

Coalition Work Training

Picture the Homeless

(Adapted from: Organize! Organizing for Social Change. Midwest Academy Manual for Activists. Kim Bobo & Steve Max)

Coalitions are not built because it is good, moral, or nice to get everyone working together. Coalitions are about building power. The only reason to spend the time and energy building a coalition is to amass the power necessary to do something you cannot do through one organization.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

What are some GOOD reasons to participate in coalitions?

- What are some BAD reasons to participate in coalitions?
- What are some reasons NOT to participate in a coalition?

ADVANTAGES to coalition work	DISADVANTAGES to coalition work
<p>Win together what you can't alone. Complex issues often require large numbers of people and many resources to win.</p>	<p>Distracts from other work. It takes time and resources to participate in a coalition. In the worst case, your work and the coalition's work will both suffer.</p>
<p>Build your organization. The best coalitions make your own work more effective, expand the understanding and experience of your members, and provide opportunities for your leaders to develop their skills.</p>	<p>Too many compromises. To keep a coalition together, it is often necessary to compromise and sometimes play to the least common denominator, especially when it comes to taking action.</p>
<p>Increase and share resources. If the coalition's issue is central to your organization, you may directly benefit from additional support and funding, and share resources to overcome deficiencies. The sum is often greater than the parts.</p>	<p>Fail to receive credit. If all activities are done in the name of the coalition, groups that contribute a lot often feel they do not get enough credit.</p>
<p>Broaden your scope. A coalition may provide the opportunity for your group to work on state or national issues, thus expanding the scope and impact of your work.</p>	<p>Inequality of power. The range of experience, resources and power can create internal problems.</p>
<p>Develop New Leaders. Experienced leaders can be asked to take on coalition leadership roles, thereby opening up slots for new leaders</p>	<p>Loss of control. By joining a coalition, you are likely to lose some control over the message and tactical decisions.</p>

PRINCIPLES FOR SUCCESSFUL COALITION WORK

Use experienced coalition staff. Someone needs to take responsibility for the smooth operation of the whole coalition, and that person needs to be an impartial, experienced and savvy organizer.

Choose unifying issues. It is important to focus on one common issue where the members of the coalition can agree, and avoid the tendency to work together on each others' separate agendas or issues.

Develop a realistic coalition budget. This budget should include staff time being contributed by each organization, so that the real costs of the campaign are understood.

Agree to disagree. Members of the coalition will not agree on all issues. Focus on your common agenda, and avoid issues on which you do not agree.

Play to the center with tactics. Developing tactics for a coalition is an area that usually requires compromise and a middle of the road approach. Space should be allowed for individual organizations to act independently and utilize more aggressive tactics, so long as they do not do so in the name of the coalition.

Recognize that contributions vary. There should be an honest and upfront discussion about what each organization brings to the table, and a recognition that although contributions may vary they are all essential to the success of the coalition effort.

Structure and clarify decision-making. The coalition needs to be crystal clear about who will make decisions and how.

Help organizations achieve their self-interest. Just as we organize people around their self-interests, so too must coalitions meet the self-interests of their member organizations. Organizations need to believe they are benefitting from a coalition.

Achieve real results. Coalitions must achieve concrete, measurable results that are clear to the member organizations. Otherwise, dissolve the coalition and form a coffee klatch.

Urge stable, senior board representatives. People who represent their organization in a coalition need to have a certain amount of experience and credibility. In grassroots community organizations, this is often a job for seasoned leaders.

Distribute credit fairly. An organization's ability to survive and thrive often depends on the amount of public credit it receives. Coalitions that try to ignore this fact are headed for trouble.

SCENARIOS

Scenario # 1.

An anti-war organization asks us to sign on to their petition against the war in Iraq.

What questions do we ask them?

What questions do we ask ourselves?

What factors will decide our level of involvement? What process will we follow to make those decisions?

Scenario #2.

An organization led by homeless queer youth is holding a rally against a big developer who is threatening to bulldoze an important community space that street kids rely on. The organization has asked us to work with them to help fight back.

What questions do we ask them?

What questions do we ask ourselves?

What factors will decide our level of involvement? What process will we follow to make those decisions?

Scenario #3.

A major housing coalition, which includes lots of much bigger/more mainstream organizations such as labor unions and bigtime tenant groups, is holding a big rally to fight for extended rent control protections for tenants. They want us to turn out.

What questions do we ask them?

What questions do we ask ourselves?

What factors will decide our level of involvement? What process will we follow to make those decisions?

Scenario #3.

A group of other grassroots organizing groups is coming together to create a citywide alliance of groups working on issues of racial justice. They want us to join the steering committee.

What questions do we ask them?

What questions do we ask ourselves?

What factors will decide our level of involvement? What process will we follow to make those decisions?