

Building Coalitions: Introduction to Coalition Building¹

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Introduction

Building Coalitions is a series of publications that contain information about the needs, preparations, skills, and work needed for community and other groups to establish and sustain coalitions for collaboration towards common causes. This publication is one of the fifteen-part series of fact sheets compiled by The Ohio Center for Action on Coalitions. It has been adapted for County Extension Faculty in Florida to facilitate work with local and regional organizations and groups such as nonprofits, cooperatives, county Extension associations, and others that might benefit from a plan for working together to achieve support for mutual goals.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Coalitions

Collaboration with other youth-serving organizations can be an effective and rewarding method of teaching young people. But collaborating with other groups is a double-edged sword with both advantages and disadvantages. Both should be weighed before entering a collaborative effort. If the benefits don't outweigh the costs, collaboration should not take place.

The advantages of entering a collaborative effort may be immediate or long-term, direct or indirect. Some partners may benefit more than others. It is essential that each partner recognize that the benefits will outweigh the costs of participation (Dluhy 1990).

Advantages

The advantages of collaborating most frequently are more effective and efficient delivery of programs, professional development, improved communication, elimination of duplication, increased use of programs, improved public image, better needs assessment, consistency of information, and increased availability of resources.

Collaboration can open a vast complement of resources to the innovative administrator—new staff skills, knowledge, equipment and facilities, and services. These may be available at other agencies. Combining the resources of two or more agencies can help deliver more services for the same money or the same services for less money. The

economics of scale, fewer duplicate programs, and improved cost-benefit ratios will make the delivery of the program more effective and efficient (Rossi 1982).

Staff members will grow professionally by meeting with colleagues from other agencies. They will be exposed to new methods and ideas that may benefit them. They may be made aware of new resources that are available and how to obtain them for their programs.

Improved communication between agencies will result in all partners providing more consistent and reliable information to the client. Shared information can mean increased use of programs and more public support. Agencies can share information about policy and legislative issues that affect their clientele groups. A better understanding of work done by others may help when directing clients who need critical information. Better communication between agencies will provide a better evaluation of the total impact of programs.

A coordinated needs assessment can be a benefit of collaboration. Service providers who work together can identify gaps in programs. They can also see critical widespread problems and rate issues for the most efficient use of available resources.

Disadvantages

Some disadvantages of collaborations are turf protection and mistrust, slow decision-making, limited resources, diverted resources from priority issues, an assumed position contrary to policy, and decreased level of cooperation among collaborators during a crisis.

Turf protection and mistrust are complex issues that must be overcome. If a collaborator doesn't trust their partners, they will not be as open and receptive to new ideas. There will not be a willingness to share resources and burdens. If a group must reach a consensus to act on an issue, it may take time. Many partners may not be able to go forward without the approval of a higher authority or more study. Depending on how well the group communicates or how often it meets, decisions by consensus could make acting on a problem slow and ineffective.

Due to limitations of resources, some groups who would be valuable partners are unable to cooperate. Devoting resources to a collaborative effort may take away specific resources set aside for other high-priority projects.

Sometimes a coalition may take a position that is inconsistent with the policy of one of its partners. This may cause the partner to be uncooperative, ineffective, or to withdraw from the coalition. During a crisis with a partner or the coalition, cooperation among all members may decrease. Member organizations are sometimes faced with internal changes such as budget cuts, changes in administration, or other short-term changes that will affect their commitment.

Withdrawal of support by a key member or outside pressure from individuals or groups who disagree with or don't understand the coalition's purpose may cause a crisis. This may strain the partnership.

Definitions

- **Alliance**—Individuals or organizations working together in a common effort for a common purpose to make effective and efficient use of resources; a coalition.
- **Coalition**—Individuals or organizations working together in a common effort for a common purpose to make effective and efficient use of resources; an alliance.
- **Collaboration**—Individuals or organizations associating to accomplish a common goal.
- **Coordination**—Individuals or organizations associating to accomplish a common goal.
- **Network**—Individuals or organizations who share information, ideas, resources, or services to accomplish individual or group goals.
- **Partner**—An individual or organization working with others to accomplish a common goal with a shared sense of purpose and sharing responsibility for the outcome.
- **Partnership**—Individuals or organizations working together in a side-by-side effort to accomplish a common goal with a shared responsibility for the outcome.

Summary

This fact sheet provides an understanding of the terms and some reasons for building coalitions. It is intended to help individuals to better use the series of fact sheets developed by the Ohio Center for Action on Coalitions. Comments and ideas for improvement are welcome.

Acknowledgment

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