Communication in Coalitions

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Both coalition members and coalition leaders need to have good communication skills in order for the group to function effectively. Coalition members use communication to develop understanding and respect for one another, share information, challenge each other to think differently about problems and solutions, and find the best possible solutions to the issues around which the group has formed. Coalition leaders use communication to bring individuals together around a common goal or concern and effectively facilitate meetings. Effective communication can help coalition members to remain satisfied with the group, and increased satisfaction can lead to a greater sense of community and increased community capacity (Kegler and Swan, 2012).

Foundations for Effective Communication

Effective communication can help a coalition avoid many potential difficulties. Poor communication, on the other hand, can result in turf disputes, interpersonal conflict and decreased member engagement. The following communication tips can help a coalition avoid these potential difficulties:

- Clearly define coalition goals and objectives, and ensure that all members understand them. It is helpful to have each member share how their personal goals relate to the coalition goals so as to avoid future misunderstandings and disagreements. Additionally, members should understand what they are expected to contribute toward the achievement of coalition goals.
- Use between-meeting communication as warranted to avoid surprises and make meetings more productive. This is especially important for large groups, as reaching a consensus may take more time than it would take a small group.
- Form subcommittees as needed to clarify and report on specific issues between meetings. Subcommittees may help a coalition by recommending a course of action or working out a compromise.
- Keep members informed about the policies and actions of the organization through newsletters and regular meetings. It is helpful to hold discussion meetings even when no decisions have to be made so that members remain engaged in the work of the coalition. Coalition meetings should involve real work or discussion for the coalition — as opposed to just announcements and updates — to retain member involvement.

Communication, Cohesiveness and Synergy

Effective communication within a coalition can contribute to group cohesiveness and synergy. Synergy is the degree to which a coalition combines the strengths, perspectives, knowledge and skills of its members to best achieve its goals. It exists in the presence of group trust and solid leadership, both of which are enhanced by effective communication (Jones and Barry, 2011).

The following communication tips for coalition members can help a group obtain a higher degree of synergy:

- Share ideas.
- Listen to others and respect their opinions.
- Allow all members to have an equal chance to be heard.
- Clarify what others have said.
- Share the responsibility of seeking information and opinions.
- Support fellow members through praise and agreement.

Communication and Community Capacity

Networking, the exchange of information for mutual benefit, is a form of communication that often occurs between coalition members and members of the community who are not involved in the coalition. Research has shown that networking can benefit a coalition via increased member engagement, commitment
and satisfaction (Butterfoss, 2007). It can also lead to increased community capacity as coalition members find access to resources, tools, partners and opportunities that exist outside of the coalition. According to Valente et al., coalitions need to balance their efforts between creating a dense, cohesive group and making connections to outside resources to achieve maximum effectiveness.

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