

HOW TO BUILD SUCCESSFUL COALITIONS

Be as broad as possible. The more groups and variety of groups that support/endorse the coalition, the more “people power” it has, and the more legitimacy it holds in the eyes of elected officials and the public.

Don’t recreate relationships. Build on existing neighborhood-based advocacy efforts or linkages with powerful people in the community to use as rallying points. Tap into the resources of religious leaders or community board representatives to get people involved.

Define structure. Define and engage the role of the coalition and its political focus or goals early in the process. This will help to solidify the coalition around a general infrastructure.

Facilitate, don’t dominate. When **organizing coalitions** remember that your role is to provide support, not to dominate the agenda. There needs to be full and active participation by the other members of the coalition. If the coalition is not a joint effort, with fair leadership, giving all members a voice, it will not be successful.

Be yourself. Develop a role for the coalition of a coach or clearinghouse for the different constituencies—allowing them to retain their individual identities, but also finding a common ground between them. When groups keep their own identities, the coalition will appear to represent a much more diverse population.

Focus on the big picture. It’s important to focus on the larger vision of the campaign, rather than the specific issues of each constituent. For example, when advocating for increased funding for parks, linking the recreation groups in your city with the community garden groups becomes difficult if you talk about dividing resources right away and deciding who gets what. Instead, focus on how both groups are park users and would benefit from increased public funding for parks.

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Go with what works. There is no one correct form or structure of a coalition. Your coalition can be as informal as just a few representatives of various groups united by a single issue for a short time, or an ongoing network of groups working together on multiple issues, or even as formal as having a written agreement and by-laws.

Get technical: create a coalition database. A core database or mailing list is key to having a strong coalition or campaign. A database allows you to keep track of and contact your constituents in a more timely fashion, which is crucial in any campaign. Use the mailing lists of partner and founding organizations and supplement with on-line sign-ins, petition signatures, and responses to campaign flyers. (See “Technology Tips” tip sheets for further information)

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SOME ESSENTIAL COMPONENTS OF COALITION DEVELOPMENT

THE FOUR "C"s [\[1\]](#)

Four key components of coalition-building --**conditions, commitment, contributions and competence** -- must be assessed at each stage of development. First, political, economic and community **conditions** must be right. Second, there must be a core group of people **committed** to achieve the goal. Third, they must be able to **contribute** and/or recruit from others the necessary ideology, power, and resources to reach the goal; and fourth, have the **competence** to manage both the social change strategy and the

coalition's internal development.

CONDITIONS

Conditions must be right in order to successfully form a coalition or collaboration. Some conditions to consider include:

- Ability of the initiating groups to muster broad support
- Community climate and receptivity
- Feasibility of winning
- External political and economic realities
- Past experiences with interorganizational relationships
- Past relationship with social change target
- The timing of coalescence and activities
- The urgency of the social change goal
- Relevance of the issue
- Type and level of resources available to the participating organizations

Once a coalition begins, other conditions become pertinent:

Is the relationship between the coalition and the social change target adversarial, neutral or advisory?

Does the goal generate momentum, support and sustained participation amidst changing conditions?

Do external or internal factors hinder or enhance participation by collaboration members?

Is the coalition leadership competent at managing the collaboration?

COMMITMENT

Coalition progress requires a core group committed to stay with the effort until the goal is achieved. Since coalitions are by nature diverse, not all member organizations have the same incentives for participation. There are usually differences in the type, source, level and intensity of commitment brought to a collaboration by different members. Recognizing and addressing these differences can be vital for coalition development.

TYPE OF COMMITMENT:

Pragmatism/ Self-interest: quest for resources and power

- To obtain something for their organization or constituency
- To obtain something tangible for themselves as an individual
- To enhance agency or professional reputation or credibility
- To gain protection in a shared stance
- To obtain information or contacts

Ideology/ Altruism: value-based commitment to a cause or public interest

- To do innovative or creative work
- To promote a particular political or religious ideology
- To do good work to benefit others

To further civic duty or pride

SOURCE OF COMMITMENT:

Commitment to the cause/goal (collaboration is a means to an end)

Commitment to the process of collaboration (collaboration is an end in itself)

LEVEL OF COMMITMENT:

High / low

Short term / long term

Initiating / sustaining

INTENSITY OF COMMITMENT: (This can change over time) Participant views the collaboration as:
a top priority

one of many activities

of limited interest

useful only for appearances

politically necessary, but uncomfortable

TO MAXIMIZE COMMITMENT TO THE COALITION:

- Structure opportunities for multiple levels of commitment.
- Clarify what kind and level of commitment is desirable and how it should be demonstrated.
- Encourage collaborators to articulate the basis and extent of their commitment.
- Provide a variety of incentives to sustain participation, addressing the actual motivation of the members.
- Plan for fluctuations in commitment over time.
- Address the need for protection of members.

CONTRIBUTIONS

What does the coalition need to succeed? The joy of collaborating is that different parties bring different kinds of contributions to the joint effort. Good planning will ensure that the collaboration contains a winning "mix" of contributions. Contributions may be categorized as **resources, ideology, or power.**

RESOURCES

- access to key individuals / social change target
- access to large constituency
- contacts with additional coalition members or allies
- legitimacy, reputation
- expertise in coalition work
- expertise on the issue
- financial support or fundraising capability
- managerial skills

- media contacts and expertise
- political influence with the social change target
- space, equipment
- competent staff, volunteers

IDEOLOGY

- a broad framework or vision for the collaboration
- a tone for the process of interaction and decision-making
- beliefs that fuel lasting commitment
- strong values
- credibility, moral suasion

POWER

- money
- large organization
- important constituency
- control of punishment, rewards, symbols, information
- authority
- influence

Over time, the need for different types and levels of contributions changes. Once incorporated, these new constellations may alter coalition structure and dynamics. **If contributions are insufficient, the coalition will have to:**

- compromise its position, settle for less, or limit or change its goal.
- rearrange, replace, or recruit membership and/or increase or recruit new contributions.

BALANCING DIFFERENTIAL CONTRIBUTIONS: It is unrealistic to assume that contributions will be made to the coalition without expectations about both the cost and rewards to the contributors. Decisions about the distribution of pay-offs or rewards for coalition involvement must be made.

To avoid conflict over differential contributions and rewards from members:

- Assess the amount and kinds of contributions needed at each stage of development.
- Clarify expectations about minimum contributions and ratio of contributions to rewards.
- Find ways to make different types of contributions equivalent.
- Balance contributions with rewards so that participants can each feel appreciated and share ownership of the project.

COMPETENCE

Coalitions require different types of leaders and different kinds of leadership skills. Leadership can be paid by the coalition, donated by member organizations or provided by a sponsoring agency. Leaders must approach collaborations in a non-hierarchical manner, and possess good "process" and strategic skills.

LEADERSHIP ROLES TO INCLUDE IN A COLLABORATION:

Facilitators/chairpersons - to guide meetings, clarify agendas, suggest approaches, coordinate the work to be done and keep the group moving ahead. Often it is the chairperson who serves as main point of contact for the collaboration.

Communicators -- to maintain open, multidirectional lines of communication between the coalition itself, its members and their organizations, by calling, meeting, and sending written materials, or otherwise engaging in a communication exchange.

Process (feelings) watchers -- to pay attention to the emotional climate, to maintain equality of participation among members, and to suggest changes to keep the group functioning harmoniously.

Note Takers -- to record process and outcome of coalition deliberations. Since there are diverse interpretations of reality, and many parties to share in communications; this increases the importance of good minutes and records.

Representatives from each level of the collaboration -- to integrate the work being done at each level, and to represent the ideas and issues of each dimension to the others -- e.g. to represent committee work at the steering committee or Board level.

Spokesperson -- to deal with and present the coalition's position / image to the public, the social change target, the media and outside groups.

Visionary -- to inspire diverse groups to unite around a common issue.

Strategist -- to help establish goals, targets, tactics, drawing upon good political and negotiating skills.

EFFECTIVE COALITION LEADERS KNOW HOW TO:

- cultivate internal harmony among collaborators, as well as progress toward external goals.
- help diverse participants achieve consensus on goals, strategies, actions, and other coalition business.
- find ways to interest and sustain the participation of diverse collaboration partners.
- design effective strategies that allow differential participation among members.
- tactfully air and mediate conflicts.
- possess good negotiating skills.
- maintain and enforce a vision of the whole collaboration, while paying attention to each part
- create a sense of ownership and empowerment among coalition members.

Varied COMPETENCIES are required for different collaboration leadership functions.

SKILLS NEEDED TO GET THE JOB DONE (TASK SKILLS):

relating to and addressing the media
advocacy and lobbying
communication
delegating responsibilities
fundraising
leading productive meetings

management
negotiation
political and strategic acumen
planning and forecasting
public speaking
research and needs assessment
sense of timing and strategic ability
writing

**SKILLS NEEDED TO WORK EFFECTIVELY WITH OTHERS IN THE COLLABORATION
(PROCESS SKILLS):**

balance different priorities.
elicit everybody's input and craft a common plan of action
manage conflict
perseverance and patience
sensitivity to racial, ethnic, class and gender differences
strong interpersonal abilities

vision and articulation of a larger whole in which each
participant can contribute what they do or know best