

Building the Base: Effective Advocacy Coalitions

What is a coalition? A coalition is an alliance between typically diverse organizations with their own agendas, working together for a common advocacy goal. Coalitions can be formal or informal and are often limited in time and purpose.

Why are coalitions important? For efforts to build support for an issue you are trying to address, coalitions are critical to your work. In essence, coalitions help you to gain a broad range of support and draw attention to the work you are trying to accomplish. Coalitions are able to:

- ♦ Gain strength from numbers. The more people delivering the message, the more likely it is to be heard.
- ♦ Get attention and support from policymakers.
- ♦ Ensure that advocates are allies.
- ♦ Ensure that advocates with competing needs and interests are well informed.
- ♦ Better coordinate effective action from multiple groups trying to do similar work.
- ♦ Help policymakers distinguish the numerous and competing priorities.
- ♦ Gain resources and expertise not readily available for smaller interest groups that are available through partnership of multiple organizations.
- ♦ Give voice and power to individuals and organizations that had been previously disenfranchised or had not shared proportionally in community resources.

Who makes up a coalition? Coalitions are typically composed of representatives from organizations that volunteer their time because the organizations are interested in or somehow impacted by the issue at hand. Often recruited by word of mouth, coalitions typically consist of a core group of organizations with additional members who may change over time.

Questions to ask when you are thinking about building a coalition:

- ♦ What would the issue(s) be?
- ♦ Who are the organizations that would be potentially interested and/or impacted by the issue(s)?
- ♦ How does the issue(s) tie into these organizations' interests?
- ♦ What resources and expertise could come from these organizations?
- ♦ How will the different agendas and cultures of the partnering organizations potentially influence the ability of the coalition to accomplish its goals?
- ♦ What obstacles might you encounter?
- ♦ What will need to be done to bring and keep these different organizations together for the common issue(s)?

Guidelines for successful coalition building:

1. Be strategic. Building coalitions requires a good strategy. Which organizations you ask, who asks them, in which order to ask them are all questions to answer.
2. Recruit a diverse membership for your coalition. The more powerful coalitions represent a broad range of interests that the public and decision makers cannot ignore. "Unlikely alliances" make decision makers and the public take notice – if organizations that typically disagree actually agree on your issue, people are more likely to think that the issue merits some attention.
3. To ensure consistency, have organizations send the same representative to each coalition

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- meeting. These individuals should also be decision-making members of the organizations they represent.
4. Have a small group of leaders who are deeply committed to the issue of the coalition direct the coalition.
 5. When possible, assign a full-time person to head up coalition activities. The most successful coalitions have someone to carry out tasks such as scheduling meetings, confirming appointments, and following up on assignments.
 6. Develop a distinct coalition identity that is separate from the identity of any one organization. A separate identity provides a broad umbrella for its members, making it easier for organizations who publicly disagree to work together on a unifying cause.
 7. Choose unifying issues. The most effective coalitions come together around a common issue. Make sure the development of group goals is a joint process, rather than one or two group representatives deciding the goals and then inviting others to join.
 8. Formalize coalition operations. It is best to make explicit agreements. Make sure members understand their responsibilities, rights, and how decisions will be made. Being clear can help prevent conflicts.
 9. Develop a common strategy. The strength of a coalition is in its unity. Work together to develop a strategy that makes sense for all members. The tactics you choose should be ones that all the organizations can endorse. If not, the tactics should be taken by individual organizations independent of the coalition.
 10. Clearly state the goals and objectives of the coalition, while acknowledging potential differing self-interests of the member organizations.
 11. Clearly define coalition tasks and responsibilities and divide assignments as equitably as possible.
 12. Understand and respect each organization's self interests and internal processes (e.g., chain of command for decision-making, values, history, structure). Respect for and interest in their unique agendas and how the organizations tie into the coalition can help keep them motivated.
 13. Be patient and agree to disagree. Because diverse organizations with often different orientations and agendas are coming together, getting agreement on even minor objectives can be difficult.
 14. Give and take. It is important to build on existing relationships and connections with other organizations. Don't just ask for or expect support; be prepared to give it.
 15. Recognize that contributions vary and appreciate all contributions. Each organization is important and will have something different to offer. Acknowledge them all, whether they are volunteering, providing the meeting space, funding, copying, providing publicity, leafleting, passing resolutions, or providing other resources.

Sources:

Rubin, B. R. (2000). *A citizen's guide to politics in America: How the system works and how to work the system*, pp. 131-148. M.E. Sharpe. *Voices for America's Children and NGLTF's "Comprehensive Manual for Campus Organizing"* (Shepard, Yeskel, Outcalt - 1995) and materials from the United States Student Association's Grassroots Organizing Weekend (GROW) Program.