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Putting Plans into Action

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By John Duffy
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One of the challenges we face in public administration is putting our plans into action. Most planning projects begin with great enthusiasm. Much time and effort are then devoted to preparing the plan, but then our enthusiasm diminishes and the planning effort ends in a fizzle with the plan placed on the shelf never to see the light of day. Such results are a waste of precious resources. Instead, we should develop inspiring plans that seek to achieve major goals and our

enthusiasm should carry over into the plan's implementation. In this article, I review some of the critical elements necessary for putting our plans into action.

First of all, planning should be a continual process, not a one-time event. The planning process requires us to: define the problem(s) we face, collect and analyze data, obtain stakeholder viewpoints, consider alternatives, select a preferred alternative and develop monitoring and evaluation methods. These steps should be undertaken in an iterative manner; that is, as we proceed we should return to earlier steps to determine if new information or changing conditions requires adjustment of earlier conclusions.

The planning process should also emphasize engagement between planners and all stakeholders affected by the plan. It is vital to create the conditions for two-way dialogue among stakeholders because it provides insight into the issues, challenges and opportunities related to the planning effort. Engaging with stakeholders also builds their "buy-in" or support of the plan; once stakeholders support the plan, they are more likely to help achieve its goals.

Also, there must be adequate personnel, funding and managerial support to carry the plan to fruition. A common error is to not properly resource our planning efforts. Another common pitfall of plan implementation is having a long list of goals because it dilutes attention and fails to concentrate resources on the most important goals. It is far better to have a plan with a few goals that can be adequately resourced than to have a plan with so many goals that there are insufficient resources to achieve them.

Also, for putting plans into action it is necessary for us to understand the importance of culture—the culture of our organization and the culture of the affected communities and stakeholders. To successfully put plans into action we must make sure that our goals and strategies align with commonly held values, norms and beliefs because plans that run counter to values, norms and beliefs will be ignored.

Putting plans into action requires that our plans be inspiring. As Daniel Burnham once said, “Make no little plans; they have no magic to stir men’s blood; make big plans; aim high in hope and work.” Our planning efforts should seek to make great achievements so that we can make a difference and so that those involved will do the hard work to put the plan into action.

As importantly, we must maintain discipline as we put our plans into action. We should maintain a laser focus on our goals and the steps needed to achieve them. Whenever a new initiative is placed before us we should ask ourselves, “Does this initiative move me closer to my plan’s goals?” If the answer is no, then we should dismiss it no matter how intriguing or exciting it may be.

Putting plans into action also requires an effective project management program that includes monitoring and evaluation. A plan’s project management program must clearly identify the roles responsibilities of all parties in relation to each goal and corresponding strategy. Each strategy should include the objectives necessary for achieving the goal, the actions needed to accomplish each objective and very importantly, for each goal and objective, an action-step with associated due date, responsible party and metric for measuring progress. Once these components are put into place, it is vital that these elements are monitored and that a regularly schedule reviews are conducted with all responsible parties so that progress, or the lack thereof, may be discussed and appropriate actions taken.

Lastly, we must be comfortable with revising our plans in the face of changing conditions. Plans should not be static documents. Rather, they need to reflect the changes in our operating environment.

In closing, we plan in order to effect positive, change. To do so, we must engage in meaningful and inspiring planning by developing goals and strategies that motivate our employees and stakeholders. We must use a comprehensive and engaging planning process that explains the need for change, how our goals will be achieved and what success looks and feels like. Our plans should communicate a sense of urgency so that we feel the need to put the plan into action immediately. As leaders, we must work to align our goals with our organizational and community cultures while explaining the need for change and achieving our goals. And lastly, we must monitor our plans, evaluate our progress toward achievement and hold ourselves and

others accountable for success and failure. When we accomplish these tasks, we create an environment that results in our plans begin put into action.

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