

# Where Are You Headed?

## A Conversation about Goal Definition



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### Why are well-defined program goals so important?

Goals provide an important reference point, guiding a program's direction and serving as a safeguard against taking on too much or becoming distracted from the primary purpose. Well-defined goals also help programs operate more efficiently, for instance by helping to build consensus among program staff about what they are doing. Moreover, unless goals have been clearly set, you can't really answer the question of whether a program is working. If no goals exist, or if they are vague, there is no benchmark for success.

### Do programs often operate without clear goals?

It is not uncommon for a program to lack written goal statements and, when written goals do exist, they frequently need clarifying. Often they are not specific enough or are stated in vague terms that cannot be measured. Sometimes they are statements that describe the program's activities or process rather than the intended results. In other instances, they are not consonant with the program's planned activities, or are unrealistic. I have found this to be true of programs ranging from small community-based programs to large, multi-site, government-funded programs.

### How can one tell if goals are appropriate and properly structured?

Some of the key characteristics of well-defined goals are:

- They refer to some sort of change (between a current state and an intended state).
- Each goal refers to only one change or intended outcome.
- They can be measured.
- They are specific.
- They are realistic.

### Why do so many organizations find it difficult to formulate specific, measurable goals?

There are several reasons. First, program administrators are most concerned with what they have to do to bring their programs to life. When they start their programs, their intended outcomes are often a long way off, and so it is not surprising that the program goals might not be revisited until demands for accountability bring an evalu-

ator into the picture. Second, program people are (understandably) concerned with pleasing funders, and this may distract them from more critical thinking about what they are really trying to accomplish, or are capable of accomplishing. Third, I think one of the best ways to inform solid goals is to conduct a thorough needs assessment before the fact, and this takes time and money that organizations often cannot afford.

### Don't unforeseen events sometimes make changes of direction unavoidable?

Of course. Programs operate in the real world and they respond to real world conditions. What should happen when shifts occur, but often doesn't in the absence of an evaluator on the scene, is that someone should say, "Let's go back and look at how this change affects the goal statements and clarify them."

### If finding time and money for formal needs assessment is a problem, what can program planners do?

Provided they have the capacity, an organization can do a lot on its own without having to call on a professional evaluator. One useful strategy is to spend some time talking to all the possible levels of stakeholders, including those who might fund the initiative, those who might implement it, and those who might benefit from it. This can help an organization to better define and understand the problem they're responding to, how amenable it is to change, and what sorts of changes are most likely to have an impact.

Input from funders who have sponsored similar implementations can also be particularly helpful, because they have probably been the consumers of evaluations that yielded some valuable lessons. In fact, reports done for the government are public property and often easily accessible. The [www.ed.gov](http://www.ed.gov) web site, for example, has an evaluation section where you can access reports.

### Is it becoming more difficult to successfully compete for funding without measurable goals?

Proof of results is becoming more important. Funders are likely to be skeptical about a program's efficacy, if the results can't be measured. There are still funders who define success in less quantitative terms, but they are in the minority.

### So any time and effort invested in goal setting is worthwhile?

While setting goals may sound relatively straightforward, it's often a challenging and time-consuming task. Program directors should feel really good about any extra efforts they undertake to ensure well-defined goals. It is an important first step in guiding the program in the right direction from the start, and is surely well worth the effort.