

Answering Your Call

How Do You Want to Make a Difference?

One of the hardest parts of attempting anything new is figuring out what you want to do and why. It's a lot easier to strike out in one direction and correct your course later if necessary. That's OK. But by answering a few simple questions at the start, a lot of aggravation can be avoided. So as you start this book, you will be asked to answer some very specific questions, such as "What is the exact need you feel called to address?" and "Who are you now, and what do you want your program to become?" and "How would you define the people you want to serve? Where are they, and how do they relate to you?" Then you'll assess your strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOTs). All this assessment will set the stage for creating the wonderful program you envisioned when you picked up this book.

People with good ideas usually can't wait to jump in and get started. We visionary types can be our worst enemy for failing to plan well. Who would attempt to build a house without counting the cost? What person of faith would attempt to do anything significant without first engaging in some serious prayer? So give yourself every advantage for success. Gather some friends together and pray for specific direction and guidance over what you are about to attempt. Discipline your mind and heart to remain open to what you hear from God, no matter how impossible or disappointing that message might be.

Specific things to pray for include the following:

What exactly are you being led to do?

Who will work with you?

What is your timetable?

Where will resources come from?

Should you work full time or part time on this?

Remember, committing your process to prayer is not just a onetime deal. It is very easy to get off track if you forget to check yourself. Build a prayer team that will take the job seriously and remind you to consider carefully how you listen. Keep in mind whom you are ultimately serving. Don't forget to check every thought and idea against the answers you receive from your prayer sessions. Often what we *want* to happen is not God's best action.

Once you are "prayed up," you can begin the process of preliminary planning. The First Steps chart in Worksheet 1.1 is a simple, informal process that can be filled out in a couple of hours. These steps will give you handles for your ideas and structure for your planning. Later in Chapter Four, you will complete more thorough exercises, such as project planning, preliminary strategic planning, and logic model evaluation, which is discussed in Chapter Eight. But let's first flush out the basics so you know which freeway to jump on!

Remember, if you want to attract others to your solutions, you must acquire their confidence that you have thought through the details and counted the costs.

STEP 1: ASSESS THE NEED

The first step to take in pursuing your idea is to assess the need of the population you recognize needs help. This need assessment will drive everything you do. For without determining the need, working toward a solution is pointless. So sit down by yourself or with a group of like-minded friends who share your concern, and figure out what need you feel called to address. What inspired you with your vision to help? Perhaps it's a failing school in your neighborhood. Maybe it's your own children who can't get the level of education you desire, and private school isn't an option. Maybe there's a loved one in the depths of addiction; you recognize that the need for addiction counseling and addiction treatment services is far above the existing services in your area. Or you see a large number of single mothers with

Worksheet 1.1

First Steps: Initial Questions to Answer

1. What do I feel called to do?

2. Why do I feel urgency about this situation?

3. What is God telling me to do?

4. What difference will my action make?

5. What do I have that might help the situation?

6. Who do I know that will join me?

7. How much time, energy, and money am I willing to give?

dependent children living on the streets or in substandard conditions with no means of helping themselves. Whatever the situation, you must define the need so that you can build your strategy and focus your ideas to meet that need in a clear, logical, and effective way. Worksheet 1.2 can help.

Find evidence of the need in the media. Clip newspaper articles that mention the situation. Contact established services, and educate yourself about what is being done and what isn't being done to correct the problem. Build a file of pertinent information that will help you understand all the angles surrounding your concern. Look up statistics on the Internet. Research related government Web sites for data. Become an expert resource for other concerned folks.

STEP 2: DETERMINE YOUR PLACE IN THE PICTURE

Once you identify the need, the next step is to clarify your role in the process of meeting that need. Describe yourself and your relationship to the need. Describe your emotional attachment to the population in need and your prior experience or personal connection with respect to this situation. If you already have a committed group, describe the group's credentials and experience. List important associations you have developed.

Perhaps you feel called to mentor troubled youth that are adjudicated, incarcerated or who risk becoming incarcerated. You will want to describe any affiliation you have had with troubled youth. It may be that years ago your son found himself in trouble with the law. Having walked through that process for years, you have experience and authority in this realm, and consequently you have credibility in meeting a need.

This process will give you confidence in going forward with your idea. It will also convince others to assist you or invest in your ideas because you have walked a path that perhaps they have not. You have gained access to decision makers in a closed system that few have breached. You may have the ear of the "change agents."

STEP 3: LAY OUT YOUR SOLUTION

Now that you have assessed the need and figured out the role you want to play in the situation, you are ready to present your ideas and solutions. Your initial plan should be fairly narrow in scope so that you can maintain a reasonable expectation of success. Great ideas often fail because the vision is too broad and vague.

Worksheet 1.2

Need Assessment

1. What is bothering me in my community?
2. Why is it bothering me?
3. Who do I know that is suffering because of this situation?
4. What contributing factors are making the situation worse?
5. Who could do something about it?
6. Why does the problem persist?
7. How might God feel about this situation?
8. What might I do to help?
9. When will this problem get better?
10. Does anyone else feel the way I do?

In formulating your plan, answer these questions:

What do you think needs to be done?

What could help alleviate the problem you have identified?

What new approach are you proposing?

What action should stop because it is aggravating the situation?

What would be different if your ideas were implemented?

Try to keep your initial plan to four or five main activities. These should be written down and kept in a file. Using the example of juvenile justice counseling, you might want to propose gathering a few qualified volunteers to go to the local courthouse as juvenile advocates or to the justice center twice a week and invite kids to talk individually. Each session could last, say, thirty minutes or forty minutes or longer, whatever is appropriate. Describe how those conversations would evolve. What types of questions would you ask? What is your method for encouraging these kids? Would you use any type of literature or tools during your meetings? Lay out exactly what it is that you plan to do to meet this need.

Also think about where you will conduct your work. Identify the specific locations. Having precise demographic information is crucial in establishing your credibility. Is it realistic that your group of ten volunteers would be able to cover the juvenile justice system in the entire state—or the entire county, for that matter? Probably not in your infant stage. So determine where you plan to implement your ideas or program very specifically. For example, plan to start in the central county courthouse until your volunteer base grows. Or your volunteers might want to cover more territory, with each visiting a separate facility in the county, thereby establishing your program at ten locations throughout the county right away.

You might want to team up experienced advisers or lay counselors with inexperienced eager helpers, in which case you might have five locations in your start-up phase. Plan carefully, and be very specific about where you will work.

STEP 4: SPECIFY THE PEOPLE YOU WILL SERVE

This is a critical step. Defining your target population will determine who will partner with you down the road. Will you zero in on a specific racial group? Will

you work with boys and girls? Will you serve only young people between the ages of fourteen and eighteen? Or will you meet with any youths who are interested and willing to talk? Perhaps you will ask a judge to help make that decision. A judge's endorsement may help you gain access to more kids and resources quickly.

Often in America, minority communities are considered "high-need." That is not surprising; most social problems exist in "high-need populations" everywhere in the world. For example, some demographic groups experience high rates of substance abuse and school dropouts. These two behaviors are the major contributors to juvenile justice problems. By targeting these populations as one of your primary concerns, you could leverage your resources to serve several high-needs groups with identical methods.

How about the families of the kids you will serve? Do you intend to offer your expertise to help other family members address issues that may have contributed to the child's current problems? If so, your program may take on a more holistic feel. You may be able to garner support from various family support networks by expanding your scope beyond the child to the family. Are there younger siblings who show signs of following in the older sibling's behavior patterns? Should this issue be discussed with the family as a preventive measure?

Start-up organizations need to be mobile. Today, most start-up nonprofits begin in a home office. But if you truly want to be effective, you must go to the heart of the need to prove your interest and concern and to gain credibility. So if you received donated office space in the best part of town but the need you want to meet is on the "other side of the tracks," decide how willing you are to travel to the area of need. If you fear for your life every time you enter a distressed neighborhood, then maybe this type of work isn't for you! Think specifically about how you will conduct your service.

Don't expect folks in high need to come to you. For many, busfare isn't in the budget. Later we'll explore the options of setting up shop in neighborhood churches and community centers. Remember, if you want to attract financial support, you must teach yourself and your team to think from the perspective of the people you want to serve. How likely is a single mother on welfare and living in transitional housing to hop across town to receive one hour of mentoring from some do-gooder in the suburbs? Not likely at all.

STEP 5: IDENTIFY YOUR STAKEHOLDERS

This step is a big reason why you want to take stock of your situation. After assessing the need you feel called to address, it is time to figure out who your stakeholders are. Stakeholders are any people that are affected by or affect the work you do (use Worksheet 1.3 to record who your stakeholders are; a sample stakeholder list is presented in Exhibit 1.1). Once you sift through all the people your work touches, you will be better equipped to provide the kind of care they truly need; you may also find that they can assist you in some way. Most funders want to know who you consider to be your stakeholders, so you are better off figuring that out right from the start.

Try to expand your reach in this exercise. Think beyond your daily interactions, which of course should be included on your list, but also include a level outside your immediate contact list. If you work with a local elementary school, you should also consider the middle school your stakeholder because the families you serve will one day end up there. If your church is your primary stakeholder, you should also include any alliance it is a part of because what you do could affect the alliance—and it may be able to help you, too!

Don't limit your stakeholder list to the population you serve. For example, if you have elected to serve incarcerated youth, think about how your services will touch the lives of their families, their parole officers, their fellow inmates, and the local law enforcement agencies. Include people and groups that your work affects even if they aren't aware of you. But be realistic and be able to back up your claims if asked to do so.

Keep in mind that your stakeholder list will change as you grow and attract more partners and donors. All will become part of your internal and external SWOT assessments.

STEP 6: CONDUCT SWOT ASSESSMENTS

Your final step, figuring out your strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOTs), is an exercise that is best revisited each year because conditions change. It could take one hour or a full weekend, depending on how much you want to invest in it. This step will help you see where you and your ideas are in relationship to everything else around you. The purpose is to guide you in focusing your plans and to protect you from becoming, for example, the eighth Christian job training program within an eight-block area in eight months. (Use Worksheet 1.4 to work out your SWOTs; a sample SWOT assessment is presented in Exhibit 1.2.)

Worksheet 1.3

Stakeholder Identification List

Person or Group

Exhibit 1.1

Sample Stakeholder List for Central Valley School, a Private Liberal Arts Institution

Person or Group	Stake	Current Influence	Potential Influence	Potential Resources	Other Information
Students	Education, future opportunities	Building reputation, community representatives	Requesting changes in curriculum or methods of learning	Future alumni, funding base, attracting other students to the school	Students have an unlimited and unpredictable impact on the school's future.
Parents	Investment, Children's Life Foundation	Extracurricular activities, fundraising, reputation, encouragement	Teaching methods, sports programs, new funding contacts, filling of staff positions	Board representation, community representatives, specialized teaching, assistance in difficulties	Many parents have expertise that could be helpful in specific school situations.
Extended families	Grandparents', aunts', and uncles' desire for kids' success	Financial gifts, attendance at events, emotional support	Greater funding, expertise	Business contacts, in-kind support, community representatives	Relatives could share information about how schools function in other cities and states.
Faculty and staff	Career, income, benefits	Spending six hours each day with students, administrative details, discipline, nurturing, inspiration to learn	Lifelong examples, role models, creation of memories and patterns for lifestyles, unlimited influence	Love, inspiration, guidance, stress and time management, future educational and career contacts	Relationships with teachers and staff are carried through life and can never be measured.
Board members	Investment of time, funds, and expertise	Direction for the school, fiscal responsibility	Future funding, future stability or instability of the school	New contacts, donors, in-kind support	The board can alter the profile of the school very quickly.

Food service providers	Meal preparation, hosting of events and meetings after hours and off campus	Friendly interactions with students, daily lunch planning	Modeling proper mealtime manners, clean-up procedures, and respect for others and school property	Teaching meal preparations and kitchen management skills, recipe preparation and presentation	This group could form a unit on domestic management as an elective course.
Neighbors	Maintaining a safe and wholesome area in which to live	Resistance to school construction, negative influence due to traffic	Support if invited to participate in functions	Volunteer help, parking allowances, community support, funding	Neighbors could cause difficulties if not handled properly.
City and county officials	Revenue generated by school permits and taxes	Final decisions on all facility matters	Forcible closing of the school if they decide not to reissue permits	Development of key relationships to help diffuse strife and ill will	Officials have tremendous power over the school and must be handled carefully.
State board of education	Curriculum and graduation standards, all aspects of education	Determination of what to teach students and when; requirements for testing and teacher qualifications	Right to change standards at any time, power to add or remove any aspect of instruction	Development of relationships that could warn the school of impending changes before a problem results	Even a private school like this one is at the mercy of this board; compliance is a must.
Volunteers	Investment of time, effort, and emotion	Freeing up time for staff and teachers, interactions with students	Doing work that would otherwise require payment	Friends with time to help, recess supervisors and other currently paid staff positions	Volunteers could provide many more hours of help if each brought a retired friend along.

Worksheet 1.4

SWOT Assessment

	Internal	External	Implications
Strengths			
Weaknesses			
Opportunities			
Threats			

Exhibit 1.2

Sample SWOT Assessment for Central Valley School, a Private Liberal Arts Institution

	Internal	External	Implications
Strengths	Quality of education, highly motivated and able students, committed families, new facility, high standard of discipline	Location, high value placed on education and challenge, positive image, professional expertise	DISCIPLINE: No time is wasted; more learning occurs at every level; students become leaders of tomorrow.
Weaknesses	Long-term funding, insufficient equipment, athletics program, low salaries, isolated population	Space limitations, negative public image, minimal presence in the community, newness of the institution, lack of government funding	FUNDING: Money concerns are fraught with insecurity about the future of programs, expansion, covering external costs, and attracting high-level faculty; they restrict opportunities for growth and cause daily budget stress.
Opportunities	Academic achievements, athletic achievements, strong sense of community, nurturance of leadership skills, untapped resources	Future leadership, increased enrollment and visibility, satellite campuses, invitations to lecture, ability to attract prestigious faculty, voucher laws	VISIBILITY: Visibility leads to greater opportunities for students after graduation, expands the funding base, and attracts faculty and students but could also invite criticism.

Exhibit 1.2

Sample SWOT Assessment for Central Valley School, a Private Liberal Arts Institution, Cont'd.

	Internal	External	Implications
Threats	Advances in technology, attitude of exclusivity, staff burnout, volunteer burnout, cost, student boredom	Public policy; neighborhood complaints; increased costs of utilities, permits, and association dues; negative public impressions, education laws	TECHNOLOGY: Even our motivated, disciplined, and highly able students could be stunted without the proper cutting-edge technology capabilities and training. This needs to be a priority.
Trends	<p>The school's reputation is increasing due to student accomplishments.</p> <p>Parents are retiring at an earlier age to spend more time with their families. The school receives free expertise from professionals vested in its system.</p> <p>The administration is investing in development and community relations staff.</p>	<p>The decline of public education contributes to many applications that can't be accommodated.</p> <p>Erosion of moral fiber and safety in public schools drives families to private options.</p> <p>Higher income levels make private school tuition affordable to more families.</p>	<p>SAFETY: No institution is immune from social problems. Central Valley School must remain vigilant and aware of any instability or concerns of students and faculty to thwart a potentially dangerous situation.</p> <p>Decisions regarding expansion will need to be made.</p>

Families, students, and faculty are establishing stronger community bonds as a result of the new facility.
The school is now poised to extend itself into the greater network of private schools in the state.

The population shift to semirural neighborhoods has brought many more families within commuting range of Central Valley School. Many families desire smaller classes for their children. Central Valley has a policy of sixteen per class, which attracts this type of parent.
Public policy is addressing the possibilities of charter schools and school vouchers.
More weekend and evening events will be planned, which will in turn affect neighborhood traffic patterns.
School representatives will be asked to mentor other parent groups wishing to duplicate its model and success.
Curriculum requirements could be affected.

The process is self-explanatory once you study the SWOTs form. The best preparation for this exercise is to pray for a creative, bird's-eye perspective on your work. Here are some hints you might use in filling out your SWOT chart.

Strengths

Do you have a good reputation in your community?

Do you know people in high places?

Are there impressive work-related results you can point to?

What kind of support do you already have?

These kinds of questions help you determine what your strengths are. Now come up with some of your own questions to ask your team.

Weaknesses

Do you lack funds?

Are you currently working out of a spare bedroom or the dining room?

Is there a lack of community awareness of your program?

Do you lack capacity to do all that you want to do?

It's important to be brutally honest here. Remember, you are doing an assessment—a self-evaluation. If you leave out important details, you'll find out about it later, when it's much harder to address.

Opportunities

Is there some other organization that is asking you for help?

Are there facilities available to you free of charge?

Is there a tremendous need that you can help meet?

Is there a partnership already formed that you can join?

Think of what might be available even if you haven't taken advantage of it yet.

Threats

What is hindering your work or has the potential to do so?

Are you in temporary facilities that may not be renewed?

Do you have a negative reputation among key decision makers?

Are other organizations planning to start a program like yours?

You need to be constantly looking around to see how the landscape is changing day by day. Don't assume that the status quo will remain constant. Anticipate changes around you, and you could be on the cutting edge of what the real needs in your community will become.

This will be one of the most valuable exercises you will perform for your pilot program or your well-established, well-funded, well-respected organization. SWOT analysis is a best practice that every leader, board member, manager, or professional volunteer needs to be familiar with. It should be done by individuals and then as a group, depending on your situation. It could be performed at an extended board meeting, staff meeting, volunteer meeting, or organizational retreat with the help of an outside consultant. It doesn't matter how, when, or where it is done—just do it! Do it early and do it often—at least once a year.

Well done! You have accomplished quite a lot by just following the steps laid out in this chapter. But now is not the time to pat yourself on the back. Now is the time to jump forward, while you are motivated and eager to learn more! Take all the information you have accumulated and compartmentalized and continue to refine it with the steps presented in Chapter Two.

