

Attachment 1: The Vital Issues Process

The Vital Issues Process (VIP) is a strategic planning tool that identifies a portfolio of programmatic activities (such as an “investment portfolio”) for an organization, aimed at satisfying its overall goals and objectives. The process requires a high level of stakeholder involvement, thus predisposing acceptance of the programmatic activities by those stakeholder communities.

The VIP is typically a multi-stage process, involving a series of daylong, intensive workshops, each of which builds on the results of the previous one. The first workshop focuses on definitions, identifying target goals and objectives, describing the type of issues or topical areas addressed by the sponsoring organization, and identifying criteria for issue or problem selection. The next workshop (or set of workshops) uses the selection criteria and the definition of the topical area or problem to identify and rank a set of vital issues. The following workshop (or set of workshops) selects one of those identified issues (probably, but not necessarily the highest ranked) and identifies and ranks associated programmatic activities. Subsequent workshops (or sets of workshops) can focus on tasks associated with specific programmatic activities.

Group dynamics constrain the effective size of a panel to between 10 and 15 people. The panel of participants in each workshop will differ, as expertise will be relevant to the topic at hand. Institutional perspectives key to organizational success (e.g., the private sector, local/state/federal government, citizens’ interest groups, and academe) should be identified a priori and represented on each panel. Individual panelists should be well respected and well recognized within their professional communities.

The VIP incorporates two primary facets: a qualitative facet, which takes a synthesis orientation; and a quantitative facet, which is analytically oriented. The qualitative aspect involves dialogue among individuals or groups with some stake in the topical area of interest. Such dialogue usually focuses on problem or issue definition (which can include definition of an organization’s goals and objectives) and criteria for measuring success through problem solution or goal achievement. Participation in the construction, or synthesis, of those definitions encourages participants to become invested in the process. The definitions constructed by these synthesis activities form the environment within which a set of alternatives (such as issues or programs) can be identified and ranked as to their relative importance. Next, quantitative methods are used to identify the portfolio that provides the greatest organizational good according to the set of criteria synthesized during the qualitative phase.

This dual approach can be applied in each phase of the VIP. The agenda leads off with a discussion of the topical area with which the workshop is charged, seeking to construct a definition that satisfies the group and which sets the context within which the specific issues, activities, or tasks are identified. A set of criteria for measuring success is also identified. Group discussion clarifies the identified issues and leads to consensus on their definition and scope. The issues are then relatively ranked (i.e., the items in the set are ranked against each other, and not against any external, absolute standard) using pairwise comparisons that compare each issue to all others in the set in turn against each of the identified selection criteria. This ranking is

obtained by asking the panelists to assign specific values to each issue. This procedure allows panelists to make explicit the tradeoff process and the criteria by which they are making the tradeoffs. In addition to the relative importance of the vital issues, the quantitative phase also yields an assessment of the relative level of agreement among panelists.

The VIP has been successfully applied in over 90 applications with topical areas ranging from national security, economic competitiveness, environmental quality, energy security, to health care. The VIP is a facilitated, rapporteured process with one deliverable being a report and another being a model of the dialog. The report is more than a “minutes” of the meeting(s). The report actually “tells a story” with a rich description of the issues that are of vital importance in the context of the topical area of interest. The “model” provides a topological depiction of the major elements that emerged during the dialog and of their primary couplings. The story illustrated by the model provides a graphical representation that reveals valuable insights that typically go unrecognized. One of the more important aspects of this “story” is that its authors, the panelists, are representative of the primary stakeholders. A valuable characteristic of this process is that the panelists are recruited from the full spectrum of institutional perspectives representative of the stakeholder community. This serves to ensure that the “story” captures the salient aspects of the Vital Issues associated with the topical area under consideration and, perhaps even more importantly, that the stakeholders feel ownership of the results.