

TIPS TO BUILDING AND SUSTAINING SUCCESSFUL COALITIONS

What is a Coalition?

A coalition is a group of individuals and/or organizations that work together around a common issue, event, or purpose. We can think of coalitions not just as a group, but rather as an alliance in which relationships and trust are built. While all coalitions are collaborative efforts by definition, they can vary in numerous ways including purpose, governance, and procedures.

Coalition Building:

A coalition can be convened at a meeting, workshop, or conference. The lead agency should plan the first meeting using a time-specific prepared agenda, a comfortable and well-located meeting area, and adequate refreshments. It is appropriate to prepare a draft mission statement and proposal for coalition structure and membership. Anticipate that not all invited members will become coalition members.

Problem Analysis/Needs Assessment:

What is the problem?

What are the key components of this problem and what might be causing it?

Who is affected, how many, and where?

Step 1: Recognize and express concern about the problem.

Step 2: Become involved and identify all players.

Step 3: Clarify the issue. Learn the extent of the problem and consider all sides. Remain open to new ideas by setting aside personal biases.

Step 4: Consider alternative solutions. Examine all alternatives and encourage coalition members to identify existing solutions and brainstorm new ones.

Step 5: Consider consequences for each alternative. Explore the positive and negative consequences for people on all sides of the issue. Doing nothing is an alternative.

Step 6: Inform others of the choice. Learn how public decisions are made, who makes them, and how citizens can participate in the process.

Step 7: Activate the choice. Provide input to policy makers, or carry out the plan.

Step 8: Evaluate the choice. Evaluation occurs informally throughout the process. Formal evaluation at the end of the project may lead the coalition into new concerns and problems.

Goal Setting:

Defining the goals of your coalition will ultimately guide your direction and how you get there. Below are some tips to creating goals that will foster a successful coalition.

- Believable – adopt a realistic approach that sets outcome-oriented goals, while avoiding “pie-in-the-sky” ideals that not everyone may believe are feasible
- Attainable – set goals that are achievable within a designated timeframe
- Tangible – these goals should be understandable, evident, and well-defined
- Planned – create specific goals with clear timeframes and completion dates
- Collective – goals should allow all members to be involved and successful

Fundraising:

Once a coalition has successfully set its goals, it needs to take the next steps of fundraising. Government and foundation grants are a major form of funding for nonprofits. It is also important to have a strategy in place for how you will handle funding. Successful fundraising requires good planning, organizing, managing, marketing, and above all, enthusiasm. Six tips to raising money are presented below.

1. Set fundraising goals
2. Inventory current resources – list of names, organizations, businesses, etc.
3. Develop fundraising campaign in four core parts
 - a. Vision of the coalition
 - b. Cultivation of persons you intend to solicit for funds
 - c. Solicitation for funds
 - d. Recognition of donors
4. Assess financial and personnel needs to reach fundraising goals
5. Implement fundraising activities
6. Evaluate results

Public Relations:

Image matters. An important component of any successful coalition is public relations. Be sure to have a clear and understandable message and targeted audience. Here are nine steps to building and maintaining a positive public image.

1. Unveil the program – not once but literally hundreds of times
2. Promote the ad campaign behind the program
3. Report on community acceptance
4. Report on community reactions
5. Report on trends
6. Emphasize advantages to the community
7. Tell the story of people who developed it
8. Tell the story of the program's success
9. Share success stories of other programs in wider coalition

Sustaining Success:

Building a coalition can be challenging, but sustaining one is even more difficult but not impossible. Characteristics of a successful coalitions include strong leadership, open channels of communication, and ways to resolve disagreements. Below are some tips for sustaining a successful coalition.

Evaluation

Evaluations are a useful tool for identifying places of weakness and strength and provide a guide for fostering and sustaining success.

- Collect and organize data on the outcomes that your program provides.
- Survey your clients to see if they are satisfied with the services your program provided.
- Track the effects of your efforts over time and look for ways to improve.

Ongoing Communication

As your coalition evolves through the developmental stages and difficulties arise, the need to explain the collaboration and clarify work and benefits is ongoing and demands adequate attention. Milestone updates in publications and newsletters to members and others maintains visibility and connections to the coalition and can foster motivation, which can be important when involvement or assistance is needed. Ensuring that all members feel they are part of a community that is connected, supported, and never alone is important to sustain your coalition's success.

These six themes are critical components of successful coalitions and help to create a sense of community among members within your coalition.

1. Recognition: People want to be recognized for their contributions.
2. Respect: By joining in community activities, people seek the respect of their peers.

3. **Role:** In a coalition, members need to feel that their contributions are appreciated.
4. **Relationship:** People join coalitions to form relationships. They join either for private reasons, public reasons, or to make a personal connection. By being part of a coalition, people expand their personal networks by meeting members of other coalitions with similar interests.
5. **Reward:** Organizations keep members when the rewards of being a member outweigh the time invested in the organization. Different members require different rewards. Leaders of the coalition must identify member interests and motivations.
6. **Results:** Delivering results is essential to attracting people and resources. This relates directly to goal setting and ensuring that all members are committed to the coalition's goals. If your organization sets goals that can be achieved, you are on your way to building and sustaining a successful coalition!

Regular Meetings

Regularly scheduled meetings can serve several purposes while also helping to foster ongoing communication. In general, regular meetings provide coalition members with opportunities to socialize and bond while they reflect on noteworthy achievements and challenges, update each other on current coalition activities and projects, propose new ideas and initiatives for coalition consideration, and decide on the coalition's next steps. Coalition members should agree on a meeting schedule that works best for the group as a whole. Some coalitions may decide that meeting once a month is adequate given the size of the membership, the coalition's current activities and the predictable challenges related to arranging meetings. However, your coalition may want to schedule additional meetings if preparing for particular events or planning large projects. Since the involvement of its membership is essential to a coalition's ongoing success, members should be committed to regularly attending the meetings and this expectation should be communicated to new members before they join. To encourage regular attendance, coalition members should be allowed to participate fully in the meetings. Members are more likely to appreciate the importance of attending regularly if they know that their contributions will be welcomed and valued.

Tips to organizing effective meetings:

- Draft an agenda with clear bulleted items to be discussed
- Have someone with facilitation skills direct the meeting
- Begin and end the meeting at the scheduled times
- Identifying members who will take responsibility for following-up
- Prepare an official summary of the meeting

Expect challenges and be patient

Successful coalitions are not always linear and cannot be mandated from the top. It is usually not enough to declare an arrangement to be a coalition and expect that the work will proceed in a very straightforward manner. Organizational culture, reward systems, curricular structures, policy and decision-making involvement, funding, and time are just some of the issues that can challenge coalition efforts. Expect that there will be a lot of starts and stops as members establish a common understanding of the coalition, articulate their motivations and goals for involvement, and develop shared language and processes. Above all, be patient and supportive as members contribute their expertise and experience to the coalition. Success doesn't happen without forming trusting relationships.

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