



SETTING PRIORITIES – FACILITATING CHANGE IN ANXIOUS TIMES

© 2009 Maryland Association of Nonprofit Organizations

Priorities serve as decision making aides throughout an organization, supporting everyone by giving them clear benchmarks against which they can measure their work and personally prioritize their efforts. For priorities to work, they must be set with thought and be relevant to the realities of both the organization and the individuals within the organization. Setting priorities generally involves change, so must provide balance for both the *exuberant* who enjoy change and the *reticent* who avoid it.

Each priority should be viewed as a mini strategic plan and should be:

- 1. Mission Critical:** The priority must be directly related to and articulated in reference to fulfilling the mission of the organization in such a clear way that few would question the connection. If your mission is too broad or general so as not to provide clear direction, then construct a purpose statement that narrows your focus.
This will keep the exuberant focused and the reticent reassured.
- 2. Contextually Relevant:** The priority must directly relate to the external realities the organization is facing. This requires a good understanding of what is happening outside your organization that is directly influencing and/or impacting your work – in essence that to which you are responding. You must be able to articulate what is forcing you to make a change and why you have to make it.
This will keep the exuberant from spending valuable energy on non-critical issues and will give the reticent a rationale for why things need to change.
- 3. Organizationally Relevant:** Priorities do not exist in a vacuum. They must have some link to the history, culture, and vision of the organization. This is not to say that priorities should maintain the status-quo, but rather that they need to acknowledge the starting place from which the new path leads. The priority must be able to address the question “How does an organization like ours do that?”
The reticent will see that the priority, although a change, still has a basis in the core values of the organization. The exuberant will refrain from inadvertently redefining the organizational values and shocking the system.
- 4. Achievable:** Priorities must have tangible goals and/or outcomes that encourage rather than discourage people. When communicating priorities, everyone must be able to see the path that needs to be traveled and see a glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel.
The reticent will more easily take the risk if they see a clearer picture of what success will look like while the exuberant will keep goals realistic and manageable.
- 5. Supported:** People cannot be asked to focus on priorities they do not understand, are under-resourced to achieve, or are beyond the scope of their current skills. For example, if budget accountability is a priority, all staff must be educated in the budget process, be informed of what numbers are included in the budget, and understand what elements of the budget they can control and how. The organization’s leaders must determine what support individuals need to achieve the goals set forth by a priority and provide it.
The exuberant and the reticent wont feel left out in the cold.

For more on setting priorities during tough times, see

WWW.MARYLANDNONPROFITS.ORG/HTML/SUPPORT/STRATEGYNOW.ASP