



Cornell University
Cooperative Extension

Priority Setting Resources

Selected Background Information and Techniques

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Why It's Hard for Organizations to Set Priorities

There are many reasons why most organizations find it difficult to establish and abide by specific priorities. This now dated quote from Peter Drucker (1973) links this shortcoming to the nature of support for public organizations. It still rings true.

“Being dependent on a budget allocation mitigates against setting priorities and concentrating efforts, yet nothing is ever accomplished unless scarce resources are concentrated on a small number of priorities. ... To obtain its budget, it needs the approval, or at least the acquiescence, of practically everybody who remotely could be considered a constituent. ... Being budget-based makes it even more difficult to abandon the wrong things, the old, the obsolete. ... The temptation is great, therefore, to respond to lack of results by redoubling efforts.”

Bryson (1988) outlined four broad areas which present barriers to effective strategic planning which seem directly reflected in the challenges we find in setting program priorities. The four barriers (adapted) are:

- 1. The Human Problem** – difficulty in focusing the attention of key people on key issues, decisions, conflicts, and policies. The challenge is to establish the imperative of organization priority setting, asking people to set aside specific interests until the broader framework is developed.
- 2. The Process Problem** – managing information and ideas throughout the priority setting process. A key challenge is to develop support for the product throughout the process.
- 3. The Structural Problem** – management of part/whole relationships. For us, the challenge is to arrive at Association-wide priorities that reflect consistent interpretation of mission and goals. We have done fairly well setting priorities within program areas but across programs.....
- 4. The Institutional Problem** – translating priorities into action This entails assuring follow through on changes reflected in the new priorities.

See the next two pages for suggestions on how to overcome these barriers.

References: Bryson, J.M. 1988. *Strategic Planning for Public and Nonprofit Organizations*. Sage Publ.
Drucker, P.F. 1973. *Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices*. Harper and Row, Publ.

Dealing with Barriers to Priority Setting

The following suggestions derive from a CCE Executive Director discussion of priority setting. They discussed how the barriers identified by Bryson (see previous page) operate within extension associations and made suggestions for minimizing their influence.

Suggestions for minimizing the "Human Problem":

- Start by striving for consensus on what you are trying to accomplish by priority setting. Why are we doing this and what are the stakes?
- Assure clear Board approval of the process and work with appropriate committee chairs to develop ownership for process and product.
- Involve decision makers (Board, appropriate committees) in defining the process and priority criteria to assure objectivity and rationality.
- Actively recognize that there is strength in differing viewpoints and don't place viewpoints in value order.
- Build in time to allow people to reflect on information presented, digest it, and modify decisions.
- Keep the entire process within a reasonable time frame so people don't lose track and to minimize influence of committee turnover.
- Carefully select paid and volunteer staff to carry out information gathering and interpretation. Provide needed training.
- Paid staff assume leadership for an efficient process and carry out preliminary information gathering and interpretation.
- Strengthen the nominating process to gain people with interest/skills in setting clear priorities.
- Reward those participating by assuring that the products are used and that key committees have a continuing role in implementing findings.

Suggestions for minimizing the "Process Problem":

- Be very specific in defining priorities to minimize multiple interpretations (e.g., not just "family programming" but rather specific emphases within family programming).
- Staff should assume responsibility for articulating a reasonable number of alternatives.
- Staff need to assure that the process is realistic and reasonable for volunteers.
- Make key information available prior to decision meetings.
- Beware of taking too much time to analyze info (analysis paralysis) and/or rushing the job to meet deadlines.
- Actively set an environment that helps people see more broadly than their own personal paradigms might lead them to; external information is important.
- Carefully consider support needed to produce an effective product (don't just follow a recommended process blindly).
- Keep the time frame reasonable and clearly understood.

Suggestions for minimizing the "Structural Problem":

- Decide and clarify board and committee roles in advance.
- Keep focus on current priorities rather than precedent.
- Have Board President or her/his designate on key committee responsible for the process (Long-Range, Strategic Planning, Planning and Coordination, etc.) to emphasize the importance.
- Cultivate open communication between and among the staff management team and Association leadership.
- The staff management team needs to serve as the catalyst for empowering, motivating, and supporting volunteers to make decisions for the entire association. If staff don't model collaborative priority setting, it will be very hard for volunteers to do so.
- Recognize and communicate the benefits of a system (total association) approach.
- Carefully nurture relationships throughout the planning process.

Suggestions for minimizing the "Institutional Problem":

- Paid staff and volunteers must be committed to implementing changes.
- Need to emphasize the process of fitting talent (knowledge and skills) to the task while realizing that the "tasks" have become less discrete and more complex.
- Build on existing strengths in program implementation.
- Need for well-defined implementation plans.
- Follow through on priorities by reflecting them in position descriptions, time allocation, implementation plans, and performance appraisal.

Program Priority Setting Under Fire

Establishing meaningful priorities to guide organization decisions is a complex process. Setting priorities under the pressure of impending program reductions or any significant change in resources dramatically complicates the task. While it is not possible or appropriate to prescribe a single approach for priority setting that fits all needs, there are key resources and steps that should be considered. This article draws from the experiences of many Cornell Cooperative Extension professionals across New York State.

In an ideal world, each organization has a clear statement of program priorities in place, officially adopted and updated at least annually (in preparation for implementation planning). Such priorities provide a sound basis for decisions necessitated by changing resources -- whether growing or shrinking. Unfortunately, the reality is that **many organizations often don't realize they lack clear priorities until they are in the middle of a crisis** such as proposed or actual funding reductions.

This article attempts to identify generic processes to help with priority setting in the "better late than never" scenario. A ***fair and appropriate approach*** is highly situational depending on factors such as:

- How explicitly were priorities identified in preparing for the current plan of work?
- To what degree do identified priorities represent agreed upon organization-wide priorities? (Organization-wide priorities encompass project or program area priorities. Often, we have priorities within program areas but not across.)
- To what degree do staff and volunteers understand and respect the process that was used to generate priorities?
- If significant time has passed since priorities were set, have they been reviewed and updated recently?
- How emotionally charged is the current situation; to what extent will people be able to assume a rational approach in setting priorities?
- To what extent are people able to focus on current critical community needs as key determinants in setting priorities (rather than precedent)?

There is no such thing as a one-size-fits-all approach to priority setting.

Effective Processes

The unique character of each organization (including its structure, culture, and history), how well existing program priorities are documented, and the circumstances under which priority setting is happening all contribute to defining an effective process. There are, however, attributes of effective processes that should be considered (whether or not a crisis exists).

- ***Start from program needs*** -- not positions or dollars. Even under dire cutback scenarios, there will be opportunity for creative programming, staffing configurations, and alternative levels of program support. These likely will be overlooked if the emphasis is shifted from "what needs to be done" to "what can we afford to do" too early in the process.
- ***Communicate the need for priority setting***. Assure that the total organization has an accurate, clear understanding of the budget situation -- what is and is not known and the potential implications of best and worst case scenarios. **Priority setting is essential not only for downsizing in a fair manner but also for making the case for restitution or expansion of support.** *Establish a positive tone* focusing on the future of the organization.
- ***Clarify decision roles and rules***. For example, the Board of Directors has the formal role of setting direction but key decision-making roles others needs to be clarified. What is expected of committees, other volunteers, paid staff?
- ***Build on what already exists***. If there is a recent long range planning committee report or other planning or evaluation documents, use that information as a base. Similarly, if clear priorities were set in preparation for writing the current plan of work, start there. Acknowledge and build on the good work already done.
- ***Encourage creativity*** in thinking about what might be. Assist people in thinking beyond current programs, staffing patterns, volunteer roles, inter-organization opportunities, and funding alternatives.
- ***Find out what else is going on in the community***. Determine the overall budget situation and what is happening to agencies and organizations with common program interests and audiences. When roles assumed by other organizations shift, the "unique" role of your organization might be redefined.

continues

- ***Provide a voice for organization members.*** Staff (including volunteer staff) and committees should have structured opportunity to make input to assist the Board of Directors in its decision-making role. There should be opportunity for groups to learn the concerns and interests of others. This might take the form of a total organization caucus or a designated representative group like a long range planning committee or a task force of the Board. To provide focus and facilitate comparing viewpoints, use a structured set of discussion questions.
- ***Involve outside resource persons.*** Others can help you think about how to approach priority setting, alternative ways for viewing needs and approaches, etc. from a fresh perspective.
- ***Make sure you aren't comparing apples and toasters.*** Program needs have to be described in such a way that it is possible to differentiate priority. For example, ranking "prenatal health" against "clientele phone calls" will not get you very far. The former needs to be broken down and the latter placed in a program context.
- ***Identify points of agreement and disagreement.*** Use a simple process, such as a "straw vote", to identify points of agreement and disagreement regarding priorities. This might consist of a non-binding activity where each participant assigns programs to one of three categories: "**highest priority (must do's)**", "**lesser priority**" and "**not sure**" as a basis for further discussion. Some will resist laying their cards on the table but without an open process people might proceed without complete understanding of program needs.
- ***Identify "nested" and "linked" programs.*** For example, eliminating a program that is based in formal collaboration with another agency might result in loss of program resources more than off-setting any savings gained. Eliminating a sub-component of a major program might undermine the broader effort. For example, a lesser priority program might be the key way to get a priority audience "in the door".
- ***Use identified and credible criteria for final priority setting.*** People need to know on what basis they should be setting priorities. Explicitly discuss the criteria to develop understanding.
- ***Assure that the organization formally adopts the resulting priority statements.*** This provides both the legal basis for personnel decisions and avoids the impression that priorities are "that committee's view" or the "staff view" only.
- ***Inventory staff competencies*** (but don't let that drive priority setting). Competencies are part of the formula in defining a unique organizational role.
- ***Provide breathing space between priority setting and staffing decisions.*** Have at least a few days between priority setting and any resulting staffing decisions to provide opportunity for staff and volunteers to develop alternative scenarios.

Note on Following Pages: All the techniques outlined in the following pages assume that you have an adequate program inventory to work with and have determined appropriate decision criteria. No decision tool can yield wise choices without sufficient documentation and analysis. If the results yielded by any one of these techniques seem illogical or unsupportable, you may need to revisit your decision criteria.

Decision Matrix

Purpose: One of the most common priority setting aids is the decision or criteria matrix. The purpose is to compare alternative choices relative to standards or criteria. This technique is applicable for choosing among alternatives that may or may not meet standards or criteria. (See "Paired Comparisons" for comparing against each other alternative that meets basic standards or criteria.)

Process: Draw a grid with as many rows as there are alternatives and as many columns as there are criteria. List alternatives along the side and criteria along the top of the grid. Look at each alternative down the side, one at a time, and compare it to each criterion. For an initial screening, a simple checkmark might do the trick. If you are attempting to sort items of relatively equal merit, a rating scale will provide more discrimination. For example, you could rate against each criterion using one of the following scales:

3 = criterion met very well	5 = criterion met exceptionally
2 = criterion met	4 = criterion met well
1 = criterion not met	3 = criterion met
	2 = criterion met poorly
	1 = criterion not met

Sometimes you will have criteria of differing importance. One approach is to weight the criteria. A simpler approach is to group the criteria into "must haves" and "nice to haves".

Weighting Example Assume you decided that the three most important criteria were documented impact, potential for leveraging funds, and community visibility and that the first was twice as important as the other two. The relative weighting would be .50, .25, and .25 respectively. Assume you have three alternatives to consider and that you have chosen the three-point scale above. Your decision group comes to consensus on ratings for each alternative and uses the table below to summarize.

Alternatives	Impact (Rating X Weighting)	Leveraging (Rating X Weighting)	Visibility (Rating X Weighting)	Weighted Score
Program 1	2 X .50 = 1.00	2 X .25 = 0.50	3 X .25 = 0.75	2.25
Program 2	3 X .50 = 1.50	1 X .25 = 0.25	3 X .25 = 0.75	2.50
Program 3	2 X .50 = 1.00	3 X .25 = 0.75	1 X .25 = 0.25	2.00

One common decision matrix is to assess program emphases against the CCE criteria for quality programs (see Page 6). For an example of a locally derived assessment matrix, see next two pages (pages 8 and 9). In this case, one matrix is used for each program alternative (rather than rows and columns.)

Source: Lyles, R.I. 1982. **Practical Management Problem Solving and**

Decision Making. Van Nostrand Reinhold, Co., New York

(Adapted from a form developed by CCE, Broome County)

	not at all	somewhat	very much	
Factor --	1-	2-	3-	Comments/clarification
1- Mission/vision/goals---To what extent does...				
...the program fit the CCE mission?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
...the program fit the CCE vision?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
...the program fit with current goals? (Identify goals)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
...the program fit with emerging needs? (Identify needs/issues)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
2- Meeting community needs---To what extent...				
...does this program address specific, identified local needs?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
...does the program contribute to the county's economy?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
...does the program contribute to the quality of life for county residents?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
...is this program the most effective response to the issue and/or needs?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
...does CCE uniquely meet this need? (Identify current/potential providers)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
3- Program capacity---To what extent...				
...is sufficient research information available to support this program?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
...is appropriate technology available to support this program?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
...is this program primarily education rather than service?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
...is this program contributing to research?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
...does this program include a multiplier component?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
...does this program provide significant leadership development?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
...are the most effective delivery methods utilized to conduct this program?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
...has program effectiveness been documented? (Identify method -- formal evaluation, anecdotal evidence, participant response, etc...)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____

	not at all	somewhat	very much	
	1-	2-	3-	Comments/clarification
4- Program life cycle---To what extent...				
...is there a positive future and/or long range outlook for this program?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
(Identify stage in program life cycle)				
(Identify ramifications (financial, political, staffing, etc...) with either continuing or eliminating this program)				
5- Funding capacity---To what extent...				
...are sufficient resources available to support this program?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
...is continued funding likely? (Identify current and/or potential funding sources)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
...is there a current/potential return on investment through grants/other funding?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
...does this program contribute to the association's indirect costs?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
...is the association able to support this program financially and/or with staff?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
...are collaborators significantly supporting this program financially and/or with staff?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
...is there a fee-generating capacity with this program?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
6- Public policy---To what extent...				
...is issues education/public policy currently included in this program?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
(Identify current/potential public policy-related programming efforts)				
7- Partnerships---To what extent...				
...does this program take advantage of multi-county/regional partnerships?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
...can this program develop multi-county/regional partnerships?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
...does this program involve community partners?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
...can this program involve potential community partners?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
8- Other				
What are the three (3) most important factors to this program?				

Paired Comparisons

Purpose: This technique can be used to find the highest priority alternative and to list alternatives in order of priority. This technique is applicable for choosing among viable alternatives, that is, alternatives that meet basic standards or criteria from which you are having difficulty choosing. (See "Decision Matrix" for comparing alternatives against standards or criteria.)

Process: Draw a grid with as many rows and columns as there are alternatives. List program commitments along the side and top of the grid. Look at each alternative down the side, one at a time, and compare it to each of the other alternatives across the row to determine which of the two is of higher priority. Place the letter of the higher priority of the pair in the box and continue with comparisons until the grid is completed. After completing the comparisons, work across the rows and add the number of times each alternative's letter appears anywhere in the grid and enter that total in the box at the right. The alternatives with the highest numbers in the right column are the highest priority. Those with low numbers or zeros are of lowest priority. The results from each individual participating would be added to arrive at a collective rating.

Commitment	Commitment A	Commitment B	Commitment C	Commitment D	Commitment E	Totals
Commitment A	XXXXXXX					
Commitment B	XXXXXXX	XXXXXXX				
Commitment C	XXXXXXX	XXXXXXX	XXXXXXX			
Commitment D	XXXXXXX	XXXXXXX	XXXXXXX	XXXXXXX		
Commitment E	XXXXXXX	XXXXXXX	XXXXXXX	XXXXXXX	XXXXXXX	

Example Tally

Person 1

Commitment	Commitment A	Commitment B	Commitment C	Commitment D	Commitment E	Totals
Commitment A	XXXXXXX	A	C	A	A	3
Commitment B	XXXXXXX	XXXXXXX	B	B	E	2
Commitment C	XXXXXXX	XXXXXXX	XXXXXXX	D	C	2
Commitment D	XXXXXXX	XXXXXXX	XXXXXXX	XXXXXXX	D	2
Commitment E	XXXXXXX	XXXXXXX	XXXXXXX	XXXXXXX	XXXXXXX	1

Person 2

Commitment	Commitment A	Commitment B	Commitment C	Commitment D	Commitment E	Totals
Commitment A	XXXXXXX	B	C	A	A	2
Commitment B	XXXXXXX	XXXXXXX	B	B	E	3
Commitment C	XXXXXXX	XXXXXXX	XXXXXXX	D	E	1
Commitment D	XXXXXXX	XXXXXXX	XXXXXXX	XXXXXXX	D	2
Commitment E	XXXXXXX	XXXXXXX	XXXXXXX	XXXXXXX	XXXXXXX	2

Commitments A and B are rated as highest priority with combined votes of 5 each followed by Commitment D at 4 votes, while Commitment C and E are tied for the lowest rating at 3 votes.

Source: Lyles, R.I. 1982. **Practical Management Problem Solving and Decision Making.** Van Nostrand Reinhold, Co., New York

Multi-Voting

Purpose: Provides a process for a group to organize a list of topics into priority groupings.

Variation 1: Multi-Voting

1. First vote – each person votes for their “highest priorities” voting for as many items as desired.
2. The items receiving a vote count of at least $\frac{1}{2}$ the number of people voting move on to the second vote.
3. Second vote – each person gets to vote a number of times equal to $\frac{1}{2}$ the number of items remaining on the list.
4. Continue multi-voting until the list is reduced to 3-5. These are the highest priorities.

The process can be repeated with the remaining items to identify mid level priorities.

Source: Cornell University Quality Improvement Program materials.

Variation 2: Cast Five Straws

1. Each member gets five straw votes. She or he can distribute these votes in any way wanted (all five on one item or distributed).
2. Half votes are permitted but not encouraged.
3. The top five items become the group’s high priority list.
4. After removing the top items, the process can be repeated to identify mid and lower priority items.

Source: Kaner, S. et al. 1996. **Facilitator’s Guide to Participatory Decision-Making**. New Society Publishers, Gabriola Island, BC.

Variation 3: Hi, Mid, Low

1. Divide the number of the items on the list by three.
2. Each person receives that number of choices to indicate his or her highest priority items.
3. Everyone can distribute his or her votes in any way she or he wants but must cast no more than $\frac{1}{3}$ the total number of items.
4. Votes are tallied and the top third of the list become the highest priorities.
5. The top priorities are removed from the list and the number of items divided by two.
6. Each person receives that number of choices to be distributed as wished.
7. Votes are tallied and the top half of the round two list become the mid level priorities.

Source: Derived from Kaner, S. et al. 1996. **Facilitator’s Guide to Participatory Decision-Making**. New Society Publishers, Gabriola Island, BC.

Strategy Grids

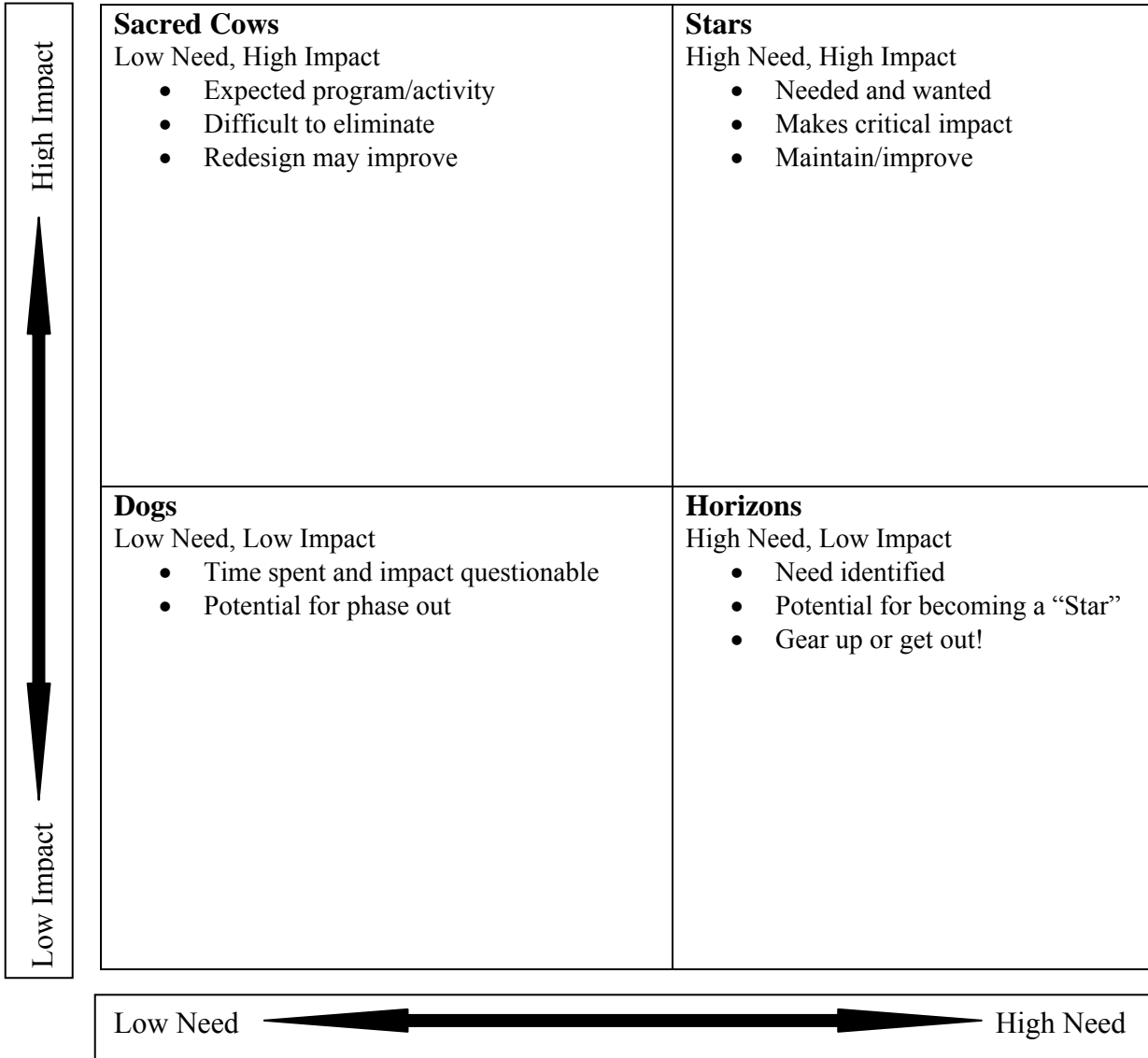
Purpose: To discriminate among alternative courses of action or activities that have differing importance and/or urgency. There are a variety of formats. One of the earlier formulations was McConkey's Strategy Grid from which the Ohio Cooperative Extension Service developed "Getting Ahead By Letting Go" illustrated on the next page. Stephen Covey features a strategy grid in "The Seven Habits of Highly Successful People" (Habit #3, Put First Things First).

Process: The first step is to set up the strategy quadrants. In the "Getting Ahead By Letting Go" example, the axes of the quadrant are impact and need. In Covey's "Putting First Things First," the axes are importance and urgency. Then, activities, projects or programs are placed in the appropriate quadrants. This can be done subjectively or by applying specific criteria. The "Getting Ahead By Letting Go" model uses explicit criteria similar to the program quality criteria in Appendix A.

The "Getting Ahead By Letting Go" grid helps point out possible shifts in emphasis. Low impact/low need items (Dogs) could be considered for phase out. High impact/low need items (Sacred Cows) may include activities that are important politically, would be difficult to eliminate, but might be redesigned to minimize investment. High need/low impact items (Horizons) have the potential to become "Stars" but need to be developed further. The choice here is to gear up or get out. High impact/high need items (Stars) are items you likely want to maintain and improve.

Sources: Conklin, N., J. Jones, G. Gunderson, and M. Spiegel. 1992. **Getting Ahead By Letting Go.** Ohio Cooperative Extension Service.
Covey, S. R. 1989. **The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People: Restoring the Character Ethic.** Simon and Schuster, New York.
McConkey, D. 1981. **Strategic Planning in Nonprofit Organizations.** Business Quarterly 46(2):24-31.

Getting Ahead by Letting Go
Ohio State University Extension



Levels of Programming

It's Not Always a Case of All or Nothing

Making the choice to pursue a given educational opportunity need not be a “go/no-go” decision. Other alternatives include:

- Phasing programs in and out over time – for example, offering topics every other year
- Unpacking a major program into modules that might be offered at different frequencies or levels of formality
- Considering alternative delivery including web-based approaches
- Cycling through “program lite” and full program versions of an offering

A helpful framework for considering alternatives that has been used widely in CCE is the concept of “levels of programming”¹:

Level I Programs typically:

- Are supported by leadership of an extension professional (typically an issue/team leader, resource educator or specialist)
- Are resource intensive
- Provide in-depth, planned experiences for targeted audiences for an agreed upon period of time
- Employ multiple delivery strategies
- Are based on the highest priorities identified in the plan of work.

Level II Programs typically:

- Are maintained without large amounts of time of extension professionals in leadership roles
- Are less resource intensive
- Have narrower scope and/or depth of subject matter
- Employ a narrower range of delivery strategies

Level III Programs typically:

- May be addressed with limited professional educator time
- Involve simple information transfer
- Answer specific questions or requests for information rather than provide an educational experience
- Can be addressed through information systems, media outlets, Internet resources, etc.

The levels often are not discrete; many programs have elements of all three levels. But, classifying existing program commitments using the levels can be a helpful starting point for considering “Is there a better way?”

¹ Anderson, C. L. 1992. *Moving Program Priorities into Levels of Programming*. Cornell Cooperative Extension. Note that this type of approach also is part of the C.O.R.E. Programs approach used widely by youth development educators.