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**Assignments and Examinations Diploma Course in**

**Developing a Strategic Community Plan,**

**Organizational Structure and Training System**

**Part 1**

**Developing a Strategic Plan**

**Section 1: An Overview of Strategic Planning or “VMOSA”**

1. What is VMOSA?

One way to make that journey is through strategic planning, the process by which a group define its own “VMOSA” that is, its Vision, Mission, Objectives, Strategies, and Action Plans. VMOSA is a practical planning process that can be used by the any community organization or initiative. This comprehensive planning tool helps your organization by providing a blueprint for moving from dreams to actions to positive outcomes for your community.

1. What is a vision?

* A vision statement is a statement about ideal conditions or how things would look if the issue important to you were completely, perfectly addressed.
* **Common characteristics of vision statements should be:**
  + Understood and shared by members of the community
  + Broad enough to allow a diverse variety of local perspectives to be encompassed within them
  + Inspiring and uplifting to everyone involved in your effort
  + Easy to communicate - for example, they should be short enough to fit on a Tshirt
* **Examples:**
  + Healthy children
  + Safe streets, safe neighbourhoods
  + Every house a home
  + Education for all
  + Peace on earth

1. How do you develop a mission statement?

* A mission statement describes *what* the group is going to do and *why* it is going to do that.
* **Guiding principles for mission statements include:**
  + Concise. Mission statements generally get their point across in one sentence.
  + Outcome-oriented.Explain the fundamental outcomes your organization is working to achieve.
  + Inclusive. Make broad statements about your groups’ key goals but are not limiting to specific strategies or sectors of the community.
* **Examples:**
  + Promoting child health and development through a comprehensive family and community initiative.
  + To develop a safe and healthy neighborhood through collaborative planning, community action, and policy advocacy.
  + Promoting community health and development by connecting people, ideas and resources.

1. Describe different types of objectives.

**There are three basic types of objectives. They are:**

* Behavioral objectives. These objectives look at changing the behaviors of people (what they are doing and saying) and the products (or results) of their behaviors. For example, a neighborhood improvement group might develop an objective around having an increased amount of home repair taking place (the behavior) or of improved housing (the result).
* Community-level outcome objectives. These are related to behavioral outcome objectives, but are more focused more on a community level instead of an individual level. For example, the same group might suggest increasing the percentage of people living in the community with adequate housing as a community-level outcome objective.
* Process objectives. These are the objectives that refer to the implementation of activities necessary to achieve other objectives. For example, the group might adopt a comprehensive plan for improving neighborhood housing.

**Examples of objectives include:**

* By December 2010, to increase by 30% parent engagement (i.e., talking, playing, reading) with children under 2 years of age. (Behavioral objective)
* By 2012, to have made a 40% increase in youth graduating from high school. (Community -level outcome objective)
* By the year 2006, increase by 30% the percentage of families that own their home. (Community-level outcome objective)
* By December of this year, implement the volunteer training program for all volunteers. (Process objective)

1. How do you develop a strategy?

Generally, organizations will have a wide variety of strategies that include people from all of the different parts, or sectors, of the community. These strategies range from very broad strategies that encompass people and resources from many different parts of the community to very specific strategies that take place on a much smaller level.

**Examples of broad strategies include:**

* A child health program might use social marketing to promote adult involvement with children
* An adolescent pregnancy initiative might decide to increase access to contraceptives in the community
* An urban revitalization project might enhance the artistic life of the community by encouraging artists to perform in the area

**Five specific strategies can help guide most interventions. They are:**

* Providing information and enhancing skills (e.g., offer skills training in conflict management)
* Enhancing services and support (e.g., start a mentoring programs for high-risk youth)
* Modify access, barriers, and opportunities (such as offering scholarships to students who would be otherwise unable to attend college)
* Change the consequences of efforts (e.g., provide incentives for community members to volunteer)
* Modify policies (e.g., change business policies to allow parents and guardians and volunteers to spend more time with young children).

1. How do you design an action plan?

Action steps are developed for each component of the intervention or (community and systems) changes to be sought.

**These include:**

* Action step(s): What will happen
* Person(s) responsible: Who will do what
* Dated completed: Timing of each action step
* Resources required: Resources and support (both what is needed and what's available )
* Barriers or resistance, and a plan to overcome them!
* Collaborators: Who else should know about this action

Here are two examples of action steps, graphed out so you can easily follow the flow.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Action step** | **Person (s) Responsible** | **Date to be Completed** | **Resources Required** | **Potential Barriers or Resistance** | **Collaborators** |
| Draft a social marketing plan | Terry McNeil (from marketing firm) | April, 2006 | $15,000 (remaining donated) | None anticipated | Members of the business action group |
| Ask local corporation to introduce flex time for parents and mentors | Maria Suarez (business action group) | September, 2008 | 5 hours: 2 hour proposal prep, 3 hours for meeting and transportation | Corporation: may see this as expensive; must convince them of benefit of the plan for the corporation | Members of the business action group and the schools action group |

**Section 2: Proclaiming your dream: Developing Vision and Mission statements**

1. Why should you create vision and mission statements?

Because these statements can help your organization focus on what is really important. Although your organization knows what you are trying to do to improve your community, it's easy to lose sight of this when dealing with the day-to-day hassles that plague all organizations. Your vision and mission statements help members remember what is important as you go about doing your daily work.

Second, your vision and mission statements let other individuals and organizations have a snapshot view of whom your group is and what it wants to do. When your vision and mission statements are easily visible (for example, if they are on the letterhead of your stationary), people can learn about your organization without having to work hard for the information. Then, those with common interests can take the time necessary to learn more. Clearly, this can be very helpful when you are recruiting other people and organizations to join in your effort.

Finally, vision and mission statements are also very helpful in having members who are focused and bound together in common purpose. Not only do the statements themselves serve as a constant reminder of what is important to your organization, the process of developing them allows people to see the organization as "theirs." Its common sense: people will believe in something more completely if they had a hand in developing it.

**There are many other reasons to develop vision and mission statements as well. For example, having clear and compelling vision statements can:**

* Draw people to common work
* Give hope for a better future
* Inspire community members to realize their dreams through positive, effective action
* Provide a basis for developing the other aspects of your action planning process: your mission, objectives, strategies, and action plans

**Having a clear mission statement can:**

* Convert the broad dreams of your vision into more specific, action-oriented terms
* Explain your goals to interested parties in a clear and concise manner
* Enhance your organization's image as being competent and professional, thus reassuring funding sources that their investment was (or would be!) a smart choice

1. How do you create vision and mission statements?

Develop your vision and mission statements

**Vision Statements**

First of all, remind members of your organization that it often takes several vision statements to fully capture the dreams of those involved in a community improvement effort. You don't need - or even want - to have just one "perfect" phrase. Encourage people to suggest all of their ideas, and write them down - possibly on poster paper at the front of the room, so people can be further inspired by the ideas of others. As you do this, help everyone keep in mind:

* What you have learned from your discussions with community members
* What your organization has decided will be your focus
* What you learned about vision statements at the beginning of this section

If you have a hard time getting started, you might wish to check out some of the vision statements in the Examples at the end of this section. You might ask yourself how well they meet the above suggestions.

After you have brainstormed a lot of ideas, your group can discuss critically the different ideas. Oftentimes, several of the vision statements will just jump out at you - someone will suggest it, and people will just instantly think, "That's it!" You can also ask yourselves the following questions about vision statements:

* Will it draw people to common work?
* Does it give hope for a better future?
* Will it inspire community members to realize their dreams through positive, effective action?
* Does it provide a basis for developing the other aspects of your action planning process?

A final caution: try not to get caught up in having a certain number of vision statements for your organization. Whether you ultimately end up with two vision statements or ten, what is most important is that the statements together give a holistic view of the vision of your organization.

**Mission Statements**

The process of writing your mission statement is much like that for developing your vision statements. The same brainstorming process can help you develop possibilities for your mission statement. Remember, though, that unlike with vision statements, you will want to develop a single mission statement for your work. After having brainstormed for possible statements, you will want to ask of each one:

* Does it describe what your organization will do and why it will do it?
* Is it concise (one sentence)?
* Is it outcome oriented?
* Is it inclusive of the goals and people who may become involved in the organization?

Together, your organization can decide on a statement that best meets these criteria.

There are many, many ways in which your organization may choose to spread its vision and mission statements. To name just a few examples, you might:

* Add them to your letterhead or stationary
* Use them on your website
* Give away T-shirts, or bookmarks, or other small gifts with them
* Add them to your press kit
* Use them when you give interviews
* Display them on the cover of your annual report

**Examination 1: Create a vision and mission statement for your organization/business**

**Section 3: Creating Objectives**

1. Explain three types of objectives

**There are three basic types of objectives. They are:**

* **Process objectives**. These are the objectives that provide the groundwork or implementation necessary to achieve your other objectives. For example, the group might adopt a comprehensive plan for improving neighborhood housing. In this case, adoption of the plan itself is the objective.
* **Behavioral objectives**. These objectives look at changing the behaviors of people (what they are doing and saying) and the products (or results) of their behaviors. For example, a neighborhood improvement group might develop an objective for having an increased amount of home repair taking place (the behavior) and fewer houses with broken or boarded-up windows (the result).
* **Community-level outcome objectives**. These are often the product or result of behavior change in many people. They are focused on change at the community level instead of an individual level. For example, the same neighborhood group might have an objective of increasing the percentage of people living in the community with adequate housing as a community-level outcome objective.

It's important to understand that these different types of objectives aren't mutually exclusive. Most groups will develop objectives in all three categories. And all of the different types of objectives should be used as intermediate markers of the organization's progress.

1. Explain the SMART + C process.

**The best objectives have several characteristics in common. They are all S.M.A.R.T. +C.:**

* Specific. That is, they tell how much (e.g., 10%) of what is to be achieved (e.g., what behavior of whom or what outcome) by when (e.g., by 2025)?
* Measurable. Information concerning the objective can be collected, detected, or obtained
* Achievable. It is feasible to pull them off.
* Relevant to the mission. Your organization has a clear understanding of how these objectives fit in with the overall vision and mission of the group.
* Timed. Your organization has developed a timeline (a portion of which is made clear in the objectives) by which they will be achieved.
* Challenging. They stretch the group to set its aims on significant improvements that are important to members of the community.

1. How do you create objectives?

Below are the processes that will help you to define and refine objectives for your organization.

1. **Define or reaffirm your vision and mission statements.**

The first thing you will need to do is review the vision and mission statements your organization has developed. Before you determine your objectives, you should have a "big picture" that they fit into.

1. **Determine the changes to be made.**

The crux of writing realistic objectives is learning what changes need to happen in order to fulfill your mission. There are many ways to do this, including:

* Research what experts in your field believe to be the best ways to solve the problem. For many community issues, researchers have developed useful ideas of what needs to occur to see real progress. This information may be available through local libraries, the Internet, state and national agencies, national non-profit groups, and university research groups.
* Discuss with local experts what needs to occur. Some of the people with whom you may wish to talk include:
* Other members of your organization
* Local experts, such as members of other, similar organizations who have a great deal of experience with the issue you are trying to change
* Agents of change, or the people in a position to contribute to the solution. Agents of change might include teachers, business leaders, church leaders, local politicians, community members, and members of the media.
* Targets of change, the people who experience the problem or issue on a day-to-day basis and those people whose actions contribute to the problem. Changing their behavior will become the heart of your objectives
* Discuss the logistical requirements of your own organization to successfully address community needs. At the same time your organization is looking at what needs to happen in the community to solve the issue important to you, you should also consider what your organization requires to get that done. Do you need an action plan? Additional funding? More staff or more training for additional staff? This information is necessary to develop the process objectives we talked about earlier in this section.

At this point in the planning process, you don't need hard and fast answers to the above questions. What you should develop as part of this step is a general list of what needs to occur to make the changes you want to see.

For example, perhaps your group has decided upon the following mission: "To reduce risks for cardiovascular diseases through a community-wide initiative." At this point in your research (without getting into specifics), your organization might have decided that your objectives will be based on the following general goals:

* Begin smoking cessation programs
* Begin smoking prevention programs
* Bring about an increase in aerobic exercise
* Decrease the amount of obesity
* Encourage healthier diets
* Increase preventative medicine (for example, more checkups for earlier detection of disease; better understanding of warning signs and symptoms)
* Increase the scientific understanding of your own organization regarding the causes and pathophysiology of cardiovascular disease
* Strengthen your organization's ties with national organizations committed to the same goals as your organization

1. **Collect baseline data on the issues to be addressed.**

As soon as your organization has a general idea of what it wants to accomplish, the next step is to develop baseline data on the issue to be addressed. Baseline data are the facts and figures that tell you how big the problem is; it gives specific figures about the extent to which it exists in your community.

Baseline data can indicate the incidence (new cases) of a problem in the community. For example, "Malott County has an adolescent pregnancy rate of 12.3 pregnancies for every thousand teenage girls." Such data can also reveal the prevalence (existing cases) of the problem. For example, "In Jefferson County, 35% of teens reported that they did not use contraceptives during the last time they had sex."

Baseline data may also measures community attitudes towards a problem. For example, "65% of the residents of Malott County do not consider teen pregnancy to be an important problem for the community."

**Why collect baseline data?**

This information is important because baseline data provides your organization with the numbers; the starting points against which you can measure how much progress you have made. Not only is this information helpful when originally asking for financial (or other) assistance, it can help you show what your organization has done later in its lifetime.

So, early in your organization's life, you can prove to funders that there really is a very significant problem in your community that needs to be addressed ("Malott County's adolescent pregnancy rate is the highest in the state of Georgia.") Then, when asked later in the life of your community initiative, "What have you done?" you will be able to answer, "Since our coalition was formed, Malott County has seen pregnancy among teens drop by 35%." If you don't collect (or obtain) the baseline information, you can't prove how much you have done.

**How do you collect this information?**

There are two basic ways to collect baseline data:

* You can collect your own baseline data for the information related to your specific issues. Ways to gather this information include the use of surveys, questionnaires, and personal interviews.
* You can use information that has already been collected. Public libraries, city government, social service agencies, local schools, or city health departments may already have the statistics that you want, especially if another organization has already done work on a similar issue in your community.

1. **Decide what is realistic for your organization to accomplish.**

Once you know what you want to do, as well as exactly how big the problem is, it's time to figure out how much you believe your organization can accomplish. Do you have the resources to affect all of the goals you looked at in Step Two? And to what extent will you be able to achieve them?

These questions are difficult ones to answer. It's hard for a new organization to know what it can reasonably expect to get done. For example, if you are trying to increase rates of childhood immunization, will your organization be able to increase it by 5% in three years, or by 20% in one year? How do you make these decisions?

Unfortunately, there are no easy answers. Your organization will need to take a good look at its resources, as well as talk to experts who have a sense of what is not only possible, but likely. For example, you might ask members of organizations who have done similar things, or researchers in your topic area what they believe makes sense.

Remember, you are attempting to set objectives that are both achievable and challenging. It's hard to hit just the right note of balance between these two qualities, and you may not always get it just right. Research and experience, however, should help you come closer and closer to this goal.

1. **Set the objectives for your organization or initiative.**

With all of this information in mind, your organization is ready to set some short-term goals or objectives that are feasible but demanding. Remember, objectives refer to specific measurable results. These changes in behavior, outcome, and process must be able to be tracked and measured in such a way to show that a change has occurred.

A caution: Oftentimes, the objectives of a community initiative or organization are set or influenced by the primary funding agency. Regardless of outside influences, each community initiative must decide what problems it is going to take on and what objectives would define success for their organization.

Your organization's list of objectives should do all of the following:

* Include all three types of objectives: objectives that measure behavior change, community outcomes, and those that measure important parts of the planning process.
* Include specific objectives that tell how much of what will occur by when. For example, "By 2025, rates of teen pregnancy among 12-17 year old girls will decrease by 30%."
* They should include all of the "SMART +C criteria." As we discussed earlier in this section, this means that they should be, Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Timed, and Challenging.

**Examples of some objectives developed by an adolescent substance abuse prevention initiative;**

* By the year 2024, the use of tobacco among 12-17 year olds will be reduced by 40%.
* By the year 2024, the use of alcohol among 12-17 year olds will be reduced by 50%.
* By the year 2024, the use of marijuana among 12-17 year olds will be reduced by 70%.
* By the year 2024, the use of cocaine among 12-17 year olds will be reduced by 80%.

1. **Review the objectives your organization has created.**

Before you finalize your objectives, it makes sense for members of your organization to review them one more time, and possibly, ask people outside of your organization to review them as well. You might ask members of your organization who were not involved in the development process to review your work. You may also wish to get the thoughts of local experts, targets and agents of change, and/or of people doing similar work in other communities to review what you have developed. You can ask reviewers to comment on:

* Do your objectives each meet the criteria of "SMART+C"?
* Is your list of objectives complete? That is, are there important objectives that are missing?
* Are your objectives appropriate? Are any of your objectives controversial? If so, your organization needs to decide if it is ready to handle the storm that may arise. For example, a program that is trying to reduce the spread of AIDS in its community may decide clean needles for drug addicts is an objective they wish to strive for; but it may very well cause difficulties for that organization. That's not to say the organization shouldn't make that an objective, but they should do so with a clear understanding of the consequences.

1. **Use your objectives to define your organization's strategies.**

Finally, once you have your general objectives, you are ready for the next step: developing the strategies that will make them possible. This is the subject of the next section of the Community Tool Box. Once your objectives are finished, and satisfactory to members of the organization and important people outside of your group, you are ready to move on to developing Successful Strategies.

**Section 4: Developing Successful Strategies: Planning to Win**

1. What are the criteria for developing a good strategy?

**Strategies for your community initiative should meet several criteria.**

Does the strategy:

* Give overall direction? A strategy, such as enhancing experience and skill or increasing resources and opportunities, should point out the overall path without dictating a particular narrow approach (e.g., using a specific skills training program).
* Fit resources and opportunities? A good strategy takes advantage of current resources and assets, such as people's willingness to act or a tradition of self-help and community pride. It also embraces new opportunities such as an emerging public concern for neighborhood safety or parallel economic development efforts in the business community.
* Minimize resistance and barriers? When initiatives set out to accomplish important things, resistance (even opposition) is inevitable. However, strategies need not provide a reason for opponents to attack the initiative. Good strategies attract allies and deter opponents.
* Reach those affected? To address the issue or problem, strategies must connect the intervention with those who it should benefit. For example, if the mission of the initiative is to get people into decent jobs, do the strategies (providing education and skills training, creating job opportunities, etc.) reach those currently unemployed?
* Advance the mission? Taken together, are strategies likely to make a difference on the mission and objectives? If the aim is to reduce a problem such as unemployment, are the strategies enough to make a difference on rates of employment? If the aim is to prevent a problem, such as substance abuse, have factors contributing to risk (and protection) been changed sufficiently to reduce use of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs?

1. How do you develop strategies?

Developing strategies involves brainstorming and talking to community members.

1. **Organize a brainstorming meeting with members of your organization and members of the community.**

Remember, people will work best in a relaxed and welcoming environment. You can help achieve this by:

* Making meetings a place where all members feel that their ideas are listened to and valued, and where constructive criticism may be openly voiced. To help meet these goals, you might post some "ground rules" so people feel free to express themselves. Sample ground rules might include:
* One person speaks at a time
* No interrupting each other
* Everyone's ideas are respected
* Bringing fans or heaters (if needed) so people will be comfortable.
* Asking members to escort each other home or to their cars, the subway, or the bus stop if the meeting runs late.
* Providing refreshments. Never underestimate the power of homemade food, drinks, and other treats.

The RTR Coalition held brainstorming sessions among organization members. They invited local teens, parents, teachers, counselors, church members, and other community leaders to participate in listening sessions. These were used to help develop strategies to reduce the risk of teen pregnancy. Homemade cookies, fruit, and coffee helped make participants feel welcome.

1. **Review (identify) the targets and agents of change for your initiative.**

* Your targets of change include all of the people who experience (or are at risk for) this issue or problem addressed by your initiative. Remember to be inclusive; that is, include everyone who is affected by the problem or issue or whose action or inaction contributes to it. For example, a coalition such the RTR Coalition would want to include all teenagers as potential targets of change, not just adolescents who seem particularly at risk, and parents, peers, and teachers whose actions or inactions might make a difference.
* Your agents of change include everyone who is in a position to help contribute to the solution. With the RTR Coalition, examples of agents of change might include teens, teachers, guidance counselors, parents of teens, lawmakers, and others.

1. **Review your vision, mission, and objectives to keep you on the right track**

It is helpful that to review your mission, vision, and objectives to ensure that your strategies are all aligned with the goals expressed in your previous work.

1. **Work together to brainstorm the best strategies for your initiative**

The following list of questions can be a guide for deciding on the most beneficial strategies for your group:

* What resources and assets exist that can be used to help achieve the vision and mission? How can they be used best?
* What obstacles or resistance exist that could make it difficult to achieve your vision and mission? How can you minimize or get around them?
* What are potential agents of change willing to do to serve the mission?
* Do you want to reduce the existing problem, or does it make more sense to try to prevent (or reduce risk for) problems before they start? For example, if you are trying to reduce teen sexual activity, you might consider gearing some of your strategies to younger children, for whom sex is not yet a personal issue; or, to promote academic success, to work with younger children who still have full potential for learning and school success.
* How will your potential strategies decrease the risk for experiencing the problem (e.g., young girls getting pressure for sex from older men)? How will the strategies increase protective factors (e.g., support from peers; access to contraceptives)?
* What potential strategies will affect the whole population and problem? For example, connecting youth with caring adults might be good for virtually all youth, regardless of income or past experience with the problem. Also, just one strategy, affecting just one part of the community such as schools or youth organizations, often isn't enough to improve the situation. Make sure that your strategies affect the problem or issue as a whole.
* What potential strategies reach those at particular risk for the problem? For example, early screenings might help focus on those at higher risk for heart disease or cancer; past academic failure or history of drug use, for identifying with whom support and other intervention efforts might be focused.

**Example: The strategies of the RTR Coalition**

We will pursue the following strategies to reach each of our objectives:

* Assist local churches in implementing parent-child awareness sessions (for example, a series of talks might be given discussing how to talk to your preteen about sex);
* Include comprehensive sex education in the curriculum of students from kindergarten through grade twelve, including information on abstinence, sexual decision-making skills, and family planning / contraception at age appropriate times;
* Incorporate options for teacher-led and peer support programs in the schools;
* Survey and report on student knowledge, attitudes, and behavior related to sexual issues;
* Increase access to contraception;
* Organize a school/community action group to create supervised after-school activities, mentor programs, etc.

1. **Check your proposed strategies for completeness, accuracy, and whether they contribute to the vision, mission, and objectives.**

**Section 5: Developing an Action Plan**

1. How do you write an action plan?

How to write an action plan

1. Determine what people and sectors of the community should be changed and involved in finding solutions.

If you have been using the VMOSA (Vision, Mission, Objectives, Strategies, and Action Plans) model, you might have already done this, when you were deciding upon your group's objectives. Again, try to be inclusive. Most of the health and development issues that community partnerships deal with are community-wide, and thus need a community-wide solution. Possible sectors include the media, the business community, religious organizations, schools, youth organizations, social service organizations, health organizations, and others.

Some members of the community you might consider asking to join the action planning group include:

* Influential people from all the parts of the community affected by your initiative (e.g., from churches and synagogues, the school system, law enforcement, etc.)
* People who are directly involved in the problem (e.g., local high school students and their parents might be involved in planning a coalition trying to reduce teen substance abuse)
* Members of grassroots organizations
* Members of the various ethnic and cultural groups in your community
* People you know who are interested in the problem or issue
* Newcomers or young people in the community who are not yet involved

Let's consider some of the people who were involved with the planning group for the fictional Reducing the Risks (RTR) Coalition that hopes to reduce the rate of teen pregnancy. Some of the members of this planning group included teachers at the local high school, local teenagers and their parents, members of the clergy, counselors and school nurses, staff of the county health department, and members of youth organizations, service agencies, and other organizations that focus on youth issues.

**Convene a planning group in your community to design your action plan.** This might be the same group of people who worked with you to decide your group's strategies and objectives. If you are organizing a new group of people, try to make your planning committee as diverse and inclusive as possible. Your group should look like the people most affected by the problem or issue.

Once everyone is present, go over your organization’s:

* Vision
* Mission
* Objectives
* Strategies
* Targets and agents of change (e.g., youth, parents and guardians, clergy)
* Proposed changes for each sector of the community (e.g., schools, faith community, service organizations, health organizations, government)

**Develop an action plan composed of action steps that address all proposed changes.** The plan should be complete, clear, and current. Additionally, the action plan should include information and ideas you have already gathered while brainstorming about your objectives and your strategies. What are the steps you must take to carry out your objectives while still fulfilling your vision and mission? Now it's time for all of the VMOSA components to come together. While the plan might address general goals you want to see accomplished, the action steps will help you determine the specific actions you will take to help make your vision a reality. Here are some guidelines to follow to write action steps.

Members of the community initiative will want to determine:

* What action or change will occur
* Who will carry it out
* When it will take place, and for how long
* What resources (i.e., money, staff) are needed to carry out the change
* Communication (who should know what)

**Example: The RTR Coalition's Action Plan (a sample)**

One community change sought by this coalition to prevent teen pregnancy was to increase publicity about contraception and unwanted pregnancy at the local high school.

* **What** action or change will occur: Hanging posters, displays, and other information about contraception and the facts about unwanted pregnancy in the hallways of the local high school. The posters and other information will become a permanent part of the high school. Posters and information will be regularly changed as new materials become available.
* **Who** will carry it out: A sub-committee comprised of parents and guardians, teachers, students, and coalition members will be responsible for maintaining the displays. The coalition as a whole will work towards finding funding to purchase the materials. Maria and Alex of the schools action group will be responsible for researching and ordering the materials.
* **By when** will it take place, and for how long: The coalition will try to have posters hanging and displays visible within six weeks of deciding on the action step (2/19/2013).
* **What resources** are needed to carry out the step: The coalition will approach the school district to request funding for the project. Otherwise, the group will seek funding from other sources such as foundations and local businesses to finance the program.
* **Communication** about the action step. The school principal and leadership of the Parent-Teacher Organization (PTO) should be given information about this planned change.

**Review your completed action plan carefully to check for completeness.** Make sure that each proposed change will help accomplish your group's mission. Also, be sure that the action plan taken as a whole will help you complete your mission; that is, make sure you aren't leaving anything out.

**Follow through.** One hard part (figuring out what to do) is finished. Now take your plan and run with it! Remember the 80-20 rule: successful efforts are 80% follow through on planned actions and 20% planning for success.

**Keep everyone informed about what's going on.** Communicate to everyone involved how his or her input was incorporated. No one likes to feel like her wit and wisdom has been ignored.

**Keep track of what (and how well) you've done.** Always keep track of what the group has actually done. If the community change (a new program or policy) took significant time or resources, it's also a good idea to evaluate what you have done, either formally or informally.

Keep several questions in mind for both yourself and others:

* Are we doing what we said we'd do?
* Are we doing it well?
* Is what we are doing advancing the mission?

You can address these questions informally (ask yourself, chat with friends and other people), as well as formally, through surveys and other evaluation methods.

**Celebrate a job well done!** Celebrate your accomplishments; you and those you work with deserve it. Celebration helps keep everyone excited and interested in the work they are doing.

1. After you've written your action plan: Getting members to do what they said they would

Every community organization has undoubtedly had this happen: you plan and you assign tasks to get everything you've planned to do accomplish. Everyone agrees (maybe they even offer) to do certain tasks and you all leave with a great feeling of accomplishment. The problem? At the next meeting, nothing has been done. Besides tearing out your hair, what can you do?

Fortunately, there are several things you can try. It's particularly tricky in the case of volunteers, because you don't want to lean too hard on someone who is donating their time and energy to begin with. Still, you can make it easier for members to get things done (and harder to avoid work) without acting like the mean neighbor down the street. Some of these gentle reminders include:

* Regular phone calls from staff members or dedicated volunteers asking others how they are doing with their tasks. This should be a supportive call, not a "are you doing what you're supposed to" call. The person calling can offer emotional support "how are you doing?" as well as see if the group member needs any other assistance. A friendly call such as this can be seen as helpful, give the member the sense that he is a very important part of the group, and serve as a great reminder to do what he said he would do.
* Distributing the action plan in writing to all members, with names attached to specific tasks. (Additionally, this can be a great time to ask for feedback before the plan becomes "official.")
* Making sure timelines (with due dates) are complete, clear and current.
* At regular group meetings, such as committee meetings or board meetings, ask members to report on accomplishing the tasks they have set out to do. Consider making this a regular part of the meeting.
* Celebrate the accomplishment of tasks. It's important that getting something done actually means something, and is recognized by the group as a whole.

Follow up on the action plan regularly. You are asking members to be accountable, and to get things done on a regular basis. If they have agreed, you should help them fulfill their commitment as best you can

**Examination 2: Develop an action plan for one of your activities in your organization/business**

**Section 6: Obtaining Feedback from Constituents: What Changes are Important and Feasible**

1. How do you obtain feedback from constituents?

**How to obtain feedback from constituents**

Ask yourself the right questions

**What do you want to know?**

Some information that you could gather just won’t be used, and so it's simply not worth the staff time to gather it. For example, perhaps you have received a grant to reduce teen pregnancy in your community. Whether or not the community perceives teen pregnancy as a problem may be less important to you than other issues, because the program is going to be implemented either way. In such a case, it might make sense for your group to use your resources in a different way, such as to determine what specific needs regarding teen pregnancy need to be addressed.

**Who has already done this?**

Check to see if someone, such as researchers or another agency, has already done a survey in your community asking the same questions that you would like answered. Your coalition is undoubtedly busy enough; don't try to reinvent the wheel.

**Who do you want to ask?**

Decide whom you would like to survey. There are a variety of people you might decide to question, depending on what you would like to find out.

Possible respondents might include:

* The targets of change, or those whose actions you would like to change
* The people most affected by the problem you are addressing
* Professionals in your area
* Local administrators (directors, coordinators, principals, etc.)
* Possible or current funders for your program
* Elected officials
* Journalists
* Researchers and field experts
* Members of your coalition

Further, decide if you want to obtain your information in a closed manner (surveying a select group of people) or in an open manner (anyone who is willing to pick up a pencil or open their mouths for a few minutes). Be careful not to ask administrators to tell you the needs of those most affected; rather, ask those who are most affected themselves.

**How many people would you like to ask?**

If you are only surveying the active members of a small coalition (say, less than 50 members), you might try to survey everyone. If you would like to learn about the feelings of the teenagers in your coalition with regards to drug abuse, however, you might find it unfeasible to survey every teen, and instead randomly choose a smaller, more workable group to question.

**How do you want to ask people?**

This may be done in a variety of ways, including:

* Listen to the opinions of people you know, researchers at planning agencies, people who work in the same or a similar field, and anyone else you can think of
* Suggestion boxes
* Noting chance meetings or comments in a log
* Feedback forms on publications such as brochures or on an agency newsletter
* Comment logs by the phone
* Designated "critique times at meetings"
* A formal survey: either by personal interviews, a phone survey, or a written survey

**Good tips**

* Keep it secret. Always try to provide instructions that minimize any possibility of bias. For example, don't discuss what you hope to learn, what you believe to be true, or what earlier surveys have told you when you are writing the instructions. When possible, allow surveys to be anonymous.
* Keep your eyes and ears open. Be responsive to all possible means of obtaining data, such as learning what has been said at public protests, what complaints have been lodged or actions taken, etc.
* Make the best of it. If the response you get from constituents isn't what you hoped for--for example, if they respond that what your coalition is doing isn't really important--reassess what you are doing, and brainstorm ideas of what else you might do to sway public opinion.

1. How do you conduct a survey?

**Obtaining formal feedback: Conducting a survey**

There are volumes upon volumes of information suggesting how you might do this, but please consider the following information as a starting point when putting together your survey.

1. **Decide how you would like to conduct your survey.**

First, should it be written or oral?

There are several advantages and disadvantages of each that you should take into account:

* An oral survey (in person, on the phone) is often less formal, and may be easier to initiate and conduct. However, the body language or tone of the interviewer may affect the respondent's answers, and of course, anonymity is not an option for spoken interviews. Further, responses from an oral interview are more likely to be vague and rambling, taking up valuable time as well as being difficult to chart.
* A written survey may be formal and exact, and thus in the long run more efficient. However, it may be more difficult to convince people to respond to a mailed written survey than to respond orally, despite the real amount of time involved. Just think: if someone called and asked you to answer a few questions, you'd probably say yes, unless you were really pressed for time. However, if you got the same list of questions in the mail, you might think about answering them, and then forget, or misplace the letter, or just throw it away.) To get around this barrier, consider giving a survey to a "captive audience," such as a group at a meeting or in a class.

1. **Decide how to format your questions.**

They may be written using open or closed questions.

* Closed questions allow the respondent to answer from a menu of different choices. This menu might be as simple as responding to a yes/no question. It also might take the form of several words (for example, "Which of the following seems to be the biggest health concern in our community?"), or a rating scale ("On a scale of one to five, with five being most important, how would you rate the importance of stopping merchants from selling alcohol to minors?"). A rating scale is often a simple yet very effective way to learn the feelings of the people taking the survey. Five point scales (between one and five) and seven point scales are often the norm when doing a survey in this manner.
* Open questions allow the respondent to answer questions in their own words, without prompts from the survey. An example of an open question would be, "What do you think is the most important health concern facing our community, and why do you think so?" The advantage of using open questions is that you are able to get deeper, more thoughtful answers than from closed questions. However, open questions may also lead to vague answers that are hard to interpret and use.
* To get the best of both worlds, you might consider using a survey with closed questions that leaves room for additional comments.

1. **To the extent that it is possible, remove all possibility of bias from your survey.**

This includes:

* When possible, don't require (or even ask for) the names of the respondents;
* Avoid discussing any expectations you might have for this survey;
* Don’t discuss previous survey results.

1. **Don't forget your manners.**

If your mother was going to respond to this survey, what would she want to see? Be sure to thank respondents ahead of time, let them know how you will use any information that you gather, and thank them again afterwards.

1. **Make it easy.**

The less respondents are directly involved in your project, the less likely they are to be willing to take a lot of time filling out a survey or discussing an issue. Keep your survey as short as possible while still getting the information that you want to know. A good rule of thumb is simply; don't ask questions you're not going to use.

1. **Make it easier.**

If you are mailing your survey, make it easy to return. Always include a self-addressed stamped envelope.

1. **Keep your cool.**

Don't be frustrated if only a small number of mailed surveys are returned to you; in fact, you should probably expect this. A "normal" return rate might only be about half of the surveys that you send out are actually completed.

**Section 7: Identifying Action Steps in Bringing About Community and System Change**

1. How do you identify action steps?
2. **Determine what your group, as a whole and individually, is really good at.**

Are you great at fund raising? Do you have a member who happens to write for the local paper? Brainstorm all the possible strengths of your group, no matter how off the wall they might seem. (You never know when an award-winning tuba player will be just what you need!)

1. **Brainstorm different, specific ways that these strengths can be used to carry out the changes that you have decided upon.**

Example:

If your organization is trying to bring about increased access to contraceptives for area youth, you might send your best politician to area drug stores to ask to pharmacists to provide contraception in a confidential way. Then, ask the graphic artist in your group to design a card with the names of the pharmacies that will do so.

1. **Consider the possible barriers to implementing your proposed changes, but don't stop there, then consider possible ways to remove these barriers.**

Some questions you might ask yourselves include:

* Do we have enough money to carry out your proposed action steps? (Are there any grants we can apply for?)
* Do we have enough manpower? (Can we recruit more volunteers?)
* Do we have enough time to carry out these changes?
* Are these action steps things people can get excited about?
* What kind of opposition can we expect if we put our plan into effect? Are there ways to get around it?

For instance, in the example given above dealing with contraceptives, pharmacists might be worried that their name next to the slogan, "Get your condoms here!" might hurt their business. A card that just had the names and phone numbers of your agency and of their establishments, however, might calm these fears and give the pharmacies some free, welcome publicity.

1. **Brainstorm different ways (your action steps) to go about implementing the proposed changes in each sector that you have chosen.**

Be sure to have someone take good notes! Again, make sure each action step includes:

* What will occur
* How much, or to what extent, these actions will occur
* Who will carry out these changes
* When these changes will take place, and for how long
* What resources (such as money and staff) are needed to carry out these changes

**Example: The RTR Coalition**

One action step might include increasing publicity about contraception and unwanted pregnancy at the local high school.

* What action or change will occur: Hanging posters, displays, and other information about contraception and the facts about unwanted pregnancy in the hallways of the local high school.
* How much, or to what extent, this action will occur: The posters and other information will become a permanent part of the high school. Posters and information will be regularly changed as new materials become available.
* Who will carry it out: A sub-committee comprised of parents, teachers, students, and coalition members will be responsible for maintaining the displays. The coalition as a whole will work towards finding funding to purchase the materials. Several coalition members will be responsible for researching and ordering the materials.
* When will it take place, and for how long: The coalition will try to have posters hanging and displays visible within six months of implementing the action step.
* What resources are needed to carry out the step: The coalition will try to approach the school district to request funding for the project. Otherwise, the coalition will seek funding from other sources such as foundations to finance the program. To make the process as clear as possible, members of the coalition should account for each point of each action step. Then, with written goals in hand, you will have the concrete steps you need to take in order to implement your plan.

1. **Determine a final list of action steps for each community sector from the ideas that came from your brainstorming.**

Try to determine lists that are feasible, effective, and comprehensive.

**Example:**

Some strategies for preventing child abuse and neglect (from the Center for Community Health and Development's Preventing Child Abuse and Neglect: An Action Planning Guide for Building a Caring Community), listed by community sector:

Changes in the schools:

* Provide training on anger management and stress reduction techniques for parents.
* Require classes in prevention of child abuse and neglect for renewal of teacher certification and for school nurses.
* Provide space and supervision on school facilities for weekend, after-school, and vacation activities for children.

Changes in health organizations:

* Provide health care credits for parents who participate in child abuse and neglect workshops.
* Provide training for health professionals on screening for abuse and neglect.
* Develop specific and comprehensive policies regarding mandatory reporting.

Changes in businesses and work sites:

* Offer workshops on stress relief and anger management to employees.
* Offer training on parenting skills, including prenatal and infant care.
* Provide flexible work schedule to accommodate parents' schedules.

Changes in government and social services:

* Provide tax incentives to parents who participate in child abuse prevention activities, such as classes on parenting skills
* Develop comprehensive laws regarding perpetrators of child abuse and neglect
* Increase protection for all victims of domestic violence through specific policies and access to shelters.

Changes in community organizations:

* Provide a community board that lists job openings, day-care and important community dates and events.
* Provide help in obtaining public or legal assistance for families in need.
* Increase the number of agencies and organizations that conduct parenting classes.

Changes in religious organizations:

* Create a network among ministers to discuss strategies for preventing abuse and neglect.
* Provide counseling and follow-up with people who feel at risk for abusing a loved one.
* Distribute inserts for church bulletins on the prevention of child abuse and neglect.

1. **Pat yourself on the back for getting all your planning done, take a deep breath, and go do what you've said you are going to!**

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