Can't We All Just Get Along?
How to Reduce Conflict by Effectively Setting Priorities

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Project completion—or the lack of it—is a common source of conflict between elected officials and staff.

Elected officials often have different perspectives and motivations than staff members do. While councilmembers may strive to respond to their constituents quickly, staff often is focused on maintaining daily operations and ongoing major projects. People will have their own expectations based on their own perspectives. Add to this fact the inevitable special projects that arise, and you have a recipe for frustration.

It is normal and expected for elected officials to hold different priorities from those of staff. The friction occurs when there is a gap between expectations and accomplishments, and this can fuel real conflict. The bottom line is that both elected officials and staff want to get things finished.

Doing a good job up-front to evaluate what needs to be done, and placing projects in the proper priority, are critical to helping local governments deliver completed projects to their citizens. This success can do a lot to reduce potential conflict between elected officials and staff and, in the end, can help us "... all just get along."

One tried and true way to set priorities has been to

distribute a list of proposed projects and ask everyone to rate them from 1 to 5, with 1 being the most important. In light of the demands felt in most localities today, this approach might yield a list with all 1's and 2's, and an occasional 3. Nearly everything is rated "important." In an environment of limited resources—money, staff, equipment, time, and so on—if all tasks are a priority, all are equal, and nothing is a true priority.

This also is true if the community's major projects list looks more like the space shuttle owner's manual. Pursuing more than eight or 10 major projects at a time can lead to the same lack of a true priority as a failed rating system. Both causes can make projects drag on forever, with nothing ever seeming to get finished.

"Perception Is Reality"

Nowhere is this statement more important to understand than in setting organizational priorities. Consider the old 1-through-5 rating system. Each member of a goals-setting team may have a different perception of what a 2 is. Without common definitions, the seeds of frustration are planted before you begin.

So the first order of business should be to write a set of definitions for the rating scale that everyone can agree upon. Don't stop here! Once this task is completed, an important component of the priority-setting process still is missing: evaluative criteria.

Why has something been rated a 1, 2, 3, 4, or 5? What has made one item more or less important than another? This is the role evaluative criteria play in the priority-setting process. A set of relevant criteria used as a filter to assign a priority rating to a project, task, or goal will make the result more effective. Of course, these criteria will differ with the political, economic, and cultural makeup of each community.

Determining the criteria to use is difficult, but these standards are critical to successful prioritization. Without them, there will be less discussion and evaluation and, in the end, a less stable set of priorities. If good criteria aren't used to set the priorities, there will be an inevitable pressure to change the poor ones being used, thus destroying the prioritization effort and wasting the resources used in the process.

At its annual winter retreat in January 2000, the Parker (Colorado) Town Council developed and adopted a set of rating definitions and five evaluative criteria. There are many ways to make use of these types of prioritization tools.

A quantitative approach also is more easily defended against claims of favoritism or pet projects.

The Staff Connection

Staff also should play an active role in the process. Staff represents the professional, management side of the equation and often understands the day-to-day logistics, realities, and barriers better than the elected officials. After all, these are what staff are paid to deal with.

After a joint brainstorming effort with elected officials, staff members might present the council with a list of priorities they have developed as a starting point for the process. This will help factor in all the necessary resources, logistics, design, and other elements.

Staff could develop their own set of filtering criteria for this step.

The prioritization process should be a joint effort between the council and the staff, with the council making the final decisions. In this way, the necessary expertise and information are included in the process.

Priority-Setting Tool: Evaluative Criteria

Criteria Definitions

Benefit/impact: Promotion of well-being and quality of life. Significant or major, positive effect. The "biggest bang" for the resources invested. Outweighing negative impacts to make positive projects. Making a difference for the better.

Window of opportunity: A limited or optimal time in which an event can occur. (The opportunity will be lost by waiting, and doing such projects will have opportunity costs, both positive and negative.)

Urgency: Time limit or constraint. A need to do a task immediately because of mandated, legal, or contractual requirements; the need for immediate coordination with other entities; or maintenance of cash flows.

Importance: Great worth, community value, or high positive significance.

Timing/pace: A rate of movement or activity on a given course of action, taking into account the precise moment for beginning or accomplishing something to maximum effect. (Does a project's schedule fit with those of other projects and priorities?)

Priority-Setting Tool: Rating Scale

Rating Examples

Very High (1)

1. An emergency that's a threat to life and/or property, or a condition in which there will be a large monetary loss.
2. Any condition or situation that could hurt the quality of life of a majority of citizens.
3. A condition in which action must be taken or a decision must be made immediately, or the condition will escalate in severity.
4. Potentially great harm to a function critical to the fulfillment of the organization's mission.
5. A mandate by the federal or state government that needs to be met immediately.

High (2)

1. A condition or situation that requires prompt attention because delays will cause a service delivery failure in a high-priority activity.
2. A circumstance involving a citizen issue that could have safety or cost implications for the community at large.
3. An action that would benefit the vast majority of the community.
4. Fulfillment of one or more goals, and/or benefit to a large segment of the community.
5. A mandate by the federal or state government that needs to be met within a specific period of time or within the current budget year.

Normal-Operations Priority (3)

1. A need to accomplish a task at a regular, programmed pace and to follow standard operational protocols.
2. A benefit to any segment of the community and contribution toward fulfilling one or more goals.
3. Action item contained in the biennial budget.

Low (4)

1. A condition or situation that has limited citizen and/or low council support and that is not related to safety.
2. A situation in which there will be little impact if action is delayed or can be performed on a future date, when time or money is available.
3. A circumstance that does not directly relate to the fulfillment of a goal and that benefits only a small segment of the community.
4. Item off a "wish list" for projects, programs, or tasks.

Very Low (5)

1. A condition or situation that is not safety-related and/or has little or no support from staff, citizens, or council.
2. Benefit to only a tiny portion of the community, on which action could be deferred without any noticeable negative impact.
3. The "last thing you would do," if you could do everything.

To maximize a system's effectiveness, use at least three and no more than five priority ratings and no more than five or six criteria. Using more of either tool tends to dilute the value of each rating or criterion. The criteria can be weighted if desired. It is essential that the group setting the priorities agrees on the criteria, the ratings, and their definitions.

With these tools in hand, setting priorities becomes fairly simple. To develop a set of priorities for a specific time frame, each team member considers each proposed project, task, or goal on its own merit. Individually, each group member evaluates each item against the criteria established by the group and assigns it a priority rating according to each criterion. The criteria ratings for each item are then averaged to arrive at a composite rating for this item.

Finally, all the ratings from each group member are averaged together for each item, coming up with an overall, prioritized list of projects.

The decision-making group should come back together one more time to go over the results of the process and to reach an agreement on the final list of prioritized projects. From here, it becomes an issue of matching resources to the top priorities.

Outside of a true emergency, it is critical to operational success to stick to this list of priorities. Making changes during the term of the priorities list will raise the chance that one or more priorities won't be met. An organization is more effective if it keeps the list of major projects for any given year to no more than 10, if possible. A number between five and eight is even better.

Remember, the more projects you give a high priority, the less important each item in the list becomes. The objective is to finish major projects. If you get some task done early, you can always move up the next project in the queue.

Using this type of quantitative approach also is more easily defended against claims of favoritism or pet projects. Importantly, it generates a priority list that is a product of the entire elected body. It also helps remove some of the emotion from the mix, making it easier for us all to get along. PM

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