Setting Group Goals

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Groups are often ambitious in achieving initial goals, but then stagnate when new goals are not set. This MontGuide describes several methods for setting and achieving group goals, including brainstorming, the nominal group technique and force field analysis.

Why Set Group Goals?

One measure of group effectiveness is how well a group accomplishes its goals. Initially, all groups were established to satisfy some common need of the members or to pursue a common cause. But, as time passes, group members frequently lose sight of their goals.

Russell Robinson contends that groups start by increasing in effectiveness until their first goals are accomplished and then decline in effectiveness unless new goals are set. Failure to periodically set new goals leads to stagnation or termination (Figure 1).

Typical response when effectiveness declines is to turn inward and devote energies to clinging to what is still left, often continuing in a state of stagnation.

Setting group goals also helps a group determine which activities to conduct. Goals are the ends group members hope to accomplish, and activities are the means to those ends. Thus a good measure of the worth of any activity is the extent to which it helps a group reach its goals. If a group is not sure of its goals, it will have difficulty deciding which activities do the group the most good.
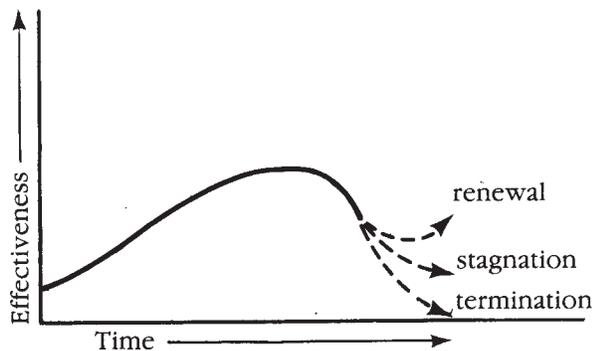

Figure 1. Typical response when effectiveness declines is to turn inward and devote energies to clinging to what is still left, often continuing in a state of stagnation.

Procedures

Setting group goals is basically a process of generating a number of alternative concerns the group might pursue and then selecting a few top priority concerns the group feels it can address. The brainstorming, nominal group and force field analysis techniques presented here have proven successful in helping groups generate alternatives and select a few as priority goals.

Brainstorming

One of the best known techniques for producing new ideas, insights and potential group goals is the brainstorming method developed by Osborn back in the 1930s. It has the advantages of stimulating a large number of alternatives in a brief amount of time. Further, participants are encouraged to come up with far-out ideas so creative new approaches may be suggested.

The technique has several major drawbacks. It is difficult to involve more than 10 participants. Ideas are not tested against reality. Skillful leadership is required to create an atmosphere in which the quality of opinions is not judged and in which all members feel free to participate. Group discussion is more likely to get off on a tangent than with the nominal group technique.

Steps:

1. A specific task is given to the group, i.e. "think of all possible goals for our group."

2. The facilitator helps warm the group up with a nonsense task, i.e., "Let's list all the ways we could improve on the design of an armadillo."

3. The facilitator encourages members to think of as many ideas as possible.

4. Criticism of any ideas and statements of judgment are not permitted.

5. Piggybacking on the ideas of others is encouraged.

6. The facilitator records the ideas on newsprint, emphasizing that once the ideas are recorded they become group property and the originator has no need to feel ownership or to lobby for a particular idea.

7. Once all ideas are recorded, or at a later meeting, the group examines the list and selects the most appropriate suggestions. This may be done by group consensus or by voting.

Nominal Group Technique

Delbecq's nominal group technique was developed to involve all members in determining group goals. The technique is termed "nominal" because much of the work is done independently by group members. Though conducted in a group setting, a good deal of the discussion that is part of normal group meetings is avoided. Since members work individually and are not influenced by group discussion, a broad range of ideas may be suggested.

By involving all members in a highly structured exercise, the technique tends to reduce the influence of dominant individuals. No one is permitted to lobby for a particular position. Criticism of other's ideas is prohibited. Thus a safe group climate is created in which all members feel free to express themselves.

Involvement of all members in the goal setting process acts to motivate the members to accomplish the selected goals. Because everyone had a hand in determining the goals, they are more likely to work toward accomplishing them. The technique is not a magic solution that will solve all the problems of a struggling group. High power individuals may object to a technique that reduces their influence. If significant interests are not represented at the session, the validity of the results will be questionable. The technique does not use in-depth discussion of recommendations nor careful analysis of background information. It does involve all members in generating a large number of alternatives and then reducing them to a manageable number of priorities in a minimum period of time.

Steps:

1. Break group down into groups of 6-10 to facilitate discussion and recording.

2. Participants write on note cards all the ideas they can think of in response to the task question. The task question needs to be carefully worded to focus thinking on the proper issue. Members work individually and silently.

3. A recorder for each group writes down all the ideas on newsprint and numbers them. This is done in a round-robin fashion, taking one idea at a time from each member until all ideas are recorded. No lobbying or criticism!

4. The group examines its list to see if any ideas can be combined.

5. Individual members vote for the ideas they feel are most important by writing the numbers of the ideas on their cards. The number of ideas each selects should be based on the total number of ideas; choose three ideas from a total of up to 15, four from a total of 15-25, five for a total greater than 25.

6. Recorders tally the number of responses for each item.

7. Results from each small group are reported back to the whole group.

8. A second round of voting on the top priorities is done by the group as a whole.

9. The total number of ideas to be acted upon depends on the number of priorities the group feels it can pursue.

Force Field Analysis

Groups can employ brainstorming and nominal group techniques to generate a large number of alternative goals and then reduce these to a few top priorities. But the goal setting process should not stop here. A group is wise to analyze the recommended goals to determine the probability of accomplishing them.

The University of Michigan Research Center for Group Dynamics found that groups often set overly optimistic goals. Setting unrealistically high aspirations sets the group up for failure. Nevertheless, members may believe they will derive greater satisfaction from accomplishing a difficult goal than an easy one. They also may feel less embarrassment if they fail at a difficult goal. Comparisons of goals set by individuals to the goals they set for their group indicate they were willing to take larger risks for the group than for themselves. Finally, members who have little responsibility for accomplishing the goals tended to set higher goals than those who are responsible for accomplishing the goals.

Leaders need to be aware of the tendency to set overly optimistic goals and guard against them. They should encourage members to carefully examine the probability for reaching agreed upon goals.

Force field analysis can help determine which priorities should be acted upon and the probability of successful action. Conducting this analysis early in the planning process helps avoid pursuing goals unlikely to be reached.

The procedure calls for identification of the forces that act to drive or restrain movement toward the goal. If the group decides it can influence either driving forces or restraining forces to a sufficient extent to accomplish its goal, it proceeds toward the goal. If the group feels it cannot significantly influence the forces, the goal is dropped, at least for the present.

Procedure:

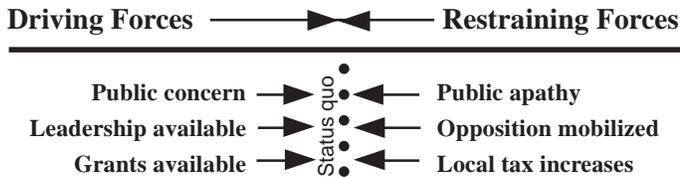*1. Diagnosing forces that help and hinder achievement of objectives:* There are forces in every situation that cause things to remain as they are or to change. Forces that push toward change are called driving or helping forces. Forces that resist change are called restraining or hindering forces. If change is to occur,

the strength of some forces must be altered so that movement can take place.

In order to plan appropriate strategies for change, the forces in the situation must be clearly understood and identified. A "force" can be people, resources, attitudes, traditions, values, needs, desires, etc.

Ask the group: What forces will help you achieve your objective(s) and what forces probably will hinder you from achieving your objectives(s)? List on newsprint all that come to mind without placing a value judgment on any.

Example

Driving Forces ——————▶◀—————— **Restraining Forces**

Driving Forces	Status quo	Restraining Forces
Public concern ➔		◀ Public apathy
Leadership available ➔		◀ Opposition mobilized
Grants available ➔		◀ Local tax increases

1. Action planning (strategy design): Change occurs when there is imbalance between the forces. An imbalance may occur through a change in the magnitude or direction of a force or through addition of a new force.

Have the group select two or three important restraining forces and two or three important driving forces which it has some possibility of altering. State specifically what will be done to change them. Write the responses on newsprint and tape to wall.

Restraining Force A _____

_____

What can be done to reduce the effect of this force?

Restraining Force B _____

_____

What can be done to reduce the effect of this force?

Restraining Force C _____

_____

What can be done to reduce the effect of this force?

Driving Force A _____

_____

What can be done to increase the effect of this force?

Driving Force B _____

_____

What can be done to increase the effect of this force?

Driving Force C _____

_____

What can be done to increase the effect of this force?

3. Goal Decision: Decide whether the effect of these actions will produce the desired change. If so, the group can realistically pursue this goal. If not, the group might better direct its efforts on other goals.

Recommended Procedure
- Keep your group alive, active and effective by periodically, perhaps annually, resetting goals.
- Use brainstorming or nominal group techniques at one meeting, following up with force field analysis at the next.
- Record the decisions on newsprint and post them on the wall at each meeting to remind members of goals they have agreed upon.
- Don't attempt more goals than the group can realistically expect to achieve.
- When determining potential group activities, consider to what degree the activities will help the group reach its goals.

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