

Empowering **YOUTH**
for School and Community
Change

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Chapter 3 *thinking Big, Starting Small: From Vision to Action*

This is a story about four people named Everybody, Somebody, Anybody, and Nobody. There was an important job to be done and Everybody was sure that Somebody would do it. Anybody could have done it, but Nobody did it. Somebody got angry about that because it was Everybody's job. Everybody thought Anybody could do it, but Nobody realized that Everybody wouldn't do it. It ended up that Everybody blamed Somebody when Nobody did what Anybody could have done.

Young people have amazing imaginations. Beyond changing their schools or improving their communities, they want to change the world. These aspirations must be encouraged to grow and develop. Too often however, both youth and adults can become discouraged by the enormity of what they want to do. The tasks seem too many. The fear of failure is too great. Things can seem hopeless and lost.

Creating change requires having a vision for how you want things to be different. It requires imagining what could exist beyond current realities. However, change may not occur if you do not take some kind of action.

Translating ideas into action is sometimes really difficult because it can be hard to break down big ideas into manageable parts. This chapter focuses on how to develop a vision and then provides a step-by-step framework for putting those visions into action.

Creating Vision

In order to create change, partner with young people to imagine and articulate a desired future. This is what it means to create a vision. What do you want the future to look like? Developing a vision is the first step toward taking intentional action for change. Here are some ideas for creating a vision:

Visualization

Start by asking young people “what matters to you?”, “what do you want to change?”, or “what do you want to create?”. These questions may be hard for some youth to answer at first, especially if they have never thought about it or have never been asked about how things could be different.

Other questions that can guide a discussion about visions for change can include:¹³

- What would your ideal (community, school, etc) be like?
- What needs to be changed in your school/community?
- What can we do to help make positive changes?

Harmony VISTA members have found it helpful to have youth journal or talk with a partner about these questions before starting a class discussion. These questions are also great for Chalk Talks (see Appendix). A Chalk Talk is an activity in which participants have a silent conversation on a large piece of paper around a specific question. The question is written at the top of the paper and, using a marker, participants respond by making comments, asking questions, responding to each other, etc. It's a great way for all “voices” to be heard even though the activity is silent.

An art project (drawing or making a model) can also be a fun way to envision “the ideal (school, classroom, community, etc)” and can be followed up with a discussion about the qualities that make this ideal.

Remember: In the visioning process no ideas are bad or wrong. Turn reactions to current realities into proactive solutions! Dream big and work with youth to do the same! Dream your most wild and ridiculous dreams for change! Remember what anthropologist Margaret Mead said, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.”

¹³Adapted from Checkoway, B. Adults as Allies. University of Michigan School of Social Work.

Idea! Closed-Eye Visualization

Ask the young people to close their eyes. Have them envision walking down a path. What does the path look like? What does it smell like? What are they wearing? As they walk down the path, they see a pair of binoculars on a stand. Being the curious people they are, they walk over to see what they'd see if they looked through the binoculars. But these are magic binoculars that allow you to see into the future. Ten years from now, what is your life (school, community, project, etc) like? In 5 years? One year? Six months? Two weeks? Ask students prompting questions about what they see. Keep these questions open-ended. After a couple of minutes, (with their eyes still closed) ask that in their vision, they walk away from the binoculars and continue walking down the road. They suddenly are seeing themselves walking down the road until they disappear into the distance.

Ask participants to journal for 5 minutes about what they saw. Then ask them to get with a partner to share their experience and then share out with the class.

These thoughts and ideas could be the beginning of a brainstorm about a community or school project.

taking Vision into Action

What are some strategies for tackling large problems on a smaller scale? How can adults help youth believe in and take action on their dreams?

STEP ONE: Visioning and Brainstorming

Visioning helps develop dreams of new realities. Brainstorming helps start the process of determining a vision and how to begin to take action. One idea for brainstorming is to write down all project ideas or all of the things in a community or school that your group would like to change. One activity Harmony VISTA Volunteers do with youth to start brainstorming ideas is called Realms of Concern and Influence. The purpose of this activity is to identify the issues that you have most control over and issues that you may not be able to change at this point in time. (see Appendix for more ideas on visioning and brainstorming)

STEP TWO: Find Themes

The next step is narrowing down the myriad of ideas from brainstorming. One idea is to check for two or three major themes in all the ideas. This can help young people get clear about what they are most passionate about. By narrowing down ideas, they can more easily decide on what topic to do a project.

Realms of Concern and Influence

The activity helps youth focus on what they are in control of and what they can change. It begins with drawing three concentric circles of increasing size on a chalkboard or piece of paper: In the smallest, central circle youth place themselves. Ask them to imagine that their success lies outside all of the circles. Ask participants to list all the things they are concerned about in their school or community (things in and out of their control). These "realms of concern" go into the outer ring. The facilitator then asks participants to determine which issues from the outer ring they have direct influence over. These "realms of influence" go into the center circle. This exercise is helpful when young people feel that there are many factors that could keep them from succeeding. It helps them focus their efforts on issues they can affect within their realm of influence. One point for discussion is that when you make changes in your realm of influence, the realm of influence gets larger. See Appendix for a more detailed description.

STEP THREE: Get Educated

Don't rush into action without all the information. This seems like an obvious step, but not getting education on an issue often gets people in trouble. Many passionate people have become frustrated when they realize midway through their project that they spent valuable time on unnecessary steps. In order to combat a problem and conduct a successful project, it is imperative to fully understand the problem, its causes, and what others have always done to try to fix it. Do the research necessary to find out what worked and didn't work for others.

One exercise that can help identify what a group already knows and what they want to learn is called a KWL (what we KNOW, what we WANT TO KNOW, what we LEARNED).

First list all of the things that the group already knows about a topic. Then list on a separate sheet of paper all of the things the group wants to know. Do your research. Then list all of the things that you learned. Then ask yourselves, "what's next?"

Ideas for Gaining Knowledge

- Start talking to people
- Look in the newspapers for articles
- Go to the library and look up books
- Internet
- Check out the resource page at the back of this guidebook

STEP FOUR: Get Started

After your group has done research on the community issue it is passionate about, it is time to create a project. Brainstorming is a great way to come up with a specific project on a community or school issue.

Here are some questions to help jump-start the project development process:

- What is the issue you want to impact in your community?
- Why do you want to do this?
- What action steps can you take?



Once you come up with a project idea, begin the detailed planning. An Individual Monthly Action Plan (IMAP—see Appendix) can be modified to help with project planning. However, the basics for project planning include:

- Keep the goal in mind and working backward from that vision to the present.
- Determine the major steps to get to your goal.
- Create a timeline.
- Determine who will do what tasks and by when.
- Identify what support you'll need and how you'll get it.
- Establish measurable outcomes. How will you know you're successful?

A Word about Overcoming Obstacles

In any project there can be a great deal of uncertainty. The end result may not be what you intended to create. You may run into roadblocks and mistakes may be made. However, the true success of a project does not lie in the results, but in how groups overcome the obstacles they encounter along the way.

One of the most important lessons to remember is that mistakes are learning experiences. Perhaps a mistake will cause the project to go a direction you at first did not plan. Great! Your project is a process full of bumps, not a straight line. Just consider the bumps to be lesson plans on how to navigate through obstacles next time.

STRATEGIES FOR OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

- Sit the group in a circle in preparation for a discussion
- Here are some sample questions:
 - What happened?
 - What did we want to happen?
 - What can we learn from this?
 - What do we need to do now?

STEP FIVE: Find Support

There are a number of agencies and organizations willing to help with youth projects. Support can look many different ways: partnerships, sharing resources, sharing time, funding, etc. There are usually several organizations in every community that could help fund youth projects. Check with local community or neighborhood organizations. Also talk with local universities or colleges, businesses, and community leaders. If you explain what you are doing and how it will help your community, these institutions may be able to help you.

Remember, ask for what you want! Sometimes this is the hardest thing to do. All someone can say is “no”.

STEP SIX: Publicity

Let others know what you are doing. Put out a press release detailing your project and how you did it. You never know who you may motivate to get involved or who may decide that you are the perfect group to support.

STEP SEVEN: Reflection

Reflection may be the most essential ingredient when engaging in a community or school action project. Reflection is most effective when done throughout a project, rather than just at the end. Reflection helps make meaning and impacts future choices. Please see Chapter Five for more on reflection.

A Story about Overcoming Obstacles

A group of students at Emmerich Manual High School in Indianapolis took a creative approach to their fundraising problem. The group was trying to organize a 3-on-3 basketball tournament at their school. As the event approached, the group realized that they were going to come up short on funds. It was too late to begin a large-scale fundraising campaign, so the students did some thinking and leapt into action. They baked cookies and sold them on the streets of Indianapolis to men and women for whatever price the people were willing to pay. Many people donated money instead of buying cookies but this solution helped them meet the fundraising goals. These dedicated young people raised enough money to ensure the success of the tournament.

Conclusion

This chapter detailed the transition from dreams and visions to actual, tangible results. The chapter charted a seven-step process, beginning with defining your group's vision and finishing with reflecting on what the youth, as well as the adult facilitator, learned from the process. Other important steps included agreeing on goals and building knowledge. A key aspect of building knowledge in Step Five was building support and partnerships with groups already doing similar work. The next chapter delves further into creating partnerships with community organizations and parents. It touches upon how to navigate through obstacles one might face in forming partnerships and gives examples for how youth can form partnerships in their communities.