Building Coalitions: Introduction

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This is the first in a series of fact sheets on coalitions that was initially compiled by The Ohio Center for Action on Coalition Development. This series will provide the reader with an overview of coalitions, tips for forming and maintaining an effective coalition, and tips for using a coalition as an agent for change in the community.

What is a Coalition?

A coalition is a formal alliance of individuals or organizations that come together to work for a common goal. It is one type of collaboration. Collaborations are defined as mutually beneficial and well-defined relationships that exist for the purpose of achieving a common goal. Other types of collaborations include the following:

- **Committees**: Formal groups that hold delegated power to perform specific functions for larger collective groups or organizations.
- **Networks**: Informal, nonhierarchical groups of individuals or organizations with flexible roles and low-key leadership.
- **Partnerships**: Associations of individuals or organizations who share resources, profits and losses to carry out joint business.

Collaboration is more formal, more durable and more involved than networking, cooperating or coordinating (Butterfoss, 2007). It can be an effective and rewarding way to reach members of the community. There are advantages and disadvantages to collaboration; both should be considered before forming a coalition.

The advantages of collaboration may be immediate or long-term, direct or indirect. Some partners may benefit from their involvement in the collaboration more than others. The assumption behind any collaborative effort, however, is that the collaboration will achieve goals in a more efficient, effective and sustainable way than any one individual or organization could accomplish on its own.

Potential advantages of collaboration include the following:

- More effective and efficient delivery of programs
- Elimination of duplication and reduced competition
- Improved communication and trust building
- Improved public image and increased credibility
- Improved needs assessment
- Consistency of information
- More opportunities for professional development
- Increased availability of resources
- Improved outreach to stakeholders
- Increased support from stakeholders and others in the community

Potential risks faced by collaborators include the following:

- Turf protection and mistrust
- Slow decision making
- Conflicting interests
- A drain on resources
- Implementation challenges
- Communication challenges
- Loss of autonomy and reduced independence
- Changes within member organizations (budget cuts, changes in administration, etc.) that may affect member commitment

These risks can be minimized through careful planning during a coalition’s formation process. Because coalition building involves a long-term investment of time and resources, however, a coalition should not be established if a simpler, less complicated structure is capable of managing the task at hand (Butterfoss and Francisco, 2004).

Elements of a Successful Coalition

- Common goals
- A clear mission or vision
- Good communication
- Equal opportunities for participation
• Group ownership and delegation of group activities
• Efficient, effective meetings
• Shared or situational leadership
• Sharing of resources and information
• Ongoing evaluation of coalition activities

References

Additional Resources
The Asset-Based Community Development Institute. "Downloadable Resources." Publications on community assessment and community mobilization. abcdinstitute.org/publications/downloadable
Coalitions Work. "Tools and Resources." Resources for a variety of coalition processes and coalition evaluation. coalitionswork.com/resources/tools
University of Kansas. "Community Tool Box." Toolkits on a variety of topics related to partnership building and community change. ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents
Iowa State University, North Central Regional Center for Rural Development. Vision to Action: Take Charge Too. Publication about community assessment, vision development, action planning and evaluation. soc.iastate.edu/extension/ncrcrd/ncrcrd-rrd182-print.pdf