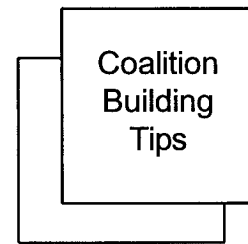


Coalition Barriers and How to Overcome Them (or Help! I'm trapped in a coalition and can't get out)

by Tom Wolff



Anyone who has been in a coalition will tell you that the path to success is a rocky one, often marked by two steps forward and one step back. This shouldn't surprise us! Many forces in communities and community helping systems are opposed to coalition building and community development. We must then think about the path of coalition progress as a dynamic one, one that is constantly changing with time. New obstacles (and opportunities) always keep arising. So let's look at some commonly-encountered barriers to coalition success, and outline some strategies that a coalition might develop to counteract them.

Barrier 1 – Turf and Competition

A clear and explicit goal of coalitions is often to promote coordination, cooperation, and collaboration. But it comes as no surprise that turf, territoriality, and competition among coalition members is a major barrier to coalition success. The capacity of one organization to feel competitive with another often amazes outsiders. This competition can be just among health and human service agencies as they compete for clients and contracts, but can also be between the private sector and the public sector, between local government and state government, or between local government and the community. A new request to provide a service might be issued by the state, and two or three different agencies – all members of the same coalition – might begin to compete for that contract, seemingly undermining the coalition's goal of cooperation. One would hope that having declared themselves wanting to be part of a coalition, these turf battles would decline – but they often escalate instead.

Strategies

In his community organizing work, Saul Alinsky always paid attention to the self-interest of all the parties, believing that solutions had to include attention to the self-interest of all. Too often we expect self-sacrifice from individuals and organizations as they move toward coalition solutions. If we understand that personal and organizational self-interest is part of the reality and part of what motivates people, then we can look for strategies that take self-interest into account. It is also possible to minimize the impact of turf, territoriality, and self-interest by appealing to a larger good. In our experience with coalitions, the larger and common good that has most appeal is that of the community and neighborhood. This is why coalition building often focuses on geographic areas.

Barrier 2 – Bad History

The most frequent comment we get when we come into new communities and talk about building a new community coalition is, "Oh, we tried that once before here. It doesn't work." Most communities have had unsuccessful attempts at building cooperation and forming coalitions in their past. Most frequently, these attempts were ill-fated because they did not involve a carefully-thought-out process, did not have enough resources to succeed, or were imposed from above as a mandate: "You WILL cooperate."

Conflictual histories also exist between agencies and different components in communities, and one should never forget their impact. Too often we enter communities without knowledge of context, thinking that history starts when we put our foot in the door. We should never forget the power of history. All we have to do is talk to an agency director and hear, "We don't work with that other agency because 15 years ago they had a director who insulted our director at a public meeting" to realize how important it is.

Strategies

The first strategy is to learn the community's history. Determine what efforts occurred in the past to build cooperation and coalitions, and how they succeeded or failed. One can also collect a detailed history of conflict and cooperation among agencies in the community. Following that, the second key way to undo bad history is to create an open and fair process that allows everyone to participate, everyone to set the ground rules, and everyone shape the coalition's agenda. In this way, some of the factors that led to conflict in the past can be avoided in this new round of coalition building.

Barrier 3 — Failure To Act

One of the most lethal behaviors of coalitions are endless, long-term planning meetings that bog down a coalition before it ever acts. Many of us have sat on coalitions that aim to solve problems by involving a large number of important people with busy schedules, who sit around a room for over a year thinking, planning, and doing needs assessments before anything happens. In most cases, this long planning process without action is not only unnecessary, but can also destroy a coalition before it starts. Administrators and bureaucrats are used to sitting in planning meetings; though the best of them have a limited tolerance. But citizens, citizen groups, and those in the community committed to change are often quickly turned off by such an atmosphere. Coalitions at their heart are based on creating change and demonstrating the capacity to act. It is this capacity that attracts the kinds of members who make coalitions succeed. When coalitions fail to display a commitment to action, or display a fear of advocacy, then they discourage the involvement of exactly the people who will make the coalition a success.

Strategies

Although a coalition must be able to operate in a planful manner, it must also be able to produce some actions and results in its first weeks and months of existence. These are not opposing goals. One can be involved in a careful, long-term planning process, while at the same time acting on issues like creating a newsletter, circulating a petition at a coalition meeting, or holding a public session on a controversial topic. All of these can happen within the first months of a coalition's existence. Such actions show the members and the community that the coalition is committed to making something happen, as opposed to writing reports that sit on someone's shelf. In order to keep players in the coalition from the start, the coalition must be able to demonstrate a commitment to action and then it must indeed act. Both commitment to action, and action itself must be sustained throughout the history of the coalition.

Conclusion

This is the first of what will be a series of three tip sheets on coalition barriers and strategies to overcome them. If you didn't see your favorite barrier above - wait for the next installment, or call (413-253-4283), write (24 South Prospect Street, Amherst, MA 01002), or e-mail <HN1877@handsnet.org>. The Doctor is in.

One in a series of tips on building coalitions.

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