Coalition Structure

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Every coalition has a unique structure that is determined by the goals and resources of the group. Some coalition structures are more formal than others. One coalition may have paid staff, for example, while another is dependent upon volunteer leaders. A coalition’s structure does not need to be complex, but taking the time to develop a structure is important because clearly defined roles, rules and procedures are positively associated with member engagement and community capacity (Garland, 2004).

A coalition’s structure may include an official name, vision and mission statements, action plans, role descriptions, bylaws, committee or workgroup guidelines, agendas, meeting notes, and other written records. Many aspects of structure will be discussed in this fact sheet and in future fact sheets. Additional tools for the development of coalition structure can be found at coalitionswork.com/resources/tools.

Coalition Identity

Coalition structure begins with an identity. Developing coalition identity in the form of a brand is an easy way to engage members early in the coalition formation process (Butterfoss, 2007). A brand is a name, logo and/or design that is used to identify a group and differentiate it from its competitors. A good brand is simple, easily recognizable, easily understandable and easily reproducible in one- or two-color print (Butterfoss, 2007). In addition to engaging members, development of a brand can enhance the image and visibility of a coalition, reinforcing its identity and mission in the community.

Rules and Procedures

Rules and procedures can be beneficial to any coalition, regardless of the size or purpose of the group. Written rules can help to ensure fairness and consistency, promote productivity, reduce conflict and keep a coalition focused on its scope and purpose (Butterfoss, 2007).

If a coalition chooses to formalize its structure through incorporation, rules known as bylaws must be written and filed with the state. Bylaws serve as legal documents that guide the operation of the coalition. Rules and bylaws may outline the following:

- The purpose of the coalition
- Requirements for coalition membership
- Officer titles and responsibilities
- How and when meetings should be conducted

Nonprofit Status and Incorporation

Incorporation, the act of registering as a legal entity, is a prerequisite to obtaining nonprofit status. There are advantages and disadvantages to incorporation, and both must be carefully considered before beginning the process.

Advantages of Incorporation

- Tax-exempt status
- Increased opportunities to apply for grants
- Reduced liability
  » Incorporation protects coalition members from being held personally liable in the event of a lawsuit.
- Increased credibility and visibility

Disadvantages of Incorporation

- Ongoing time, effort and cost required to obtain and maintain tax-exempt status
- Need to adhere to formal operating rules and procedures
- Need to formally disband if group ceases to operate
- Potential need to consult an attorney for specific legal advice

Additionally, incorporation may affect the coalition itself in the following ways:

- Incorporation can reduce member participation, as they may feel that it is the organization’s responsibility to complete activities rather than their own. This is not necessarily the case, however, as a coalition that is incorporated can still ensure clear roles and responsibilities for members (Raynor, 2011).
- Incorporation may make it more difficult for a coalition to make the case that it speaks for a broad group of organizations, given that an incorporated coalition exists as a separate entity (Raynor, 2011). An incorporated coalition must take extra care and effort to demonstrate that it is committed to a common goal.

- Incorporation may create a higher potential for competition between the coalition and member organizations. See the 15th fact sheet in this series titled *Common Difficulties Faced by Coalitions* for more information on this type of conflict.

In their early stages, coalitions often use the nonprofit status of one of their lead organizations. This type of arrangement may be possible for the life of a coalition, or it may lead to competition and conflict (Butterfoss, 2007). It is ultimately up to each coalition to decide whether incorporation is worthwhile.

**References**


**Additional Resources**

The Asset-Based Community Development Institute. "Downloadable Resources." Publications on community assessment and community mobilization. [abcdinstitute.org/publications/downloadable](http://abcdinstitute.org/publications/downloadable)

Coalitions Work. "Tools and Resources." Resources for a variety of coalition processes and coalition evaluation. [coalitionswork.com/resources/tools](http://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](http://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents)

University of Wisconsin-Extension. "Program Development and Evaluation." Logic Model templates and examples. [uwex.edu/ces/pdande/evaluation/evallogicmodel.html](http://uwex.edu/ces/pdande/evaluation/evallogicmodel.html)

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](http://soc.iastate.edu/extension/ncrcrd/ncrcrd-rrd182-print.pdf)