

Goal Setting for Traction

Mistakes to Avoid in Local Government Priority Setting and Five Solutions

By Rod Gould, Chair, Institute for Local Government



Every local agency faces the essential dilemma of too many public needs chasing too few resources. This is particularly true in the wake of the economic fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic. Annual goal or priority setting has long been considered a best practice in local government as a way to make decisions about which community priorities warrant an agency's limited resources.

However, too often these efforts fail to deliver the anticipated results. Priorities can be quickly forgotten, goals not achieved, and finger pointing and blaming can begin. When that happens, elected leader-staff relations suffer, and the priority (or goal-setting) process itself becomes suspect. The local government's public trust and legitimacy can be weakened.

Goal setting often fails for one or more of these reasons:

- » Unrealistic goals
- » Too many goals
- » Lack of agreement on the process
- » Lack of alignment with work plans
- » Weak accountability for

implementing the goals once set

These common pitfalls can be avoided by exercising discipline and focus.

1. Be Realistic

Too often local elected bodies set goals or priorities that are wildly outsized given the available budgetary and staff resources. The elected leaders assume they are directing the activities of the entire employee count and general fund budget, ignoring the reality that the vast majority of both are consumed with day-to-day services and projects.

Typically, 90% or more of staff time positions and funding are committed to core services and activities. Another small portion of organizational capacity is consumed by emergencies, new mandates and emerging community needs that can't wait. Thus, only a small remainder of staff time and public dollars can be applied to new goals and priorities each year. That is, of course, unless elected leaders are prepared to reduce basic services, which is not realistic given how slim most local governments are operating already.

Goals and priorities are often so ambitious they would be impossible to achieve even if the entire budget and staff complement were devoted to them.

Examples:

- Eliminate homelessness in Anytown
- Provide housing for all who need it
- Fully prepare for any emergency
- Curb emissions by 50%
- Reduce single occupant vehicles on the road by 30% next year

It's good to aim high at the outset of a goal-setting effort, but be ready to include a reality check about what can likely be achieved, and scale back the goals accordingly.

2. Focus On A Few Important Priorities (Three To Five)

Even if the goals and priorities were attainable, having too many also risks failure. To be successful in reporting measurable attainment to the community, elected leaders should focus on just a few top goals for the year. What are their true priorities for the resources not consumed by daily services? This means prioritizing, compromising, delaying or dropping some goals.

Moreover, the priorities must be explicit and attainable. Otherwise the governing body's priorities can become a laundry list of campaign pledges and personal agendas. Staff simply cannot make progress on them all. This is demoralizing for staff, frustrates elected leaders and disappoints community members.

3. Create A Process For Narrowing The List

The process of winnowing down lists of goals or priorities to a handful must be carefully thought-out to avoid it ending in frustration. The Delphi Technique in the form of dot voting is a favorite method to reveal which items enjoy the most

governing body support. The rules of engagement need to be stated up front so all know what to expect. For instance, no multiple dots by a single elected official on one goal item, and a majority of the governing body needs to show dots on any given item for it to end up as a “priority” for the year. Sometimes it is useful to have “tier 1” and “tier 2” goals, with the tier 1 being the 3-5 top items for staff and elected official focus for the year, and tier 2 being another 3-5 to pursue as resources permit.

Meaningful goal or priority setting necessitates discipline. It is all too common that the elected body adds new priorities or goals throughout the year to the approved list. If that happens, then the priorities set at the outset can easily be pushed aside, causing failures and frustrations.

Yet local governments are dynamic institutions and things happen during the year that may justify reshuffling the annual goals or priorities. The elected body must understand and mutually agree to add to the existing priority list if previously approved items are delayed or dropped to free up the staff capacity and resources for the new item(s). If something is added to the top of the pile, something must come off the bottom.

When that doesn’t happen, it falls to the chief executive to make the call about what his or her staff will spend time on – essentially doing the prioritization him or herself. Intentional and transparent policy-making by elected leaders, with advice from professional staff, is the hallmark of high-functioning public agencies.

4. Align Policy Makers’ Goals Or Priorities With Administrative And Operational Work Plans

Effective public organizations use work plans to direct the work of the operating and support departments. After the elected body agrees upon a handful of general goals or priorities for the year, the staff should return to the elected body within a month with concrete actions to implement those goals or priorities. This constitutes the staffs’ work plan to operationalize the priorities, and it encourages accountability for implementing the priorities.

It is also how the staff and governing body can ensure they are on the same page with expectations, as well as with budgetary and other resources needed to achieve the priorities. Staff should explain what these discrete actions entail and answer the elected leaders’ questions.

This may well involve discussion, negotiation and adjustments of the work plan items until the elected body and management are in alignment – which is critical for success. It is a chance for the elected leaders and senior staff to work as a team in their respective roles and areas of expertise: policy-making consistent with public needs married to effective and efficient implementation and administration.

The work plans then become the road maps that guide the departments beyond the rendering of day-to-day public services. Example:

GOAL	WORKPLAN	ACTION STEPS AND TIMELINE
Reduce single occupant vehicles in town	(1) Open HOV Lane on Cumberland Road	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Obtain budget augmentation for engineering by date • Carry out design by date • Prepare public information by date • Implement by date
	(2) Charge for parking in municipal lot except for carpools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ordinance to Council by date • Implementation by date
	(3) Add protected bike lanes to Main and Central Avenues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Design by date • Public information by date • Implementation by date
	4) 10 minutes headways on major transit routes of city bus system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Determine major transit routes by date • Conduct cost analysis and implementation factors by date • Report to council by date • Establish implementation date of agreed upon routes, with budget augmentation by date • Create public information by date

5. Results Require Accountability

The fifth most common failure of local government goal or priority setting is failure to follow-up, make course corrections and ensure accountability.

Priorities must be incorporated into the budget and the work plans of the departments and city manager, county administrator or general manager. Elected leaders should receive quarterly reports at regularly scheduled public meetings on progress made and difficulties faced in meeting the goals or priorities. This includes the opportunity for discussion and allows elected leaders to give direction for adjustments and recalibration as needed.

The chief executive should be collaborating with the department directors between reports to keep things on track and adapt to changing circumstances, while keeping the council or board apprised of significant deviations. At year’s end, the staff should prepare and present a report on goal or priority attainment for public discussion at a governing body meeting. Goal attainment ought to figure prominently in the chief executive’s performance evaluation as well.

If the agency’s management system includes the above steps, staff will be accountable and the council/board will fulfill its proper role of overseeing public agency progress toward agreed-upon goals/priorities. The process is then repeated and becomes the way things are done. The local government gets traction and earns trust and credibility.

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Your Priority/Goal Setting Checklist

BE REALISTIC

- Keep it all real and focused. Good things will be achieved.
- Explicitly recognize how much of the budget and staff capacity is already spoken for in the provision of daily public services before priority/goal setting commences.

FOCUS ON A FEW IMPORTANT PRIORITIES

- Limit the goals/priorities to three to five per year for sufficient focus and accountability.
- Set 30,000-foot goals that are general in nature, but then tie them to objective, verifiable work plan actions.

CREATE A PROCESS FOR NARROWING THE LIST

- Engage the public early in the process through outreach to commissions, standing committees, focus groups and on-line surveys.
- Exercise the discipline to add goals/priorities only as needed during the year while removing or delaying existing approved items to free up capacity if new goals/priorities are added.

ALIGN GOALS OR PRIORITIES WITH WORK PLANS

- Create work plans that clearly show how the goals or priorities will be carried out, with timelines included.
- Discuss the work plans with the governing body to ensure the elected officials and management are operating with the same set of assumptions.
- Provide an opportunity for the governing body to make changes based on new information, and/or to include resources in the budget so the priorities can be achieved.

RESULTS REQUIRE ACCOUNTABILITY

- Report quarterly on progress and challenges in public meetings. Take stock annually and reset goals or priorities accordingly.
- Reflect the priorities in the budget, departmental work plans and evaluation of the executive.



Conclusion

Audit your goal- or priority-setting process with these practices in mind for greater effectiveness and service to your community or constituents. Getting things done requires focus, realistic expectations, regular communication and methods to stay on track. Elected officials, staff and the public all gain as a result.

Rod Gould is Chair of the Institute for Local Government and Senior Partner of Management Partners. Jan Perkins is Vice President of Management Partners. Both Rod and Jan managed California cities and held leadership roles in their professional organizations for decades.



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