

## Policy Writing Basics

Margaret Robertson

Policy is one of the tools used in managing many organizations, and people who work in sustainability are often called upon to write or collaborate on the writing of policies. A policy is a formal statement of principles, a set of guidelines or rules that guide decision-making, activities and conduct in an organization. Policies provide consistency and continuity. With policies in place, everyone has a common understanding, can refer to the same framework for decisions, and the framework remains in place even if personnel change. Policies provide a written record that is accessible to everyone, reducing the potential for conflict or misunderstanding. Once issues are discussed and policies agreed upon, decision-making is more efficient since people do not need to keep discussing the same issues again. The basic approach to writing a policy is to identify the topic of focus, collect examples of similar policies from other organizations, write and distribute a draft, collect and integrate feedback, revise as needed, finalize, approve, draft procedures for implementing, and schedule regular reviews.

As in any problem-solving process, the first step is to define the problem or identify the issue to be addressed. Sometimes a single issue is what prompts a particular policy to be written. In other cases, an organization decides to work methodically to develop a collection of multiple policies, and thus the first activities are planning sessions by stakeholders to identify collaboratively which policies are needed and in what priority. As with all planning and management work, the development of policies is built upon the organization's mission, goals, and objectives. See Chapter 16, "Working in an Organization" in the book *Sustainability Principles and Practice* for information about planning within an organization.

Once a particular topic of concern is identified as the subject of a policy that needs to be written, participants begin by gathering information and conducting research. Often the most productive activity is to search for policies written by similar organizations on similar topics, from which to compile a list of elements to consider for inclusion. For example, if a sustainability team at a university needed to develop a policy on green cleaning methods, they could search for existing green cleaning policies at other universities. Although care must be taken not to copy someone else's policy, this kind of benchmarking is very helpful in providing a framework. Other resources can include professional organizations, technical experts, and relevant laws and regulations, as well as conversations with people who have experience with or who are impacted by this issue, a process which can include both formal surveys and informal conversations.

An individual or small team is then selected to do the writing of a first draft. In general, policy writing should not be done in committee meetings, as there is the potential both to get hung up on insignificant details and to have difficulty getting started with crafting language in the first

place. It is easier for a committee to work when participants have an existing document to which to respond. The policy should be written as clearly as possible in straightforward, jargon-free language and should be no more than one page in length. Bullet points are often used to make the layout easy to use. The document should avoid using brand names, names of people, dates, and any other information that can become outdated.

The first draft is then distributed to stakeholders for comment. Feedback can be collected and discussed verbally in meetings; however, it is more efficient if participants first make comments directly on electronic documents, using either a different-colored font or the markup feature of word-processing software, so that those marked-up versions can be distributed and read by participants in advance before coming together for discussion.

The process of meeting to review feedback, agreeing on and incorporating revisions, and circulating a revised draft is continued as needed until a final draft is agreed upon by the group. The final draft is then presented to the approving body in the organization for ratification, which might be an administrator, a management committee, or a board of trustees or directors. Once ratified, the final approval date is added to the policy, and the policy can be communicated to others and then implemented.

Every policy within an organization should follow the same format for consistency. A typical policy contains the title; a brief statement of purpose; a description of scope, that is, where or to whom the policy will apply; the policy narrative itself; the approval date, date of most recent revision, and date of next review; the responsible party with contact information; reference to relevant statute, regulation, or governing authority, if appropriate; reference to related procedure; and definitions of any uncommon or specialized terms or words that can have different meanings in different contexts, listed in alphabetical order.

A written policy is implemented through written procedures. A policy is a statement of guiding principles; it describes 'what' and 'why.' A procedure provides instructions for carrying out the policy; it describes 'how': the specific action steps to be done, how they will be done, and by whom.

Every policy should be reviewed on a regular basis to determine whether it is understandable as written and whether it is working as intended. This is the standard feedback step that is essential to all planning and management activities. As with the original drafting of a policy, review and evaluation should be done collaboratively. The policy is adapted and revised as needed and, unless changes are minor, presented to the approving body in the organization for re-approval.

## **Resources**

Campbell, Nancy J. *Writing Effective Policies and Procedures: A Step-by-Step Resource for Clear Communication*. New York: AMACOM, 1998.

Info Entrepreneurs. "How to Write an Environmental Policy." Chambre de Commerce du Montréal Métropolitain. <http://www.infoentrepreneurs.org/en/guides/how-to-write-an-environmental-policy/>