# Coalition Building:
# The Dynamics and Development

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Coalitions are the driving force behind information sharing, advocacy, and service delivery. They tend to be designed to meet specific community needs and to address specific issues, such as advocating for a piece of legislation or increasing the power behind a project. Many coalitions originally established to take care of an immediate critical need prove so valuable that their scope and activities are expanded to encompass other objectives, and their duration extended indefinitely.

Today, the Hispanic community has recognized the potential utility of coalition-building as a means of bringing about social and political change, forming a united front on issues such as welfare, immigration, and education. Most Hispanic nonprofit human service or community development organizations, in fact, are now members of at least one coalition. Often, groups of organizations form short-term, ad hoc coalitions to respond to a particular event; for example, civil rights abuses by police officers against immigrants may lead to a coalition of civil rights organizations demanding an apology, a firing or a resignation, and appropriate changes in behavior. Proposed legislation and budget decisions often generate coalition action; a coalition focused on education might form to support a school bond issue, oppose proposed state or local budget cuts, or advocate against school closings.

This *NCLR Leadership Bulletin* sets the stage for understanding how coalitions work. It suggests some questions to consider in designing and developing effective coalitions, and identifies benefits to be gained — as well as pitfalls to be avoided.

## What is a Coalition?

A coalition is an organization of organizations working together for a common goal, building a strong base of power necessary to do something that one organization could otherwise not do alone. Building a coalition is an art that calls for distinctive attitudes and skills. A commitment to participate in shared decision-making, allocation of resources related to activities, and response to identified needs are all required when talks of coalition-building begin. Diverse interest groups combine their human and material resources to effect a specific change that otherwise would be more difficult to bring about independently.

Coalitions are increasingly important vehicles for accomplishing positive community changes benefiting Hispanics. They are formed for various reasons such as fundraising, special aid efforts, responding to local events, conducting

legislative advocacy, and pushing forth a set agenda (for example, local coalitions in many Latino communities are organizing themselves to advocate for and maintain bilingual education in the classroom). Coalitions vary, in that they can be short-term or long-term, single- or multi-issue, limited to certain constituencies (such as a coalition of women's organizations joining together to advocate against sexual harassment in the work force), or geographically designed. Coalitions are not only composed of organizations; many include individuals who are considered representative of identified population segments (such as the business community, health professionals, teachers, ethnic subpopulations). Before developing a coalition, a consensus on the part of everyone who is joining must be reached, the roles and responsibilities clarified, and the scope of action clearly defined to avoid duplication of what others are doing.

## Why Form a Coalition?

Coalitions help groups to trust one another and to break down stereotypes and misperceptions they may have of others. By working together on a common agenda, they can learn to overcome the suspicion and disappointment that have marred many past relationships that lacked collaboration. The formation of a coalition tends to eliminate unnecessary competition, making coalition work more cost-effective because

of informal intergroup cooperation, others emerge overnight, usually over an issue or event.

Whether people begin discussing how community organizations might work together to respond to a particular event, or organizations begin to recognize the need to improve coordination and communication amongst themselves, it is likely that a small group of individuals will take the lead in exploring the idea of forming a coalition.

Establishing ground rules helps address conflict should it arise. A coalition is most likely to survive if there is a high positive return on the time and other resource investments of its members. Successful coalitions have accomplished their initial objectives and have developed a long-term agenda with which to continue working.

## What are the Advantages/ Disadvantages?

Whenever individuals or organizations join together, there will be both opportunities of which to take advantage and challenges to overcome. A realistic assessment of a coalition's makeup and circumstances at the outset is essential to anticipating its strengths and weaknesses.

If members of a coalition have sufficient commitment and interest, and are willing to contribute enough time and effort, the advantages can be numerous. For example, in the early stages of developing a coalition, a high concentration will be placed on staffing the coalition. An advantage a member organization can benefit from is the additional staff and money that comes its way because of the coalition work. Another advantage that will contribute to the power structure of the coalition is vis-

research, information, office services, equipment, and other resources can be coordinated and shared. The effectiveness of a coalition depends to a considerable degree upon its members' organizational skills, commitment, interest, and contributions of time and effort. Individual organizations acting alone may lack the resources and the clout to produce desired results.

A coalition can be more adept than a single individual or group in mobilizing organizations and community leaders to effect change and become more visible. A group effort can bring together diverse opinions and develop a program, an activity, or a campaign. Some coalitions are formed with the expectation that they will continue to exist over a long period, often to address a particular program or policy issue of ongoing concern. Thus there are HIV/AIDS, education, employment, immigration, and human rights coalitions in communi-

ties, which are particularly active during policy debates and budget battles, but remain ongoing entities. Some communities have coalitions whose common interest is that they all provide services to a particular population or in a particular neighborhood. If there is adequate commitment to a coalition and clear understanding of the self-interest and relationships of the member organizations, one can build a powerful coalition capable of long-term success.

Groups join coalitions for different reasons — a commitment to particular issues, an opportunity to have contact with other organizations, or a sense of added credibility to be gained from association with others. Different factors combine to make people realize a need for unity. Individuals assess conditions that make a coalition necessary, consult with potential partners, and otherwise prepare the ground for coalition-building. Some coalitions develop after years

ibility. Because of their broad base, a coalition will have greater visibility and appeal. The development of a coalition in a community tends automatically to give its focus issue greater visibility, thus increasing the coalition's success. A coalition will also help establish a pattern of cooperation amongst competing groups. Members of a coalition tend to develop trust in each other, which leads to an ongoing willingness to cooperate outside the coalition as well. Working together on a common agenda helps form newer and stronger relationships. (See Box 2, for additional advantages)

There are however, potential disadvantages to coalition work. Coalitions must be aware if their member groups have different levels of commitment (such as not having a strong commitment to long-range possibilities, for example, and opting for short-term gains). The groups must have a clear focus on the needs and priorities that will go into their coalition work, and must take into account the long-term possibilities. It is important to have an approved system of formal accountability and to establish criteria all members of the coalition will accept.

Because of past isolation, potential members are often reluctant to work in a coalition. They may be over-anxious about gaining allies for their own agendas, or have real fears that their partners may not take a stand on their particular concerns. Many groups will focus on their own priorities, insisting that their issues are more important than those of others. Thus, they opt for short-term gains and fail to take into account the long-range possibilities. Most educators, social workers, religious leaders, and others in the helping professions see themselves primarily in terms of offering assistance, imparting information, and delivering services to the commu-

| **ADVANTAGES** | **Box 2** |
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▲ In pooling people and resources, important victories can be won.

▲ Coalitions tend to be more cost-effective in their work than are groups of separate organizations operating individually toward the same goal.

▲ Resources, information, office services, and equipment are pooled, making competition unnecessary.

▲ Coalition-development builds an ongoing power base.

| **DISADVANTAGES** | **Box 3** |
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Listed are some common disadvantages of which to be aware:

▲ **Too many compromises.** To keep the coalition together, it is often necessary to play to the least common denominator, especially on tactics.

▲ **Inequality of power.** The range of experience, resources, and power can create internal problems. One group, one vote does not work for groups with wide ranges of power and resources.

▲ **Weak members can't deliver.** Organizations providing leadership and resources may get impatient with some of the weaker groups' inexperience and inability to deliver on commitments.

nity. Efforts to build power and influence often seem alien or hostile to what they consider to be their calling. (See Box 3, for additional disadvantages)

These difficulties can be surmounted with an understanding of the art of coalition-building. Coalition-builders need to be aware that promoting cohesion among disparate groups means accepting a number of premises. (See box 4)

## Establishing a Coalition

A coalition is most likely to be effective and long-lasting when it is developed carefully and with the greatest possible involvement of the key personnel of the organizations expected to become its members. The following is one rea-

sonable set of steps for establishing an effective coalition:

1. Get together a representative leadership group from potential member entities. If the coalition is likely to involve representatives of various sectors, be sure the group includes people from each sector. Consider the need for involvement of various nationality groups, and if the coalition will include both Hispanics and non-Hispanics, other minorities, representatives from low-income communities, service providers, etc.

2. Determine why a coalition is needed, and what its objectives, scope, and priorities might be. Determine what the coalition will do and what it will not do. Be as specific as possible.

3. Develop a written summary of the coalition's focus, and be sure all leadership group members find it satisfactory.

4. Using the members of the leadership group, systematically meet with the leaders of all entities you want to join the coalition. Use the written summary as a basis for discussion, and determine their interest in participating. Identify any problems they have with the proposed purposes, scope, and priorities of the coalition to bring back to the leadership group.

5. Hold an organizing meeting. Try to get agreement on the scope statement and address other areas of concern, and if there is broad agreement that the coalition is needed, agree on a schedule and specify responsibilities for getting it started.

6. Draft a statement of principles and have groups sign on, with the understanding that this is the minimum requirement of membership.

7. Select a steering committee or other leadership group which is representative of the range of interests and types of groups in the full membership, willing to commit time and energy to coalition development, and acceptable to the full membership.

8. Using this group as leaders, establish a series of ad hoc committees to plan for various aspects of the coalition's activities, such as issue or health needs priorities and specific agendas, procedures for "signing on" to various letters or other materials, mailing list development, membership dues or in-kind contributions, etc. Involve all members in committees, charge them with drafting brief policy reports, and arrange a full coalition meeting to discuss

**EIGHT BASIC PREMISES FOR SUCCESSFUL COALITIONS   Box 4**

1. Realizing that individuals or organizations can share common concerns, even if for different reasons, and encouraging groups to think of goals that unite them, despite factors that may divide them.

2. Fostering an open, non-threatening atmosphere, in which individuals are free to express feelings about their relation to the larger society and their own groups.

3. Understanding that the dynamics of an extremely diversified organization are different from those of the more homogeneous groups in which people usually take part.

4. Encouraging individual groups to maintain their identity and autonomy as they participate in achieving common objectives.

5. Appreciating the agendas of others, separating compatible from incompatible objectives, and framing issues in such a way that many groups can identify with them.

6. Accepting partial consensus at times, and not insisting on unanimous support on every step before the coalition takes action.

7. Anticipating the inevitable clashes of opinion, verbal and nonverbal communication styles, values, and attitudes, and working to minimize their divisive potential.

8. Thinking in terms of power and influence — from building power bases to forging new community networks to generating publicity and votes in electoral campaigns.

and make decisions on committee reports.

9. Have a one-day retreat or major meeting to adopt procedures and establish priorities for at least the first six months of activities. Be sure that the task forces or committees are assigned to see that each major task is carried out. Be sure that at least one or two "winnable" issues or activities with a high probability of positive impact are included, so that the coalition can experience some early success. Take on a short-term project such as a defined outreach campaign on a particular problem. Discuss whether some crisis requiring action is also likely to occur, and try to be ready for it.

10. Use the steering group actively during the initial period to encourage positive results and recommend changes in procedures or other appropriate action to resolve any early problems. Be sure someone is responsible for encouraging all members to be active in major coalition activities. Do outreach to add new members if some important groups do not initially join. Be sure that the coalition carries out some visible activities, and that mailings keep all members informed. Hold special coalition meetings whenever issues make them necessary, and have at least quarterly meetings otherwise; the steering group should meet at least monthly during the early period.

11. Assess progress at the end of six months, have another major coalition meeting if needed, and make changes. Remember that coalitions take time to become strong, and that cooperation and trust among agencies must develop based on positive experiences.

Defining and discussing the foundation on which the coalition will grow helps encourage individual organizations to weigh carefully their motives for committing themselves. Many factors such as the ones just mentioned will definitely help groups understand the work and needs a coalition will require. As the strategy and planning continues to develop, questions, ideologies, and priorities will emerge and be built into the structure. Individuals and organizations forming or joining a coalition should ask themselves if their agenda isn't already being carried out by another group. How should we organize the coalition? Does it make sense to invest resources in this coalition? What are realistic goals that can be achieved? What is the plan of action? How can infrastructure be provided? What are the assets available? These are only a few of the questions that will emerge when talks of developing a coalition begin.

# Pitfalls to Avoid

A coalition will be most successful if it has a manageable scope of activity, effectively involves all its members, and focuses on activities which it would be difficult for member organizations to address successfully on their own. The critical issue in dealing with individual members in a coalition of organizations is how to give individuals a meaningful role, while maintaining a decision-making process which recognizes that the organizations represent constituencies of many individuals. There is certainly

no such thing as the perfect coalition, so no single structure, focus, or approach will be effective in all communities. Organizations taking part in a coalition should avoid two common pitfalls: adhering to their own programs so rigidly that they cannot work on a common agenda, and relinquishing important parts of their own programs in the hope of gaining allies.

Some coalitions may get trapped in a hopeless struggle over ideological positions. Others totally skip the process of defining basic principles and leap into projects that have not been carefully thought out. Remember that coalitions take time, understanding, and commitment. The more coalition leaders anticipate difficulties in these areas and work out procedures to resolve them, the better the coalition will be able to focus on its goals and tasks. Pitfalls that can weaken or destroy the organization and need to be avoided include:

1. **Losing sight of the focus or goal of the coalition.** If a coalition moves from one topic to another, or becomes more broadly based by adding more issues than originally planned, the original goal or focus of the coalition may become lost in the process. This may lead organizations to leave the coalition due to lack of results, or cause strife among organizations that feel confused and unfocused. Coalitions should have clear procedures for reviewing and approving new issues or focus areas.

2. **Losing sight of your own organization's goal.** A community-based organization can become too involved in the needs and functioning of a coalition. When the goals of a member organization are becoming co-opted or changed due to involvement in a coalition, the individual organization must reas-

sess its participation in the group. This problem can often be avoided by assuring that your organization's positions and priorities are well defined before it joins a coalition.

3. **Over-commitment of resources.** An organization may become involved in a coalition effort in order to reduce the resources committed to a specific issue, only to find that the coalition requires more resources, personnel time, in-kind support, or fiscal support than originally planned. A member organization may find that its staff representative is neglecting ongoing duties due to coalition work. This requires a judgement call: if a short-term allocation of extra resources will achieve a critical goal of the coalition, the commitment may be justified; if not, the organization may need to cut back or even withdraw from the coalition effort.

4. **Difficulty in achieving consensus, compromise, or agreement on an issue.** Issues tend to become complicated over time with various groups maneuvering or supporting issues for their own interest. It is important to create an atmosphere in which all members understand the process for reaching a decision and how to bring closure to discussions. Roll-call votes are appropriate for substantive discussions such as whether the coalition will put its energies into supporting an issue. However, **NEVER** allow issues of ethics or personal morals to be controlled by majority vote. If a member feels generally or morally compromised, the damage may be irrevocable and the coalition will be weakened.

5. **Unpopular stands by the coalition.** A coalition may at times find

it necessary to take a very difficult position that may negatively affect a member organization. This possibility should be considered before joining a coalition. If controversial issues being addressed are not part of an organization's scope of activities or are addressed in a fashion not in the organization's style, then it may be wise not to join. Also, before taking on an issue which may become politically troublesome, the coalition should make sure that there is strong member support and commitment over the long term. This careful planning on the part of the individual organizations and the coalition can help minimize the likelihood that certain issues will become divisive, and that the coalition members will fall prey to political pressure and choose not to be associated with the cause. It will prevent the development of a sense that the coalition is weakening, which opponents can use against your efforts.

In sum, building and maintaining a coalition will entail various levels of time, commitment, and effort by individuals and organizations. The bottom line is that groups joining a coalition will need to work together in clarifying their focus and addressing any pitfalls that may arise in order to see the set agenda or project realized. Remember there is no such thing as a flawless coalition; it is the leadership, time, and effort behind the coalition that ensures effectiveness. ✳

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