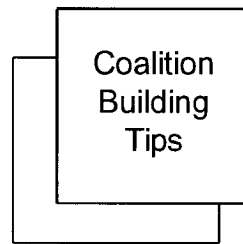


Evaluating Coalition Efforts

by Vincent Francisco and Tom Wolff



Coalition evaluation is often a mystery for staff and membership. As a result, coalitions often hire outside evaluators and leave the evaluation to them, accepting whatever recommendations are made because they are the “experts.” This isn’t necessary, nor is it recommended. The coalition is the primary consumer of the evaluation, so care should be taken to do evaluation correctly from the start and avoid problems later on.

In this Tip Sheet, we will explore some issues to consider before undertaking an evaluation; criteria for a successful evaluation; questions you may wish to answer through evaluation; and how you can answer those questions. While this won’t replace the need for an evaluation specialist, it should help you when hiring an evaluator and using evaluation data. It will also help you understand evaluation language, which may be more than half the battle.

□ Why Hire An Evaluator?

There are several reasons to hire an evaluator. One of the most compelling is that you may be told to do so by your funder. Some funders even specify which one. You may want an evaluator to improve the functioning of your coalition, or to acquire information for new or continued funding. All these reasons (and more) are certainly valid. The important thing is to be aware of what your reasons are, and of how much control you have over the final product. If an evaluator is specified by your funder, you may have little control over the evaluation or the relationship (beyond refusing the money, that is). However, even in this situation, the evaluators should be responsive to your needs and the local culture. And in all cases, you should be clear on what you want the evaluation to *do*.

□ What Are the Criteria for a Successful Evaluation?

• Strategic Planning

In our experience, several key factors contribute to a successful evaluation relationship. The first is strategic planning within the coalition. This should include development of a mission or goals statement, and a list of objectives (with a timeline). It can also include the strategies to be employed and detailed action plans, stating who will do what by when. Your strategic plan should flow from some type of needs assessment that identifies relevant issues, barriers, resources, and culturally appropriate ways of dealing with problems. Aside from encouraging clear thinking, a strategic plan helps you and the evaluator know what will be evaluated. When you know this, that’s a big step forward.

• Sensitivity to Local Culture

Make sure that the evaluators are sensitive to local culture (ethnic and political) and can speak your language (figuratively and literally, using translation when called for). The evaluators should also be presenting the information in clear, direct, user-friendly formats. You want them taking to and with the coalition membership and funders — not down, not up, and not sideways.

• Contributions to Coalition Improvement

Your evaluation should improve your coalition. Make sure that the evaluation includes ongoing feedback in a style you can use to strengthen coalition planning and activities. In every case, you and the evaluators should apply a *utility criterion* to the evaluation methods. That is, will this evaluation give us information that will be *used* by the coalition and its members, the funder, the community, etc? The evaluation hasn’t much value if it can’t be translated into action. If it won’t be used, don’t do it.

□ What Questions Should the Evaluation Help Answer?

• Process Evaluation: What Activities Took Place?

This kind of evaluation focuses on the *day-to-day activities* of your coalition. Methodologies here may include activity logs, surveys, and interviews. Key variables might involve in-house developments (committees adopted, staff hired), outside meetings, communications received, funding generated, community participation, and media coverage. Surveys can be done rating the importance and feasibility of goals, and rating the satisfaction of the membership with coalition implementation. Process evaluation might also include an analysis of critical events in the development of the coalition, using semi-structured interviews.

• Outcome Evaluation: What Was Accomplished?

This kind of the evaluation focuses on the coalition's *accomplishments*. It can include the number and type of changes in policies or practices in the community, as well as the development of new services. It can also be useful to do surveys of self-reported behavior changes (such as alcohol and drug use), as well as surveys rating the significance of outcomes achieved. The number of objectives met over time is also a useful outcome evaluation tool. The outcome evaluation can be further supplemented with interviews on critical accomplishment events.

• Impact Evaluation: What Were the Long-Range Effects

This kind of evaluation focuses on the *ultimate impacts* the coalition is having on the community, over and above specific outcomes. The focus here is often on statistical indicators. For example, a substance abuse prevention coalition might focus on collecting data on alcohol-related nighttime single vehicle accidents, or the number of drug-affected babies born in the community. A teen pregnancy prevention coalition might focus on the pregnancy rate for its locale. These data can be graphed with the data on coalition accomplishments to show a relationship between changes in the community and a decrease in problems in living. When interpreting such data, keep in mind that problems in living, such as drug use and teen pregnancy, are incredibly complicated — even the efforts of ten coalitions might not directly reduce the problem immediately. But you will make a difference if you reach the entire community affected by the problem, in ways appropriate to the problem and the community.

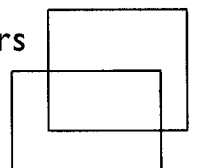
The above is only a partial list of questions compiled from our experience. You may have additional ones. The important thing is that from the start you and your evaluators should identify what questions you need to answer and how you will answer them. This can be done most easily from your strategic plan, with its objectives and actions.

□ In Summary

Evaluation is important. Very important. It is best done in the context of strategic planning so that you know what it is you are evaluating. Consider what questions you want answered. Match your data collection methods to those questions. Make sure that feedback occurs, and that your evaluators provide it in a fashion that meets your needs. Then use the evaluation feedback to improve your coalition.

More information on evaluation rationales and methodology can be obtained from AHEC/Community Partners, or from the Work Group on Health Promotion and Community Development, 4086 Dole Center, University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS 66045. Vincent Francisco is a veteran member of the Work Group. See the May-June, 1994 issue of the *Catalyst* for a review of its materials.

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One in a series of tips on building coalitions.