

SECTION NINE

BUILDING SUCCESSFUL COALITIONS

Coalitions provide a structure for organizations to more effectively harness and focus their collective resources. This structure is usually created for a defined period and for the specific purpose of collectively planning and implementing an issue-based program or strategy. Coalitions can avoid duplication and contradiction between member groups while promoting complementary and synergistic actions that will create the greatest impact.

A coalition is but one approach to legislative influence. It is important to ascertain the appropriateness of a coalition for the task at hand before investing time, effort, and other resources. Consider the following questions.

- Is a coalition necessary or appropriate to achieve the required funding?
- Is another effective and efficient organization already in place?
- Do others see the issue as a priority?
- Are other organizations willing to relinquish control of the issue to a coalition, or do they simply want advice?

Creating a Coalition

If the concept of a coalition appears appropriate, consider the following issues to determine if it will serve the desired purpose.

- Establish a framework for developing consensus and guidelines for coordinating and managing resources
- Turn neutral groups into allies
- Stimulate interaction, cross-agency collaboration and trust, thus reducing turf battles
- Provide a powerful and diverse constituency
- Support funding, if needed
- Serve as a means to access critical officials and decision makers
- Achieve goals that may be otherwise unaffordable to smaller groups
- Effectively lobby, petition, publicize, and organize
- Establish priorities, combine perspectives, and provide leadership
- Provide volunteer support
- Develop and distribute information and educational materials

Once the decision to form a coalition has been made (by an individual, small group, or large organization), the task of forming the coalition begins. There is considerable variation in the process; however, the following steps are common.

- Analyze needs, problems, and resources. The results of the analysis will provide the framework for a purpose statement and assist in formulating the scope and direction of an action plan.
- Identify principles and goals.
- The leadership of the coalition should propose goals and objectives to the membership for consideration. These goals should be flexible initially so that the membership can help establish discrete goals and objectives that are relatively uncontroversial and widely supported. It is usually best to first achieve a wide consensus to reduce the likelihood of future disagreements.

Try to design early goals and objectives with a high probability of success. Early success helps increase credibility, motivation, funding, and volunteerism. There should also be a mechanism for adding or changing goals and objectives over time.

- Address coalition longevity. The chapter membership often desires a specific life expectancy for a coalition. Consider goal completion in terms of one year, six meetings, the end of next year's legislative session, or the accomplishment of a specific objective or objectives.
- When it is appropriate to name the coalition, it is advisable to name it after an issue rather than an organization in order to attract the largest number of supporters (for example, "The Coalition for Health Care Reform").

Leadership is the vitality of the coalition. It is essential to identify the small group of representatives that has the vision, knowledge, and communication and problem-solving skills to create and sustain the support of others. If your chapter is initiating the development of a coalition, a chapter member should be the coalition chairperson or, at the very least, on the steering committee. When joining an existing coalition, inquire about opportunities to represent your chapter in the leadership of the group.

This leadership may be an individual, group, or existing organization, and will serve the following purposes.

- Perform the initial steps in forming the coalition
- Be responsible for all communications
- Provide information and management expertise
- Facilitate consensus building
- Provide physical and personnel resources
- Assume fiscal and fiduciary responsibilities, if any
- Supervise fundraising activities, if any

Membership

The heart of the coalition is its membership. In the world of public policy advocacy, "strange bedfellows often make powerful alliances." It is said, "coalitions thrive with uncommon members who work uncommonly hard."

Coalitions should encourage membership representing diverse, multifaceted skills, temperaments, and levels of involvement. Because coalitions require a range of talent, it is best to invite all who express a desire to be involved and then make them feel welcome and assist in defining their roles. When the issues or goals are shared, political philosophy and affiliation should not be a consideration. It is important that the public and media view the coalition as a group representing a broad social movement, not a narrow sectarian cause. . A list of organizations that are

potential coalition members is available from the State Legislative Office.

Some coalition members can offer financial support, staff, and professional expertise; others will bring media access, political influence, and geographic representation. It is important to have widespread support and representation, but it is equally crucial to ensure that the coalition has a measurable depth of commitment to the issue. When the opposition increases its efforts to defeat your proposal, the time and talent of the coalition members are most needed.

Individuals and organizations that comprise the membership of a coalition must remain committed to the original plan rather than change positions midstream and accept compromises that have not been discussed by the entire group. Any degree of mistrust or unreliability can weaken or even destroy a coalition.

The Coalition Message

The organizers of a coalition should be concerned with its image from the beginning. Materials should provide a clear and concise description of the coalition and its members, goals and objectives, accomplishments, membership information, and facts on the coalition's issue. Once these materials are available, they can be used to develop the coalition's membership meetings and requests for participation.

Finances

Financial resources for coalition activities may be available from various sources.

- Membership fees may offer start-up capital (though rarely enough to cover ongoing operations) and serve to selectively identify committed individuals and organizations.
- Corporate contributions may be available from businesses with a stake in the issues of the coalition.
- Grants may be available to non-profit organizations but require

investigation, submission of applications, and hard work.

Managing the Process

As the coalition moves toward achieving its goals, it is important to maintain a sense of vitality among the membership. This is a particular challenge in volunteer organizations. Some symptoms of decreasing vitality are decline in membership, decreasing enthusiasm, production of less than excellent projects and programs, low attendance at meetings, and lack of follow-through. Some contributors to decreasing vitality are:

- Meetings that fail to produce results (meetings that consist primarily of reports and announcements)
- Frustration with bureaucracy
- Power struggles and attention seeking
- Poorly defined decision-making
- Resentment of assignments
- Goal displacement
- Media cycles (high versus low visibility)

Coalition leadership must be attentive to these signs and effectively manage problems. Specifically, they should use some of the following techniques to maintain and renew vitality.

- Clarify the decision-making process
- Specify achievable goals
- Maintain close contact with the membership
- Define and fairly apportion tasks
- Conform to the logistical needs of members
- Secure approval for projects and plans
- Establish short-term goals to fuel enthusiasm
- Facilitate conflict resolution and negotiation
- Measure actual results against planned goals
- Keep leadership and membership informed

- Address concerns early and suggest solutions
- Produce tangible products
- Conduct educational workshops
- Recognize accomplishments publicly (and respect anonymity when requested)
- Avoid “using” members as token representatives
- Maintain high levels of communication among the membership
- Provide “time out” (avoid full speed all the time)
- Have fun and celebrate

Coalitions can be powerful tools for promoting issues, focusing attention, and synergizing effort. The key to success is the commitment of the membership, which is a reflection of effective leadership. This type of advocacy process is particularly fulfilling when members enjoy and take pride in their participation and contributions. Individuals and organizations can efficiently and effectively influence change, and collective resources can be focused on common goals with appropriate organization and structure.