

2 SETTING GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

TIPS FOR DEVELOPING A LADDER OF ENGAGEMENT

The following tips will help you outline a clear path of landowner actions that will ultimately help achieve your landscape goal. You can then use the outline to see where landowners may need assistance, and your programming can support them to take the next step.

- Rather than beginning by writing down the actions of a novice landowner and working your way up toward a model landowner, it's often easier to start by thinking about the actions you believe a model landowner would take to help address your conservation goal. Then, work backward, identifying what a landowner would need to do before undertaking the action you just wrote.
- Break down the actions into smaller specific steps. For example: "Remove invasive species" involves learning to identify them, learning how to remove them, getting access to the right equipment, etc. "Sign up for cost-share" entails checking eligibility, filling out the form, having the form signed by a forester, having the form signed by the Natural Resources Conservation Service, waiting for the application to return, doing the work, asking for reimbursement, etc.
- For each step, focus on what you want the landowner to do (not on what you want them to think or what you will do). Make the steps concrete—i.e., something you can see. Use action words. For example: Instead of "care about water quality," say, "attend a workshop to learn about how the health of the watershed affects them." Instead of "understand forest regeneration," say, "meet with a professional to learn about their forest's regeneration prospects."
- Identify alternative paths (i.e., do-it-yourself versus hiring a contractor).
- Identify steps you can eliminate. For example:
 - Do they need to understand your project or funding? (The answer is almost always "no.")
 - Can you assess their property instead of having them do it?
 - Must they travel to two offices to get the necessary signatures?
- Determine what assistance you'll need to provide landowners at each step of the ladder, and who will provide it.
- Determine the first step you want landowners to take—i.e., what you'll ask them to do in your first communication with them. This should be a relatively simple action that the landowner is able to take and that you can persuade them to take without much education and preparation. In fact, attending your educational session may be the first step you want landowners to take to enter your program.

2.3 Choosing SMART Objectives

Social science research tells us that simple, clear, and specific calls to action are much more likely to result in action than broad, confusing, or multi-step requests. You can use your Ladder of Engagement to select one landowner action to be the focus of your outreach. Choosing this action involves identifying a clear, simple answer to the question: What should the landowner do in response to my outreach?

The attributes of a good call to action are nicely captured in the acronym “SMART.”

SPECIFIC

Make sure that your communication objective is expressed as a concrete and clear landowner action. Ideally, you should ask landowners to take a simple, observable action. One way to know whether you have a specific objective is to ensure that the action would be interpreted in the same way by any observer.

MEASURABLE

Good communication objectives can be logically tied to relevant indicators and measures of success. This allows you to track progress, and know what’s working well and when you need to recalibrate your efforts. If you have a specific, observable objective, you can usually find a way to count instances of the behavior and track progress against your goals.

ATTAINABLE

Good objectives are ambitious but realistic. Ask yourself: Can landowners reasonably be expected to take this action? Do they have access to information, vendors, money, or other resources needed to do what you’re asking? Don’t waste resources on a program that you know is likely to fail.

RELEVANT

Your communication objective should also be relevant for accomplishing the outcomes you want to see on the ground. It’s important to ask yourself: Is this communication objective worth accomplishing? Does it get me at least part of the way toward the outcomes I want to see on the ground? And do I have a plan for taking landowners the rest of the way, so I can actually see outcomes on the ground?

For example, many conservation partnerships host woods forums to facilitate information exchange and networking among woodland owners. In some cases, that is a worthwhile goal in itself. But if you want to accomplish specific conservation goals, you need to think through the needed steps and actions to get there. What would you like landowners to do after they leave the event? You can build this into the agenda so that there is a clear next step.

TIME BOUND

Set realistic milestones for your program and when you hope to achieve them. At the end of that period, take stock of what you’ve accomplished and decide whether to continue the current outreach or perhaps change your focus to sustaining relationships and moving people up the Ladder of Engagement.

Also, make sure all stakeholders (including funders) are on board with your timeline. Too many effective communication programs are discontinued before the effort bears fruit. An equal number of ineffective programs continue, in the false hope that they will yield results at some point.