Creating a Vision Statement[1]

A vision statement should be compelling and inspiring and motivate people to work together toward shared success. It is a succinct way to describe the ideal result a partnership is seeking. One well-known organizational tenet is that the group will never be greater than the vision that guides it; thus, the development of a vision statement requires that partners think boldly and set high goals.

Successful partnerships engage in a thoughtful process to define their shared vision. This requires taking all the time that is needed to ensure complete agreement and understanding among all the partners. The objective is to obtain consensus, not compromise, so that all partners are enthusiastic about the work that lies ahead. A clear vision serves as both the glue that holds a partnership together and as a rudder that directs its actions. If all of the partners are committed to the same goals, then they are better equipped to negotiate the inevitable differences of perspective and opinion that arise as they work together. Likewise, if the goals are held firm, the partnership can be flexible in how they are accomplished.

Flexibility is essential to accommodate political, economic, leadership or other changes, and clear goals help guide the partnership as it evolves over time. The composition of the planning team should reflect that program and community nature and include such relevant participants in the community.

It is also highly recommended that the group use an outside facilitator for this process. The role of the facilitator is to serve as a neutral party to ensure that all ideas are considered. The greatest benefit of an outside facilitator is that he or she comes to the table without any preconceived ideas. As a truly neutral party, the facilitator will be able to clarify options and sort through differences that are almost certain to arise. In the best-case scenario, the facilitator will be familiar with the language of and issues around Adult Basic Education. If the facilitator is new to ABE, it will be helpful to provide him/her with a list of commonly used vocabulary and a brief introduction into some of the issues that are likely to emerge. Regardless of his/her background, it is always helpful to give the facilitator some information on the participants who will be at the meeting.

"A vision is a description in words that conjures up a similar picture for each member of the group of the destination of the group's work together." [2]

Preparing the Partnership to Develop Its Vision

Before beginning the session, the facilitator will need to lay out ground rules for the meeting. The following suggestions should help keep the process on track:

[1] Adapted from *Creating a Vision for After School Partnerships,* After School Investments Project, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Child Care Bureau

[2] Sharon Deich, A Guide to Successful Public-Private Partnerships for Out-of-School Time and Community School Initiatives (Washington, D.C.: The Finance Project, January 2001).

1. Establish a "parking lot." A variety of important issues are likely to arise during discussion of the vision statement. In order to keep the group on task, the facilitator will have to decide which issues are central to the discussion and which should be considered at a later time. The issues to be discussed later should be placed in a "parking lot." The most common way to keep track of such issues is to post them on a sheet of flip-chart paper and keep it in a place where the group can refer to it throughout the meeting. At the end of the session, the group should review the issues placed in the "parking lot" and decide how they will be resolved.

2. Agree upon a common vocabulary for the partnership. "Community Adult Learning Centers (CALCs)," "ACLS," "ABE," "adult learners," "next steps," are just a few of the terms used to describe programs and activities in which ABE programs engage. Before beginning the discussion of a common vision, the partners need to agree on the language they will use to describe their common work.

3. Determine how the group will make decisions. The partnership will have to establish clear rules for how and when it will move forward. Most partnerships want to see unanimous consent from the partners before moving forward. Some establish methods, such as the "thumbs-up/thumbs-down" approach to determine if the group is ready to move forward with a decision.

4. Modify the exercises to meet the need of your group. Agreeing on the vision statement involved negotiation about what was core to the partnership's work and what is part of, but not central to its vision. Developing the vision statement will give focus on how the partnership will proceed. Creating a vision is more of an art than a science, and the facilitator and partners should feel free to adapt the exercises to best meet the needs of the group.

Addressing "Hot" Topics

Community planning partnerships bring together stakeholders from different backgrounds. Each of these partners has a unique culture and approach to addressing community issues, and friction may develop as new groups of stakeholders sit down to find their common purpose. A facilitator who is knowledgeable about such "hot" topics can help address potentially sticky issues. The facilitator can also reassure the group that all partnerships will face times when members cannot quickly agree on a solution or strategy but that part of this process is finding the common ground. The key to diffusing conflicting issues is to focus on the middle ground where both opportunities for exploration and support are provided.

Thumbs-up/thumbs-down: This approach to decision-making involves asking each partner to vote on various decisions with his or her thumb. Partners have the option of showing a thumb up to indicate agreement, thumb down to indicate disagreement or thumb to the side to indicate indecision. The group may then choose to hear from those who disagree or are undecided to see where more information or discussion is needed. As the groups move forward with their common vision there will be other opportunities to discuss this issue.

Competition versus cooperation. Inevitably, efforts to engage a wide group of stakeholders may bring together potential partners who see themselves as competitors rather than collaborators. Successful partnerships must develop a level of trust before moving forward as a group. Competitive behavior can derail these efforts.

Facilitators can take several steps to keep competition to a minimum. First and most important is the task of helping all participants understand how everyone will benefit from a successful partnership. To address this, the facilitator may ask partners to set aside their individual organizational agendas, with an agreement that time will be made available at the end of the meeting to discuss how the day's events, plans and decisions would affect the individual partner organizations. A second approach to minimize competition is to find ways for competitors to support each other. In each of these cases, competitive situations can be transformed into cooperative solutions. As the group works to develop the vision, the facilitator needs to keep participants focused on issues that must be addressed immediately versus those which are better put in the "parking lot" for later discussion. In general, when developing a vision, it is best to put issues of program design or implementation into the parking lot and to focus on issues of strategies and approaches.

Creating a Vision Statement: Step-by-Step

While there are many different exercises for developing a shared vision, most rely on a three step process. That process: 1) begins with brainstorming ideas; 2) involves crafting a vision from the results of brainstorming; and 3) ends with a review of the final vision statement by the group to ensure unanimous support.

1. Brainstorming

This section provides two alternative brainstorming techniques for generating the vision statement. While there are many variations on these techniques, the following two approaches have been successfully employed in a wide variety of circumstances. The facilitator should feel free to adapt the exercises to best meet the needs of the partnership.

Option One: Looking into the future
The facilitator provides the following directions to the group: Imagine it is five years from now and a magazine is writing a feature story on the success of your statewide afterschool partnership. As a team, you need to come up with a headline and an opening paragraph for the article.

The facilitator then asks each member to generate a headline and a sentence or two for the first paragraph. In small groups of 4-6 people, common themes and phrases are generated. The small groups then report to each other, and a combined list of common themes and phrases is produced. That list is used to craft the vision statement.

Option Two: The ideal partnership
The facilitator asks the group: If you could imagine an ideal ABE partnership, what would it look like? What functions would it serve? What would result from this effort?

Each participant is given about 5-6 index cards to write down his or her thoughts. As the participants finish, the notes are posted on the wall. Participants then organize the notes by ideas and key words. Individuals can move around the notes, or for a large group, the facilitator can move them. Once the notes have been sorted, the facilitator summarizes the ideas and key phrases. That summary is then used to generate the vision statement.

As the group works toward agreement on a vision statement, the following questions can help guide discussions:

- Is the vision statement bold enough to inspire yet credible enough that stakeholders believe it can come true?
- Is the vision focused on the future?
- Does the vision spark and sustain passion?
- Does the vision clarify your direction and instill a sense of common commitment?
- Does the vision mobilize and coordinate efforts into a single cohesive enterprise?
- Can the vision see you through the hard times as well as the good?
- Does the vision act as a living reminder of what is important and what can be achieved?
- Does the vision statement build loyalty by providing an ideal that is valuable to all members?

2. Drafting the Vision Statement

At the conclusion of the brainstorming session, the group should appoint a small team to draft one or two statements. Another option is to have the facilitator draft a statement based on the input of the group. If this exercise is part of a longer meeting, the small group or facilitator can present the draft statements at the conclusion of the meeting–leaving time for discussion. If the draft vision statements are to be presented at a later time, be sure to schedule that meeting for the near future.

3. Reviewing and Revising the Statement

Once the drafts are ready, they must be presented to the group so a statement that all partners find satisfactory can be selected. Once the partnership is in agreement on a statement, each member of the team will have the opportunity to present it to members of his or her organization and others with whom they work closely. It is expected that the vision statement will go through several revisions before it is ready to be shared publicly.

Moving Forward with Your Vision

With a vision statement in hand, it is now time to begin putting your partnership in place. Keep a copy of your vision statement handy—some partnerships choose to begin each meeting by reviewing it. Throughout this work, the partnership will be continually challenged to connect its actions to the vision. This will require staying focused on the big picture, regularly reexamining priorities, and spending time and making time to think strategically and systematically. The vision statement is the first tool the partnership has to make the vision a reality. Put it on a brochure or fact sheet about the new partnership; use it to interest new partners and supports; and mark the progress of the group towards achieving the vision.