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Introduction

Priority setting is a process we Extension professionals must continually use to set and reset our day-to-day and program priorities. Yet, many times we find ourselves working on low-priority goals or on activities unrelated to high-priority concerns. Sometimes we're aware of our busyness with non-priority items; but often we're pressured by others to "set our priorities."

At this point, we exclaim, "I know ... but how can I set my priorities when everyone says everything is high priority!" These moments of frustration seem to be occurring more often. Increasing pressures by many people, and the growing complexity of problems and society make the Extension professional's priority setting more difficult.
This booklet is intended for Extension people who wish to deal with these problems and who wish to independently study and think about how a systematic process of setting priorities relates to their Extension jobs.

The booklet has three sections that provide answers to these questions:

I. What is priority setting?
II. Why must we set priorities?
III. How do we set priorities?

This booklet stresses priority setting as a personal commitment made by professional Extension workers. Though Extension workers cooperate with clientele in developing programs and related activities, many Extension people don't implement programs unless they see them as their own personal priorities. Though many things influence and pressure Extension people, only an individual can decide whether a goal or activity is high priority and do something about it.

This booklet discusses priority setting in the context of program development. This doesn't mean priority setting and program development are synonymous. They aren't. But the priority-setting process may register the most impact in a program development situation and the ideas are transferable to many short-range situations, such as "what do I do this week?"

Furthermore, once a person has set program priorities, those priorities, plus the process s/he has mastered, influence the more immediate and day-to-day priorities.

In Section 3, "How Do We Set Priorities?" a case example (a county home economist) is presented with each step in the 6-step process. Further case examples are outlined step by step following Section 3. If it will help you understand the steps, turn to the case study most like your own situation as you read.

You may wish to review some sections lightly, others in more depth. Regardless of how much time you spend thinking about the ideas, you'll get the most from these pages by discussing them with others in similar positions, and most importantly by applying them to your specific Extension job situation.
## What Is Priority Setting?

### Definition

First, what is a priority? Dictionaries say it's:

- **The state of being earlier in time, or of preceding something else.**

- **Precedence in order, rank, etc.**

- **The having of certain rights before another... a preferential rating, especially one that allocates rights and services usually in limited supply ... something meriting prior attention.**

An Extension concept of priority setting is:

- **A dynamic process of deciding what goals or actions are most important now, and a commitment of self and resources to that decision.**

Let's examine each part of the above statement.

### "A Dynamic Process"

Priority setting in Extension is a complex professional responsibility. It's a continual process of subjective and interrelated decisions, a flexibility to respond to problems as they arise and **before** they arise. Priorities must be set in every phase of program development including: identifying target audiences, delineating needs, specifying goals, determining needed actions and following through with them, and even selecting the very small tasks to be done daily or weekly to accomplish goals.

Our personal job priorities affect others and theirs affect us. The priorities of Extension and our client groups may determine the money and other resources available to us. In turn, our program priorities affect the Extension system and the people we serve.

### "Deciding"

All of us make decisions all our lives, some of them trivial and some very important. Based on our resources, limitations, and alternatives, we decide what we're going to wear in the morning, what to eat for breakfast, what TV channel to watch, what to do for fun on the weekend, what to do for a living, and how to vote.

The main factors in a thoughtful decision are the same, whether the question to be decided is trivial or very important. A decision first involves possibilities or alternatives, for without alternatives there can be no choice.
For instance, we can return to the office after a day off and find the "in" basket filled with letters, booklets, phone call memos. These are priority alternatives. What to do first? We're helped to decide by knowing the nature of the letters and calls, the topics of the booklets, how we feel, and the schedule for the day ahead. These factors become the criteria for choice.

Freedom to choose is a privilege and a responsibility. However, we're only as free as our resources, limitations, and alternatives allow. If the whole day is tied up with meetings, we may only have time to return one call. If our alternatives are broad, we have a greater responsibility for our choices and their consequences to others and ourselves. Depending on our roles, our decisions may affect only us, a few others, or even thousands of people.

Making decisions in priority setting involves:

1. Understanding the priority setting situation (what to do today?).

2. Purpose or goal to be achieved (to use one free hour today most effectively).

3. Available alternatives (letters, booklets, phone calls, coffee break, or conversation).

4. Probable consequences of each alternative (I can make phone calls in the next hour, but I can't get through all those meetings without coffee).

5. Values to the decision maker of these probable consequences (my need for the coffee is more important than returning this call ... or this call is more important than my physical need).

Priority setting as an application of decision making is particularly complex. The priorities already set, the numbers and needs of the people our current priority setting will affect, and the alternatives available to us all add to the complexity. In priority setting, decisions are made about what is most urgent and critical. What needs to be done first?

"Goals and Actions"

We need to set priorities on both goals and actions. A goal is what we hope to achieve; actions are how we achieve our goals. We first ask: "What needs doing? What results do we hope to get?" And then, "What must we do to achieve that end? How are we going to do it?"

Sometimes we get involved in an activity for which we're unsure of the goal. This doesn't mean we're not goal-oriented, but it should force us to evolve a goal and decide more specific direction for the activity. If we don't, we'll continue to be busy without a sense of direction or achievement.

Goals may be general or specific. Often specific goals are aimed at fulfilling a broader goal. For instance, our
general goal might be to improve the economy of a community. A specific goal to achieve that broader goal (for a community development agent) would be to improve the marketing procedures of small manufacturers or (for an agriculture agent) to improve the livestock production of farmers in the area.

Goals may be long- or short-range. For example, a long-range goal might be for the community to provide cultural development activities for its citizens. We might anticipate building a civic theater or art center sometime in the future. But, a short-range goal to fulfill the same long-range objective might be to hold a successful summer art fair this year.

Goals may be institutional or individual. If Extension's goal is to provide educational opportunities for low-income senior citizens, our individual program goal might be to sponsor education on low-cost nutrition for the elderly in our county. Or, if all the elderly folks in our county are well-off, we may not consider the institutional goal to be important in our programs. On the other hand, if our community has a large number of low-income people over 65, we might have initiated the goal for the institution. In Extension, these goals are interrelated.

Actions help us achieve goals. Actions help us achieve goals and clarify goals. If we want to help the community get a cultural center (goal), we can consult with the city planning commission, citizens groups, and art clubs, and help them petition for a bond issue (actions). For our more immediate goals, we might help organize a summer art fair committee to get park space for displays, contact artists, and get concessions. The interrelationship of goals and actions becomes clearer if we see that the goals we set as priorities become, in turn, bases for setting priorities on our actions.

Priority setting as a process relates to any one of the above types of goals and actions. But, we must see the difference between goals and actions to set priorities and stick to them. We can't, for instance, say that our home visits or county fair (actions) are a higher priority than improving livestock marketing in a community (goal). That's like comparing apples and oranges. In setting priorities, we must compare goals with goals, and actions with actions.

"Most Important Now" Setting priorities is a specific kind of decision making with two dimensions: value and time. It's not only deciding what to do (what's most valuable and important), but what to do first (what's most important now), and how much time to give to it.
When we set a priority, we judge one possibility to be more important, urgent, or valuable than another at this time. We set priorities on both our goals and our actions, since priority implies a sequence of activities, first things first, as well as a ranking in importance. For instance, it's important to recruit 4-H leaders and to train them --but if there are no leaders to train in a particular project, it's more important to recruit them first so we can train them. But if the deadline for 4-H enrollment is tomorrow, getting the details settled will take priority over both recruiting and training.

Priority setting, then, is:

1. Deciding what needs doing most.
2. Deciding what needs doing first.

First, we look at our goals to see which is more urgent now. Second, we decide what more specific goals need to be achieved if that long-range goal is to be met. Third, actions must be designed to achieve the goals.

How can we judge what's most important or critical now? One way is to recognize that priority setting implies looking ahead to see the future consequences of our actions or lack of action on a problem to help us judge its importance. What will happen if I don't call the farmer with corn root worm problems, but instead phone fair committee members to arrange a meeting for next week? If I don't call the farmer, his entire crop could be damaged tomorrow could be too late. But I can still arrange next week's committee meeting tomorrow or have someone else do the phoning. Seeing the consequences of our actions certainly helps us determine priorities. Sometimes we can only guess what the possible results of our action or lack of action will be. This is a risk that can be minimized by getting good information about priority alternatives and comparing them (see page 21).

The importance, sequence, and consequences of our goal setting and actions in setting priorities can be shown by how we make gardening decisions.

First, we must decide on a goal: What do we want to harvest at season's end? Tomatoes and corn? But the garden plot is only 4 x 8 feet. Since tomatoes and corn mature at the same time, we won't have enough room for both. Which crop will save us more money at the supermarket? Since tomatoes are more expensive to buy and corn takes up too much room, we'll profit more from a tomato crop. Could an earlier harvest crop be planted to use available space before the tomatoes mature? How about a set of radishes, or some pole beans to climb up and save space?

First things first! Now that we've decided what to plant, we must sequence activities to achieve the goal. We can buy seeds and start them indoors so they're big enough by planting
time, then till the soil, and fertilize in advance. All these things must be done in sequence to get the desired results at summer's end.

Setting program priorities, of course, is a much more complex and far-reaching process than planning a garden, but it takes the same things into account.

"Commitment of Self and Resources"

Priority setting is critical when many possible alternative goals exist and only limited resources to commit to them. At those times (and they're occurring more and more often), we must make a professional decision and a personal commitment to action. Though a group or organization like Extension sets constraints and parameters on what our priorities ought to be, only we can commit ourselves. Finally only we can decide: are we or aren't we going to do it?

As Extension educators, our priorities affect the lives of countless others. Our information for determining priorities comes from many people, groups, agencies, and institutions, including Extension. Our alternatives may be as broad as the society we serve. We're limited and guided by the goals of our organization, our job descriptions, the resources available, and the appropriateness of an activity to our clientele and their goals. But none of these decides for us or commits us to a priority. Only we can do that.

Thus setting priorities means saying yes, now, to certain goals and related actions and then doing them in a first-things first sequence. It also implies reshuffling priorities so goals and actions of lesser importance get less time or fewer resources, are done by someone else, or get a no. Deciding not to do something is as valid as deciding what to do. Deciding what to do means we won't have time to do certain other things.

Summary

Setting program priorities is a six-step process of considering various alternative goals and actions presented from many sources, allocating adequate resources and energy to the most important problems needing immediate attention, and committing our actions to get results. We must take into account previously set priorities (ongoing programs), crisis situations, the goals and thrusts of our institution and/or program area, past expectations of people, different interest groups to be served, and available resources or expertise, every time we consider a new priority alternative.

Priority setting isn't easy, but it's necessary. Why?
Priority Setting - Why?

There are many reasons to set priorities. Some are important to the clientele groups and larger society we serve; some are important for us to do our jobs well. These reasons fall into five categories:

Changing Needs and Roles

1. **Priority setting is important to meet the changing needs and roles of our audiences.**

   The world is changing at a faster pace than ever before. People change, their roles in life change, their needs and problems change. Problems are becoming more complex and interrelated as time goes by. People are better educated and demand more of us today than they did in the past—both in quality and quantity. New laws and regulations on the environment, population distribution, pesticides, etc., demand educational as well as legal input. The interrelatedness of problems and institutions creates more challenges for Extension professionals than in the past. No longer are our programs strictly rural oriented. The farm population has changed and shifted. Much of it has moved to the cities and towns. Farms are getting bigger and more specialized. The need for better farm production on less land is greater now than ever before, and the farmer's needs are more complex. People in big cities and small towns need help with their specific problems—and the problems are growing daily.

   If Extension is a problem-solving institution, and if Extension agents are indeed change agents, we must help people respond not only to present needs and crises, but also to problems of the future: How to deal with new technologies? What constitutes a healthy human being? How can we help people prepare for the changes the future will demand?

   But Extension resources are limited. We can't be all things to all people, even though the demands are great. Setting priorities and sticking to them is the only way to apply glue to a problem instead of a watery paste that spreads itself thin over many projects—and wears off in a short time.

   Extension priorities and our program priorities must not merely follow the trends of society. We must be in the advance guard of future problems, to prevent them before they occur or to help people meet them when they're inevitable. We must be flexible enough to respond to people's needs, but firm enough to stick with priorities and reach defined goals.
2. Priority setting helps us prevent future crisis.

President Kennedy once said he asked experts to advise him "not what should I do, but what will happen if I do?"

We must take the consequences of our actions into account as we set priorities so we can make judgments about what we do in the present. What will happen if I do or don't do something?

Doing something, for instance, may be the cause of a future crisis. What we envision as a cure may end up being worse than the disease. Phosphates brought us whiter wash loads, but with them came lake pollution. The dangers of DDT may be worse than the bugs it was supposed to destroy.

On the other hand, a crisis may occur if we don't do something. If a riverside community doesn't build a dike or institute flood plain zoning, massive property and crop damage will surely result in a flood year. Or what will happen to productive farmlands if zoning and restrictions aren't instituted near urban areas?

Seeing the effect of past actions on our present lives will help us look ahead to see the effect of our present actions on the future. Trying to see the future consequences of our present actions is an important part of setting priorities so that we can either prevent a crisis or avoid causing one. It will help us weigh risks and reduce uncertainty about the probability of future consequences occurring and thus make more rational decisions. We must also look ahead to the future needs of people and plan action now to meet those needs. For instance, if we know that advanced technology and increased population will bring more unemployment, what can we do about it now? We also need to plan time for emerging, "time-is-right" concerns. For instance, a fuel shortage causes people to be more urgently concerned about energy conservation or seeking new sources of energy. Can we plan our time to allow for educational efforts in conjunction with people's concern over the future?

3. Priority setting helps our credibility and accountability.

We set priorities to get concrete results on important problems. These results will be noticed by those who demand we be accountable for our programs: Extension administration, legislatures, the county board, our clientele, and our community.

More and more, people external to Extension are holding us accountable for program results they see as important. They ask: What are you doing? What do you have to show for the resources we've invested? What difference have you made in the lives of people you work with and for? Are your activities worth the tax dollars or grants provided to support them? Our credibility increases when we show results and measure.
up to what we've said our priorities are. If others help us set priorities and are aware of them, they can see how we meet those priorities. They'll see how we apply our resources to problems and "put our money where our mouth is." Successful activities build credibility, trust, and cooperation. Our credibility will be high only if we actually carry out actions other people can see, to meet goals they recognize as important.

4. Priority setting helps make our Extension jobs easier.

If we commit ourselves, and use our commitments to guide our activities, it will be easier for us to know what to do and when to do it. First, we must commit ourselves to setting some priorities and then to carrying out a few selected priority programs. Having a priority set and seeing it as critically important helps us make time to carry it out. If a choice is congruent with our own values and what we determine is important, commitment to the priority decision will come easily.

Setting priorities helps the person burdened with too many tasks break those tasks down by importance and get the most important things done first. It helps those locked into traditional activities, by habit or demand, become more open to new and changing priority problems. We can plan our programs more realistically and develop plans of work that tell what actually needs to be done to reach priority goals, and what actions we've designed to meet those goals. Our jobs become easier if others are aware of our priorities and adjust their expectations accordingly. We must discover the priorities of others, use them to decide ours, and communicate ours to them if we expect their involvement and help.

5. Priority setting helps us allocate resources, coordinate our programs with others, and provide balanced programming.

Setting priorities on the most critical needs and problems, and then setting priorities on our activities, allows us more efficient use of our limited resources. If we set priorities, back-up help, money, time, and cooperation with other agencies or the organization will be better coordinated and more likely to be available when we need them. Knowing the priorities of Extension and other personnel, and letting them know our priorities will help coordinate county, area, and statewide programs to deal with problems of most urgency. We're not setting priorities by ourselves.

For instance, in light of predicted food shortages and high prices, an agricultural agent can plan programs to improve livestock production; a community development agent
can concentrate on land use planning to save precious farm acreage; a home agent might program on low-cost nutrition; and a horticulture specialist could help people use home gardens as a supplement to store-bought food. All can work together on education for actions to relieve one acute community problem with dire future consequences. Such coordination in planning priority programs for an entire community, or even for an entire state, will help reach all segments of the population who need help, despite a limited amount of time, staff, and other resources. One agent or specialist can't do this alone.

**Summary**

Setting priorities as individuals and as an organization helps us aim our limited resources at the most critical problems. By so doing, we'll increase our impact, be more efficient and more credible, reach more people, help prevent crises, enjoy our work more, minimize risk and uncertainty, plan more realistically, keep our work up to date with changing needs, and use our resources more wisely. These are reasons why we need to set priorities. But how do we do it?
How Do We Set Priorities?

Priority setting is a personal commitment to act on those goals and related actions we've ranked as most immediately important. We can make these commitments if we see priority setting as a priority concern in our jobs. Assuming such a commitment exists, the six-step process described below can enhance priority setting, whether the context is annual plans of work, this week's schedule, or long-range program emphases.

Priority setting is a process we must continually apply to all our efforts throughout a year. However, one of the most critical applications of rational priority setting is in the program development process.

Program development involves identifying the critical problems in a community, area, or state over the next two or three years, setting appropriate goals, and deciding activities to solve them. Within program development, priority setting involves deciding what goals are most urgent and which activities must be done first. Priority setting is discussed below in a program development context, but the same steps can be applied to our daily, weekly, or monthly time frames.

Each of the following six steps involves deciding what needs to get done and what needs doing first to get results:

Step 1. Understanding the priority-setting situation.
Step 2. Identifying the possible priorities.
Step 3. Identifying criteria for selecting priorities.
Step 4. Determining the relative importance of priorities.
Step 5. Reflecting on priorities: consequences and timing.
Step 6. Commitment to action on priorities.
Step One: understanding the priority setting situation

Though the priority-setting situation varies, the things we should know about it don't. To really understand the task confronting us means understanding whether we're determining goals or our actions or both, the situation we're in, and the sources of influence on our job.

Goals and Actions

Goals are where we hope to get; actions are how we get there. Yet many believe that actions, such as radio programming, are goals in themselves. To understand our priority-setting situation, we must differentiate between our goals and actions, even though they're closely interrelated. Our actions help us achieve our goals. Our goals give direction to our actions. But we're often so busy with busyness that it's hard to get down to business—the business of deciding the most important goals and the best sequence of activities to achieve them.

Stopping to ask why we're doing something will lead to more purposeful activity—more business and less busyness. We're all involved in many repetitious, carryover, and ongoing activities. We answer phone calls, visit clients, attend meetings, plan fair exhibits, design materials, give speeches, make radio and TV programs—but to what end? Every time we undertake an activity we should ask ourselves: Why am I doing this? Is it because I'm expected to do it? Is it because Extension has always done it? Is it because this is the best means to a specific end—or has the activity become an end in itself?

For instance, when we plan the county fair, we must stop to think whether we're doing this planning for the sake of the county fair or is the fair only a means to a more important goal. If that goal is defined as "giving information," we should pursue the goals of the fair even further. What information? To whom? Why? What bigger goals will this information help achieve? Are those goals more important than other goals?

When we try to decide what's most important now, we must first ask why we're doing it. Then we must ask: "Is this why (the goal, objective, problem) really a top priority or do other important problems need more immediate attention?" Once the important priority goals have been set, then deciding ways (actions) to meet those goals will come more easily. Deciding on the methods is also a matter of setting priorities. We will be better able to sift through the never-
ending heap of busyness activities to find and use those that must come first if we're to meet defined goals. Everything else, of necessity, becomes a lower priority.

The Situation We're In

Understanding our priority-setting situation also means knowing first what present priorities and commitments we have and second the resources available to carry them out. Realistically, we're already involved in countless activities, hopefully related to important goals. We never start with a clean slate. But have we examined them lately? Do our commitments already outweigh our limited resources? All we may know about our activities is that we have too much to do. Too many important things get shuffled aside from lack of time or commitment to do something about them ... or else we're running ourselves ragged trying to give a little to each of our commitments without making major commitments to the most critical needs. If this isn't true for you, you don't have a priority-setting problem. But if you can't keep up with all your current commitments, let alone start new ones, you should examine your present commitments carefully.

There are several types of current commitments: carryover, repetitions, and emerging. Many priority goals and activities carry over from one month or year to another. We have made prior commitments (prior = priority). We're called on to do many of the same things year after year because people have come to expect our help in such areas as food preservation, pest control, etc., by habit or tradition (repetitious). We become aware that people are more ready this year to do something about a problem than they were two years ago when we first thought of it (emerging).

Perhaps the greatest current commitments are our long-range goals and activities. If we're concerned about what to do today, we should be guided by the commitments we've made for six weeks or a year from today.
In setting priorities, we can treat the ongoing commitments in several ways. We can ignore them and pretend we're starting with a clean slate. Realistically, selecting this alternative could prove to be the ticket to a quick exit from Extension, for we often make commitments to get or keep others' support.

A second way is to consider our present commitments as possible priorities, along with other emerging and new concerns. Selecting this option means some present commitments eventually will be rated lower priority. If so, we'll need to tactfully explain to certain constituent groups why we can no longer give as much time as they expect to their high priority goals and activities.

A third way to treat prior or ongoing commitments is to recognize some are going to take your time no matter what you do. Therefore, you may simply wish to set aside a certain percentage of your time for them (40%-70%) and think only of the remaining portion of your time as you set new priority goals and related activities.

Regardless of the approach, all traditional, repetitious, and ongoing activities and commitments, as well as emerging concerns, must be considered when setting new priorities.

Besides looking at ongoing and current commitments, you should also take a good look at the resources available. How much time do you have? Back up support? Dollars for travel and supplies? Listing your resources provides a practical tool not only for assessing your own situation, but also for explaining that situation to others.

Comparing both lists--your current commitments and the resources at your disposal--will help you more clearly describe the situation you're in, deal more effectively with setting priorities for the near- and long-range future, and allocate or redirect your resources wisely.

**Four Sources of Influence**

Though Extension educators must make hard professional decisions on priorities, they don't act alone during any of the priority-setting steps. Many sources of pressure and influence are responsible for the activities we're already involved in, but they also provide information, criteria, alternatives, resources, and cooperation for our priorities.

The following four sources, shown in Exhibit 1, influence our program priorities:

1. The community(s) or society at large.
2. Specific clientele or interest groups.
3. The Extension organization.
4. Self (one's own values, interests, concerns).

The Extension role we play (our priority goals and activities) is influenced by these four major sources.
The community and society at large give us certain norms of expected behavior, provide our funding and thus our accountability problems, and offer ideas about unmet societal or community priorities. This source presents the most general and ambiguous signals about our priorities.

The specific clientele groups include such groups as a particular neighborhood, organization, type of business, farm operation, or age, income, or ethnic group. The clientele groups provide more direct signals and pressures about our priorities and their priorities are most apt to offer direct conflicting pressures.

The Extension organization gives us our job description, our budget, our professional rewards, and back-up support. Sometimes, however, these benefits demand things of us that may conflict with clientele group or community pressures.
The fourth influence on our jobs and our priorities is ourselves. Our own values, interests, needs, experience, background, and time often present us with different priorities than those that occur to the other three sources of influence. At times, the pressures from the other three groups overwhelm our personal priorities. But no matter how our priorities and theirs differ, no matter how much we end up doing "their thing," it's important to recognize that we make the decision to act or not to act. Thus, whatever we decide becomes a personal priority to us, whether we like it or not, simply because we've opted to do it.

Often our biggest problem is to set program priorities among the myriad possibilities presented by the sources of influence. These sources may voluntarily come forth with suggestions or demands for programs on problems of priority concern to them. These suggestions and demands are the alternatives from which we must select priorities. These sources aren't to be looked on as "bad," even though they'll cause us problems by suggesting more than we can possibly do. In fact, they're absolutely necessary and helpful sources of influence. If all our sources, such as potential clientele, don't come forth, we should involve them more during the priority setting process to help ensure that the priorities we set are truly important. They'll also provide legitimation and resources for our programs.

CASE STUDY: Mary Ann Walker, Home Economist

STEP 1: Understanding the priority-setting situation

Mary Ann Walker, an Extension home economist is busy with dress revues, county fair activities, nutrition workshops, phone calls, home visits, and newsletters for homemakers in her county. She has many repetitious and ongoing activities. These are her methods for achieving her goals.

Like most home economists, she plans programs on an annual basis. She has to set priorities on what problems or concerns she will deal with in the coming year, but also on what methods and activities she'll use to accomplish her goals.

She has other priority-setting situations during the year. Each day or week she also has to decide how important certain goals are at that time, and how important certain activities are to accomplish them.

Mary Ann has to identify exactly what priorities she's trying to set: goals or actions.

Let's look at the sources of influence on Mary Ann.
Her programming interests are community-wide and her programs must reflect the interests of the community at large. They're geared toward the society's getting adequate food, clothing, and shelter; the future of family life; food and nutrition; consumer problems; education; and the well-being of people in social groups. She can get information about community-wide priorities from representatives of the community: elected officials, Extension committees, county boards, government agencies, advisory groups, surveys, news media, scientific and social research, and many others.

Mary Ann's specific clientele groups might include the elderly, families, teachers, homemakers, young marrieds, low-income people, and youth groups. She might also deal with other specific clientele, such as social workers, family counselors, or consumer groups, who deal with one or more of her specific clientele groups. They can help further her program efforts, as well as provide input and resources for them.

The influences from the Extension organization are Mary Ann's county office chairperson, her co-workers, district director, program area leader, research and specialist personnel from the University, administrators, and her job description, which outlines what she was hired to do.

The fourth source of influence on Mary Ann's job is Mary Ann herself. Her own values, interests, priorities, and perceptions of what's important for her community are important factors to consider when she plans programs. She must draw on her past experience in the community, her training, and the requests, demands, information, and policies presented to her from the other sources of influence. She's a major contributor to the priority-setting process, as well as a receiver. As the subjective decision maker, she'll use the objective information, the sources of influence, and the process to set her priorities.

Mary Ann's problem was to plan her program priorities for the coming year(s). Before she began selecting alternative priorities from which to choose, she had to define the situation she was in, by knowing whether it was her goals or actions she was deciding, by knowing her resources and commitments. She took into account the repetitive, ongoing, and traditional activities in which she was already involved. She differentiated these activities from the problems or goals they were designed to meet. She considered the four sources of influence on her job as channels of communication from which the suggested priority alternatives would be discovered.

Mary Ann described to herself the following situation as she looked ahead to the coming year:

Available time for planning = 240 days (less vacation & sick days)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Current commitments</th>
<th>Time committed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>County fair</td>
<td>25 days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homemakers Council</td>
<td>5 days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homemakers leader training</td>
<td>30 days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-H leader training</td>
<td>20 days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio and newsletters</td>
<td>30 days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unplanned phone calls</td>
<td>20 days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-H activities</td>
<td>20 days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional association and Extension committees</td>
<td>6 days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total time committed</strong></td>
<td><strong>156 days</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Time remaining for other priority goals and activities 84 days
Step Two: Identifying the Possible Priorities

The situation we're in is due to pressures or influences working on us and our jobs in many direct and indirect ways. Influences from the four sources can be positive aids to priority setting, not just pressures and demands. But to make these pressures positive, we should take the initiative to determine what these sources think our priority goals and activities should be.

The process of identifying possible priorities can be complex if we're trying to identify program goal priorities for the next year or so. But the same principles apply to simpler situations, such as designing daily or weekly activities to meet goals.

Identifying priority alternatives doesn't mean simply developing a "list." We need to discover the potential consequences and the relative importance of the possible priorities.

Different groups and sources of influence will inevitably identify different priorities; some overlap will occur. One group may see a possible priority as very valuable and attractive, while another may see the same alternative as unimportant. For each possible priority we identify, we'll need information about its relative importance, who it's important to, and its degree of urgency.

Depending on how critical the problem is, we'll need information about:

1. The probability of the priority alternative actually happening if selected. Is the alternative acceptable to people with the most influence on our jobs? Are barriers, people, lack of time or interest, conflicts with other ongoing programs, or lack of resources likely to prevent it, even if it's very important?

2. The consequences of the priority alternative if selected. We need to know what will happen to the people we work with, to Extension, to ourselves, and to the community if we choose a particular priority. On the other hand, what will happen if other possibilities receive higher priority? Will neglecting a possibility bring dire consequences in the future?
These questions aren't easy to answer. You may not get satisfactory answers to them for all your priority alternatives, but knowing the importance and probable consequences will help you decide. You don't always need hard data to answer these questions. Even if you could get hard data, your own subjectivity and judgment would affect your eventual choice. There's no neat, concise, mathematical formula available to help you set your priorities. The relative attractiveness and potential consequences of each priority alternative will, in most cases, be your own perception and the perceptions of others. Recognize it!

**Ways To Get Information**

We can find out the high priorities of the four sources of influence, the degree of importance the sources attach to each possibility, and their ideas about the consequences of an alternative in many ways. We must use those methods to identify their priority concerns, priority goals, and activities before coming up with a list of priority possibilities from which we'll select our high priorities.

Four general approaches can help identify priority possibilities and related information.

**Existing Information**

To avoid duplicating others' efforts, check data banks, prior surveys, studies, or research done by Extension or other agencies, to get information applicable to your situation and the sources of influence on your job.

**Surveys**

You can get information about potential audiences and their opinions and attitudes about priorities, by telephone surveys, mail questionnaires, or personal interviews. Be sure you know exactly who you want to survey and what you want to find out from them. Sampling is the most efficient way to survey the community as a whole or particular client groups.

A more complicated, but useful, survey approach for setting priorities is the Focus Delphi Process, which involves returning to the same respondents three or four times to get their reactions to priorities identified earlier and to get their information about priorities as you begin to narrow down possible alternatives.

**Observation**

You can get useful facts for priority setting by reading newspaper letters to the editor, counting the number of news stories about a topic, listening to radio call-in shows, studying participation numbers for past learning experiences on a topic, checking the popularity of particular library books, and looking at election results. Such observations may tell us more about past priorities and opinions (which have a bearing on the present and future) than they tell us about anticipated needs, however.
Approaching Groups

Four major types of groups can give us information about community or interest-group priorities:

**Existing voluntary organizations.** Organizations such as the local Chamber of Commerce, the Audubon Society, other conservation groups, social action or citizen pressure groups, consumer organizations, service clubs, and other community groups are usually ready for involvement on topics of interest to them. Though such groups have vested interests in particular areas and will express biases about priorities, a good cross section of different types of groups will give you a balance of priority possibilities from which to choose.

**Extension advisory groups.** Advisory groups are used in most states and counties to build cooperation among client groups, local leaders, and Extension professionals. Advisory committees on priorities for specific problem and subject areas also give input on priorities. Examples are 4-H leader councils, livestock improvement associations, homemaker groups, and rural development committees. Such groups provide high involvement, but if they're not handled properly may be time-consuming and merely serve to maintain the status quo.

**Task forces.** These are small ad hoc groups assigned a specific task for a relatively short period of time, thus differing from ongoing advisory groups. Because they're small and the tasks are specific, such groups are efficient and usually involve very interested or knowledgeable citizens from the general population or from specific clientele groups.

**Open meetings.** These meetings can get public response for or against issues, offer a chance to share feelings, and allow all people to speak out. However, the highly interested are usually the only ones to speak and the nonsocial ones don't come.

Ways To Approach Groups

Several tested techniques are particularly useful to clarify priorities within each of the above group approaches:

**Brainstorming.** Needs a skilled leader to encourage people to suggest all possible priorities regardless of their feasibility. Judgments and conclusions about the merits of suggested possible priorities are postponed until all the ideas have been heard.

**Nominal groups.** This is an excellent way to get at perceived priorities, especially from nonvocal people who come to a meeting. A large group meeting is divided into smaller
groups who write their perceived priorities on cards. These individual priorities are then consolidated on large sheets of paper or a blackboard to be reviewed, discussed, clarified, and voted on by the larger group to decide the most crucial priority problems. Individual, as well as group, priorities are identified with less threat to participants than an open discussion or brainstorming.

Guided discussion. This kind of discussion can bring out perceived ideas on priorities, especially when background information about trends and predictions for the future are brought into the discussion. People can analyze and discuss how trends such as fuel shortages or societal directions might affect their local situation. The method also helps people examine what's important for their community, what they really want or don't want to happen, and what they can do to cause or prevent it.

Combinations. Combinations of these approaches and techniques are possible. For instance, a guided discussion could use existing data in a brainstorming session with a voluntary organization. Or survey data may be needed to supplement attitudes and expressed priorities discovered in an open meeting. Don't ignore natural, everyday listening, conversation, and observation as useful ways to identify priorities.

Two-Way Communication

If priority setting in program development is to be successful, you can't simply "go get" the information and then set priorities. You must not only get input from sources; you need to share information with them. You must make your own needs known to the sources of influence. For example, the groups you work with must know that their role is advisory, not dictatorial. They must clearly understand that others will have something to say about your priorities too.

Each group must understand why you are setting priorities—that there are more demands on your time than you can handle and you must make important choices. If each group understands that so many hours in your day will be divided among many programs and activities and that you can make a major commitment of your time to only a few critically important problems with wide impact, you can avoid alienation later when you have to choose certain priorities over others.

Your sources must know the difference between goals and actions. You need suggestions about important priority needs and concerns if setting program goals is your focus. Or you might need suggestions about events and activities if
setting priority actions is your focus. You must help them understand the difference between the relative importance of a concern and its urgency or criticalness now. You must find out what priorities your sources will be committed to helping carry out later.

Once your priorities are set, you must communicate those priorities back to your sources of influence, particularly your fellow professionals, because they also provide needed support and resources. They'll be more willing to support your priorities if they've had some say in what your priorities are and understand how and why they were chosen. They can't provide support if they're not even aware of your priorities. In fact, the biggest reason priorities aren't followed through is because others don't know our priorities or expect different priorities.

Some feel we can't say no to someone for fear it will hurt our public relations. However, if we communicate with our client groups about our resource-commitment ratio and our need to make more effective input on priorities, our public relations may be enhanced more than if we make weak responses to many demands. Public relations may be a top priority but it will be enhanced more by effective, results-oriented programming on priorities than by our mere presence at a meeting.
CASE STUDY: Mary Ann Walker, Home Economist (cont.)

STEP 2: Mary Ann Walker knew where to go to find alternative priority concerns, but she had to be careful when approaching her possible priorities sources to find out their perceived priorities. She had to make sure the priorities she finally chose would get support.

Self- Mary Ann started with herself to find her own priority concerns and interests. She took an inventory of her current commitments and noted which ones she'd like to carry further. She examined her own programming interests: the things she liked to do and got rewards from doing. She noted the things she thought were worthwhile and needed by the community. She read newspapers, books, newsmagazines and journals; watched television documentaries; talked with people; kept up to date on societal needs and related them to the needs of her own community and specific clientele. Mary Ann's own personal values, interests, and perceptions of what's important would greatly affect her commitment to the priorities finally set.

Society & Community- Mary Ann has been constantly in touch with the needs of her community through contacts with her Extension committee, county board, and certain civic groups and service clubs. At priority-setting time, she surveyed community needs by geographic area or municipality. She used the brainstorming method with her advisory groups to discover and define specific needs of communities and the county. She checked to see how many of those were related to state or societal needs in general.

Specific clientele- Mary Ann maintained contact with representatives of the specific clientele groups she served throughout her experience as home economist. She risked all these groups, including those with whom she might conduct programs even if she hadn't programmed with each of them. Her own memory also provided a good list of priority needs. Still, she felt each group should be contacted at program planning time, especially those with whom she had no recent contact. She called on the fair board, 4-H council, women's groups, Homemakers Clubs, social action and service agencies, consumer groups, and representatives of the elderly and minorities. She used statistical data for information about specific groups of people in her community and their needs.

Extension organization- Mary Ann knew the priorities of her state Extension organization and her program area. Statewide program planning committees, memos, district meetings, contact with state specialists, and her fellow agents in and near her county kept her in touch with needs she would find in her own county. By knowing what state specialists were saying, what trends they discovered, what programs and materials they were working on, what resources they'd be ready to provide, and what had been done in other counties that might be useful to her, she found it easier to discover and meet her own programming needs. The national Extension Home Economics Focus II helped her recognize national or societal needs and their relationships to needs of her community.

All these sources of influence provided information for Mary Ann. But she needed to be sure which source carried more weight in helping her decide priorities. Perhaps she values her own principles and ideas more than any of the others’. Perhaps she gets the most support and recognition from the Extension organization. Perhaps she's most concerned with a few clientele groups with which she's been successful or whose needs she sees as most critical. It may be that her overview of society and the future makes her more aware of the total society’s needs over the particular needs of its segments. She examined these influences on her priorities. They would affect her objectivity, but she was aware it was a subjective decision she had to make.
After checking with all her sources and viewing the overlap among the suggested alternative goals for the next several years, Mary Ann found herself weighting input from Extension and specific client groups more, her own input second, and societal input the least. She came up with the following priority possibilities:

1. Adequate nutrition for teenagers.
2. Low-income family nutrition.
3. Consumer education.
4. Improved child-parent relationships.
5. Housing for elderly.
6. Crafts and arts.
7. Prenatal care programs.
8. Role of women.
9. Estate planning.
10. Use of credit.
11. Home safety.
12. Adjusting to social change.
13. Family planning.
Step Three: identifying criteria for selecting priorities

**Rules of the Game**

Once we’ve identified possible priority alternatives, the next difficult question is: How do we choose among them? How do we assign relative value to each? How do we determine the urgency of one important priority over another?

We can only choose by determining the rules of the game in advance. These rules are called criteria.

**Identifying Criteria**

Identifying what criteria we’ll use to select priorities may be the most critical of the six priority-setting steps. The criteria are the bases on which we select priorities and the defense for our eventual choice. The criteria are the reasons we designate certain goals and activities as higher priority than others.

For instance, if the criteria of immediate need, economic benefits, and numbers affected are identified as most important, we might choose a program on weed-free, optimum fertility corn production for 1,000 area farmers, rather than a home gardening program for 400 families. That choice might be reversed if only 100 corn growers were affected as opposed to 1500 home gardeners, or if the criteria of economic benefits were changed to personal satisfaction and productive leisure benefits.

**Weighting Criteria**

Thus, we must carefully select and weight the criteria we use to choose. Aside from our actual priority possibilities, the criteria we select have the greatest effect on our eventual priorities.

Particular criteria are important in themselves, but even more important is who says so. Eventually, you’ll decide which criteria carry more weight than others, but the sources of criteria will help you do that weighing.

Therefore, the sources of possible priority alternatives are also the sources of criteria. Some of the same approaches, techniques, and channels of communication used to identify possible priorities can also be used to identify criteria.

An additional technique, “value clarification,” is most useful to identify criteria. Value clarification can be used to identify the importance of your own criteria and to help others identify theirs. Briefly, the technique forces you to examine what’s most valuable and important to your life.
and to publicly acknowledge those feelings to others so that underlying personal values become guides to your behavior.

You don't need to make two trips, one for priority concerns and another for criteria to make choices. Both steps can be integrated into some of the same activities. By involving the four sources of influence in identifying possible priorities and criteria for selecting among them, you'll establish a situation for these same groups to support the commitments you make later.

To help ensure that the priorities you select are truly the best ones, and to avoid alienation of specific groups, it's wise to select a balanced group of criteria that reflects social, economic, environmental, and human development concerns. Some examples are: environmental protection, benefits to groups and community organizations, learning and educational development, health and safety, enhancement of human values, etc. If your criteria are too heavily loaded in one direction (that is, economic concerns with disregard for the environment or vice versa), a group with broader or different interests might well be alienated—or your priorities may not be the best ones.

But it's a different-and necessary-matter to identify which criteria will carry more weight in your decision, which ones are most critical at this time. If you don't, you either won't be able to determine your priorities or else you may end up with mediocre, watered-down program goals and actions.

Some other examples of criteria are: readiness of client groups, availability of resources and backup support, time necessary, volunteers committed to needed task, contribution to Extension or program area mission, improvement of social equality, personal satisfaction or rewards, expertise, budget, contribution to the solution of other problems, etc.

Criteria come from the four sources of influence on the job. Your task in Step 3, then, is to identify and list the criteria from each source of influence (including yourself) and to weigh their importance, depending on their source, your job situation, and the priority-setting situation you face.

Though no formula exists to objectively identify and weigh criteria, the funnel idea in Exhibit 2 shows how the criteria you select from the four sources of influence are like screens or filters in a funnel.

The criteria from the community and society are broadest in nature and allow the most projects and possible priorities through.

The specific client groups you work with offer the next set of criteria to screen possible priorities. They're more specific and thus more discriminating. They may even conflict with each other or with criteria from the other sources.

The third source—the Extension organization—also has criteria to screen out certain alternatives that don't fit the Extension mission or resources.
Summary

The final filter, however, is you. Only you can weigh all the priority alternatives that get through the other screens. Only you can decide your program priorities.

Every situation in which we obtain criteria for setting priorities involves the following points:

1. Criteria come from the four sources of influence on our jobs. Each has its own criteria, just as each has its own priorities to suggest.
2. We can use various approaches and techniques to identify, clarify, and weight criteria from the four sources.
3. Criteria will differ, depending on the source of influence's interests, purpose, problem, job, and other factors.
4. All situations involve getting criteria from one's self. You can't escape the need to clarify what's critical and important to you. Therefore, some value clarification is in order as you define your criteria and help others define theirs.
5. Criteria can be both subjective (personal and societal values, feelings, beliefs, opinions, and desires) and objective (surveys, facts, research, scientific predictions, trends, and real experiences).

6. When several sources indicate the same criterion, it may indicate that criterion's importance.

7. The person setting priorities is the center of the process. That person must coordinate the selection and relationships of criteria to possible priorities.

8. Criteria will differ in value or importance. If you don't manage how they've weighed, others will dictate their importance to you.
Mary Ann Walker identified criteria from her sources of influence and reading. The criteria she found most critical for her priority-setting process were phrased as questions for each source of influence:

**Community and Society**
1. How many people will be affected?
2. What’s this alternative’s relationship to national and state priorities and goals?
3. How will it be accepted or supported by the community?
4. Is it a recognized need in the community?

**Specific Clientele**
1. Does it solve these specific clients’ problem(s)?
2. Will it prevent further problems?
3. Will these clients accept it as a priority concern? Are they ready for it?
4. Will it agree with or oppose these clients’ personal values, such as consumer rights, economic benefits, and environmental protection?

**Extension Organization**
1. Does this alternative fit the Extension and program area mission?
2. Is this alternative educational?
3. Can I get the resources to do it?
4. Does it relate to current state Extension thrusts?
5. Is research or information available to deal with it?
6. Does it relate to other Extension programs or concerns?
7. Is it a balanced, equal opportunity program?

**Self**
1. Does this alternative fall into my job description?
2. Am I personally concerned or interested?
3. Do I have the expertise necessary to adequately deal with it?
4. Does it interrelate with other activities I’m involved in?
5. Does it fit my personal values of human dignity, social equality, and cultural development?
Step Four: determining the relative importance of priorities

A priority is something that's most important now. Though the two dimensions, value and time, may be determined simultaneously, it's easier to see the difference when they're considered separately.

In this step you actually assign relative importance to priority alternatives.

What is valuable or important is a difficult philosophical question. At one time, people relied on dogma and religion to guide their decisions on what was important in their lives. With the advent of scientific observation and empirical research, however, we now find it difficult to accept as valuable anything that can't be scientifically proven. This is particularly true in Extension because of our traditional commitment to research and newly tested knowledge.

Science Can't Prove Value

Though scientific research and statistical data treatment have contributed much to our knowledge of the world and ourselves, they have not and will not be able to determine for us what's most important. We can use a scientific method to discover facts, possible priorities, and criteria, but we must be aware that our own personal values and biases and those of others will determine the relative importance or value of priorities. No matter what conclusion we reach about the relative importance of certain priorities, that conclusion is based on certain human assumptions. We must make every effort to be more aware of our own values and to help others understand theirs if we're to make rational decisions on priorities.

Importance Through Reasoning

Step 4 in priority setting, assigning relative value and importance, is essentially one of reasoning and logical thinking based on human assumptions and values in the form of criteria.

The following examples illustrate how certain criteria help determine the relative value of possible priority alternatives.
Example 1
Priority alternatives: Program on wise pesticide use vs. farming efficiency through pesticide use.

Criterion: Environmental protection.

Conclusion: Wise use of pesticides will help protect the environment. The farm efficiency program may not. Therefore, the wise use of pesticides program is more important.

Example 2
Priority alternatives: 4-H Camp discussions on life goals and skills vs. shuffleboard tournament.

Criterion: Enhancement of individual values.

Conclusion: Discussion of life goals helps individuals understand personal values, while shuffleboard may not. Therefore, camp discussions on life goals are more important.

Example 3
Priority alternatives: Estate planning program vs. farm management program for low-income farmers,

Criterion: Socioeconomic equality.

Conclusion: Programming for low-income farmers will enhance socioeconomic equality better than an estate planning program.

The conclusion of whether a priority alternative is high or low in importance depends on whether it meets an identified criterion. Obviously, each conclusion can be changed if another criterion is added or if another source of influence weighs that criterion differently. The reasoning process can quickly become very complex, so make sure your criteria are well identified in advance.

The reasoning process occurs within the funnel described in Step 3. Each possible priority alternative is passed through the screens of the funnel (selected criteria of each source of influence). If the priority possibility meets the criteria, it passes. If it doesn’t it’s thrown out or blocked in the funnel. You’re the final filter. Your own criteria will help you select the most important priorities from those alternatives that pass through the criteria of the other three sources.
There are many ways to get possible priorities and criteria from sources of influence. Some approaches expect a group simply to set priorities without their understanding why. But we have an obligation to help ourselves and others understand why certain things are more important than others. We must help our sources of influence become more conscious of their criteria and values. Connecting criteria with priority alternatives also provides us with a sounder rationale and defense of our priorities.

Regardless of approach, the relative importance of each alternative must be based on criteria identified before or during choice.
Determined the relative importance of priorities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alternatives</th>
<th>Community</th>
<th>Specific Clients</th>
<th>Extension</th>
<th>Self</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Adequate nutrition for teenagers.</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>H H H H H</td>
<td>H H H</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Low-income family nutrition.</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>H H H H H</td>
<td>H H H</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Consumer education.</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>H H H H H</td>
<td>H H H</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Improved child-parent relationships.</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>H H H H H</td>
<td>H H H</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Housing for elderly.</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>H H H H H</td>
<td>L L L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Crafts and arts.</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>H H H H H</td>
<td>H H H</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Prenatal care programs.</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>H H H H H</td>
<td>L L L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Role of women.</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>H H H H H</td>
<td>L L L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Estate planning.</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>M L M M M</td>
<td>L L L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Use of credit.</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>L H H H H</td>
<td>L L L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Home safety.</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>L H H H H</td>
<td>L L L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Adjusting to social change.</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>L H H H H</td>
<td>L L L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Family planning.</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>L H H H H</td>
<td>L L L</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

She then checked which alternatives met the criteria of each source, including her own. She ultimately identified four programs as higher in value and importance than the others:

1. Teenage nutrition.
2. Low-income family nutrition.
3. Consumer education.
4. Use of credit.

Though she personally felt low-income family nutrition was most important in light of its future consequences, she decided to place that priority lower on her list since it was the exclusive priority concern of other home economists in the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program. Teenage nutrition became her top priority.

These priority alternatives were more important than the others because of her training; the readiness of specific clients and community, prevention of problems, close relationship to national, and state goals, and the interrelationships of the priorities.
Step 5: reflecting on priorities: consequences and timing

Many goals, concerns, and issues can be perceived as important and valuable by the four sources of influence. But just because a goal or action is important doesn't necessarily mean it's a priority—something that must be done now.

A priority is some problem or concern that needs immediate attention. It's something that must be done first, before something else—deal with an immediate crisis, to prevent a future crisis, or to enable a later action or goal to be accomplished.

In Step 5 we look ahead to see the future consequences of our action or inaction on a priority. We decide what goals or subgoals need to be reached first, what needs to be done next, and how much time must be devoted to necessary activities.

There are two critical questions in this step:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Consider Future Consequences</th>
<th>What are the future consequences of my action or inaction on this priority? Is it really most important now to prevent or avoid causing unwanted consequences or to cause desired consequences?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Consider Timing</td>
<td>What's the necessary timing on each priority perceived as important? This question has two parts:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1. What must be done first?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. How much time should be blocked off during the upcoming week, month, or year to get the job done adequately?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Examples of criteria that might help us determine answers to the time dimension question are:

1. Readiness of people (knowledge, attitudes, enthusiasm).
2. Calendars and accessibility of backup resources.
3. Interrelationship with other programs at some time or other.
4. What part of the problem needs to be solved first.
5. The complexity of the problem and how much time it needs.
6. Potential payoff and future consequences of undertaking or neglecting a priority.
7. What other activities are needed to precede the major activity.

Many of these criteria to determine timing depend on the capacity of groups to accept a priority and the resources available to undertake it. The relationship of a priority to limited resources comes to the forefront in this step.

To illustrate the time dimension, let's presume you've assigned higher importance to three programs and lower importance to another five possible alternatives. In this step, you can put the five lower priorities on the back burner and deal only with the three high priorities.

To treat these three important priorities, you must ask yourself which one needs more time in the next year or so. Those priorities that involve more people, are more sociopolitical than technical, involve more social barriers, need more resources and backup, are newer in nature, are interrelated with other problems, and need more legitimation and preparation, will require more time. If you have 120 days of flexible time open in the next year, you may find your top priority requires 50 or more of those days, your second priority may need 40, and the third may need 30.

Once you've allotted time to the various priorities, you must determine the necessary timing and sequencing of activities if priority goals are to be achieved. For instance, if your priority is to achieve a goal two years from now, you should consider what subgoals need to be achieved before then. What activities are needed, in what order or sequence, if the bigger or more long-range goal is to be achieved?

You can better sequence goals and related actions if you ask yourself:

1. What subgoals must be met before the ultimate goal is achieved?
2. What actions need to precede others to achieve these goals?

By starting with the perceived goal and working backwards in time you can determine the necessary sequence of events, activities, and subgoals that must precede the ultimate goal. You'll be surprised how many times we need to have something done yesterday if we expect something else to be achieved three years from now.

We really haven't set priorities until we've dealt with both the value (Step 4) and time dimensions (Step 5).
CASE STUDY. Mary Ann Walker, Home Economist (cont)

STEP 5: Mary Ann Walker came up with the following order of importance in reflecting on priorities:

1. Teenage nutrition.
2. Consumer education.
3. Use of credit.

When she looked ahead to the future consequences of her actions on teenage nutrition, she could see that such a program might significantly contribute to the health and well-being of teenagers, their stamina and alertness, especially in school, and better management of their own food buying and meal preparation when they were on their own.

She was able to plan a sequence of activities by looking ahead three years and then working backwards to the present to see what things needed to happen.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Goal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In 3 years:</td>
<td>Teenagers will be eating &quot;significantly&quot; better than at present, based on a random sample of teenage eating patterns.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If so, 2 1/2 years</td>
<td>Educational program will have to be completed for all 13 communities in the county.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>But if so, 2 years</td>
<td>I have to begin my series of programs that could likely involve 3 meetings in each locale.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>But if so, 1 1/2 years</td>
<td>I need to have developed the instructional materials I'll use.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Which means that 1 year from now:</td>
<td>I have to have sessions with physicians, 4-H leaders, nurses, dietitians, school teachers, and others to gain their support, cooperation, and willingness to be part of the program.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Which means 6 months</td>
<td>I'll need to have thought clearly about communities, approaches, potential support people, and related activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Which means that within the next 6 weeks:</td>
<td>I need to do a benchmark survey to determine knowledge level, attitudes, areas of concern, current food habits, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Which means that NOW:</td>
<td>I'd better write or talk to others in Family Living and Sociology about how to make surveys, get resources, etc.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mary Ann had priority activities and subgoals needing immediate attention if a sequence of events were to lead towards her broader goal in three years. Reflecting on her priorities, their future consequences, the amount of time needed, and sequencing of related goals and actions had everything to do with whether she would achieve her overall program goals.
Step 6: commitment to action on priorities

This step includes processes needing particular attention when the other steps have been completed.

The sequence of the six steps could be changed. For example, other priority alternatives might become apparent during Step 5. Or your programming situation may be more clear after examining the possible priority alternatives. Or you might discover more criteria or reassign levels of value to priorities after you’ve reflected on your high priorities and dealt with the questions of timing and future consequences.

But the order will hold true in most cases. So, in the last step you should give attention to several critical concepts:

1. Commitment.
2. Communication.
3. Resources.
5. Flexibility.

Commitment

You've not really completed your priority setting until you've committed yourself to a priority. You've said to yourself: "This is critical. All else is secondary until this activity, or this goal, or this audience is satisfied."

Commitment is internal. No one else can make you committed. The other three sources of influence can pressure you for a commitment, but only you can reach that point. This is why we've stressed the notion that you are the "final filter." You have the final say about your program goals, though they've been greatly influenced by your sources of influence, especially those you serve with programs.

Extension professionals are those who become committed to doing a job well, and that job can't be done well without an internal, personal commitment on their part. Harry Truman said, "The buck stops here." You, too, can't afford to pass the buck. You must develop a "stick-to-it" attitude.

Is it possible to be personally committed to some goal and still not be able to carry it out because of interruptions and other pressures? Perhaps, but if that happens you haven't become personally committed enough to take precautions to protect your commitments and priorities. You can take steps to prevent these occurrences by communicating your priorities to others, allocating limited resources, and designing actions to carry out priorities.
Communication

Influences on your job come from at least four sources. What's to stop those sources from pressuring you to change your commitments? Nothing, unless you communicate to all your sources of influence your job situation, the criticalness of setting priorities, your good reasons for the priorities you've set, and your intention to meet them. Support from fellow professionals is a must.

Saying some priorities are higher is like saying "yes" to them. When others are assigned lower priority it's like saying "no"-or "maybe"-to them. However, you can say indirectly. Let your high priorities speak for you. Said in the "right" way, your message will be clear and won't offend or alienate people. For example, you can tell them your priorities will change after you've focused on certain things for a year or two, long enough to make a difference or get the job done. You can use your priority-setting group meetings (if you use such a technique) to reinforce these ideas. You may also assign some lower priorities to other people, agencies, or groups. Can someone else do it? Can you give a lower priority a little time and let others carry the ball?

However you treat the lower priorities, you must make clear your commitment to the high priorities you've set. Making your intentions publicly known to others is one of the best steps toward commitment.

Resources

A key reason for setting priorities in the first place is because our limited resources can't meet all the demands. Thus, resource allocation is critical to priority setting and it's also the best way to commit ourselves to priorities.

One way of communicating priorities is to get resources allocated, to get the help of specialists and other Extension people scheduled, and to get money budgeted in ways that make it difficult to pick up new activities unrelated to high priorities. The very act of getting resource and backup support communicates your commitments to others. Plans of work or calendars of events aren't simply busywork. They protect your time by blocking it off for priorities. They can help you practice two-way communication in the Extension organization.

Action

Many excellent empirical research studies have shown that the best predictors of one's future behavior are one's previous outward actions and behavior in the presence of others. For example, if you wish to know whether someone will organize a meeting for you, look to people who have done it in the past, or who have publicly expressed a willingness to do it. You can use the same principle to enhance your commitment and protect your priorities. By publicly telling others your priorities and intentions, you've performed an overt, public action that you and others see.
Your plan of work or efforts to secure resources and Extension support are such public actions. The commitment works both ways.

Old sayings like "actions speak louder than words," or put your money where your mouth is," indicate that the best ways to tell others your priorities are the actual activities you plan and the programs you conduct. If you haven't set priorities, or if you have dealt with things superficially, it will be more difficult to convince others of your intentions. Eventually, however, if you've committed yourself to action, others will see your Extension role as purposeful and directed by the priorities you've set with others.

The best possible action you can take towards commitment is to plan activities using the working-backwards idea. If you develop such a plan of action and then let your clientele groups and organization know about it, you'll place them and yourself on the spot. You'll have deadlines to meet—an excellent incentive to get things done. If you've called a meeting for March 9, sent letters to clientele, scheduled resource people and a meeting place, and announced the meeting to the mass media, it will be pretty hard to postpone work on a priority goal the meeting was designed to enhance. Without such planned actions, deadlines, and real activities, a list of priorities could sit meaningless in your files for years.

The closer we can get to overt action, the better our commitment to priorities will be.

**Flexibility**

Extension work has been a success because of the tireless efforts of people like you who have helped others with their concerns and problems. Much of Extension's reputation is due to its flexibility and readiness to respond when needed. We aren't suggesting that you or any other Extension worker drop the concept of flexibility. You must be able to respond to requests and emergency situations as they arise. The idea of flexibility is not contrary to priority setting. When emergencies arise, you'll have to decide, first, whether they're within the scope of Extension's mission (priorities). If so, respond.

Second, let's realize that emergencies always develop. Why not build into your schedule some time for dealing with those emergencies? You can't plan 100% of your time and still be able to deal with emergencies. Plan for flexibility.

In summary, the outcome of this sixth step in priority setting is a commitment to priorities that we and others have determined are most important now. Commitment is much more possible if we have designed actions to meet our priority goals, have communicated our intentions to clientele, to the community, to the Extension system, and most important, to ourselves. Goals are important, but only actions will get results.
Mary Ann followed up her priority-setting with well-written plans of work to her program leaders, nutrition specialist, office peers, the homemaker club council, and other home economists in her district. The explanations of her priorities, needed resources, and planned activities were well received by most of them.

She also began contacting survey specialists, requesting money to do surveys, and making initial contacts with local resource people. She visited teachers and 4-H leaders to get their help and cooperation for her program, and to see how to make contacts with teenagers. She discovered such contacts would help her make inroads towards her second and third priorities; consumer education and use of credit were important topics on which to educate teenagers who would soon be on their own. She presented her ideas with a firmness that conveyed commitment and yet an openness to suggestions about better methods or other people to contact.

Her immediate priorities became clearer to her and to others as her actions communicated her program commitments.
Summary

This booklet was written with Extension program planning in mind. But the concepts can apply to short- or long-term situations, and to non-Extension programming situations as well. The critical ideas are:

1. Limited resources, accountability, the increasing complexity and interrelatedness of problems, and other factors demand that we set our priorities.
2. Some goals and actions are more important than others.
3. Some goals and actions need to be accomplished before others.
4. Someone needs to decide what goals and actions are high priority.
5. All situations of individuals are different, but underlying principles apply to many situations.
6. Four sources of influence put pressure on us as Extension professionals in setting priorities. They also provide possible priorities and criteria to judge them.
7. The Extension professional is ultimately responsible for considering all factors and making personal commitments to high priorities.
8. Criteria need to be used to determine priorities. One important criterion is the future consequences of our actions.
9. Setting priorities is worthless unless commitment and action follow.
10. Two-way communication with sources of influence is necessary to set priorities and stick to them.

If you understand these concepts and are committed to set priorities, you are on the first step of a road that leads to results.
CASE STUDY: Dick Snelling, County Youth Agent

STEP 1: Dick Snelling, a youth agent, spent a great deal of time each year working with local volunteers to plan 4-H and other programs for youth.

Dick Snelling, a youth agent, spent a great deal of time each year working with local volunteers to plan 4-H and other programs for youth. His overall program goals -- developing human relations and community responsibility, enhancing career exploration, encouraging values clarification, and helping youth develop coherent life styles, were ongoing statewide concerns each year.

But Dick had priority problems. After discussing his situation with others, Dick concluded that the problems were caused by the poor connection between overall program goals and the local activities he conducted with local 4-H leaders. Some said the broad statewide goals would mean more if he could develop some specific local goals related to the statewide thrusts. County activities would also relate better to such local goals. Dick decided to identify some of them by going to the sources of influence on his job.

Dick's job was influenced by sources similar to Mary Ann Walker's, the home economist. He had to consider the community and society, which asked him to plan programs for youth to learn the basics of citizenship, cooperation, and relating to other people. He discovered the society's needs and priorities through mass media, school programs, Extension committees, his own sense of values, research, and opinion polls.

Dick's specific clients were the 4-H club members, leaders, and parents in his county. He also conducted short-term youth projects for non-4-H club members. These audiences told him their expectations for 4-H and youth programs through the county 4-H leaders' council, phone calls, and office visits.

The Extension organization influenced his programs through his district 4-H program leaders, other specialists, written support materials, financial support, other agents, and the local Extension committee.

Finally, Dick's own values and experiences affected his priorities. He was raised on a farm, had 4-H experiences as a boy, and raised beef calves and gave demonstrations in his project work. He also lived with other students at college who came from large cities and became interested in urban 4-H and disadvantaged youth. Dick needed to set priorities on a county 4-H program that would reflect his own values, as well as the values and priorities of his other sources of influence.
As he considered how to get input on possible priority-goals for his county, Dick decided to work primarily within the current organization and ask leaders and 4-H members what they saw as priorities. The annual 4-H leaders' council county meeting was a good way to start the process.

At the meeting, Dick explained his need to set priorities to the group. He outlined the existing statewide goals, his current activities, the difference between goals and activities, the need for two-way communication and getting input on priorities.

He arranged the leaders and members into buzz groups to brainstorm on these questions:

1. Of existing 4-H statewide goals, which ones should we focus on in next year's county youth program?
2. Within the statewide goals, what community problems, issues, and concerns should we deal with to improve our local 4-H program?
3. Considering both the statewide goals and our community concerns, what goals should be high priority?

As a result of the brainstorming sessions and a later followup with non-4-H club groups Dick developed this list of possible priority goals:

1. Develop more leadership in wood and mechanical projects.
2. Improve communication among leaders, agents, and parents.
3. Improve quality of work in member-initiated projects.
4. Expand 4-H to urban and disadvantaged youth.
5. Expand opportunities for junior leadership.
6. Increase project training in all projects.
7. Increase development of community projects by clubs.
8. Increase sharing of leadership by local clubs.
9. Improve recreational training.
10. Develop a family-oriented 4-H program.

This list of goals seemed long to Dick. Some goals and commitments and many more on-going activities were already locked in. But it showed Dick why he had a priority-setting problem. He began to see that several of his current activities were unrelated to priority goals.

Dick set criteria for choosing among these alternatives by relying on input from his state program leaders, 4-H Club members and leaders, and himself.

Through letters and discussions with his program leader, he concluded he should use the statewide program goals as basic criteria for whether the more specific local goals were high priority or not. If a particular goal would greatly help 4-Hers achieve a statewide program goal, such as “clarification of personal values,” that goal would be a high priority.

The district program leader also pointed out the following possible criteria:

- Resources and available specialist help.
- Amount of time being given by others to certain activities.
• The type of inservice training intended for the coming year for youth agents.
• The amount of controversy surrounding some goals.
• The possibility of a priority increasing 4-H membership.

At the annual 4-H executive council meeting, Dick approached his leaders and members for their ideas on how they and he together should decide priority goals for the coming year. In their buzz groups, they came up with the following criteria for assigning priorities:

1. Number of kids affected.
2. Interest of parents and leaders.
3. Was event a success last year?
4. Has anyone suggested changes or additions to last year's program?
5. Dick's time.
7. Travel and distance.

Dick agreed with most of the ideas he got from his 4-H organization and from his district leader. He recognized the need to build programs on the past, but he questioned whether last year's success, among other criteria stated - by leaders, wouldn't lead to static, traditional programs. He therefore also came up with these criteria:

1. Will goal stimulate members' interest in their community?
2. Will goal serve most projects and clubs in county?
3. Will goal encourage both cooperation and competition?
4. Will it be educational?

**STEP 4:** Dick decided to share the list of possible priority goals and determining the relative importance of priorities with various people identified at the next 4-H executive council meeting. He explained again that he needed to set priorities and select certain activities. He asked them to use the criteria listed under Step 3 in assigning rank order to the 10 possible priority goals on the sheet.

Though Dick put more of the responsibility back on the group, he stressed the importance of his criteria.

As the votes were tabulated and communicated to the group, the list looked like this:

1. Expand 4-H to urban and disadvantaged youth.
2. Improve communication among leaders, parents, and agents.
3. Improve quality of member-initiated work.
4. Increase leadership in wood and mechanical projects.
5. Increase project training in all projects.
6. Increase development of community projects by clubs.

Dick realized that the first item on the list was important . . . but there were no cities larger than 40,000 in his county. He also realized that state youth specialists were developing a plan for expanding 4-H to disadvantaged rural youth. Inservice training and materials would be ready in another year. He decided his aptitude and resources to tackle that difficult job would be greater in another year, especially if well-trained leaders were developed this year to lead ongoing programs while he dedicated a lot of time next year to expanding the 4-H program.

Therefore, he selected the following interrelated goals as his top priorities for the year ahead:

1. Improve quality of member-initiated project work.
2. Improve communication among leaders, parents, and agents.
3. Increase project training in all projects.
STEP 5: Reflecting on priorities: consequences and timing
The goals that Dick and his youth leaders and members picked for the next year supported statewide 4-H program goals. Dick still asked himself several reflective questions:

1. Are all pertinent facts available and do they support these priorities?
2. Is the goal likely to be achieved?
3. Are people ready for it?
4. Do people know about it?
5. Are the goals more appropriate for certain groups than for others?
6. Are members and leaders aware of the time it will take to pursue the goals?
7. Will the priority goals help increase the impact of traditional events and their relationship to overall 4-H goals?

These questions made Dick realize that if the quality of member-initiated project work was really to improve by next year, it would be necessary to develop a sequence of subgoals and activities. He began to ask more questions.

We want improved project work next year. What projects? What members? Who needs it most? What's the present quality of work? What do leaders and parents need to do? What materials are available? Many decisions had to be made before a calendar of activities to meet the goal would materialize.

Dick's head began to swim. He began to realize there was more to getting members to improve the quality of their work than just saying so. He needed a plan to get people involved in making decisions and carrying out actions.

The project completion date was August 1. If leaders had to review and judge the projects by July 15, about 4 months remained for members to do their work. Members would need a better understanding of project work, its purposes, standards of expected quality, and necessary skills by March 15.

Dick saw even more need for planning a calendar of activities for things that had to happen first. Leaders would need project training in February and March. He hadn't realized how closely related his Number 1 and 3 priorities were, but he could see that project training for leaders had now become an activity in support of a larger goal. Leaders would need new materials, training on how to work with members, and other help by the first of February. A planned executive committee meeting in October could help organize subcommittees to work on materials, assess where training was most needed, and arrange training meetings for leaders in December and January. Dick then considered what he had to do before the week of January 17 (the week of planned and publicized project training meetings) if results were to be shown in improved project work by members in the coming year.

Dick planned an information program for members, parents, and leaders for August or September. He got information from other states and counties on how they conducted training. He wrote to his state leader right away for her advice.
STEP 6:
Dick used his newsletters and 4-H executive council meetings to inform his members and leaders about plans for improving project work and training. During these communications, he also got feedback on further refinements. He actually began to get more support than he expected from some of the more traditional 4-H Club families. They could see, as he explained it, that in the long run the whole program would benefit by the focused attention on parts of it.

He also found more willingness on the part of some leaders and parents to share the leadership load. His openness in sharing the predicament he faced enlightened them. The help he got from other youth agencies and Extension agents on new innovations for the county fair and how to run a camp were spin-off benefits and contributed to his Number 2 priority of improved communication.

The involved activity of setting priorities was itself a value clarification process for Dick. He began to see what was really important for himself and others. His clients and colleagues noticed he was more interested in and committed to his job. The commitment became infectious.

CASE STUDY: Elaine Jackson, State Plant Pathology Specialist

STEP 1:
Elaine Jackson had been a state Extension specialist in plant pathology for two years. Her situation was becoming extremely frustrating. At first she worked directly with farmers on disease control of farm crops as local agricultural agents identified problem situations. However, she soon began to do more work with pesticide dealers and plant breeders working on disease-resistant varieties.

Her work in urban horticulture was so successful that her phone rang constantly May through July in the past year. Her mail was piling up. She was way behind on correspondence. Everybody thought their own problems were highest priority. Elaine's concern was—how do I decide which problems are of most concern, but more critically, what audiences are most important, and exactly what is my most important job responsibility?

Elaine began defining her situation by listing her community and society sources of influence. She felt strongly that the world, national, and state food situation, as reflected by the World Bank, United Nations, and USDA publications, must be considered. She also knew about the pressures being put on agribusiness and pesticide producers from environmentally concerned groups such as Audubon, Sierra Club, Friends of the Earth, and various consumer protection groups.

The Extension organization also provided many influences on Elaine: other crop and livestock specialists, safety specialists, plant breeders, economists, agricultural program leaders, Extension agents, district directors, and the colleagues in her department.
Elaine’s specific clientele were: State Department of Agriculture personnel, county plant inspectors, farm supply dealers, garden store operators, farmers, fruit growers, municipal parks departments, other faculty in Extension, and home gardeners.

Elaine was herself a critical source of priority alternatives. She was obviously committed to a specialized field, plant pathology, and also had commitments to some activities she couldn’t get rid of quickly.

STEP 2: Identifying the possible priorities

Elaine was trying to determine her priority audience. She knew she would have to work with various possible audiences to determine her main audiences. She began her process by first discussing the situation with her department chairperson and her state agriculture agribusiness program leader. Among them, they evolved a strategy in which Elaine could begin to see a more well-defined and acceptable plant pathology program.

They decided that Elaine must involve the following people in deciding her program goals. These goals would help her and others identify her approaches and thus her audiences.

1. County agricultural agents.
2. Other plant and soils science specialists, especially the researchers in her own department.
3. Selected agribusiness clientele (some she had worked with, and others she had not).
4. Other state and federal agency representatives (some she had worked with, and others she thought she should).

The first step was to prepare a list of possible critical goals. She developed a mail questionnaire and listed the following broad topic categories:

1. Pesticide use and safety.
2. Diagnosis and identification of diseases.
3. Control for new and continuing diseases of horticultural and farm crops.
4. Control for new and continuing diseases of other plants (trees, aquatic plants, etc.).
5. Legislation.
6. Biological control of diseases.
7. Plant breeding.
8. Other.

She asked people in all 4 groups to identify specific concerns needing Extension education efforts in the next 1-5 years. She got a voluminous list from her sources.

From the broader categories her eventual list of specific possible priority goals were:

1. Dutch Elm disease.
2. Storage rot of grains.
3. Corn leaf blight.
4. EPA regulations on fungicide use.
5. Biological control of diseases.
7. Improving diagnosis of plant health.
8. Improving protection and care of plants.
9. Relationship of nutrient deficiencies to diseases.
10. Crop rotation for corn disease control.
11. Alternate host controls.
12. Education on generic chemicals.
She then prepared a second questionnaire using this list of possible concerns as perceived by her potential audiences. This list was sent with instructions for them to rate the importance of each of the listed alternatives and identify the reasons why certain alternatives should be chosen.

**STEP 3:**

Elaine used a modified version of the “Delphi Process” to decide her priority audiences. She needed to: (1) identify goals, (2) identify criteria for selecting priority goals, (3) choose desirable actions to achieve selected priorities, and (4) let the respondents identify the most logical high priority audiences she should work with on these goals and methods.

From her second mailing, her respondents (6 fellow department members, 36 agricultural agents, 11 fellow agricultural specialists, 4 program leaders, 23 farmers and truck gardeners, 16 agribusiness clients, and 13 state and federal agency personnel) identified the following important criteria for deciding statewide Extension education programs on plant pathology from:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Extension organization &amp; colleagues</th>
<th>Specific clientele</th>
<th>Self</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>agents</td>
<td>farmers</td>
<td>1. Within my training.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>specialists</td>
<td>agribusiness</td>
<td>2. Readiness of agents and agency.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>program leaders</td>
<td>governmental agencies</td>
<td>3. Time, schedules.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>researchers</td>
<td></td>
<td>4. Reaches most people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Research available.</td>
<td>2. Get rid of and prevent disease.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Is it a well-defined issue?</td>
<td>7. Who else is already dealing with problems?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**STEP 4:**

Elaine did her priority setting by mail with those who agreed to work with her. She sent out the list of possible priorities, along with the appropriate list of criteria for each group, to her colleagues and asked them to select one or two high priority concerns. She also asked them to check which criteria influenced their choices and to suggest how the broader society and community would benefit if she programmed on their choice.

The response from her second mailing indicated, to her surprise, that her potential clientele groups wanted her to work on (1) general plant care and protection and (2) plant health diagnosis. The choices were surprising to Elaine because they hadn’t been important in her previous work. The criteria supporting these priorities were: efficiency, numbers affected, prevention of problems, and greater potential payoff in the long run.

**STEP 5:**

Elaine could see that if these two goals could be met, her program efforts on more specific requests (such as fire blight, late blight, rust, and storage rot) would also be enhanced.

Elaine thought she should block out time to study, develop, and prepare materials now if she were to achieve her goals. For example,
if her program on expanding the knowledge base for plant health diagnosis were to get
results, she had to approach several groups, some before others. She decided her
primary audiences should be those who get calls on "what's wrong with my
plant?" - dealers, nursery personnel, fungicide salespeople, and horticulture agents. She
could reach more people by increasing their understanding of the role of early diagnosis
in disease control. She started at the end, with her goals, and worked backwards to find
out what she needed to do now with certain audiences if later successes were to happen.

### TimeGoals and actions
In 3 years: More people, including the general public, would receive information on plant health and disease.
If so, 2 1/2 years from now: I should promote public meetings for home gardeners and fruit growers.
By 2 years from now: I should conduct programs on the idea of disease diagnosis for agency people, dealers, and large growers.
If so, 1 1/2 years from now: I should begin working with new people on a mass media program to generate awareness and interest in plant health.
But if so, 1 year from now: I have to write fact sheets, get new materials, bulletins, and audio-visuals on useful early diagnostic techniques.
By 6 months from now: I should complete reading and writing on characteristics of healthy plants and disease symptoms.

**STEP 6:**

**Commitment to action on priorities**

Once Elaine found out the importance of her priorities, and the time needed for them, she became more committed to the very task itself. Her department chairperson and program leader inquired one day how her priority setting was going. Her positive response got them thinking about discussing the idea with other Extension faculty.

Elaine was just as busy as always, but she now had time for writing bulletins and answering the phone on her top priorities. She still got many questions on the same topics as before, but more of them were coming from quasi-professionals in horticulture diseases, such as garden store operators and agents. She got part-time help to answer the phone on the other questions that come to a plant pathology department in summer.

Agents who worked with Elaine saw that she was still the same committed specialist she always was, except that she was now more committed to working on the general educational concerns underlying more immediate questions, such as "How can I detect blight earlier?"

Her audiences were defined as professionals and dealers. In effect, she reduced the number of people she was trying to reach by recognizing that she could get the "multiplier effect" if she aimed at dealers, agents, fruit and vegetable growers, and others who had many more contacts with the general public than she ever could. Her audiences developed more confidence to deal with common problems and began to call Elaine on more difficult ones.
CASE STUDY: Hank Porter, Area Resource Agent

STEP 1: Understanding the priority-setting situation

Hank Porter was an area community and resource development (CRD) agent for six years and in that time he found many rewards, but many problems. His work was very intangible and ambiguous. Sometimes he wondered whether he was a regional Chamber of Commerce assistant, an Extension agent, or a specialist in business or a half dozen other subjects.

He worked on regional planning, lakeshore improvement, industrial development, and procurement of low-rent housing within many counties in his area. However, he tended to work on many projects in response to day-to-day requests. He was concerned whether his activities really responded to the critical needs and issues in his eight-county area, or if he could make a more significant contribution by giving more systematic attention to setting priorities.

Hank saw the communities as most critical to his program's success. He got input about broad societal concerns such as the economy, the environment, taxes, alienation, equal opportunity, and cultural opportunities, from mass media, conversations with political leaders, and his organization.

Hank also needed input from the eight counties he worked in about their specific needs and problems.

Within these counties, specific groups such as Chambers of Commerce, town and county board members, industrial development boards, service clubs, Regional Planning Commission, civic groups, municipalities, small businesses, and environmental protection groups would need to be approached.

His Extension sources of influence were sociologists, survey teams, economic specialists, urban and regional planners, CRD program leaders, local Extension agents, recreation and leisure specialists.

Hank felt he was the critical source of influence on his own role in CRD work, but he knew he had to depend heavily on others. As a facilitator between content specialists and agents in specific locales, he was the channel between local problems and new research and ideas. He needed flexibility, adaptability, and concern for the needs of people.

STEP 2: Identifying the possible priorities

Hank worked in a certain defined geographic area with county agents in designated counties. He decided he needed to approach several groups to get input. He talked with the six county agents with whom he worked. Based on their general concerns, he asked state program leaders and state specialists how they saw the situation. The Extension specialists and leaders assured him they would do all they could to provide back-up support to the programs identified as critical by the communities he worked in. So Hank went back to the counties to solicit the concerns of certain communities as his own priorities.

Hank and his agents decided to conduct a pilot effort within the next year to identify a township and/or village in each county. Within each, they promoted a special town -problem identification meeting. At this meeting, Hank led the participants through the "nominal group" process. He asked the participants to form into groups of
He asked the participants to list on one side of their cards what critical problems they perceived in their community and on the other side what should be done about the problem, or whether it was realistic to expect the problem to be solved.

The ideas of individuals were later consolidated on paper, hung up on walls, discussed, and voted on by the groups. The lists of the priority concerns identified for each of the 6 pilot communities were:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rock County</th>
<th>Dakota County</th>
<th>Joliet County</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Collfax)</td>
<td>(Hills City)</td>
<td>(Cold Springs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. New hospital needed.</td>
<td>3. Mail system.</td>
<td>3. Recreation facilities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Farmers need higher prices.</td>
<td>5. Housing.</td>
<td>5. Too many tourists.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hansforth County</th>
<th>Washington County</th>
<th>Billingsburg County</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Sterling)</td>
<td>(Hills City)</td>
<td>(Scandia)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Income.</td>
<td>3. Land use planning.</td>
<td>3. Water quality.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Out migration.</td>
<td>4. Urban sprawl.</td>
<td>4. Electricity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Roads.</td>
<td>5. Tax pressures on farmers.</td>
<td>5. Stream bank erosion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Land use zoning.</td>
<td>8. Role of local government.</td>
<td>8. Recreation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Then Hank asked himself, "How can I select among them? What happens if I pick some and not others?" He still had a difficult task ahead.

**STEP 3:**
Identifying criteria for selecting priorities. Hank decided he needed to check with all four sources of influence for criteria to use in setting priorities.

From the community and society, he found criteria by listening to the radio, watching TV, and reading newspapers. The amount of time and space given to concerns in the media was very revealing, especially documentaries and features that explored important issues. He also found ideas in the minutes of the State Association of County Supervisors and the League of Municipalities. The legislative hearings and issues taken up by such groups as the League of Women Voters also helped him set societal directions for his programs. For the society, he identified the following as criteria:
1. Environmentally supportive.
2. Economically supportive.
3. Affects many people.
4. Local groups approve the program.
5. The program solves local governmental problems.
6. Does it need any more money from community?
7. Will community be better off?
8. Will program mean more jobs?

The Extension organization also had certain criteria. His program leaders said the following were important in setting program priorities:

1. Educational.
2. Problem solving.
3. Efficient.
4. Balanced programming.
5. Equal opportunity.
6. Economic and social benefits.
7. Payoff.
8. Visibility.

From the six specific pilot communities he worked with, Hank got the following list of criteria during meetings in which he used the nominal group technique:

1. Level of interest of people affected.
2. Will it make a difference?
3. Number of people affected.
4. Will some of the current vested interests in communities be threatened?
5. Do communities have resources and people to handle program?
6. What will consequences of action or inaction be?

Hanks's own personal values and commitments were also important. One night he listed for himself those things of critical importance for him to choose among programs. These personal interests and values in order of their criticalness were:

1. Benefit of individual, not the system.
2. Education.
3. Consistency.
5. Reasonable economic benefits.
6. Time, previous commitments.
7. Sufficient backup help.
8. Is it critical now?

STEP 4:
Determining the relative importance of priorities

In community and resource development, Hank needed to work very closely with his potential clients in identifying priorities. The priority alternatives and criteria used in valuing in this area were much more attitudinal and less factual and certain. Alternatives could be interpreted in various ways and quick solutions to problems were very often nonexistent. For these reasons, Hank thought he should make his choices in a group setting (his 6 communities) to have people review the criteria and to set priorities with him.
Hank told the group that the criteria were like screens or filters, and their group was a screen in a funnel out of which would come the priorities and programs he should work on in their community.

He told them he had a number of program possibilities. He put the concerns for each particular community on a blackboard so the group could ask questions about them, add to them, or revise them if they wished.

He asked the group to look at the criteria, to ask questions until they understood the list, and then to pick out the three that most seemed to represent community and society concerns.

These votes were tallied and the top seven were put back on the board. Hank then reviewed the specific clientele criteria, and asked the group to ask questions to clarify the possibilities. They were then asked to vote again as to which of the seven possible priorities left over from the first round best met their own specific criteria. The votes were tallied and the top five were put back on the board.

Hank thanked the group for their selections and explained that their chosen high priorities would have to be put through two more filters: the Extension organization's and his own, before he could select which ones he'd program on. He said he'd report his chosen program priorities back to them when they were selected. Then he went home to pass the five top priority alternatives through the Extension screen and his own.

When he finished, the priorities were ranked in importance as follows:
1. Land use planning (Hank's No. 1 priority)
2. Urban sprawl
3. Waste disposal
4. Tax pressures on farmers
5. Mass transportation
6. Growing population
7. Air pollution

**STEP 5:** Reflecting on priorities:

One thing became clear to Hank when he reflected on what was ranked most important by the communities and himself. If results of any magnitude were to come from his work on land use planning and zoning, he would need more than merely a voice vote of influentials in a county. He tried to answer several other questions about his top priority:

1. Is the choice congruent with my efforts in other counties? (4 of 6 counties were working on it-it was.)
2. Do the facts and hard data support it? (Data on taxes, population growth, subdivisions, condemnations, and mixing of home and industrial sites supported it.)
3. Will urban land use planning support my other work? (He knew that the choice was an "umbrella program" for more specific concerns on pollution, preferential tax treatments for farmlands, industrial development, and urban sprawl.)
4. Was anything likely to happen? Was the choice just a put-off with no likely consequences?

On this last question, he concluded, it was extremely timely for four of six counties to deal with this topic. If they didn't, the consequences were very gloomy. Chaos and conflicts were likely in the future if individuals and communities didn't consider land use choices now.

Next came the question of timing. Hank saw the major part of his time over the
The goal he had in mind was that at the end of five years each county would have a comprehensive land use plan and zoning ordinance. Applying the "work-backwards" concept, he built the following sequence of necessary priorities and supportive short-term priorities:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Goals and actions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>By end of 5th year:</td>
<td>Land use plan in Washington County.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If so, by end of 4th year:</td>
<td>Hearings and other public input and reactions must</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By end of 3rd year:</td>
<td>Task force study meetings, community surveys taken, and recommendations made to county board.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| By end of 2nd year:   | Extension educational program on need for land use planning:
|                       | • meetings                                                                        |
|                       | • mass media                                                                      |
| If so, by end of 1st year: | Data collection.  
|                       | Legitimation with key influentials.                                               |
|                       | Assignment of special concerns of people.                                         |
|                       | Checking with key resource people on program.                                     |

**STEP 6:** Hank communicated much of his commitment to others in early stages of his priority-setting process. He had checked with his program leaders and specialists and asked them about alternatives and criteria. They said they'd be ready to commit resources to his pilot communities depending on their needs. So he had already made tentative commitments to the organization.

However, once he had set down a calendar of activities, he still needed to commit himself to the communities, to his Extension program leaders, to specialists in urban and regional planning, and to the Extension agents. He did this through newsletters, memos, formal plans of work, and notices of upcoming activities in the mass media.

His actions, such as regular visits to the six pilot communities, communicated to them that he was committed. During these early visits, his discussions with agents and local leaders showed his commitment to working on land use planning as a top priority.

Hank knew he would have to adjust his schedule as new emergencies came up, but basically he had committed himself to his priorities through discussions, memos, and scheduling meetings on which further meetings depended.
The following references may add to your understanding of the six priority-setting steps or help you do a priority-setting task better.

*D...* Discusses in practical terms how to improve one's consistency, reasoning, and logical thinking; and how to improve three types of value judgments. Though written for formal school teachers, this book should help further understanding of how to determine the importance of priority possibilities.

*P...* Presents a program planning model and summarizes research on Extension program development done at the University of Wisconsin and other universities. Implications for practice and further research are presented in direct terms. The priority-setting process can occur within such a planning model.

*A...* A philosophical treatise on the relationship of one's personal values to scientific research. It gives a perspective on how to interpret new research and knowledge and apply it to determining what's most important.

*A...* A practical guide to two processes of involving people to gather possible priorities and criteria. The nominal group technique and the Delphi survey process are discussed in easy to understand terms. Examples are provided.

*In-depth philosophical treatment of how the value of goals and actions is determined and how they interrelate. An excellent presentation of the philosophy that underlies the Extension learning-by-doing approach. It also discusses how the value or importance of a possible priority can be determined.*

*Discusses how seven possible personal values can serve as basic assumptions to decide which needs and concerns are top priority. Different values and assumptions force different conclusions by different people though they see the same fact. Thus, what is deemed high priority depends on one's basic values and assumptions.*

*Real-life experiences in a Nazi concentration camp are related as they forced Frankl to search for the real meaning of life. These experiences could be useful to help determine what criteria are critical, what's most important, and what needs to be done.*

The best book giving full attention to theory and experimental research on personal commitment, its factors, and the degree to which different outward behaviors relate to internal beliefs. Though others treat dissonance theory, attitudes, and values as they relate to commitments, this book may be a starting point for further understanding of how we can stick to our priorities.


*First chapter presents an overall theoretical view on factors in a social setting or community that should be taken into account in trying to understand a situation and determine priorities.*


*An easily understood manual on how to design various data-gathering strategies. The strategies, simplified rules, and other discussion can help either the practitioner or the researcher.*


*A practical booklet on sociological research procedures. It discusses surveys, attitude measurement and analysis. Presents useful advice on how to gather ideas on possible priorities and criteria and interpret them.*


The best description of how one can use the brainstorming technique with a group to get ideas and input on priority concerns.


*A discussion of how one man searched for the quality and value of life. A though t-provoking philosophical book describing how both the artist and the scientist must integrate their thinking if we're to truly know what's most important in this world, what needs to be done first and how one can reach commitment to priorities.*


*A practical, easy to understand booklet on how to understand one's own values and use them in everyday practical decisions and priority setting.*


*Includes 79 specific strategies which individuals and groups can use to determine what is most important in their lives. These identified values can in turn help further reasoning to determine activity and program priorities.*

Steele, Sara. *Developing a Questionnaire*. Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin-Extension, Division of Program and Staff Development, 1974.

*A short practical outline of what a practitioner must do to take reliable, valid surveys via a mailed questionnaire. Examples relating to Extension are included.*


*Presents theoretical discussion of the C.I.P.P. model of program evaluation and how evaluation processes undergird decisions at various stages of program development and implementation. Discusses the decision-making model that serves as a basis for the priority-setting model of this booklet.*
All generally recognized theories and methods of measuring attitudes are included in this book for those who want an in-depth understanding of methods such as Likert Scale, semantic differential, etc.

Discusses the increasingly fast changing world and the stress that the speed of change places on individuals. Includes implications for how we set priorities, how to deal with the consequences of past and current decisions, and how to decide about the future.

An older but excellent book for understanding a basic systematic approach to Extension programming. The discussion on continuity, integration, and sequencing can be helpful to understand the process of what needs to be done first and what needs to precede other goals and actions.

Discusses a unique way to gather and systematize available data. The basic approach is to use clues left behind by people’s behaviors as information about what they see as priorities and what their commitments are.
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