

Elements of Community Visioning: A Perspective

Bridget Murphy and Summer White Eagle

Graduate Students, Training & Development

Keywords: Community visioning, intervention, community planning, future, global drivers, catalyst for change, collaborative

Abstract

Visioning has found success for individuals, organizations and communities as an intervention for change. This process is used as a catalyst for change that involves all stakeholders. Although visioning has some disadvantages, the process has found high levels of success and has made significant social, environmental, and economic impacts on communities and their members. Within this paper, elements of the process of visioning and its advantages and disadvantages will be discussed. An example of how the Wisconsin Rapids intervention was conducted and the subsequent results will be examined.

The word “visioning,” at its most elementary level, can conjure up dreams of seeing into the future or looking into a crystal ball to see a glimpse of events to come. Although visioning in this respect may not seem to relate to the community, it is essentially at the heart of what community visioning is. Visioning requires dreaming and using the most active parts of one’s imagination.

In a professional sense, visioning is a term used to refer to a personal, organizational, or community intervention in which individuals or members develop and describe their desired vision of the future (French & Bell, 1999). Within the development of the vision, a time frame is usually set some distance into the future. This imagined future may be anywhere from six months to 30 years in the future. Community members are required to imagine the future as they would like to see it in the most pristine or perfect sense. In essence, the participants are creating a mental paradise for life in the future for themselves, their organization, or their community. This intervention is focused on the most positive aspects of the future and does not dwell on problems or figurative bumps in the road.

The Basic Visioning Process

Techniques for launching the visioning process can vary. Sometimes there is a catalyst that requires this type of intervention, other times there is a perceived situation in the future that requires future planning. Whether it is a catalyst or a part of a planned process, a visioning process can begin in different ways.

Although some prefer quiet reflection time and small phrases to record the vision, others feel working with abstract objects or tools allow the imagination to flourish (French & Bell, 1999). They believe going beyond the pen and paper allows the imagination to become more fluid for a better vision to be imagined. Although the catalysts for launching the vision vary, the following components are relatively the same. These components include: the sharing of the vision without debate, the refocusing of the vision whereby all members buy into the newly created vision, and the development of an action plan to make the vision a reality (French &

Bell, 1999; Clemmer, 2006). These components may not happen during the first session of visioning, but they are essential if the overall intervention will find success.

Community Visioning

One major use of visioning is in the community. This type of intervention gathers community members together to develop and describe their vision of what they want their community to be like in the future. The time frame may be anywhere from six months to 20 or 30 years in the future. Like all forms of visioning, this technique uses images of potential rather than problems as starting points for change (French & Bell, 1999).

The objective of visioning is to make a difference for the community by creating a vision for the preferred future and then developing the capacity to make that vision a reality. Visioning helps define where a community wants to be and provides a framework for determining strategic actions. It is a grassroots movement and provides confidence in community support.

Advantages to Community Visioning

There are numerous advantages to community visioning. This technique utilizes a broad range of viewpoints and expertise in the community. Through this group process, ideas can be tested, discussed, and refined by people with diverse perspectives. Community leaders can gain residents' commitment by implementing action-oriented activities and team-building activities to foster cooperation among the members of the community. The visioning process broadens everyone's understanding of the issues, challenges, and opportunities facing the community.

In many cases, community planning is done by the economically elite. The community visioning process is unique in that it reflects a variety of perspectives inside the community and is formed through careful dialogue and thought. When each member is allowed to contribute to the visioning process without immediate debate, a variety of perspectives are allowed to be heard. The process itself invokes pride in the community and stretches thinking, when a positive future is envisioned for the community. This represents a critical focal point and the beginning of high performance.

Peter Senge (1994, p. 214) believes that "the origin of the vision is much less important than the process whereby it comes to be shared." He suggests that a vision is not truly shared until it connects with the personal visions of people throughout the community. In this sense, the focus of a visioning project is to hear all voices of the community. Through the process of community visioning, a variety of perspectives from the group are shared. Although visioning can sometimes be reflective of the most ideal and almost impossible to achieve scenarios, it does allow for thinking beyond the normal goals and objectives that often limit the community by the wants of only a few.

Disadvantages of Community Visioning

On the downside, this intervention does require long-term commitment. In some communities, this commitment could span decades and generations. It can also span significant advances in technology, changing demographics, and culture shifts that interfere or make the original vision obsolete. This intervention requires the willingness to make significant changes and leaps beyond normal thinking, especially when groups have primarily held traditional views or evidenced short-sighted thinking when creating goals or objectives.

The development of a marketing plan is often necessary to communicate the message to citizens in the community. Finding solutions to working around an individual or group's agenda

can also pose a challenge. It may be challenging to give a healthy balance of attention to each of the areas determined to be important in the community. For example, equal attention would need to be devoted to issues in the following areas: environmental, social, financial, human, political and cultural (C. Loden, personal communication, April 2, 2007).

A final requirement that may hinder this intervention is that once an action plan is created, it takes conscientious follow-through and nurturing if it will become a reality in the future (Clemmer, 2006). This goes beyond a dedication of time or group of individuals that foster the original vision; it takes the whole community and the future community to make the vision a reality.

Characteristics of Communities with a Common Vision

Communities that have engaged in creating a common vision generally have a population with a higher average level of education (J. Fox, personal communication, March 30, 2007¹). These communities tend to benefit from an upward trend in employment and a downward trend in the percentage of population not in the labor force. They typically provide adequate products and services to their residents and possess the administrative and managerial capacity to run and promote their community. These communities also tend to have a higher proportion of owner-occupied accommodations and a lower proportion of rented accommodations.

Communities who vision often have a younger population and a healthy exchange of ideas internally. These communities have a higher proportion of residents working in the creative class (scientists and engineers, university professors, poets and architects) and possess community foundation resources made available by members of the community for collective benefit (J. Fox, personal communication, March 30, 2007). They generally have high-tech occupations and industries and a lower proportion of lower skilled jobs. This contributes to the availability of a variety of experts to provide the breadth of services that residents expect. Communities who engage in the visioning process typically have an optimistic attitude towards change and benefit from decentralized decision making.

Case Study of a Community Visioning Intervention

In 2004, the Wisconsin Rapids/Biron/Grand Rapids areas of Wisconsin initiated the internationally recognized Community Progress Initiative, which used community visioning as a key component to engage citizens to take an active role in creating their future. The primary goals of the project are to create a business-friendly environment and empower entrepreneurs, shape a shared vision for people throughout the region, create new jobs, build the area's endowed charitable assets to support sustainable community development, motivate emerging leaders to drive positive change, and inspire community spirit and pride (Progress Initiative, 2005). Community Progress Initiative encourages citizens to learn about and actively participate in this process to build a strong and positive community while simultaneously creating a business friendly culture.

This process began at the first stakeholder invitational meeting, when the outside facilitator described the major emerging global drivers impacting the world. Based on the deliberations of the 2007 World Economic Forum, these drivers were identified as increased energy consumption and use, wealth in the United States being distributed to fewer people, a dramatic increase in wealth and workforce size in China and India, a decline in United States

economic power in the world, and media power shifting to the internet and away from traditional media (D. Beurle, personal communication, March 30, 2007²).

The second step in the process was to have the community stakeholder attendees identify key forces or drivers shaping the future of the local region. These key forces were described and clarified during a brainstorming session, and tallied by the facilitators. Identified key drivers potentially shaping the Wisconsin Rapids region included the entrepreneurial culture and environment, agriculture, climate change, downtown revitalization, and tourism (Progress Initiative, 2005). Through the collaborative process, each driver was rated on importance for the future and its degree of uncertainty. The drivers were then mapped on two axes; one axis depicted the level of uncertainty while the other denoted the level of importance. Drivers that rated high on both factors were examined and from these seven cluster networks were identified: Cranberry Agriculture, Downtown Revitalization, New E-conomies, Paper and Forestry Products, Small Business Development, Tourism, and Workforce Training and Education (D. Beurle, personal communication, March 30, 2007).

With the identification of the clusters, the stakeholder attendees defined four plausible future directions for the region and developed detailed narratives of the implications of each of the four possible directions. This process is known as Scenario Shaping of Clusters of Drivers (C. Loden, personal communication, March 30, 2007³). Through a societal, economic, and environmental filter, this process projects what a particular cluster might look like if there is too much or too little development. It is a valuable exercise because people are able to think about what potential scenarios could look like in 20-30 years. For example, if the Tourism Cluster were to be developed too rapidly and without enough planning, initially the business could be seen as good but in the long run it could be detrimental to the overall image and/or value of the community as a whole (D. Beurle, personal communication, March 30, 2007).

The purpose of the Scenario Planning Process is to identify a preferred future and the key strategic actions needed to move towards the preferred scenario. In the case of the Wisconsin Rapids/Biron/Grand Rapids areas, the community stakeholders did some modeling to predict what things would look like and identified specific objectives and actions for each of the clusters. For example, the New E-conomies Cluster had three objectives: address the technological concerns of the community and develop an excellent technology structure, form an Ideas Incubator to match ideas to resources in the community to create a system for the growth of new ventures, and create a Portal Website⁴ (Progress Initiative, 2005). The cluster group's specific tasks were to form committees and map out the phases, timeline, and objectives of the Portal Website as well as procure a grant for the development of the Ideas Incubator.

The Community Progress Initiative was initially a three-year project, but the community has chosen to continue the project to focus on making a stronger future happen for all citizens (Progress Initiative, 2005). Citizens involved in the Community Progress Initiative realize that joining a cluster group is one of the most viable ways to build the community. People in the Wisconsin Rapids/Biron/Grand Rapids areas have aligned themselves around a preferred future and are able to see beyond their own self-interest to build that future. The visioning process started to show how the pieces fit together, and through this process, the citizens began to see a greater role in their community (D. Beurle, personal communication March 30, 2007).

Continuing the Visioning Process

The visioning process has been refined and practiced with successful results in engaging new leadership in communities. It is extremely inclusive and uses a widely communicated, open

call to action to encourage maximum citizen participation and create excitement about the future. This process, however, must be supported by specific plans to implement and maintain the vision. Community leaders have to commit to the process itself as the visioning must have follow-through and nurturing. It remains a perpetual process that is always looking towards the potential future of the community, by revisiting and reshaping the vision each year. This is not a onetime process, but the beginning of an ongoing mission for the community. The Wisconsin Rapids Community Progress Initiative is currently celebrating its fourth year and has been recognized internationally as a model in community economic development by the International Community Development Society as the 2006 Innovative Project (Progress Initiative, 2005).

Conclusion

Although visioning can be an ideal catalyst for change, there are always limitations to its success. Due to its time commitment and longevity, visioning must be fostered beyond the individual or small group level. It cannot be the vision of just a few in a community or the elite, it must be fostered and respected by all stakeholders.

With limitations clearly realized, visioning in communities can make a profound impact. As in the case of the intervention in the Wisconsin community, major components of the community were affected. These components include the society as a whole, the economic sector, and the environment. Although visioning may take a significant amount of time to realize, the process of creating the vision and the journey towards that ultimate dream have immediate benefits for communities.

References

- Clemmer, J. (2006). Organizational visioning pathways and pitfalls. *Expert Magazine*. Retrieved April 16, 2007, from http://www.expertmagazine.com/artman/publish/article_835.shtml
- French, W., & Bell, C. (1999). *Organization development*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Martin, J. (1995). *The great transition*. New York: American Management Association.
- Progress Initiative. (2005). *Progress initiative report to community*. Retrieved May 1, 2007, from <http://64.233.167.104/search?q=cache:zOrFmrNPcNUJ:www.progressinitiative.com/reporttocommunity.pdf+Wisconsin+Rapids+%22community+visioning%22&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=2&gl=us>
- Senge, P. (1994). *The fifth discipline fieldbook: strategies and tools for building a learning organization*. New York: Doubleday.

Footnotes

¹ Juliet R. Fox, Senior Lecturer, University of Wisconsin – Stout, Communication Technologies and Director of the Dunn County Community Visioning.

² David Beurle, Found and Managing Director of Innovative Leadership Australia (ILA)

³ Connie Loden, Manager of Loden Consulting Services, Certified Economic Developer, Past-President of Wisconsin Rural Partners and Wisconsin Rural Leadership Program, Vice-President of Operations for the Community Development Society, Executive Director of Heart of Wisconsin Business and Economic Alliance.

⁴ Portal Website is a collaborative effort to bring together community resources, link them to one site that brands the Central Wisconsin area and make the area's assets visible to a wide audience.