

PRIORITIES OF RESEARCH AND MANAGEMENT AND THE SETTING OF OBJECTIVES

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INTRODUCTION

Setting objectives and priorities may be divided into process and content. The former includes the procedures and definition of responsibility for writing and selecting objectives and priorities. The latter concerns the specific program items and their order of priority.

This workshop discussion group focused on process because understanding this is essential if content is to be effectively manipulated; furthermore, process has an important direct impact on content. Four main issues were covered during the discussion.

1. The structure of organizations in relation to the setting of objectives and priorities.

2. The effects of external influences on the objectives and priorities of organizations.

3. The criteria required for setting priorities.

4. The method for changing priorities in an organization with diverse responsibilities and major external pressures.

Criteria for selecting objectives were not discussed as this process was considered to be comparatively straightforward.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

The broad structure of government organizations, as evidenced by recent changes instigated by State and Federal Governments, is often established outside the organizations themselves. Obviously such structural changes may have a profound influence on organizational objectives and priorities. This potential is recognized under "external influences" below (Fig. 1),

but is not considered further in this report.

Despite external influences, government organizations themselves decide on the important internal processes for decision-making with respect to objectives and priorities. One aspect of this is allocation of responsibility for writing, selecting and implementing objectives. For the Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM), these responsibilities are allocated as shown in Table 1. This pattern is applicable to other groups, such as CSIRO, although the latter has a shorter hierarchy.

The following points emerge from Table 1.

1. Objectives and priorities flow down the hierarchy. For example, departmental corporate objectives are based on relevant Acts and Regulations, and themselves form the basis for divisional objectives, which in turn form the basis for branch objectives, and so on.

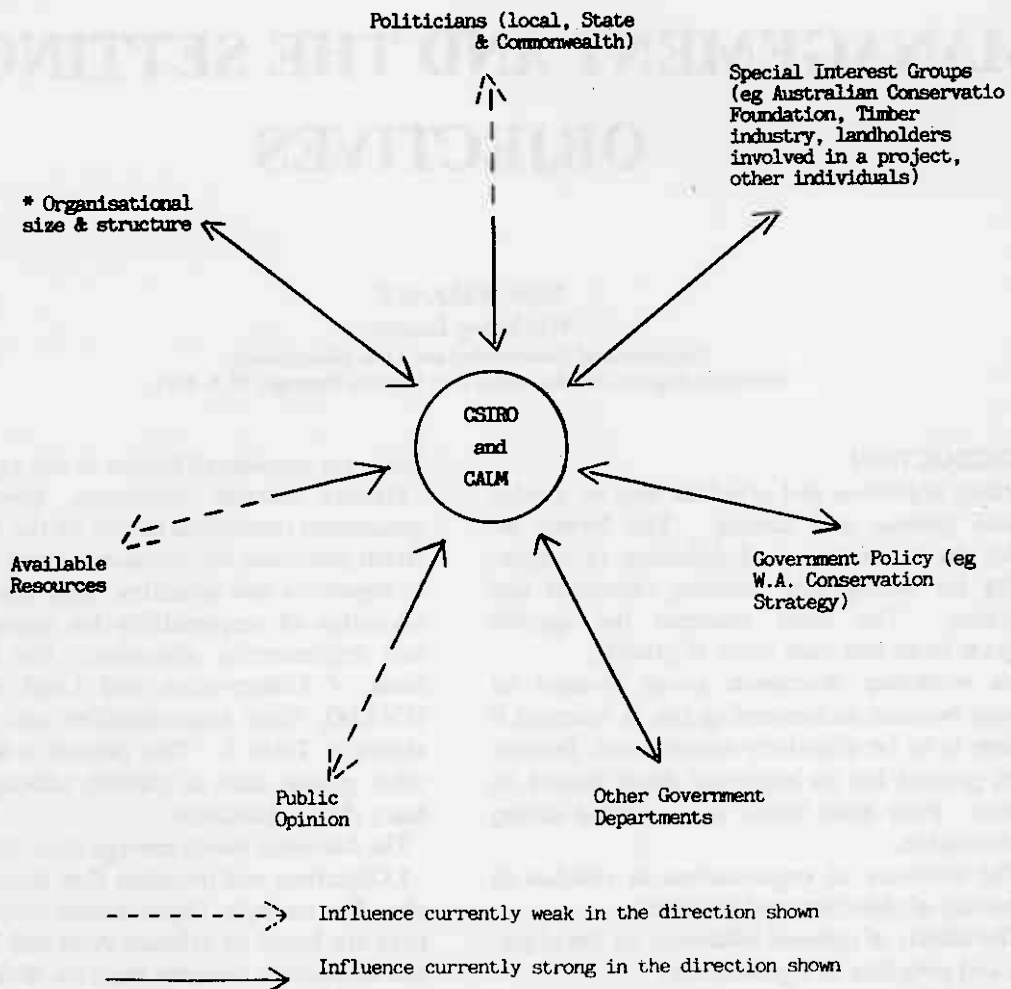
2. It is important that those who implement objectives should also contribute to their formulation.

3. While final selection of objectives and priorities at any level will, where necessary, be made by the Executive Director or equivalent in other organizations, decision-making is usually devolved to more junior levels.

During periods of rapid and continuing external change the ability of organizations to adapt priorities and objectives is severely tested. At these times a further characteristic of organizations, inertia (or internal resistance to change), may become apparent. Means of overcoming organizational inertia are well covered in manage-

FIGURE 1: Outside Influences on Objectives & Priorities

The two-way nature of relationships is recognised by the double-headed arrows. Although very important, relationships between outside influences are not shown.



* While to a large degree an internal matter, the general form of government organisations is often imposed.

ment literature. During discussion the personalities of staff and quality of personnel management were stressed as crucial factors affecting the degree of inertia. In addition, it is important that all personnel subscribe to a common set of objectives if adaptation is to be successful.

Personnel management is critical in any organization and, in particular, all staff involved in this field should receive relevant training in personnel management and in leadership skills.

OUTSIDE INFLUENCES

Priorities and objectives are greatly influenced by the environment in which organizations operate, and organizations themselves influence their environment. Major elements of this relationship are shown in Figure 1.

Government organizations generally have a weak influence on politicians and it is extremely important that organizations keep the public and special interest groups informed. This is especially so during periods of declining resources. One method for land management bodies to shape outside influences is for their publications (e.g.

TABLE 1. Department of Conservation & Land Management (CALM):
Responsibilities Within the Organisation for Setting Objectives & Priorities.

Policy Level	Action				
	Writing	Comments	Final Decisions	Implementation	Monitoring Implementation
Departmental	Policy Directorate	Branches Regions National Parks & Nature Conservation Authority Lands & Forest Commission Outside Groups	Executive Director	Department	Executive Director Policy Directorate
Divisional	Division	Policy Directorate Regions Branches Outside Groups	Policy Directorate General Manager Divisional Manager	Division	Policy Directorate Divisional Manager
Branch	Branch	Divisional Managers Branches Regions Outside Groups	Policy Directorate General Manager Divisional Managers Branch Manager	Branch	Divisional Managers Branch Managers Regional Managers
Regional	Region	Divisional Managers Branches Districts Outside Groups	Policy Directorate General Manager Divisional Managers Regional Manager	Region	Divisional Managers Regional Manager Branch Managers
District	District	Region Branches Outside Groups	Policy Directorate General Manager Divisional Managers Regional Manager District Manager	District	Regional Manager District Manager Branch Managers

CALM publications "Landscape" and "Beating about the Bush") to become more effective communicators of an environmental ethic.

Organizations concerned with land management may have strong opposing influential groups and while industrial lobby groups (i.e. those both for and against resource harvesting industries) are strong, there is no effective lobby group for the land itself. More "friends of the park" type groups should be established to fill this role. While these would not always support organizational objectives and priorities, they could at least be kept informed of constraints on the organization and the reasons for decisions.

There are a number of methods that have been used by various organizations for keeping politicians informed and these

range from holding open days to distributing calendars with the organization's objectives on each page. Whatever the means, the importance of better explaining priorities and objectives is apparent. It is also important to achieve a balanced, positive media coverage.

SETTING PRIORITIES

Priorities may be established by using the con-

cept of broad themes. Examples of themes for an organization like CALM include wildlife research, timber production operations and nature interpretation in parks and forests.

For setting priorities between themes the following five criteria were proposed by the discussion group.

1. The intensity of external pressures with respect to individual themes, particularly in view of the factors shown in Figure 1 (in this context instructions from Ministers and Cabinet are considered to be external pressures).

2. The degree to which particular themes contribute to achieving departmental objectives and policies.

3. Have historical commitments been made for individual themes?

4. The urgency with which individual themes are to be implemented.

5. The capacity to implement individual themes.

By scoring different themes for each criterion and adding scores for all criteria, a hierarchy of priorities can be established.

In some organizations scientific merit would be an additional criterion. This criterion is covered in CALM within Departmental policies and objec-

tives at the theme level. Nevertheless, criteria for assessing competing interests within themes (e.g. within the theme of wildlife research) would necessarily include criteria additional to those listed, and some of these would pertain to scientific merit.

There was general agreement, within the discussion group, concerning the five basic criteria but the relative importance of each was debated. In particular, there was disagreement concerning whether "external pressures" was the most important criterion, or whether priorities should be established for the remaining criteria before considering "external pressures". This conflict was not resolved, thus underlining the importance of having objectives that are meaningful in the short term and that also provide direction over the longer term despite short term external pressures.

Having identified criteria for ranking competing themes, and, together with more specific criteria, for ranking competing programs within themes, a procedure for changing priorities could be developed as follows.

1. Describe and analyze the current situation including allocation of staff and expenditure to each function and the degree to which objectives have been attained.

2. Through internal debate establish the most important trends between and within themes. That is, identify where the need for resources should decline or increase and quantify these increases or decreases. This process also serves to prepare personnel for change.

3. Allocate specific priorities to themes and within themes, balancing the increases and decreases defined in (2).

4. Define the trends that should be followed and re-define objectives if necessary. Disseminate information concerning trends to personnel so that they are informed and prepared for change.

5. Re-direct resources as soon as possible, but this may be a gradual process.

6. Regularly evaluate achievements and resource expenditure between and within themes. Use this information to continue the process of changing

priorities as time goes on.

This procedure is more difficult in the current climate of declining resources. In this situation work may cease in some sub-themes, or indeed, whole themes may disappear. While private enterprise may use profit-based criteria to make these decisions, many government organizations do not have objectives that can be categorized on a strict profit/loss basis. It is very difficult to choose between widely disparate themes (e.g. resources for control of timber production or resources for development of a marine park) and largely impossible to quantify.

CONCLUSIONS

The setting of priorities in a large and multi-purpose organization is a most difficult task for management, particularly when very different themes or programs are being compared, but it is a critical step in ensuring the most efficient use of resources. While the criteria and process for setting priorities developed during this workshop will assist managers, a significant component of major decisions will continue to reflect the subjective view of senior staff. This occurs in all organizations.

A second issue is the significant impact of external factors on the priorities and objectives of organizations. It is, therefore, extremely important for organizations to exert a positive influence on their external environment (Figure 1).

Finally, a most significant issue is the attitude to change (including the adoption of new research findings) in an organization. A positive attitude to change may stem from effective training and personnel management programs. Without these, changes will be resisted and efficiency will decline.

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