

looking at the total picture

Mary Ann Peterson

How many times have you completed a project, a report, a program, a day, week, or month—and realized, too late, that a significant element was missing, important tasks didn't get done, or the net effect was imbalanced or simply inefficient? Have you ever wished for an effective method for getting ideas, reactions, and input from others? Perhaps there have been times you'd like to have had a way of looking at the "total picture," while making plans or before making a decision.

A simple, flexible technique for helping with all of this is available to you if you have a bulletin board, a stack of 3" x 5" cards, felt-tip markers, and pushpins.

At first, using a visual planning board (VPB) may seem to create extra work rather than improved efficiency, but with only a couple of VPB sessions, its planning and organizational benefits become evident and the limitless possibilities begin to emerge.

What Is VPB?

What is the VPB technique? The process involves three steps:

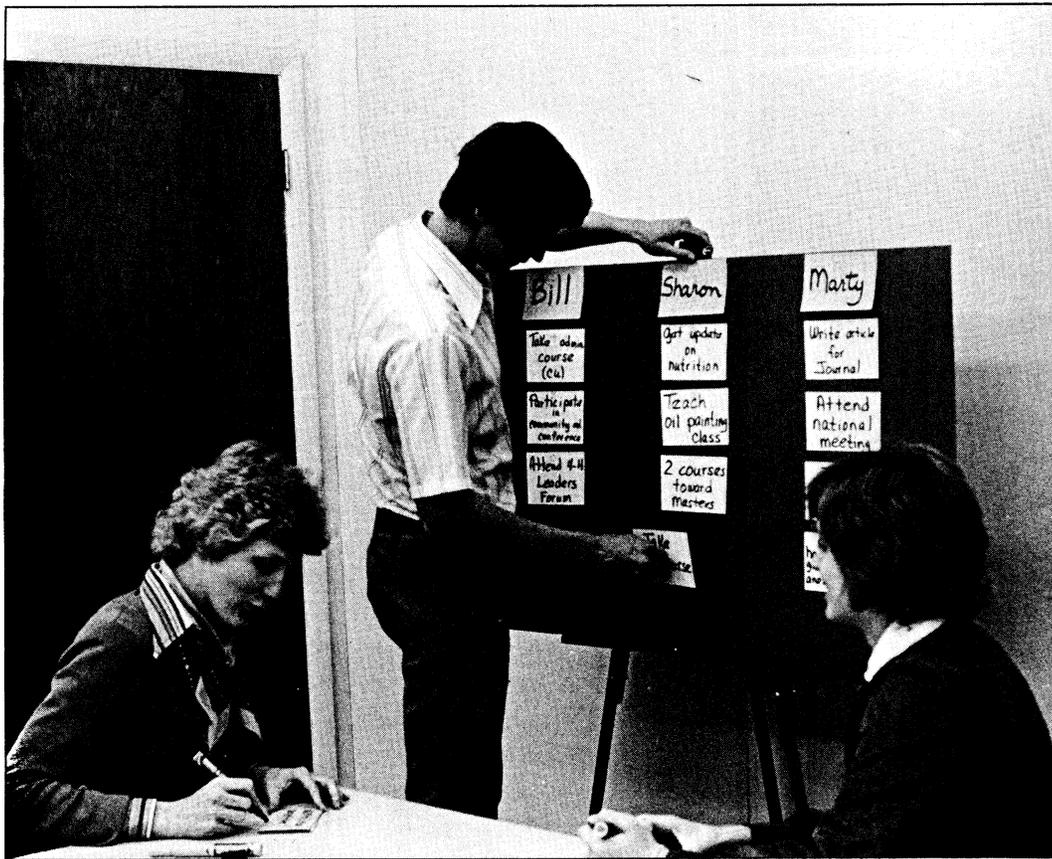
1. Writing key words and ideas on 3" x 5" cards (or pieces of paper).
2. Pinning the cards to a bulletin board.
3. Organizing and rearranging the cards as desired.

Getting ideas, thoughts, and related facts out where you can actually *see* them, and being able to reorganize, rearrange, and view this information from different perspectives—that is, making a process, idea, plan, whatever, *visual*—is the key to VPB's usefulness. Once tuned in to a visual approach to planning, problem solving, and idea gathering, other methods may seem limiting. Another bonus is that seeing everything on a board makes you feel good about how much you did during your VPB session.

Ways to Use VPB

One of the many ways our staff uses a visual planning board is in developing our plan of work. Meeting with our

Mary Ann Peterson: Extension Agent—Home Economics, Jefferson County Extension Service, Colorado State University—Golden.



advisory council, we brainstorm program ideas, write each on a separate card, and pin them to a large board. We then organize them in columns according to program areas or audiences (nutrition, environmental education, senior citizens, etc.). Realizing we can't possibly do everything, we rearrange the cards according to priorities, selecting the programs we feel most need to be emphasized during the next year, as well as those we'll eliminate or won't develop. Each agent then takes the program cards for which he/she will be responsible and uses these to write the plan of work.

A staff or individual could use a similar process to construct personal or professional development plans. Perhaps two key columns—(1) things you need to do and (2) things you'd like to do—could be identified. Goals, as well as the methods and means of reaching them, could be determined. Priorities could be set and a time frame established for both short- and long-range goals.

Some of our staff members have even used a VPB to help them solve a personal problem. Once they get the

problem and various alternatives up on the board, a possible solution becomes more evident.

There are many other types of tasks for which the VPB can be used: planning a newsletter; organizing a presentation, lesson, or thesis; developing a job description; planning an activity or event and recording progress while preparing for it; dividing work loads and responsibilities; planning for a family room or new office space; evaluating a program (on a "post-mortum" board); or recording proceedings or discussion points during a meeting. It can also be used to outline an article for the *Journal of Extension*!

Use Your Imagination

The visual planning board's flexibility and adaptability are limited only by your own imagination. It can be used by an individual, as well as by groups. The scope can be broad (like the plan of work) or specific (how to recruit kids for day camp). The process can be limited in time (one session) or ongoing over several meetings, weeks, or months. Ideas and information can evolve or people can put thoughts on cards ahead of time.

The surface you use can be a bulletin board, cork board, a chunk of styrofoam, or a large piece of cardboard. After the process, the cards can be distributed, filed, or thrown away—or the information on an organized bundle of cards can be typed. A polaroid picture of the board can even be taken for future reference. The cards can also be saved so that the board can be reconstructed at any time.

So if you're interested in a usable, *useful* tool that provides for maximum flexibility and input and ensures that no ideas or information are lost, try using a visual planning board—you'll like it!