

INTRODUCTION

Change in communities is inevitable. Global economic trends alter the profitability of local businesses, changing the number and mix of local job opportunities. The aging of Pennsylvania's population is changing the need for local public services—and the ability of local governments and school districts to get revenues to provide those services. Social and cultural change affects the number of community volunteers for important local activities, such as volunteer fire companies, service organizations, local government boards, and churches. Land use change affects the community's appearance, environmental conditions, employment, traffic patterns, housing opportunities, and quality of life.

Most communities have little ability to control the changes affecting them. What they can control is *how* they anticipate and respond to those changes. Most successful communities view these changes as *opportunities* instead of *threats*; they anticipate the changes that might occur in their community, they build a shared community vision about how to respond, and then they work together to build that future. Having a common vision for the future, shared by all within the community, provides the ability to keep ahead of change.

Several factors are essential for creating and maintaining a community vision.

1. The vision must reflect the varied perspectives within the community.

If the vision is based solely on one group's perspective and ignores the concerns of other community members (such as the "loyal opposition"), the vision will not truly reflect the concerns and needs of the whole community, and it will be very difficult to implement and sustain. Bringing all perspectives to the table at the beginning, especially if those perspectives conflict, is essential to make the vision truly reflective of community needs and acceptable to all.

2. The vision must be built through careful dialogue and thought.

Building a common vision requires careful and patient dialogue between members of the community, with people carefully listening to each other to find common concerns rather than merely defending their own views.

3. The vision must be based upon an accurate understanding of current conditions.

For a vision to be effective, it must be realistic and based upon a true understanding of the community's strengths, weaknesses, and the trends affecting it. Before deciding where the community should go in the future, community members must first understand where they are starting from.

4. The vision must be supported by plans for implementing and maintaining the vision.

Often what separates a successful vision from an unsuccessful one is implementing and maintaining the vision. Too many community vision statements are merely taking up space on a shelf because all the community's energy went into writing a report rather than producing a living document with clear implementation steps and accountability. The community vision must include plans for how the vision will be implemented, including an implementation timeline, a list of who is responsible for each implementation step, and ongoing evaluation of the vision.

5. The vision must have follow-through and nurturing.

Someone or some organization must help shepherd the implementation of the vision to ensure that the implementation steps are occurring in a timely manner, that it remains true to the spirit of the community, and that progress is made. An advantage of the *Charting Our Community's Future* program is that Penn State Cooperative Extension can provide this community-level follow-up, because extension is community-based and has links to other resources and expertise the community may need.

Creating a Vision in Your Community

This is the first in a series of four workbooks to help you develop, implement, and maintain a shared vision for your community's future. The workbooks are designed to be used as part of a four-session, community-level process that involves citizens and community leaders and that creates a workable plan of action for enhancing the quality of life for everyone in your community. The *Charting Our Community's Future* workbooks and program help participants to explore their ideas for the community and build a consensus for the community's future.

The four community-level *Charting* sessions typically are facilitated by a county-based Penn State Cooperative Extension educator. The exercises in the workbooks are intended to be used during the community-level sessions. The sessions include:

Session 1: Setting Our Course

This session begins with an overview of the *Charting Our Community's Future* process and basic ground rules, and ends with an around-the-table discussion of what local people like about their community today. This information will ultimately represent a vital part of the community's vision.

Session 2: Where We Are

The second session focuses on examining in detail the community's current condition. Information about a variety of family and children, employment, local governance, cultural, and environmental issues is discussed, and an inventory of current "assets" in the community is developed.

Session 3: Where We Want to Be

The third session uses a series of exercises to help participants propose and develop long-range (10–15 years) goals for community development and to craft a central strategic vision for the community. The group works together to develop consensus about the top five to ten long-range goals for the community.

Session 4: Making the Trip

The fourth session concentrates on identifying and outlining specific community-level projects that will help move the community toward fulfilling the goals and vision. Implementation plans are developed for these projects, including clearly identifying a timeline and who will take responsibility for which steps

After the fourth session, Penn State Cooperative Extension staff and faculty draft a report that summarizes the *Charting* process in the community, including the ideas and concerns expressed by participants, background information on the community, and detailed information on the implementation projects. This Community Action Plan report is intended for use by community members to help others understand and share the community vision, and as an active tool for implementing the vision. Penn State Cooperative Extension staff and faculty also continue to support the community's efforts with information, education, and technical assistance. Upon request, a "refresher" visioning session can also be held (after at least six months have passed) to help sustain and renew the vision, and to mark progress on and revise the action plan.

Can We Talk?

How can we work together more effectively?

Building a dream for the future requires each of us to talk about possibilities and listen to what others are saying. This can be a challenge if some participants have traditionally viewed each other as opponents, or if they have varied perspectives that conflict. Yet listening and hearing each other is one of the most essential aspects of creating a shared vision.

Here are a few hints:

- Suspend old assumptions and “think together.”
- Regard each other as colleagues.
- Look for shared interests, not “positions” that people will try to defend.
- Master the practices of dialogue and discussion.

Ask yourself: Is the whole story greater than the sum of all the parts?

YES! *If* we are each **thinking holistically** about our community’s future

Dialogue

- We explore subtle issues freely and creatively.
- We listen carefully to one another and suspend our own views.
- We seek common goals.

Discussion

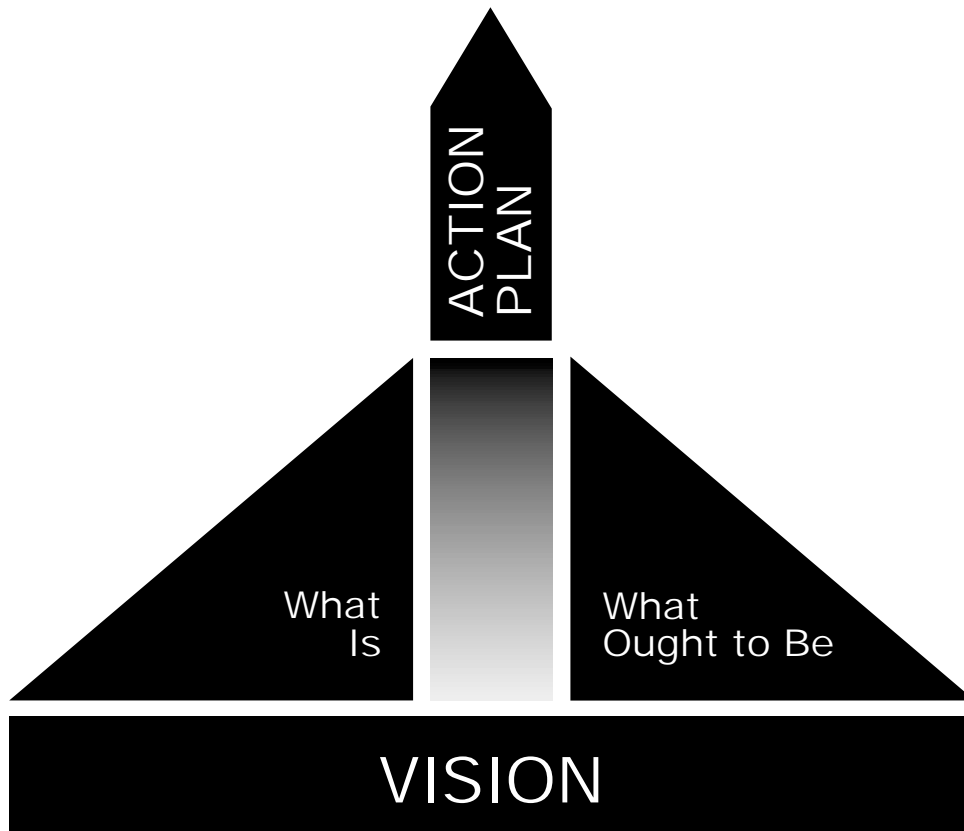
- We present and defend different views.
- We tend to search for the best view to support decisions that must be made at this time.

“The practice of systems thinking starts with understanding a simple concept called feedback that shows how actions can reinforce or counteract each other.”

—Peter Senge in *The Fifth Discipline*

There Are Two Important Conditions of a Powerful Vision.

The two conditions of a powerful vision are the *current condition* and the *desired condition*.



If we can agree that there is a gap between “what is” and “what ought to be,” then the gap must be identified and filled with a workable plan of action.

The Power of Vision

A powerful vision is:

- shared and supported
- comprehensive and detailed
- positive and inspiring

Achieving the vision requires:

- strong intuition
- willingness to take a chance and change
- a learning environment
- long-term commitment

Vision is not a bouquet of superlatives or a grail-like object. It is specific, detailed, customized, distinctive, and unique to a given community. Vision can empower people for service and facilitate productivity. The vision statement clarifies the specific (strategic) direction and activities the community will pursue in order to make a positive impact on peoples' lives.

Mission statements are philosophical in nature and often describe who you hope to reach or what the community hopes to accomplish—it is very likely that many communities share the same mission.

Vision describes what you hope to become in the future.

So What About Values?

Strong values help determine which road to take and how to measure the *rightness* of our direction. Values and beliefs affect which issues people see as important and how they believe a particular problem should be solved. Value differences may lead to conflict in the community about what should be done, and how to do it. Navigating through these potential differences requires an understanding of the important differences between *facts*, *myths*, and *values*.

A **fact** is a verifiable statement of what is. The sales tax in Pennsylvania is 6 percent; that is a fact. Social security is partially funded out of current tax dollars; it is not a long-term pension fund. Current workers are paying the bill for those who are drawing retirement benefits. These are all facts that can be verified.

A **myth**, when making community decisions, is treated exactly the same as a fact, because a myth is what people think is a fact. However, a myth can be disproved using objective measures.

Values are beliefs about what should be. Values cannot be proven right or wrong. The statement “Part of the government’s responsibility is to look after old folks!” is a value judgment. It cannot be proven right or wrong.

When it comes to facts, myths, and values, remember that reasonable people can agree on the facts of an issue, yet disagree about how to respond. Part of the *Charting* process is to help community members to better understand facts about the community, and to reach compromise and consensus about how to respond to community challenges.

—Adapted from *Working with Our Publics: Module 6: Education for Public Decisions*.

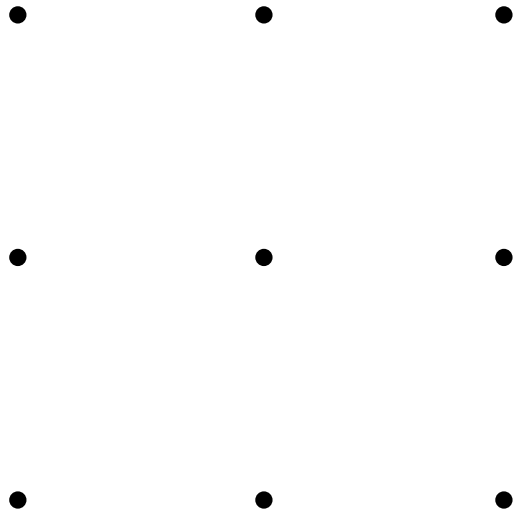
Are You Seeing the Forest and the Trees?



Test Your Creativity and Intuition!

Connect each spot with four straight lines—without lifting your pencil from the page. Your line can cross itself one time, but don't go through any spot more than once!

If you have a solution, don't let your neighbor see it...yet!



Let's Pull Our Thoughts Together!

Exercise

You've reached a point in the visioning process when it is helpful to stop and collect your thoughts. Make some notes about your vision for improving the quality of life in *your* community.

What do you like best about your community today?

In what ways does your community already provide a positive environment for families, children, businesses, and others?

Which trends do you believe will strongly influence your community's capacity for improving peoples' lives?

What key improvement(s) do you believe would help to fill in the gap between “what is” and “what ought to be”?

Are We Ready for the Long Term?

Are local leaders and residents ready to make a long-term commitment to community and economic development? How might a local coalition for this effort be strengthened and become more effective in the months ahead?

What is *your* most ideal vision for the people in your community?
(Use words, pictures, or other descriptors — don't worry about grammar or carefully crafted sentences . . . just start writing it down!)
