Dealings between coalition members are usually harmonious, given that a coalition is an alliance of individuals brought together by a common interest or goal. Controversy and conflict do occasionally develop, however, especially when groups are large and diverse (Jones, 2005). When left unresolved, conflict can seriously damage a coalition’s efforts to reach a common goal. Recognizing potential difficulties that a coalition may encounter and dealing with them before they escalate can protect the work of the group.

Coalition processes that help prevent unnecessary conflict include the following:

- Effective communication
- Shared understanding of member roles, purposes and meeting processes
- Flexibility and the ability to adapt goals, roles, etc., as needed
- Careful member recruitment
  - Individuals and groups who have only a partial or marginal relationship to the coalition mission may increase the risk for conflict.

**Potential Benefits of Conflict**

While the presence of these processes will help a coalition avoid unnecessary conflict, there are other sources of conflict that a coalition may encounter. Coalition members can expect tension to occasionally occur, so they need to be prepared with strategies to effectively manage conflict. When conflict is appropriately managed, it can actually benefit a coalition by doing the following:

- Identifying problems that would have otherwise remained hidden
- Improving understanding of the issues that led to the conflict
- Generating new ways of thinking about issues and processes
- Improving standards, regulations and policies
- Increasing member engagement
- Engaging interested individuals who had been formerly uninvolved
- Building a coalition’s capacity to deal with differences

Poorly managed conflict, on the other hand, can create frustration, divide groups and alienate members. Recognizing potential sources of conflict and developing strategies for conflict management are critical for the success of the coalition.

Common sources of conflict include disagreements over goals, resources, methods, public identity, personalities and mixed loyalties. Turf battles are another potential source of conflict. A turf battle occurs when one organization perceives another as a threat or competitor instead of an ally. Mistrust and lack of familiarity are common causes of turf battles. One party may not believe that their goals are compatible with the goals of the other party; they may feel like the exchange of resources between organizations is unequal; or one party may not be willing to change its mission, goals or activities to reflect those of the coalition. When a turf battle takes place, the organizations involved defend their resources rather than sharing them in the pursuit of a common goal. Turf battles, like other unnecessary sources of conflict, are best avoided via good communication and a shared understanding of goals, roles and purposes.

**Strategies for Managing Conflict**

When conflict does occur, coalition leaders first need to assess the issue of controversy and decide whether or not it is critical to the work of the coalition. If it is not a critical issue, it is best to use an avoidance strategy and divert attention to the work of the coalition.

If the issue is critical to the work of the coalition, compromising, collaborating, welcoming differences and bargaining are usually the best strategies for managing
conflict. These cooperative strategies build an atmosphere of trust, calmness and reason, as they allow individuals to share their needs and concerns, listen to the needs of others and utilize group problem-solving processes to arrive at acceptable solutions.

A group problem-solving process typically involves the following steps:
1. Define the problem.
   a. What is happening?
   b. Who is affected?
   c. How frequently does the problem occur?
2. Determine what is causing the problem.
4. Assess the consequences of each solution.
   a. Who will be affected?
   b. What are the costs?
   c. What are the benefits?
5. Select the best solution.
6. Develop an action plan.

Additionally, Butterfoss recommends the following tips for effective conflict management:
• Practice active listening.
• Keep emotions in check.
• Separate the people from the problem.
• Focus on the interests of the group instead of the individuals or organizations involved in the disagreement.

When working through conflict and solving problems as a group, it is helpful for a coalition to develop objective criteria that can be used in making decisions. Ideally, group decisions will lead to mutual gain, benefiting the coalition as a whole.

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/nccrd/nccrd-rrd182-print.pdf