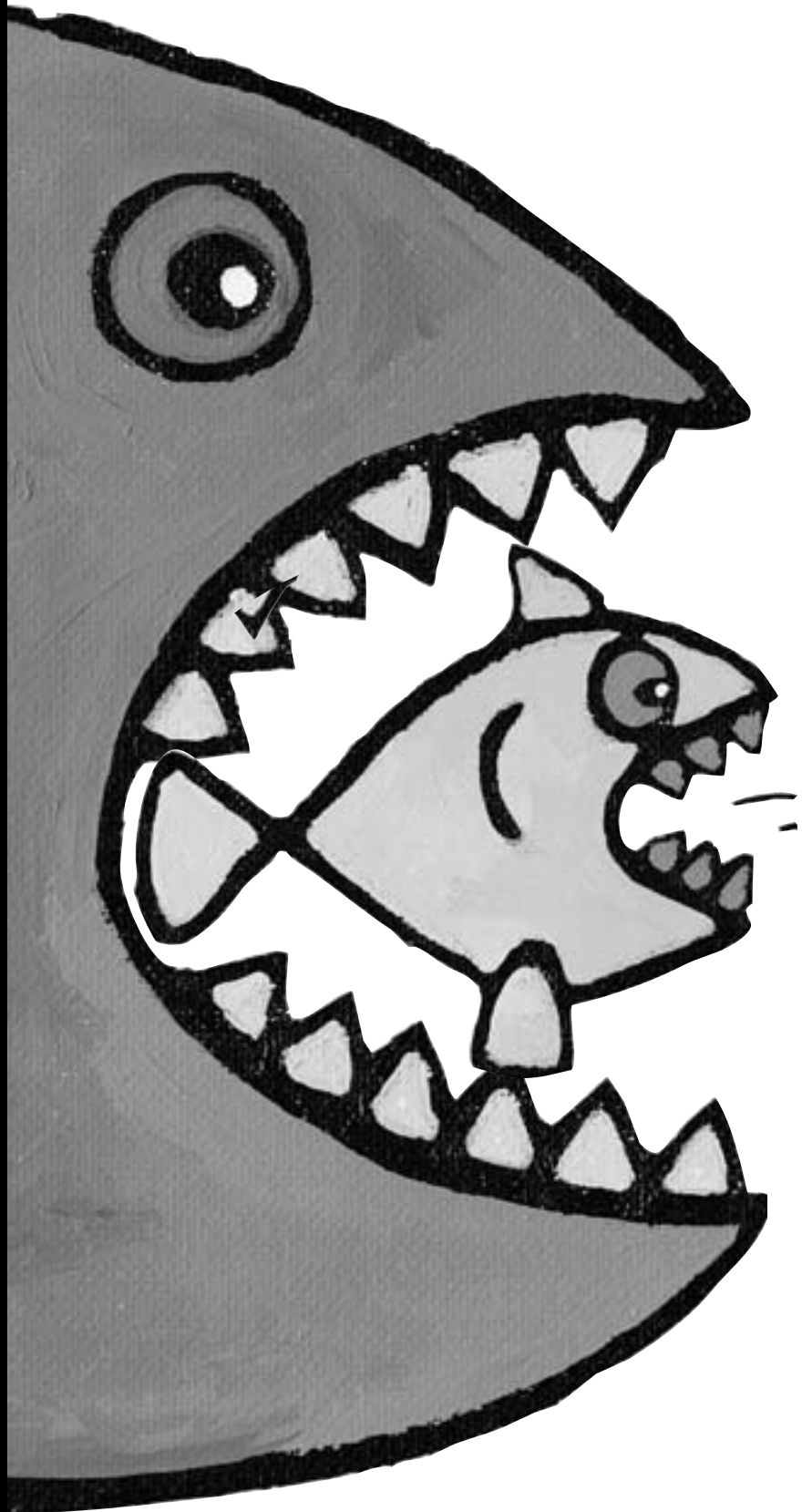


Just the Facts

To set priorities is to give an item within a category, group, or list a certain rank. Ranking can be by importance, by time, or by some other defined system of order or values. A vote or multiple-choice opinion survey, a discussion, or a lone individual can determine the ranking.

When undertaking a resource-related project, it is helpful to set priorities for issues to address and for goals to accomplish. For issues, the highest priority often goes to what activity has the greatest impact on the resource or what will garner the most public attention and support for action. Issues such as dams and clear cutting forestlands have immediate visible impacts and can help generate support and motivate action for additional work. Sometimes ranking an issue higher is as much for perception and political reasons as it is because of its importance. Larger issues, such as non-point sources of pollution and recreation, may be ranked lower simply because of complexity. Even though they may have a more pervasive impact over time, solving the problems requires a greater commitment of resources and time.

Goals are often prioritized based on the availability of human, environmental, or financial resources needed to achieve them or external threats or pressures such as pending legislation or an upcoming planning meeting. Like issues, timing is also a consideration. Some goals will need to be worked on over a period of time while others can be achieved relatively quickly.



1. Get a list

Based upon prior group discussions, there should be a list of issues, goals, tasks, or some other items. The list should be refined to the point where similar information and ideas are grouped under one theme and everyone present is in agreement with the wording of statements and expression of ideas.

All of this preparatory work should be on walls so that participants can see it especially if time has elapsed between meetings or workshops.

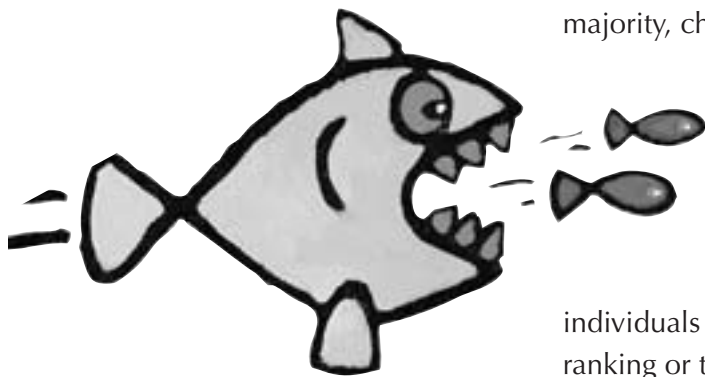
2. Rank the Items

If the group is less than 10 people, and the list is manageable, have each person write down on his or her own piece of paper how they would rank the items. Then randomly select one item and have each person take a turn sharing his or her recommendation for its ranking and why. A facilitator or recorder captures comments on a flipchart. When everyone has spoken, review the list and see if there is agreement about the ranking.

If there are some whose ranks are completely opposite than that of the majority, check back with those

dots. Another alternative is to use dot-votes in multiple steps. Participants vote their way through the entire list using different colors of dots: first step is to vote for top three using another a color (blue); second step is to vote for top one within those three using a second color (green); third step is to vote for top one outside of that first group of three using a third color (yellow); and so on.

If the group is especially large and so is the number of items, divide into subgroups and assign each group to a category. Subgroups discuss and decide upon ranks



HOW TO DO IT

individuals to further discuss the ranking or to make sure they agree with the group's decision.

For larger groups, give all of the participants an equal number of colored dot-stickers. Ask everyone to come forward and place their dots on the top three or five items, depending upon the size of the list, as they see it. When done, count the dot-votes and see if there is a natural consensus. Discuss the top items, then rate the remaining items by counting their dot-votes and discuss rates for any items without

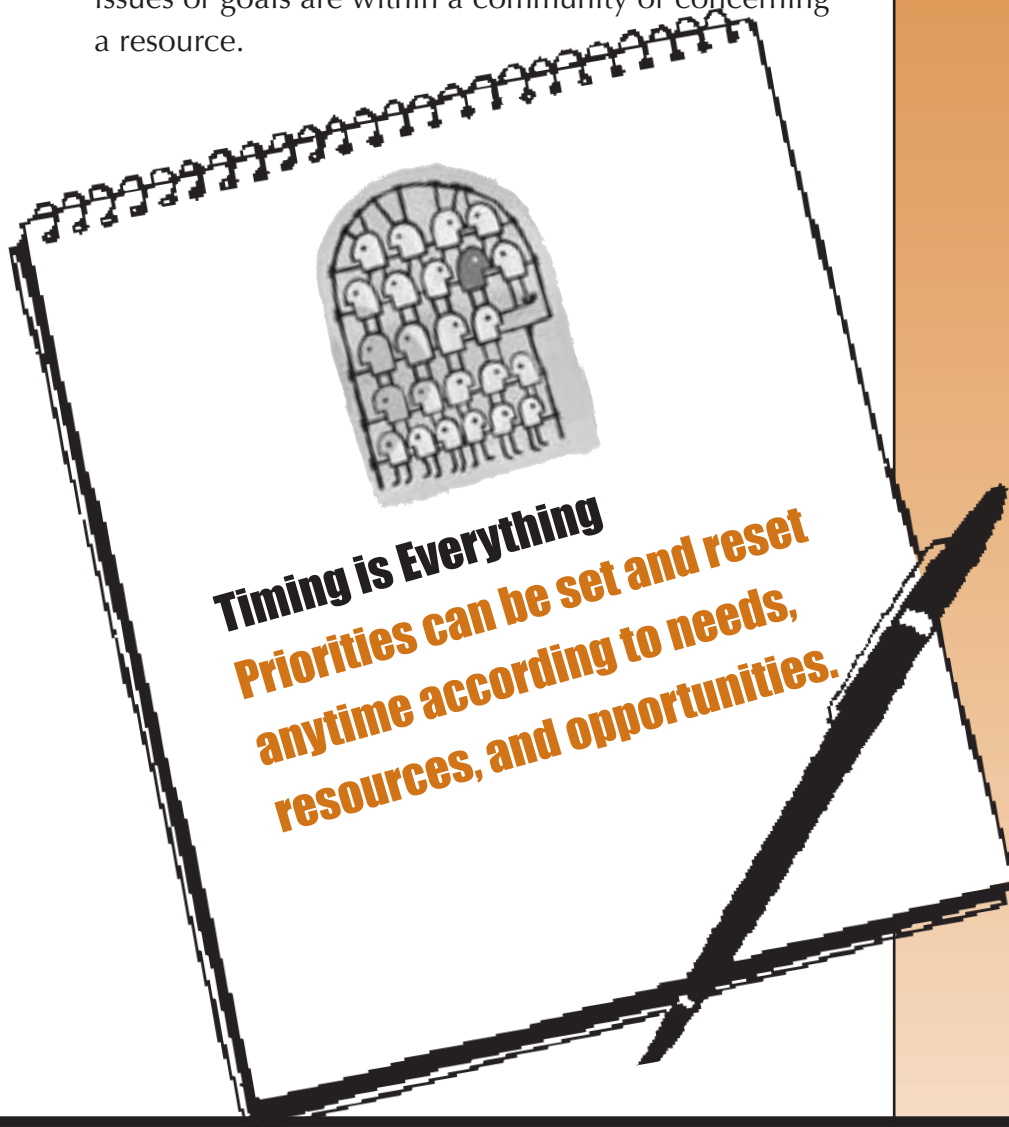
within that category. Everyone reconvenes and reports their recommendations. The end result is a number one priority in each of the different categories. Or, have the whole group select an overall priority across the categories.

Use It If...

- You want the group to focus.
- You desire to form consensus among a number of people about what problems or challenges are facing a community and its resources or about what they want to do.
- You plan on building a strong public involvement campaign. Identifying and prioritizing issues launches setting and prioritizing goals and that leads into creating doable action agendas.

Forget It If...

- You need action. There's a clear, single threat that needs to be fought against, not multiple ideas.
- You have not developed consensus about what the issues or goals are within a community or concerning a resource.



National Park Service
*Rivers, Trails and Conservation
Assistance Program*
1849 C Street, NW
Mail Stop 1010
Washington, DC 20240
www.nps.gov/rtca



COMMUNITY
TOOL BOX

vision creating

WHAT WE'VE FOUND

The process of developing a vision is a wonderful opportunity for people to come together, take a pragmatic look at their area, and work cooperatively to describe a direction they want to go. It takes good information and hard work to make a link between the present and the future. One thing we know is that the success of creating a vision and its subsequent acceptance by a community directly correlates to the diversity of the group who developed it. Broad interests yield broad support; limited interests bring limited support.



Just the Facts

Creating a vision begins with a group of stakeholders, or those with invested interests in a project, resource, or community. They are asked to state what they value about their area and what they would like to see improved in the next five to ten years. The final vision can be any length—a single sentence or a few bullet points—as long as it is clear, focused, and easily understandable.

Visions are based on reality; they are not wishful thinking. The advantages of using a group to do this work are to use their collective imaginations to create the most positive, practical, possible

outcome for the project or resource; to enable

shared authorship

of the vision which

will translate into a

sense

of ownership and

commitment to see-

ing the vision real-

ized; and,

assuming the group

represents diverse in-

terests, to broaden sup-

port among the

community at large.

Once written, a vision statement helps to define the direction in which to proceed. For example, a vision statement can be used to work “backwards” to develop a plan of action. Ask: “If this were the future, and this vision has happened, what was done?” “How did we get this outcome?” This helps avoid focusing on negative reactions such as how difficult or impossible it will be to do something. Vision statements can also aid in recruiting volunteers and keeping people motivated.

THE TERMS VISION, MISSION, GOALS AND OBJECTIVES ARE OFTEN USED INTERCHANGEABLY. THEY ARE RELATED BUT DISTINCT PARTS OF THE PUZZLE. HERE'S HOW:

VISION:

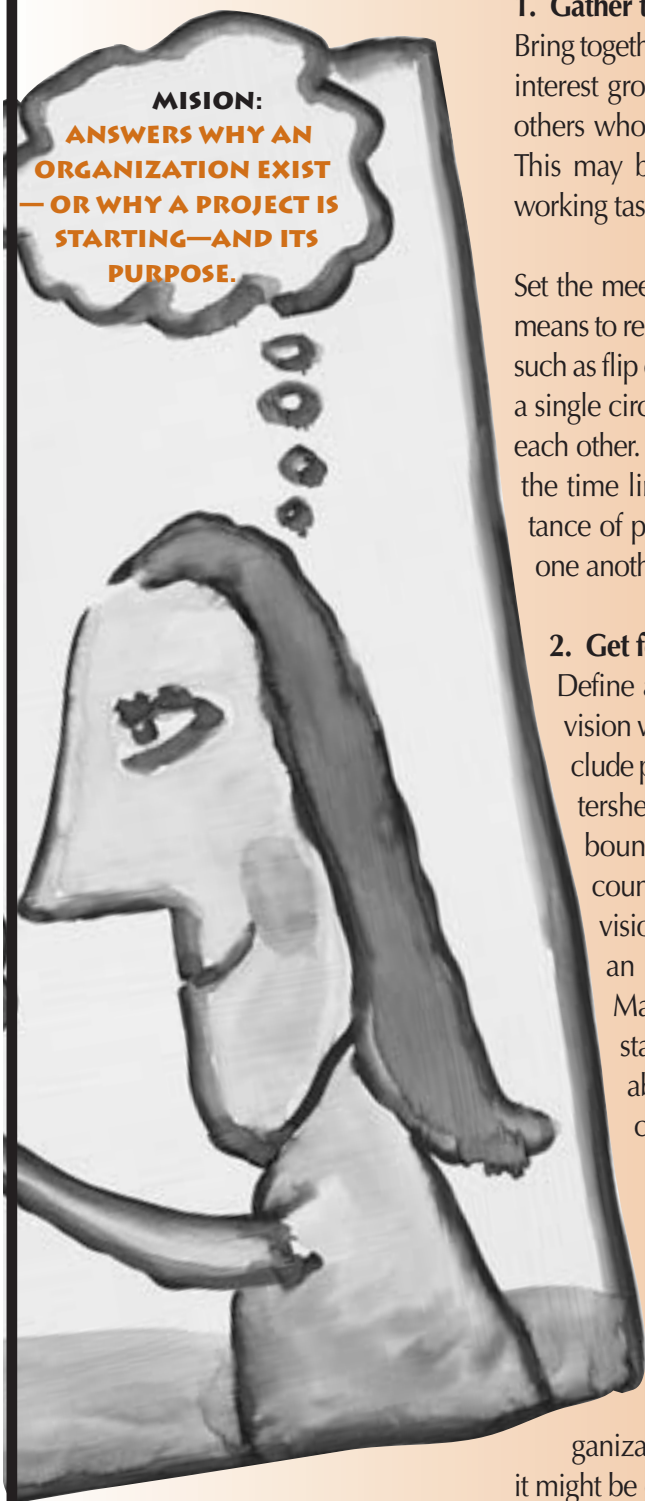
SUMMARIZES THE IDEAL STATE OF AN ORGANIZATION—OR PROJECT OR RESOURCE.

GOAL:

TRANSFORMS A VISION INTO A DISCRETE STATEMENT OF DIRECTION.

OBJECTIVE: BREAKS DOWN A GOAL INTO TASKS THAT ARE MEASURABLE AND TIME-ORIENTED.





HOW TO DO IT

1. Gather the players

Bring together key stakeholders, diverse interest groups, resource experts, and others who represent the community. This may be an advisory group or a working task force.

Set the meeting up with a facilitator, a means to record and post all comments such as flip charts, and arrange chairs in a single circle to allow everyone to see each other. Explain the exercise, state the time limits, and stress the importance of participation and respect for one another's thoughts.

2. Get focused

Define and set a limit on what the vision will address. Possibilities include physical features such as watersheds or river valleys or boundaries such as township, county or school districts, or the vision may be for an entity like an organization or a park. Make sure everyone understands and is in agreement about the limits before proceeding.

3. Identify what's important

Have people identify and define those things that make their community, the resource, or their organization special. Consider how it might be described to a visitor. Capture all comments. Look for themes and commonalities among the attributes and have the participants cluster and

label them accordingly. If there are several, it may be necessary to prioritize the attributes before continuing and rule some out.

4. Think future

Take those attributes and imagine how they might be described to a visitor five to ten years from now. Given these qualities, in this place, what is possible? What is the dream? If it is slightly out-of-reach, that is okay; if it is as unrealistic as a New Year's resolution, then scale back. Have fun thinking of scenarios.

5. Write it

Using the words captured during the brainstorm, begin to put together sentences to form a statement. Try beginning with "To become the...To be known as...To be...To offer...To maintain..." There may be a lot of focus on single words, or making subtle changes, but this is important to the process. Everyone should be comfortable with what is said and how it is said.

6. Agree on it

The final vision should be something that the participants feel addresses what is most important for their community, resource, or organization. With a vision in hand, tell others about it by issuing a press release, printing brochures or posters, creating buttons or shirts, or using most any other medium. Let everyone know about the vision so work can begin on implementing it.

Use It If...

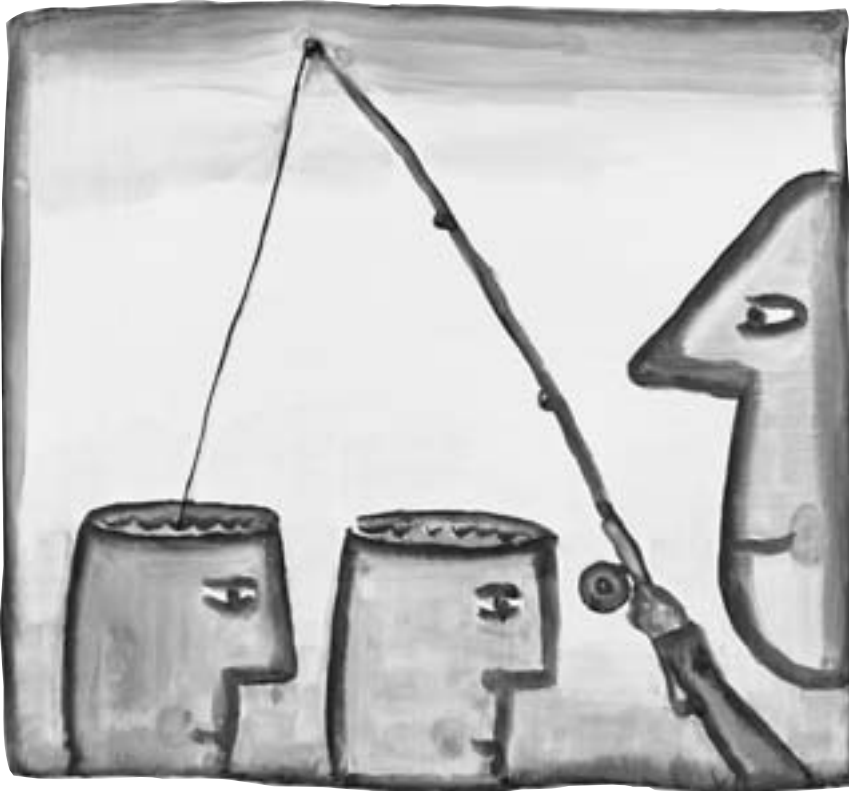
- You see great potential in your area and know that others do as well.
- You desire to get a group inspired and make them more cohesive.
- You want a clear, agreed upon way to keep a project focused. A created vision statement allows you to check and challenge your actions by asking, "Will this help us reach our vision?"

Forget It If...

- You need action. There's a clear, single threat that needs to be fought against and all of your energies are directed at doing just that.
- You do not have broad-based representation from diverse interest groups to create a vision. Without this, it may be difficult to get support or help in any efforts; what you may get is loud, strong opposition.
- You have too many skeptics or unwilling participants. The visioning exercise is irrelevant if people are unwilling to buy into it and accept the process as meaningful.

Timing is Everything

Create a vision in the beginning stages of a project or formation of a group. It should not change.



RIVERS & TRAILS PROGRAM

National Park Service
*Rivers, Trails and Conservation
Assistance Program*
1849 C Street, NW
Mail Stop 1010
Washington, DC 20240
www.nps.gov/rtca