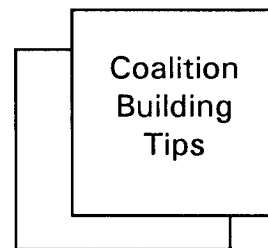


Coalition Leadership

by Tom Wolff, Community Partners



□ Coalition Leadership

Coalition leadership requires attention to basic organizational functions - communication, clarity of roles, decision-making, etc. - just as in other organizations. However, in some ways, coalitions are unusual forms of organization and raise special leadership issues.

□ Types of Leadership Structures

How leadership in coalitions is defined and how it functions in coalitions vary enormously. Some coalitions have paid staff which may be part-time or full-time; and either from the local community or not. In large, well-funded coalitions, we often find organizations with a full-time director which look a great deal like a traditional human service agency. In other coalitions, leadership is a totally voluntary capacity and emerges solely from the membership. Finally, in a third form, we see some combination of paid and volunteer leadership.

□ Coalition Leadership Models Vary with Coalition Goals

Depending upon the goals of the coalition, a variety of these styles may prove to be effective. One coalition might be run by a specific charismatic leader, while another coalition's leadership might be shared among several different individuals. In this insert, we describe leadership issues as applicable to coalitions which have as their goals bringing together various components of the community to become more effective problem solvers and to maximize the use of resources in the community. Those goals require a commitment to community development, and thus a shared leadership model tends to be the one that seems most effective in achieving these goals. For coalitions that have a commitment to community development, not only is the involvement of existing leaders critical, but developing new leadership is also adopted as a goal.

□ Skills and Style

Critical skills and styles for coalition leaders include:

- **An inclusive, welcoming stance:** Coalition leaders should set the tone for welcoming new members and for bringing them into the coalition. Orienting new members and urging them into active roles are part of the welcoming.
- **Excellent communicators:** Both in verbal and written materials, coalition leaders need to take complex materials and make them understandable to all audiences.
- **Group facilitation skills:** Coalition leaders need to be able to guide both large and small meetings, with numerous participants and various agendas. Meetings would allow everyone to have their say, and yet be able to follow agendas, move through problem-solving processes and ultimately make decisions.
- **Conflict resolution:** It is helpful for coalition leaders to appreciate the benefits of conflict, since conflict is a regular part of what happens in coalitions. Seeing conflict as an opportunity to be grappled with, rather than a horror to be avoided, is crucial to coalition leadership. Identifying the various self-interests, seeing the common ground, and helping to seek compromises are part of this activity.
- **Sharing the spotlight:** Coalition leaders must leave their egos at the door and be able to share the glory and the spotlight with other coalition members and other entities in the community. This can be a complicated tightrope - being too modest can lead to the coalition remaining invisible, being too forward may bring resentment.
- **Trust:** Coalition leaders must be able to engender trust in those with whom they work. They must be reliable, prompt, honest and true to their word.

Finally, coalition leaders must bring energy and hope to coalitions in both their styles and their skills. One can easily see how hard it would be to find one individual with all the above traits - thus the advantages of a shared leadership model which calls upon many individual's skills become more obvious. Also clear are the risks of relying on a single leader to be the initiator of all coalition activity.

❑ Specific Issues and Challenges of Coalition Leadership

Delegation

The role of coalitions as catalysts instead of doers is paralleled in the role of the coalition leaders. The leaders must also be catalysts for action instead of doers of the action. An excellent program manager and program developer who knows how to get things done can actually be less successful as a coalition leader, since s/he may not foster delegation and develop new leadership. Coalition leaders must support the active engagement of all members, and seek support for themselves from others in the coalition.

Juggling Responsibilities, Roles and Time

Coalitions, when they start to become effective, open more and more doors with each success. Balancing these various opportunities and obligations is critical. Numerous coalition leaders suffer from making too many commitments and spreading themselves, and the coalition, too thin.

Jealousy and Criticism

Coalition leaders often are the target of both criticism and jealousy. Being central and visible figures, these negative reactions can occur quite separate from any inappropriate action being taken by the leader. Understanding that this is a natural part of group process is a necessary stance for the leader. Constructively dealing with both criticism and jealousy by listening and responding non-defensively is necessary for the feelings to diminish.

Action Orientation

Many coalitions get bogged down in lengthy planning processes or in cautiously avoiding controversial issues. Coalition leaders must be able to move the coalition towards action and accomplishments, so that coalition members can keep a balance between the time that they put in and the benefits they reap from the coalition's accomplishments. This drive for products must be carefully linked with a thoughtful coalition process.

Paid Staff

Having paid coalition staff (versus only volunteer leadership) raises important issues:

- 1) When coalitions have paid staff, a key issue is the differentiation of tasks to be performed by staff vs. coalition members. As unpleasant tasks arise, do all eyes focus on the paid staff and does the staff person take on the task or try to delegate it? And if s/he tries to delegate the task, do coalition members help or do they leave it for the staff person? The ways these scenarios play out can decide the tone of the coalition.
- 2) Supervision and support for paid staff is a second key issue. The high-stress job of being a coalition staff person requires skilled supervision and support, which is rarely available. The supervision needs to come from one or more individuals with practical knowledge of coalitions, group process, conflict resolution, etc.

Developing Leaders

Coalitions vary in their commitment to developing new leadership with the coalitions and in communities. When leadership development is a stated goal, it creates new leadership issues. Specifically, one needs to decide if new leaders are going to be sought from professional ranks, or from citizens. And then existing coalition leaders play a key role in modeling, mentoring, training and encouraging new leaders.

"Team leadership enhances the possibility that different styles of leadership can be brought to bear simultaneously. If the leader is a visionary with little talent for practical steps, a team member who is a naturally gifted agenda-setter can provide priceless support. No one knows enough to perform all the functions in our most demanding leadership posts today." - John Gardner, The Nature of Leadership, Independent Sector, 1986.

One in a series of tips on building coalitions.

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