

Effective Local Government Priority Setting

By Rick Beauchamp

By now many of us have had an opportunity to reflect on our new year resolutions and establish our personal priorities for 2009 and beyond. It is now time to establish our corporate priorities with our new councils and boards for the next three years. There is an old saying, "If you don't know where you are going you are never going to get there." Truer words have not been spoken when it comes to establishing a collective vision of what should be accomplished by local governments during the next three year mandate. Before we know it, three years will have passed and there will be another civic election before us. When your constituents look at your municipal or regional organization in three years time what will they acknowledge and thank you for doing today, this week, this month or the next three years?

One of council's primary roles is to establish key corporate priorities for the organization; hopefully in close consultation with senior staff to ensure that there is a clear understanding of what key goals to be accomplished over the next three years are. It is extremely important for council and staff to be in sync with one another. Staff needs a clear mandate in order to keep focused and deliver effective service to the electorate. Priority setting provides an opportunity to connect corporate goals with the corporation's documented vision, mission and values that may be found in corporate documents such as official community plans or corporate business plans. Regardless of the size of the organization, it is important that a collective vision be established to help keep both political and administrative energy focused towards an agreed upon priority action plan that can be measured for accountability by the electorate. There are a number of challenges and pitfalls to watch out for when establishing your corporate priorities including:

1. Collective Vision

Local governments are changing at a rapid rate. Whether it is an imbalanced tax base, climate change or demographic shift these changes need to be reflected in the official vision for the community. As noted, one of the biggest challenges facing organizations in establishing their priorities is the lack of a collective vision between council and staff. If there is no collective vision of the future or defined change in direction then there is risk of council not supporting staff and the electorate not supporting council. Everyone needs to be singing from the same song sheet.

2. Specific Goals

Specific goals let staff know exactly what is expected of them with no room for misinterpretation and should answer:

- who is responsible
- what is to be accomplished
- when this must be done

- why is this important and
- what requirements or constraints are involved?

Priorities must be specifically defined if you are going to be able to measure your accomplishments.

3. Attainable Results

Many organizations fail to accomplish their priorities as a result of setting overly lofty goals that are unattainable thereby serving as demotulators rather than motivators for their staff. By setting ambitious, yet realistic goals, you will inspire staff to help leverage their talents and available opportunities in order achieve corporate priorities.

4. Ranking Priorities

There are a number of approaches to take when ranking priorities but one effective method is taking the list and ranking them as:

- *Priority 1: Must Do* – these are the highest priority goals
- *Priority 2: Should Do* – these goals should be achieved but it is not essential
- *Priority 3: Nice to Do* – but not necessary.

Another method used is ranking priorities into high, medium and low priorities.

5. Public Involvement

Engaging citizens in strategic goal setting is increasingly being seen as an effective way not only to identify citizens' priorities but also to incorporate a variety of different perspectives with priorities. Using the public as partners, and fostering a facilitation process, allows the public to be collaborators in the development of key strategic goals. The process recognizes that citizens are members of the political community and part of the process in developing a guiding document for the organization. Public engagement can take time and requires willingness to incorporate public feedback into the priorities and can create unrealistic expectations regarding how public input will be used in developing strategic goals.

6. Measuring Results

When setting priorities it is important to set specific criteria for measuring progress. This gives staff a way to stay on track, aim for target dates and report the results. It is also important to report to the general public the progress and results of the corporate objectives in a manner than can be easily understood. Using the KISS (keep it simple stupid) principle should be considered when sharing this information using a number of applications such as the annual report for the corporation, newsletters and website for reporting results. Celebrating results is important to help build staff moral and also gauge community acceptance of corporate objectives.

Summary

Local governments are facing many challenges with some having to try to ward off a diminishing tax base along with demands to deliver more services with fewer resources. Taking the time to prioritize goals for the next three years is particularly important. It is wise not to set too many goals as it is better to complete fewer goals than to start too many with a few or no finished results. Council and staff collaboration in establishing a clear vision with a list of realistic, yet achievable goals is one of the keys to reaching these objectives.

Remember... Rome was not built in a day and breaking goals into incremental projects over a three year period may allow for greater success.

Good luck!

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