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**Action Planning in the Academic Literature**

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Action planning is addressed in several fields of academia, including industrial and organizational psychology, social work, and public health. This report highlights key findings in these works and how they might apply to the work of organizations seeking to mobilize students to register and vote. Relevant topics include the components of action plans, the importance of goals and motivation, how self-efficacy influences outcomes, individual vs. group goals, and how to apply planning to an institutional setting. Practical tools for action planning are included as well.

**Components of Action Plans: Habits, Goals, and Motivations**

Scholars find that action planning is effective in a wide variety of contexts, including weight management, sun exposure, community involvement, rehabilitation, and the achievement of business goals (Cooper, Bryer, and Meek 2006; Hagger and Luszczynska 2014; Locke and Latham 2013). One key finding among psychologists involves creating action plans that are specific, “if-then” plans (Hagger and Luszczynska 2014). If-then plans involve pre-determining responses given specific stimuli. For example, a person desiring to lose weight might create a plan that dictates “if I get hungry, then I will eat some carrot sticks instead of eating chips.” This type of planning allows people to achieve their goals by developing new habits instead of relying on willpower.



While this finding may not seem relevant in a political context, it is important to understand the link between planning, goals, and motivations (Locke and Latham 2013). All human behavior can be linked back to the human desire to achieve goals – whether finding something to eat for dinner, climbing Mount Everest, or strengthening democracy through an increase in youth voting. Since some goals can be achieved through more than one means, action planning provides a defined path to achieve specific goals (Finkel and Fitzsimons 2020). In light of the link between goals, motivations, and planning, it is important that action plans align with individual and group goals and be continually updated as goals develop and change (Rothman, Erlich, and Tropman 2001).

### **The Importance of Self-Efficacy in Goal Setting**

Industrial and organizational psychologists find that, in team and work settings, people expend greater effort and work longer when they have challenging but realistic goals (Locke and Latham 2013). This may be because the link between action planning on goal accomplishment is strongly associated with an individual's sense of efficacy – which means a person's belief that they are capable of accomplishing their goals (Rothman, Erlich, and Tropman 2001; Scobbie, Dixon, and Wyke 2011). Individuals are more likely to achieve goals if they believe they are capable of achieving the goals, which leads to a virtuous cycle – setting realistic goals helps increase self-efficacy, which in turn makes a person more likely to achieve their goals, which further increases self-efficacy and so on (Scobbie, Dixon, and Wyke 2011). Higher levels of political efficacy also increase the likelihood of political action (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993).



In light of this finding, it is important to strike an appropriate balance between setting a goal that is achievable (leading to increased efficacy) and that stretches an individual or team's abilities (leading to goal accomplishment). Breaking goals into stages can also help enhance the self-efficacy cycle (Kruglanski et al. 2018). Creating staged goals allows people to recognize their accomplishments upon the completion of each goal, which feeds the virtuous cycle.

### **Individual Goals vs. Group Goals**

Much work in psychology and public health applies action planning to individual goals. However, social workers and industrial and organizational psychologists have also studied how planning works in a group context. Research suggests that planning may be more effective when done in groups (Hagger and Luszczynska 2014). However, the efficacy of group goal setting is conditional on a number of factors.

First, the goals that underlie individual and group plans must align (Locke and Latham 2013). Otherwise, conflicting plans can lead individuals to choose the plan that accomplishes the goal most important to them (Finkel and Fitzsimons 2020; Locke and Latham 2013). Additionally, planning in a group setting, especially when there are multiple stakeholders, can be used as a delay tactic (Rothman, Erlich, and Tropman 2001). While planning can be instrumental in achieving community consensus, it is important to recognize that planning is only effective when followed by an implementation period in which teams periodically evaluate their progress. The key is finding a balance that allows for effective evaluation without taking time away from the work that needs to be completed (Rothman, Erlich, and Tropman 2001).



## **Planning in an Institutional Setting**

While the psychology literature does not address institutional-level planning, the social work literature does go into some detail about how planning might work at the institutional level. While this literature focuses more on case studies and lacks some of the empirical backing found in psychology, scholars address the challenge of institutional planning in a number of areas.

First, institution-based planning can be used as a way to build consensus. Rothman et al. (2001) discuss the use of planning as a means of achieving consensus among stakeholder groups. While consensus-building can be helpful, Rothman and his colleagues caution that such collaboration can also lead to intentional or unintentional delays by one or more stakeholders (Rothman, Erlich, and Tropman 2001).

Secondly, social work literature addresses questions about whether to engage community partners in the planning process. While most authors discuss planning as a communal activity, Rothman (1996) suggests that planning does not necessarily need to involve members of the community. Rothman focuses on the goals-oriented aspects of community planning, including needs assessment, decision analysis, and evaluation, and their positive effects on outcomes. These processes are separate from the consensus building approach described above.

Further, the concept of goal alignment, which was addressed in the small group goals section of this report, is also relevant to institutional planning. Ensuring that individual goals are aligned with community goals can help make sure that all parties are committed to the group's objectives. Involving key stakeholders in a goal identification process at the outset of planning can



help identify individual goals that align with group objectives. Highlighting these shared goals and how they might work together can help achieve buy-in and will help ensure that all stakeholders are bought into what the group is trying to accomplish. The literature addresses these ideas indirectly, and UMD team members confirm the efficacy of this strategy based on prior experience.

### **Practical Tools for Action Planning**

In addition to empirical studies of planning on goal achievement, scholars provide practical tools for groups seeking to engage in action planning. These works generally originate from the field of community practice, and while they lack empirical data, the case studies included, particularly in a community organizing context, may be helpful as your group engages in the planning process (Minkler 2012; Ross and Coleman 2000).



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