

## Coalitions – some Basics

Never forget – a COALITION is not just a list of individuals.  
A COALITION is... **“an organization of organizations.”**

Coalitions come in as many forms as there are issues and groups.

- Coalitions can be *short-term* or *permanent*,
- *single issue* (Low-Income Housing Network, Coalition of Citizens with Disabilities) or *multi-issue* (the Senior Citizens Lobby);
- they can focus on a *specific policy* issue (Alliance for Tobacco Control and Health) or a *broad set of budget matters* (a Children’s Budget Coalition).

Coalitions offer a means to bring communities together, to learn about common problems, and set some common priorities. Because they represent bigger numbers, there are more people to share the work: no one group will have to do everything.

But whatever their form, **coalitions derive their power from their numbers** – their ability to show people in decision-making roles that they are working to build the support required to pass muster with voters and decision-making bodies.

Beyond sheer numbers, coalitions offer many advantages. They:

- ◆ combine resources,
- ◆ offer a forum for thinking about problems,
- ◆ reduce competition for funding and volunteer time,
- ◆ provide an efficient way to work with a broad range of groups and agencies,
- ◆ offer support and expertise to small groups,
- ◆ provide a network for everyone involved.

Want to form a coalition? These simple steps will get you started.

- 1) Talk with those affected; learn their priorities. What PROBLEM would they address?
- 2) Identify a CONVENER, and pull a small (4-6) CORE GROUP together to brain-storm;
- 3) Together, the Core Group will “frame the issue” by turning the *problem* into a good organizing *issue* (not too narrow, not too broad), set the *agenda*, and devise a *timetable*;
- 4) Then, use the Core Group to BUILD THE COALITION.
  - (a) Start with LIKELY ALLIES – groups you feel reasonably certain share common interests and values on your issue. Once you have brain-stormed your way through all the possible likely allies, ask yourselves who has a connection with those groups and can make a personal contact to invite them to join.
  - (b) Next move to UNLIKELY ALLIES/ODD COUPLES. These are groups that might join you on a specific issue, groups you may never have reached out to before.

Unlikely Allies are important for two reasons: they signal to politicians that you are reaching beyond your usual allies to build the “51%” needed to win; and, in the context of closely-divided legislative bodies, all issues need allies from across the political spectrum to win.
- 5) Last, call an *Organizing Meeting*, and set a *Goal* (or two – 1 long-term, another short-term), and get started.

## Why some groups hesitate to join in.

Despite many advantages to working together, there are some drawbacks:

- Logistics are complicated. It can be hard enough to set meetings for 6 people, doing it for representatives of 20 organizations is more complicated.
- Getting agreement is often harder – especially when some of the member groups are large, well-staffed, and well-funded, while other groups are tiny.
- When a Coalition acts, the credit as well as the blame is shared. E.g., your group won't get as much visibility as it does when working alone. And, if one member of the Coalition misspeaks or misbehaves, everyone in the Coalition may be affected.
- There is a fear (unfounded) that everyone in a coalition has to agree with everything every member says or does.
- Decision making must be shared. That can be tricky.

Happily, there are good answers to most of these drawbacks.

- Responsibility for logistics (like setting meetings) can rotate among the groups.
- Key Contact lists can identify people from key groups with authority to speak for their group on short notice.
- You can start small: setting up a time-limited, single-issue campaign, rather than a permanent, multi-issue coalition.
- Endorsements can be arranged so groups can opt in or out. Or, in some cases, members can agree that every group need not work actively *for* an effort or position, but every group must pledge *not to work against* positions taken by the group.

Whether acting along or acting in Coalition, always keep the THREE-LEGGED STOOL in your plans. In framing your issue(s) setting your goals, selecting a strategy, or developing a plan – be sure to think in terms of:

The **CAPITOL LEG** – i.e., the relevant elected officials;  
The **COMMUNITY/GRASS ROOTS LEG**; and  
The **MEDIA**.