

You Get What You Measure[®]: A Process to Determine and Measure Progress in Community Development

Introduction

This article describes a process that integrates participatory planning and systems thinking into the development of strategic measures so that communities can monitor progress toward community development goals. This process -- *You Get What You Measure* (YGWYM) -- was first created more than 16 years ago as an alternative strategic planning and measurement approach, and has been used by groups such as the U.S. Forest Service Cooperative Forestry Program, the National Good Food Network of the Wallace Center at Winrock International, and the Community Foundation of Greater South Wood County, Wisconsin. The process has evolved to become one that helps groups work together to achieve meaningful change in their communities and organizations by developing shared goals, weaving together diverse perspectives and values, discovering and agreeing on measures that relate to key leverage points known to lead to progress, and aligning resources to make focused change. This article presents a discussion of determining goals, planning for measurement and translating plans into actions.

The Process

YGWYM is about determining if communities are making progress in achieving the condition changes that they desire. It uses participatory planning and systems thinking to come to agreement about goals, find leverage points in systems, and define indicators that observe and measure whether leverage points are being addressed. It is about learning to use measurement and the power of measures to achieve strategic goals. The diagram (Figure 1) illustrates this process.

YGWYM begins with identifying goals. Starting with this crucial task, the rest of the process is a continuous flow of updating, revising, implementing and monitoring progress towards goals. This process helps multiple stakeholders come to a shared understanding of the system they are trying to impact while measuring progress. It also creates a shared understanding of goals and assumptions. This shared understanding is rarely achieved in other processes. It also avoids the arbitrary prioritization of activities that is common in processes like brainstorming or voting with dots, which do not incorporate systems thinking.

Author Contact:

Shanna Ratner, Principal, Yellow Wood Associates, Inc.
228 North Main Street St. Albans, VT 05478
Phone: (802) 524-6141
Email: shanna@yellowwood.org

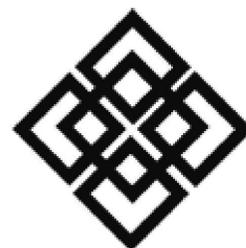


Figure 1



To get buy-in for the process with stakeholder groups, we typically begin with a discussion called, “Everyday Measurement” during which we ask people to identify things they measure or monitor in their everyday life. There are an infinite number of things we pay attention to. The information we pay attention to guides decisions and behavior so that we achieve a goal that matters to us. For example, we pay attention to how high the grass is or how much money is in the checking account. Interestingly, our goals are often implicit and unspoken. For example, the person who measures the height of the grass might assume that keeping the lawn mowed to a certain height is a key factor in keeping peace in the household. By measuring the height of the grass, he or she knows when to mow. But is the height of the grass the best measure of household harmony? What if there are other, more powerful ways to keep peace in the household? What if a more effective measure is the number of times household members have shown each other appreciation in the past day, week or month?

We are creatures of habit. Once we decide what to measure to achieve our goals, it takes effort to change. Unless we review measures periodically, we may be stuck in habits that no longer serve us well. What we choose to measure affects how we allocate resources at the individual, organizational and societal levels. The following sections describe more of the process.

*Identifying Goals: What do we **really** want?*

In the YGWYM approach, a goal is defined as a desirable condition to achieve. It is about “being,” not about “doing.” For example, creating jobs is an activity, while a situation in which everyone who wants a job has one is a condition, a state of being. To change from being a community with high unemployment to one with full employment may require many different types of activities. Creating jobs is only one. What about providing child care, affordable housing, transportation, appropriate clothing, skills training, volunteer work opportunities, entrepreneurship opportunities, or opportunities in

the informal economy? When a goal is stated as a condition, it opens up new awareness about the range of activities required to bring about that condition, as well as the range of partners that need to be engaged.

When goals are defined as activities, it is easy to forget why the activity is important, or to overlook other components that must be in place to achieve the desired conditions. Other components may be beyond the scope of any one organization, so organizations focus on what they know how to do. Unfortunately, without a goal understood by a range of parties, it is unlikely that the larger condition will be met even if a specific activity is successful. That's why it is important to define goals first and actions last.

Goals may describe conditions that are not present or conditions that are present but threatened. In either case, the power of setting goals is fully realized when they are stated as if they are current reality. Stating a goal in the present tense creates a dissonance between reality as we know it and reality as we desire it to be. That dissonance creates energy that drives us toward a resolution. If we hold tight to the goal, the resolution will likely move us in that direction; if we let go of the goal we will slide back to the conditions we are trying to change. When vision statements are written in the future tense (we will be a community that...) the energy dissipates because the dissonance evaporates. There is no tension between accepting current reality and positing a different future. The tension comes from holding two separate visions (current reality and a vision of the future as if it were current reality) in one's mind at the same time. Try it and see.

Discovering Indicators

Goals are broad statements of desired conditions, but they do not necessarily mean the same thing to everyone. For example, the goal, "We are a safe community," may mean no traffic accidents to one person and no domestic abuse to someone else. YGWYM *indicators* get to the heart of what matters about the goal from the views of multiple community stakeholders. We recommend that those who participate in the process represent the full range of stakeholders needed to make progress; people who might impede progress, and people who

will be affected by progress. We define an indicator as something that must be changed to ensure that progress has been made toward a goal. At this stage in the process, we ask people to list one or two of the most important things in their current reality that must change for them (and their constituents) to feel that real progress is being made toward the goal. What matters the most, given their situation, their knowledge, and their life experience? There are no "wrong" indicators. Defining indicators in this way gives us the opportunity to see the world through eyes other than our own.

Once indicators have been written, each stakeholder is asked to explain what the indicator means to him/her and how it relates to the goal. This process often opens up new avenues of communication as people begin to appreciate the knowledge and perspectives of others. This appreciative approach involves people in a personal and meaningful way that increases their investment in the work to come. In this way, the YGWYM process prevents diverse stakeholders from assuming that the goal means the same to everyone in the room – these assumptions create flaws in some planning processes.

Goals and Indicators: An Example

The Rural Action organization in Ohio set this goal: *"There is a robust value chain in Central Appalachia that connects landowners, harvesters, primary and secondary producers, transporters and other suppliers for certified and regionally-oriented wood products."*

The organization's analysis began with 15 indicators, and then three key leverage indicators emerged from the analysis. The strongest was: *Establish several builder or retail allies who see the value of this project and help us form and test the model.*

Focusing on this single key leverage indicator (measuring progress in building relationships) reduced the number of measures required to track progress.

Identifying Key Leverage Indicators

In discovering possible indicators, the process considers numerous ways that groups might make progress toward a goal. Given limited resources, it is rarely possible or ideal to pursue them all. Through YGWYM, people work together to understand the relationships among all the indicators they have identified. They do this by asking themselves as a group: “If one person’s indicator were to move toward the goal, what impact would that have on each of the others’ indicators?”

As group members analyze indicators in a systems context (each in relation to each), they discover *key leverage indicators* that drive the entire system toward the goal. Key leverage indicators are the “upstream” indicators—those that must change before others can. Groups are often surprised and pleased to gain clarity about which indicators need to change first.

Revealing Assumptions

As stakeholders discuss the relationships between indicators, they reveal assumptions about the way they think the world works. For example, if the goal was “We are a safe community,” and one person’s indicator was “there are fewer traffic accidents downtown” and another’s indicator was “fewer people use cell phones while they are driving,” stakeholders might agree that there is a relationship between these two indicators because people who use cell phones while driving cause accidents. But this assumption may not be true. At the conclusion of the process, stakeholders review and record key assumptions related to every key leverage indicator. Indicator analyses with many dotted lines (used when there is uncertainty or disagreement about the relationship among indicators) reveal that stakeholders lack a solid understanding of the situation they wish to impact. At this point, the group identifies all areas where more information is needed. Therefore, the YGWYM process reveals untested assumptions among diverse stakeholders. By rigorously testing assumptions and gathering information, the surest *key results indicators* arise. The key results indicators are the changes that will result over time if the system behaves the way the stakeholders assume it does. One

way to test assumptions over time is to create baseline measures for key results indicators as well as key leverage indicators.

The YGWYM process has been designed to focus resources where they will make the most difference, including resources devoted to measurement. Generally speaking, it is easy for a group to prioritize key leverage indicators based on the amount of leverage associated with each one. If groups have limited resources, it makes sense to focus on the leverage point that will cause the most change.

Creating Measures

A leverage indicator describes what needs to change, but it does not reveal the current status or condition in a way that will measure change over time. So the group must next create measures—ways to actually count or value the status of an indicator. YGWYM emphasizes measuring behavioral and observable changes. Things may be measured in terms of “number of,” “percent of,” “quality of,” or “rating of.”

Good measurement requires a clear understanding of what is being measured. Therefore, the first step in creating a measure for a key leverage indicator involves defining key terms. For example, one participant’s goal was: *Arts strengthen the economy of Central Minnesota*. To the group’s surprise, the most powerful key leverage indicator was: *Government bodies eliminate barriers to businesses and develop a process to attract and welcome new investment downtown*. Several terms needed to be defined before a measure could be created for this indicator. Which government bodies? What barriers? What is meant by “business” and “investment”? What constitutes a “process” and how would one know it if it existed? Here’s an example of definitions from a session with participants:

Government bodies – City of X and Q County.
Barriers – ordinances, parking, accessibility, signage, permits, interpretation, occupancy, cost of compliance, valuation (taxes), preservation, codes, fears (government, change, power) politics.
Businesses – businesses, government, educational institutions, philanthropies, support (funders – organizations and individuals).

Investment – the offering of benefits.

Process – a system with clearly defined steps and resources; clear understanding of who sets priorities and makes decisions

Once a group has defined a measure, including a unit of measure, we ask members to consider how they would use the information if they had it. One of the basic tenets of You Get What You Measure is that if the group does not know how information will be used before it is collected, it should not be collected. Considering how information will be used before it is collected is important because this:

- 1) Allows explanation of purpose clearly to those being asked for information;
- 2) Influences how the information is collected (e.g., anonymously or for attribution; on video or on paper), as well as the methods that must be used to establish sufficient credibility with intended audiences;
- 3) Provides the opportunity to think through how information can be used to influence decision-makers, including the timing of relevant decisions and how (and by whom) the information can best be inserted into the decision-making process;
- 4) Encourages the group to think through how the information will be incorporated into its own work going forward.

Identifying Baselines and Framing Measures

After stakeholders have defined their measures and understand how they will use the information they collect, they are ready to develop a measurement plan to obtain the necessary information. Measurement plans identify specific measures tied to key leverage indicators and goals. The plans explain how, how often, and by whom the information will be collected, analyzed, reported, and reviewed. In our experience, measurement plans should be tested to ensure that assumptions made about data availability and relevance are valid. The first time group members measure against an indicator, they often create a baseline. In other instances, data already exists that allow for a historic baseline.

Creating Targets

Measures can also be used to establish targets. Targets motivate behavior. There is a reason, for example, that the United Way puts thermometers in parks during fund drives! Targets are most effective when they are realistic and achievable. What we call framing measures can be used to establish the context for realistic and achievable targets, especially when there is no relevant local experience to use as a guideline. As an example, let's look at HomeTown Competitiveness, a program of the Rural Policy Research Institute (RUPRI) Center for Rural Entrepreneurship, the Heartland Center for Leadership Development, and the Nebraska Community Foundation. It helps organizations measure the value of real estate likely to change hands in their communities over the next 10 or 15 years so they can set targets for raising rural community endowments based on capturing 5 percent of that value. This gives communities a clear and compelling sense of what is actually possible and a solid way to measure progress.

The development of shared measurement systems poses a challenge even with the availability of the Internet to collect and share information, because shared measurement systems require a change in culture for most organizations. The time and effort required to create shared measurement systems goes beyond the scope of any single organization's responsibility. Generally, a third party is needed to facilitate development and use, and to work out the glitches at least in the initial stages. As the power of shared measurements becomes evident, organizations will be more willing to invest in them. Shared measurement is an essential component of collaborative efforts to address complex goals that can increase the efficiency with which communities achieve goals versus the fragmented efforts that occur when isolated organizations compete. The YGWYM process has a built-in process for discovering common goals, key leverage indicators, and meaningful measures of progress that can be shared.

Designing Interventions

The YGWYM process considers actions *after* goals are widely understood, key leverage indicators have

been identified, and measures have been created. But this is an iterative process. Goals, indicators and measures may be refined over time, and actions can be reconsidered as more is learned about the system that needs to change to achieve desired goals. Once participants are comfortable that there is alignment between their measures, key leverage indicators, and goals, the next step is to consider what interventions are needed to move the measures in the desired direction over time.

Those who use YGWYM have learned the hard way that interventions should never be discussed in a vacuum, but rather in the context of existing obligations. Otherwise, one runs the risk of identifying interventions that no one is in a position to implement. Interventions must be integrated into actual work plans within the limits of existing resources. Once a measure (or a suite of measures) is created and agreed upon, we ask participants to list the activities to which they are already committed over the coming year. Then we ask them to assess how likely each activity is to have a positive impact on the measure or measures that matter. YGWYM offers three categories: unlikely, somewhat likely, or highly likely. It is affirming when activities that are “highly likely” to move the measure in the desired direction are already planned. Activities that are “somewhat likely” to improve the measure or measures often offer the greatest opportunity for re-alignment to improve impacts. This usually involves including new or different partners in the work, reframing the work in terms of the goal, and/or adjusting the actions themselves. For actions already on the books that are “unlikely” to have an impact on the measure, we ask whether there is any way to reallocate resources toward actions more likely to move the measure toward the goal, or find another partner better suited to carrying them out. Given that most plates are perpetually full, achieving alignment between interventions, measures, indicators, and goals generally requires reallocation of resources and letting go of one thing to embrace something else. When groups operate in relative isolation, they often duplicate efforts and try to do too much with too little, achieving relatively meager success in every area. When groups come together to determine shared

goals, it provides the opportunity to rethink who is doing what and begin to improve overall effectiveness by increasing the commitment and capacity of each group to what they do best in service of the shared goal.

Using Results of Measurement and Reflecting

Putting measurement into action helps groups learn more about the conditions they are trying to impact, and, through reflection, brings focus and clarity to interventions. Data acquired through measurement increases stakeholders’ ability to explain and engender support for their decisions. When different stakeholders take responsibility for collecting measurement-related information, it gives them something to contribute to the group as a whole, as well as receive the benefit of the information shared by others. This sets up reciprocal relationships that build trust, as well as increase shared understanding and effectiveness.

It is also important that measures be calibrated to the degree of precision required to make better decisions. In community development work, it is rarely necessary to measure anything to the fourth decimal point. We are often better served by gaining valid information we did not have before, as long as the level of precision is matched to the task at hand. For example, there are more and less precise ways of measuring many environmental phenomena such as turbidity in a stream. One group faced with limited resources and the challenge of establishing the relationship between industrial discharges and stream turbidity decided to invest in white tennis shoes and measuring sticks. They walked into the stream to the point where they could no longer see their white shoes and made a record of the date, the distance from the bank and the depth of the water. By doing this at a fixed number of places along the bank, on a regular schedule, they were able to correlate changes in turbidity with the dates of industrial discharge. This evidence was sufficient to interest state authorities, who followed up with more precise, science-based research.

Through You Get What You Measure, practitioners strive to identify straightforward measures and

measurement systems to use at the community or organizational level and particularly among partners in collaborative endeavors. These measures are then closely aligned to shared goals. Overall, teaching people to use a participatory, systems framework to discover, identify, develop, and implement measures of progress can benefit community development practice.

Resources

Examples of YGWYM Tool Applications:

Advantage Valley Entrepreneurial Development Collaborative:

http://fieldus.org/Publications/EDS08/EDS_2008AdvantageValleyCS.pdf

Central Appalachian Network

<http://www.cannetwork.org/>

Western Heritage Byways:

<http://byways.org/explore/byways/2593>

Broward County Community Foundation:

<http://www.cfbroward.org/>

Author Information

Shanna Ratner is the Principal of Yellow Wood Associates, Inc. Shanna has over 26 years experience managing complex research and capacity building initiatives and analyzing rural economic development opportunities. She has worked closely with federal, state, and local governments, citizen groups, and non-profit organizations in identifying and implementing solutions to a range of economic development challenges. Shanna was one of a dozen members of the Aspen Institute's Learning Cluster on Rural

Community Capacity Building, a member of the first class of Donella Meadows Fellows in Systems Thinking, and is currently a Mel King Fellow at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Shanna holds a Master of Science degree in Agricultural Economics from Cornell University and a Bachelor's Degree in Value Systems from New College in Sarasota, Florida.

Editor Contact

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For more information, contact the editor:

Joyce Hoelting, Assistant Director, Extension Center for Community Vitality

University of Minnesota

464 Coffey Hall, 1420 Eckles Avenue, St. Paul, MN 55108

612-625-8233

jhoeltin@umn.edu