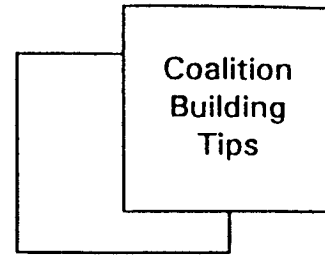


Coalition Membership

by Tom Wolff, AHEC/Community Partners



The definition of coalition membership varies widely. Often the mission or funding of the coalition pre-determines who the membership will be. Generally in the AHEC/Community Partners coalitions the mission is defined as improving the quality of life in the community. Under this broad mission statement the logical definition of membership would include anyone who can endorse and work on that mission. Thus anyone in the community who is willing to work on improving the quality of life in that community is considered eligible to be a member. This may be one of the broader, more open membership definitions among the array of coalitions. Below we explore a number of issues that help clarify the limitations and opportunities that are established by various definitions of membership.

Inclusion, Exclusion

The group development literature informs us that inclusion and exclusion are key variables in the start-up of any group. Coalition start-ups are no exception. Initial coalition discussions about who should be invited, and who should not, are often among the coalition's first decisions. We often hear 'don't invite him, he's a troublemaker'. 'We don't want people from that town, because they're different from us'. 'Let's make sure we get the Mayor and the Chief of Police, we need them'. If one makes the assumption that the goal of the coalition is to mobilize as many resources from as many sectors of the community as possible to work on community issues, then one needs to make initial membership decisions that would create a sense of equal access to the coalition. Developing and maintaining the open membership system requires a constant examination of coalition practices. Do new members get introduced when they arrive? Do they feel welcomed? How does one bring new members up-to-date on what's happening? If coalitions limit who can be members, who can be on steering committees, whose resources they are interested in tapping, then by definition they are excluding people from the community and the coalition will not be able to tap into their capacities and resources to solve the community's problems. Often coalitions decide to start off small, and try to increase their inclusiveness as time proceeds. The difficulty with this approach is that when others come on board they can feel that critical decisions were made without them. An inclusive approach requires addressing the issue at the start.

Money and Membership Issues

Many coalitions ask people who are members to show their support by paying a fee to cover coalition expenses. How the issue of money and membership is constructed will have a large impact on the coalition. If the coalition sets the fee as a membership fee, then it says a member is one who pays the fee. An alternate approach is to say that anyone who supports the mission of the coalition and signs up as a member is a member, and those who are able to provide financial support become sponsors of the coalition. This separates the issue of membership from financial support. By setting a fee as a membership criteria, one potentially eliminates low-income citizens, even if one establishes a scholarship or sliding fee scale, since having to make requests for that can be a humiliating experience. Balancing the need to obtain financial support from members, with not excluding people based on fees is a key issue around membership in coalition activities.

□ Activity Level

Although membership can be claimed by those who sign up as members or those who send financial support, the key component of coalition membership is activity. Without coalition members providing their time and their efforts, there is no coalition. Thus, a key factor in the success of any coalition is the amount of energy and time invested by its members in the community. No matter how many people have paid their dues, if you cannot get members to sign up for activities and task forces, the projects that the coalition takes on will fail. Marian Wright Edelman of the Children's Defense Fund, in talking about developing teen pregnancy prevention coalitions, says that we need to distinguish between the talkers and the actors. Often at the beginning of the coalition, we see more of the talkers and only later do we see the actors. Thus, another important factor in assessing membership in a coalition is to examine the activity level.

□ Multi-Sectoral, Multi-Cultural Coalitions

How well the coalition membership represents the various sectors and sub-cultures of a community is another key variable in membership. For membership to be truly representative, efforts have to be made to reach those who don't easily come to coalition activities. The hardest to reach individuals tend to be those at the very top of the power structure: the heads of corporations, police chiefs, superintendents of schools - and those at the very bottom of the power scale: the disenfranchised, the citizens. Specific efforts involving individual, personalized outreach need to be focused on those groups not well represented, so the coalition can be both multi-sectoral and multi-cultural. Getting these hard to reach individuals into the room is only the first step, the coalition will need to create a welcoming environment if the newcomers are to stay with the coalition. Without this, the strength of the membership will be weakened.

□ The Role of Citizens

Although coalitions proclaim themselves as empowering institutions, giving voice to the members of the community, they often fail at involving citizens in their efforts. Coalitions are often quite successful at engaging certain components of a community to interact in daytime meetings, in formal settings. But this modality has enormous barriers to involving grassroots citizens, barriers including: time, money, language, family responsibilities, transportation, etc. There are no simple answers as to how to best engage citizens in coalition activities. To change the meetings to evenings, provide interpreters and day care may be ways of enticing citizens to a meeting, but one is likely to lose many human service providers with after work events. One should not assume that coalition building efforts and citizens community development activities can always be, or need to be, merged into one organization. Rather, we must seek the areas of overlapping interest of these initiatives. There needs to be an active exploration of how neighborhood organizations, community development groups, citizen action groups and community coalitions can find common ground and ways of collaborating. This indeed may be the greatest future challenge for coalition membership.

The strength of a coalition is really the sum of the capacities of its members. Seeking a broad representation of active members and maintaining an open door are critical to coalition success.

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