



How to build **COALITIONS**

Collaboration

Much discussion must occur before partnering at the community level can take place. However, discussion can falter when participants don't speak the same language. The following definitions can help participants reach desirable goals.

Networking—The process of sharing information between agencies. These agencies may or may not have common goals.

Collaboration—The process of agencies sharing information *and* resources to achieve common goals.

Coalition or alliance—A group of agencies or organizations collaborating under a formal structure for a common purpose to be more efficient and effective.

Partnership—An association of agencies or organizations working together to eliminate needless competition.

Why collaborate?

Agencies and organizations working together can bring about worthwhile community action. However, collaboration does have disadvantages. Before collaborating, both the positive and negative consequences of coalition action need to be evaluated as thoroughly as possible.

Advantages

The advantages of collaborating may be immediate or long term, direct or indirect. If there are no immediate or direct benefits to the group, there may be long-term or indirect benefits. It is essential that each partner believes that the benefits outweigh the costs of participation.

Frequently described advantages of belonging to a coalition are:

- effective and efficient program delivery,
- improved 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.

Becoming a partner in a coalition can open many resources to the innovative group: new staff skills, new knowledge, new equipment and facilities, and new services. Combining the resources of two or more agencies can help deliver more services for the same money or the same services for less money through economies of scale, reduction of duplication, and improved cost-benefit ratios. When group members interact with partners from other groups, they will be exposed to new methods and ideas and become aware of new resources.

“A coalition can open many resources to the innovative group.”

Improved communication between agencies and organizations will result in:

- more consistent and reliable information to clients,
- an increased use of programs,
- more public support,
- better understanding of policy and legislative issues,
- better direction given to clients, and
- improved evaluation of programs.

Another advantage is coordinated needs assessment. A group of service providers working together can better identify gaps in services. They also can identify more critical problems and set a course of action that makes better use of available resources.

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Disadvantages

Some disadvantages of working through a coalition are:

Turf protection and mistrust must be overcome.

If collaborative partners mistrust each other, they won't be receptive to new ideas, nor will they be willing to share resources. Most of the advantage of working together is lost; in fact, there may be a negative outcome.

Reaching consensus can take time. Many partners may need approval of a higher authority or more study time. Depending on how well the group communicates or how often it meets, decision by consensus could make acting on a problem slow and ineffective.

Limited resources may cause otherwise valuable partners to decide not to collaborate. Devoting resources to a coalition may reduce resources available for other high-priority projects.

Taking a policy position that is inconsistent with one of the partners may cause the partner to be uncooperative, ineffective, or to drop out.

Members in crisis may cause cooperation to decrease. Member organizations are sometimes faced with internal crises such as budget cuts, changes in administration, or other short term problems. The coalition may face its own crisis such as withdrawal of a key member or outside pressure groups that disagree with or don't understand the coalition position. These tensions may strain the partnership.

Summary

This fact sheet is intended to give an understanding of the terms and an assessment of the potential for working together in coalitions.

References

Dluhy, Milan J., *Building Coalitions in the Human Services*. Newbury Park, California: Sage Publications, 1990.

Rossi, Robert J., *Agencies Working Together, A Guide to Coordinating and Planning*. Beverly Hills, California: Sage Publications, 1982.

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