

# **COALITION BUILDING**

## **Adapted from The Nature Conservancy**

### **What Is a Coalition?**

In simplest terms, a coalition is a group of individuals and/or organizations with a common interest who agree to work together toward a common goal. The goal can be broad or narrow, and the individuals and organizations involved may be drawn from a narrow area of interest, or from broad segments of the community.

Coalitions may be loose associations in which members work for a short period of time to achieve a specific goal and then disband. They may be more formal and become permanent organizations in themselves. Some coalitions will choose to have a high public profile, while others will choose to work “behind the scenes.” Regardless of their size and structure, they exist to create and/or support efforts to reach a particular set of goals.

### **Why Start a Coalition?**

There are a number of reasons why developing a coalition might be a good idea. In general terms, it can concentrate the community's focus on a particular problem, create alliances among those who might not normally work together, keep a community's approach to issues consistent, and keep your message consistent. Consistency is important, especially if there are already a number of organizations or individuals working on an issue. If their approaches all differ significantly, and they are not cooperating or collaborating, it can lead to a chaotic situation where very little is accomplished. If, on the other hand, they can work together and agree on a common way to deal with the issue and on common goals, they will be much more likely to make headway.

Coalitions also provide your initiative with a distinct identity -- which can serve many purposes. The name you chose for the coalition has the potential to reframe the issue on your own terms and influence the language of the debate. Remaking the issue's image creates an opportunity to recruit even more interest groups who otherwise would not have become involved.

Other specific reasons for forming a coalition might include:

- To address an urgent situation.
- To empower a community to take control of its future.
- To raise funds or provide services.
- To eliminate unnecessary duplication of effort.
- To pool resources.
- To increase communication among groups.
- To revitalize the sagging energies of groups who are trying to do too much alone.
- To plan and launch short-term and long-term initiatives on a variety of issues.
- To develop and use political clout.

## Barriers to Starting a Coalition

There are often barriers to starting a coalition, and it is important to be aware of and anticipate them if you plan to be successful. Among the most common:

- **Turf issues.** Organizations are often very sensitive about sharing their work, their target populations, and especially their funding. Part of the work of starting a coalition may be to convince a number of organizations that working together will benefit all of them at the same time and better address their common issues as well.
- **Bad history.** Organizations, individuals, or the community as a whole may have had experiences in the past that have convinced them that working with certain others -- or working together at all -- is simply not possible. A new coalition may have to contend with this history before it can actually start the work it needs to do.
- **Domination by "professionals" or some other elite.** All too often, people with advanced degrees, local politicians, business leaders, members of government agencies and others, in their rush to solve problems often neglect to involve the people most affected by the issue at hand. Creating a participatory atmosphere and reining in those who believe they have all the answers is almost always part of starting a coalition.
- **Poor links to the community.** A first step may have to be the development of what had been nonexistent relationships among your organizations and the community at large.
- **Minimal organizational capacity.** It might be necessary to find a coordinator, or for one or more individuals or organizations to find a way to share the burden of organization for the new group if it is to develop beyond a first meeting.
- **Funding and Resources.** The difficulty of finding funding is an obvious obstacle. Because many coalitions are voluntary, there is often little power to compel members to commit resources. New coalitions need to be alert to all funding possibilities.
- **Failure to provide and create leadership within the coalition.** Coalitions demand collaborative leadership. If that leadership is not available and cannot be developed from within the coalition, its existence is probably at risk. It may be necessary to bring in an outside facilitator and/or training in collaborative leadership to salvage the situation.
- **The perceived -- or actual -- costs of working together outweigh the benefits for many coalition members.** The task here may be to find ways to increase benefits and decrease costs for the individuals and organizations for whom this is the case if the coalition is to survive.

If you understand the potential barriers to forming a coalition, you can plan for them and increase your chances of success.

## When Should You Start a Coalition?

A coalition needs to have a purpose if it is to be successful. As discussed above, the purpose may be broad or narrow, but it is unlikely that a diverse group will come together unless there is a reason to do so. At particular times, circumstances help to move the formation of coalitions. The possibility of forming a coalition may depend on these factors:

- **Is the issue or problem clear enough that everyone can agree on what it is?** If there's no agreement that it is an issue, it is unlikely that you will be able to form a coalition around it. The problem must be clearly defined, even if the solution is not.
- **Is there at least some level of trust among the individuals and organizations who would make up the coalition?** Community history, or the history of particular organizations, may present what seem to be insurmountable barriers to the formation of a coalition. Community divisions along racial, ethnic, class, religious, or political lines; old feuds; turf battles among organizations or agencies. Past failed coalition efforts may mean that a great deal of groundwork has to be done before the community is willing to consider the possibility of a coalition. It may take a long time to build up trust to that point.
- **Is a coalition the best response to the issue?** Assuming that neither issue definition nor mistrust is a problem, there is still the possibility that most people will not see a coalition as the most effective way to handle the situation (and that they may be right). These questions need to be answered before you try to start a coalition:
  - Can the issue be better addressed if all concerned parties are working together, and will a coalition help to accomplish that purpose?
  - Will a coalition increase the likelihood that all the factors related to the issue are identified and attended to?
  - Will a coalition increase the coherence, strength, and effectiveness of the community's response to the issue?
  - If the community already has a number of coalitions, is yet another the best response to this issue?

## Who Should Be Part of a Coalition?

In general, the broader the membership of any coalition, the better, but there are certain people and groups whose representation on a coalition is absolutely essential.

- **Stakeholders.** These are the people most affected by the issue who have a stake in the success of the coalition's efforts.
- **Community opinion leaders.** It is extremely useful to save seats at the table for those who can influence large numbers of others. Clergy, business or civic leaders, or people who are simply highly credible in the community may fall into this group.
- **Policy makers.** The participation of local political leaders, state representatives, and others in policy-making positions will both add credibility to your enterprise and increase the chances that you can actually influence policy in your area of interest.

## How Do You Get a Coalition Started?

**1. Put together a core group.** You are probably not alone in your concerns about the issue at hand, and you may already have a core group -- a few individuals or organizations -- ready to work at forming a coalition. If not, your first step is to find and make contact with those few individuals and organizations most involved with the issue.

Some reasons why a core group, rather than an individual, should lead the effort:

- A core group will have more contacts and more knowledge of the community than a single individual.
- It will give the idea of a coalition more standing among potential members.
- It will make finding and reaching potential members a much faster process.
- A core group will make the task easier on all the individuals involved, and therefore more likely to get done.
- It shows that the effort has wide support.

There are a few ways to approach assembling a core group:

- Start with people you know. Your contacts are usually the ones most easily persuaded.
- Contact people in organizations, associations, agencies, and institutions most affected by the issue.
- Talk to influential people, or people with lots of contacts.

**2. Identify the most important potential coalition members.** Especially if your coalition has a narrow and time-limited purpose, there are probably people or organizations you cannot do without. It is important to identify them and to target them specifically for membership. This may mean courting them -- an initial meeting over lunch where you pick up the tab, for instance, or a promise of a place on the steering committee.

Most of these individuals and organizations are referred to in "Who should be part of a coalition?" above, but each community is different. In yours, there may be a specific person among the target population, or a particular town official, without whom nothing can get done. The chances are that you or other members of the core group know this person and have some connection to them.

Another way to identify potential coalition members and spokespeople is through polling. A poll can help you identify who has high name recognition and who has credibility on the issue.

**3. Recruit members to the coalition.** Now that your core group is in place, and you have decided on the potential members who are necessary to the success of the coalition, you can start recruiting members. Although it is important to start with the individuals and groups mentioned above, you will probably want to be as inclusive as possible.

Use the networking capacity of your core group to the fullest. The core group can brainstorm a list of possible members, in addition to those deemed essential. Then each member can identify individuals on the list whom they know personally, or organizations where they have a personal contact. If there are names left on the list without a contact, they can be divided among the members of the core group.

The best coalitions are the ones that are made up of unlikely allies. If the members of your coalition are vastly different but can agree on something, that gets attention -- from the public, the media, and from policy makers. It suggests that if people who disagree on so many things can agree on this issue, then maybe this position has some merit. A diverse coalition can also help build issue bridges between traditional adversaries and help neutralize opposition to your campaign later on. Keep in mind that not all groups have to belong as formal members. It is common to have different categories or levels of membership to accommodate more reluctant partners.

There are a number of ways to contact people and organizations for the purpose of recruitment, such as:

- Face-to-face meetings
- Phone calls
- E-mail
- Personal letters
- Mass mailings
- Public Service Announcements or ads in the media
- Flyers and posters

Although direct personal contact is the best, it can take up a large amount of time. Therefore, you should prioritize the "must-haves."

Be sure to ask those you talk to for suggestions about other potential members, and try to have them make the contact. That will spread out the work, and also give the invitation more credibility, since it comes from someone the contacted person knows. If you are successful, you could end up contacting and recruiting several times the number of people and organizations on your original list.

**4. Plan and hold a first meeting.** The first meeting of a coalition is important. If it is a high-energy, optimistic gathering that gets people excited, you're off to a good start. If it's depressed and negative or just boring, it's a good bet that a lot of people will not come back. It is up to the core group to plan a meeting that will start the coalition off on the right foot.

Two of the main factors to keep in mind for this meeting are the logistics (where, when, how long, etc.) and the content of it. The agenda should depend on your particular issue and purposes, but you will probably want to include some of the following:

- Introductions all around.
- Start defining the issue or problem around which the coalition has come together.
- Discuss what the structure and leadership of the coalition will be.
- At least start the process of creating a common vision and agreeing on shared values about the direction of the coalition.
- Discuss a procedure for forming an action plan.
- Review the things to be done before the next meeting, and who has agreed to do them.
- Schedule at least the next meeting.

**5. Follow up on the first meeting.** Some tips to make sure your next meeting will be well attended and productive:

- Distribute the minutes of the first meeting and reminders about the next meeting to those who attended, and send them out with invitations to potential new members as well.
- Follow up on the groups or individuals who are working on tasks assigned at the first meeting.
- If there are committees or task forces forming, try to recruit new members for them.
- Keep looking for new coalition members.

**6. Next steps.** There are a number of specific things -- some of which you have already started in that first meeting -- that need to be done to make sure that the coalition keeps moving forward:

- Gather information about the issue.
- Finish creating vision and mission statements.
- Complete an action plan (what needs to be done).
- Finish the work of designing a structure for the coalition (ranging from no governance at all to a very formal hierarchy).
- Elect officers, or a coordinating or steering committee.
- Consider the need for professional staff.
- Determine what other resources -- financial, material, informational, etc. -- you need, develop a plan for getting them, and decide who's going to be responsible for carrying it out.

**7. Keeping the Coalition Going.** Some general tips for the “care and feeding” of a coalition to keep it going strong:

- Make sure that lines of communication within the coalition and with the public are open.
- Be as inclusive and participatory as you can.
- Continue to network with as many groups and individuals as possible.
- Be realistic and try to set concrete, reachable goals.
- Try to make meetings creative and interesting.
- Acknowledge diversity among your members, and among their ideas and beliefs.
- Praise and reward outstanding contributions and celebrate your successes.

## **Pitfalls to Watch Out For**

Coalitions need to exist only as long as it is useful to its members. But, when it disintegrates before achieving its goal, it usually has fallen victim to one of these defects:

- **Failure to keep members informed about the policies and actions of the organization.** Lack of information is a prime reason for believing the coalition has been ineffective and therefore for dropping out. To keep the information flowing, it is necessary to send regular e-mails, publish newsletters, set up telephone networks or hold frequent discussion meetings even when no decisions have to be made.
- **Lack of interim rewards for members.** The failure of a coalition to show some concrete results short of ultimate victory often discourages its members. To provide interim reinforcement, it may be necessary to sponsor social events (day trips, cocktail parties

and picnics for example). Important public figures, such as local office holders, may be asked to attend these activities to show support for the coalition's goals. Such gatherings are essentially surrogates for more tangible rewards, but may work well as stopgap measures.

- **Loss of key leaders.** An organization may develop a serious vulnerability if one dominant leader prevents others from sharing power. In a well-structured alliance, the leadership role is diffused so the loss of any one person would not be fatal.
- **Serious differences over the coalition's direction.** Such splits may suggest the coalition was weak to begin with, perhaps because it lacked requirements for cohesion, such as ideological ties. Splits tend to occur during moments of crisis when two seemingly attractive policy alternatives present themselves, or a frustrating defeat is suffered.
- **Change in conditions.** When circumstances arise that were not present when the coalition was formed, it may be unable to adapt. It perishes because its members recalculate the costs and benefits in light of the new circumstances, and the results encourage defection.
- **Delay.** Unless a coalition is intended to be permanent, the members expect it to achieve its main objective within a reasonable time.

Flexibility and compromise are essential for a successful collaboration. Do not be discouraged by the inevitable bumps in the road. Disappointments and challenges can make a coalition stronger. And remember: all the difficulties you may encounter along the way will be outweighed by the rewards you get from the power and energy of a great coalition, and the feeling of achievement you'll get when your coalition finally reaches its ultimate goal.

## Online Resources

[http://ctb.ku.edu/tools/en/sub\\_section\\_main\\_1057.htm](http://ctb.ku.edu/tools/en/sub_section_main_1057.htm)

"The Community Tool Box" is a web site designed for non-profits to encourage community health and development. It includes many tips on coalition building.

<http://www.ncbi.org>

Home page of the National Coalition Building Institute.

"A Guide to Coalition Building," by Janice Forsythe. A paper on forming advocacy coalitions written for health community.

[https://www.orau.gov/cdcynergy/web/ba/Content/activeinformation/resources/Coalition\\_Building\\_Primer.pdf](https://www.orau.gov/cdcynergy/web/ba/Content/activeinformation/resources/Coalition_Building_Primer.pdf)