



AHEC/Community Partners

Building Healthy Communities

Building Coalitions That Work: Lessons from the Field

Developed by:

David L. Foster, Ph.D.

Thomas J. Wolff, Ph.D.

AHEC/Community Partners

24 South Prospect Street

Amherst, MA 01002

info@ahecpartners.org

www.ahecpartners.org

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BUILDING COALITIONS THAT WORK: LESSONS FROM THE FIELD

It is a considerable challenge to derive a generic set of principles for successful coalition development in light of the great variation in what is called a 'coalition'. The definitions of a coalition vary widely, from two agencies joining together in a grant submission to a broad community group with representatives from every sector. How coalitions define 'success' will also vary from coalition to coalition, and over time within a coalition (e.g., we have succeeded if we get the Chief of Police to join our coalition vs. we have succeeded if we get the Chief of Police fired).

AHEC/Community Partners has been working to support community coalitions in defining, developing and carrying out their own agendas. This is done through consultation, facilitation and education. Our coalition-building work has been going on for the past ten years under the auspices of the Massachusetts Area Health Education Centers, with funding for the Community Partners program from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation over the past three years. During this time we have worked intensively in eleven communities across Massachusetts, with short-term consultations in many others.

From these experiences, we have learned about many aspects of coalition development. We have reported these lessons in a number of publications, including a series of Tip Sheets on coalition building, several of which are referenced below for further development of particular issues.

ASSUMPTIONS:

To clarify the principles of success in a brief paper, it is necessary to first spell out some of the basic assumptions of the particular approach to coalition building articulated in this model:

1. **Ecological approach:** Individuals are understood in the broadest context of their environment. Thus, when examining social problems (e.g., drug abuse, teen pregnancy), always consider the major forces in American life today that impact on the problem including: racism, sexism, class elitism, and social and economic injustices.
2. **Social change:** Coalitions are committed to addressing those components of society that require change as opposed to simply improving ways to adapt to society's ills.
3. **Multisectoral-multicultural approaches:** Coalitions need to be open to everyone in a community. The coalitions' basic principles must celebrate diversity and must value the multicultural characteristics of their communities. Institutional racism needs to be identified and addressed. In communities of color, empowerment within their own community may need to precede multicultural efforts.
4. **Capacity approach:** Coalitions focus on their communities' capacities and strengths as well as their deficits and problems. They focus on individuals as citizens rather than, or as well as, clients.

PRINCIPLES:

We have organized the principles of success in eight broad areas. Many of them will seem obvious - true for many types of organizations. In our experience guiding and supporting the

development of an array of coalitions, the validity of these principles has been consistently reaffirmed. However, in the development of many coalitions, they are frequently overlooked. This may be due, in part, to the fact that many coalition participants are used to operating in hierarchical organizations with missions, structures and resources heavily influenced by outside forces, particularly funding sources.

MISSION AND GOALS

Coalition members must clearly define their shared mission/goals and assure that the identified goals incorporate the self-interests of the various constituencies, plus something larger than those self-interests. Coalition building requires both a realistic understanding that addressing the self-interests of participants is crucial, and a willingness to set aside personal agendas for a common good. Walking the tight rope between these agendas is critical to coalition success.

When a coalition includes large numbers of health and human service providers, it is common to find some tension about the mission of a broad-based coalition. There are members who believe the focus of the group should be on improving the system of services through increased communication, coordination and collaboration. There are others whose concerns are focused more on advocating for and guiding social change in collaboration with non-providers in the community. While these are quite different agendas, coalitions are able to bridge them by openly acknowledging the differences and creating working groups within the coalition that address each area of concern. The mission statements and goals may reflect this dual approach explicitly.

"We are a community-wide coalition with a vision of effective and compassionate response to the diversity of human need in Greater Taunton. Our mission is two-fold: to improve the visibility, availability, accessibility and coordination of all health and human services in the area; and to support the empowerment of all members of the community through public education, participation, advocacy and action." (Mission statement of the Greater Taunton Health and Human Services Coalition)

INCLUSIVE MEMBERSHIP

Membership in a coalition needs to be inclusive, allowing all members of a community who endorse the coalition's mission to join in the coalition's efforts. Inclusive membership will occur only through active recruiting of the two power extremes in the community - the most powerful (business, clergy, city hall, etc.) and the least powerful (neighborhood groups, youth, people of color, the poor, etc.). The geographic boundaries of the coalition will also be decided by those directly involved.

There are really two issues lodged within this principle. First, are the definition and structure of membership open and inclusive? There are coalitions that define membership as being specific representatives, or their designees, from particular organizations and/or constituencies. It is tempting to do this to keep the group small and more efficient, or to assure participation of important leaders and groups. This exclusive approach loses in effectiveness what it may gain in efficiency. Within any community there is a wealth of talent and wisdom - among professionals,

residents, and others - that is inevitably lost when membership is "by invitation only." Coalitions composed of the already influential can effectively exert one kind of power, but it is rarely about social change. It most often deals with symptoms, not the root issues. It also rarely succeeds in mobilizing the community to address fundamental community issues.

The second issue: Are there specific goals and strategies to reach out and engage those who are not ordinarily welcomed to these kinds of community efforts? This is not as easy as it sounds, particularly the strategies. Coalitions that want to actively involve both residents and professionals must resolve a variety of barriers: when will the coalition meet, during the day or in the evening? Will the location, process, language and agenda be ones that are welcoming and comfortable for all groups? In diverse communities, how will the cultural and linguistic issues be addressed? These are but a few of the challenges to building truly inclusive coalitions. The obstacles are real, but our experience shows that there are substantial benefits to working thoughtfully and openly toward overcoming them.

In four coalitions that have assessed their members' satisfaction with coalition functioning, all have found substantially higher ratings for items related to providers and the service system (e.g., communication among members, access to information, funding for programs) than for items involving interaction with the broader community (e.g., participation of residents, assessing community needs, use of the media). Across the four coalitions, the average for the ten (10) community items was 3.0, while for the other twenty (20) items the average was 3.7 (using a five (5) point scale - very unsatisfied to very satisfied). This has raised the level of attention given by the coalitions to reaching out to new constituencies. [Tip Sheets: Coalition Membership; Engaging Residents in Coalition Building]

ORGANIZATIONAL COMPETENCE

The group's organizational structure and modes of operation must be clear and competent enough so that the coalition can perform basic tasks effectively. Five key elements include: leadership, decision making, communication, resources and staffing.

Leadership

Coalitions need to have a clearly identified leadership structure, but also need to disperse leadership as broadly as possible. Within coalitions, the most effective leadership is that which focuses on facilitation and coordination. When those who are used to being in charge of a traditional organization assume leadership of a coalition, it is useful to adopt a somewhat different style, so as to invite broad participation and greater engagement.

Building new leadership is a crucial role for coalitions. Often we see those who lead the coalitions feeling overloaded with the responsibilities of committees and projects, on top of the work they are getting paid to do. It usually takes an intentional plan, endorsed by these multi-role leaders, to identify and nurture others in the coalition with interests and abilities for assuming increasing responsibilities within the group. This need is especially great among community groups which have been disenfranchised, where leadership potential has been largely discounted and discouraged: communities of color, women, and youth. [Tip Sheet: Coalition Leadership]

Decision Making

A clear, democratic decision-making process is needed which allows for broad participation in determining the course of the coalition. Where there are leaders wanting (or even willing) to control the decision making, the coalition needs structures that assure a democratic process. Coalitions should be thoughtful about how, and what, authority is delegated to Executive Committees or officers, and how they are accountable to the whole. This is true even when current leaders are seen as "trustworthy" - both because the way decision-making power is shared sends messages about the coalition's values, and because who is leading is more likely to change than the process.

In addition to structures for basic decision making, it is helpful for coalitions to allow for conflict and disagreement to occur and be resolved within the 'normal' processes. We find that many coalitions leaders, particularly among professionals, experience conflict as negative and detrimental to the group. Their first instinct, therefore, is to making decisions in a way that glosses over areas of disagreement, rather than recognizing and learning from them.

Communication

Active and effective communication among members of the coalition, and between the coalition and both the community and outside system (e.g., the State), is critical. All of these are a challenge for most coalitions. They take time; they require a clear sense of what message the coalition wishes to send to its members, to the community and to others. Some coalitions have developed effective monthly newsletters - from four to a dozen pages - to disseminate the news, ideas, requests, etc. that they want to share with an array of audiences. Minutes of coalition meetings and short committee reports included in the newsletter are more likely to be read, and more economical to distribute. We have found that sometimes this newsletter helps people feel like members of the group even though they may be able to attend only occasional meetings. It also keeps the coalition in the eyes of elected officials and other leaders who may not be directly a part of the group.

Resources

The mobilization and effective use of resources from within the coalition, and outside, is essential. Our monitoring and evaluation research suggests, however, that while critical resources can be a boon to the coalition, they also can create serious difficulties. We have observed several coalitions in which the pursuit of, the decision making about, and management of financial resources severely weakened the coalitions. This was generally because these issues about funds distracted the group, or at least the leaders, from the work of building a strong organization and being clear about the coalitions' purposes and plans.

We would caution coalitions about going after resources, even for staffing, until there has been some time to: (1) build relationships, (2) define initial agreements about mission and goals, and (3) establish some track record of small successes for the group as a whole. From this base, the coalition can both more safely and more successfully seek funding for staffing to support the work of the group.

Staffing

Most broad-based coalition efforts benefit significantly from having experienced staff. The staff must have good group and organizational process skills and community development philosophy and skills. The appropriate type and best use of staff resources is a critical issue. Some coalitions see a staff person as a guide, facilitator, problem solver and communications link. Others see having staff as a way for coalition members to avoid having to do the essential volunteer work. Like the non-profit model, they become a "board" that sets the agenda for the staff to carry out. This latter approach undermines the essential collaborative, community building functions of the coalition, as we have defined them.

In addition to these professional functions of staff, many coalitions benefit from the work of clerical staff, either hired or donated. Such staff can be responsible for compiling and sending out mailings, setting up meetings and making follow-up calls in support of the coalition leaders. This will increase volunteers' willingness to serve in leadership roles and enable them to focus more on the process and productivity of the group.

Services from an experienced consultant/resource person from outside the group can also bring several benefits. First are the lessons learned from other coalitions in the practical matters of coalition building. Second is a neutral, facilitative role to help the group with problem solving and planning. In both processes, it is helpful to have facilitation from someone who is not part of the group's ongoing issues and to allow the coalition's leaders to step back and participate as members of the group.

PLANNING

With coalitions, as with any complex organization, good planning increases the chances for success. Thus they must develop at least a rudimentary system for ongoing planning. While this may seem obvious, we have observed that left to their own devices, many coalitions do not do systematic planning. When encouraged to, however, most coalitions do so with very positive results.

We have found that an annual, half-day, all-coalition planning meeting is a useful catalyst for successful planning. The meeting format which we have developed has four components. The first is a review of the coalition's work since the previous planning meeting (for new coalitions, a reflection on their process of coming together). This includes naming accomplishments, identifying the benefits of participating in the coalitions, and articulating the frustrations or disappointments members have felt.

The second is reassessment of the coalition's organizational development. The group reviews issues of leadership, committee structure and effectiveness, assesses the flow of communication, and considers issues related to membership - diversity, outreach, participation and support. This is a chance to consider if the people who "should" be around the table are there, and if not - why not; and, whether those who are members are contributing their time, skills and organizational resources to support the work of the coalition, and if not - why not.

Third, the group focuses on how these reflections and other available information can guide what the coalition plans to do in the coming year, and how it should organize that work. This part of

the meeting identifies the community and coalition issues that might be addressed during the coming year, establishes the coalition's priorities, and determines how to organize the working groups needed to effectively address these issues. It is important in defining these issues that several things be considered: Is the issue focused and specific enough to allow the group to have a direct impact? Are there real chances for some success in the near future? Is there an adequate group of coalition members committed to working on this issue?

The final component is to develop specific work plans that identify the next steps: what needs to be done? By whom? By when? There is real benefit in having those attending the planning meeting get to this level of development, usually by breaking up into working groups, but there is often insufficient time. When that is the case, we recommend that work groups use the end of the meeting to schedule their next group meeting and commit to bringing their work plan to share at the next coalition meeting. This helps assure that the momentum of the planning meeting will be maintained and there is some accountability for each group to define a specific plan for action. [Tip Sheets: Coalition Planning; Community Assessment]

ACTION AND ADVOCACY

Successful coalitions take actions that are doable and thus prove their effectiveness to themselves and their communities through concrete results. This often means that coalitions load experiments for success to guarantee early victories that will illustrate to the members and the communities that change can occur. A short agenda of doable tasks also prevents a coalition from spreading itself too thin.

With a solid base in group process and planning, coalitions need to be action oriented to produce meaningful change. While networking and information exchange are valuable underpinnings for the coalition, specific actions need to emerge from the planning that are targeted to achieve coalition goals in the community. Our data shows clearly a direct benefit from planning, which leads to community-oriented action, which yields community changes. While not necessarily sufficient, each is necessary for the next.

One lesson we derive from this is that in their early development, coalitions should not expect to, or be expected to, produce significant changes (outcomes, impacts) in short periods of time. As can be seen in Figure 1, which is typical for a successful coalition, there are predictable lags between planning, actions and changes. If there is pressure for immediate results, planning will be short-changed, actions may not be carefully conceived, and the long term results will likely suffer.

[SEE FIGURE 1]

Advocacy, defined as actions targeted to produce specific organizational or community changes, is an essential part of any effective action plan. There are many forms that this advocacy may take - public or private; in-person or written; individual, small group or large group; etc. This may vary based on the style of the group, the particular "target", or the nature of the issue.

HOPE AND CELEBRATION

Coalition activities need to include fun and must affirm the strengths and joys of the community. Indeed, one of the great gifts of effective coalitions to their members and to their communities is the gift of hope that emerges from an optimistic coalition approach that affirms that many community problems can be effectively addressed. Leaders will promote the hope and accomplishments of the coalition, helping the group celebrate this process.

The vitality and morale of a coalition is noticeably enhanced when it remembers to celebrate its successes. With the many challenges that confront most coalitions, it is easy to get mired in the work of dealing with all that has yet to be done and the burden of more demands than can be met. In the face of this, many coalitions forget to step back and reflect publicly on the groups' accomplishments.

Annual meetings are one vehicle that coalitions use to set time aside for this purpose. Public recognition of these achievements can be enhanced by using coalition newsletters, public meetings and the local media.

TIME AND PERSISTENCE

The agendas of broad-based coalitions that address the quality of life in communities can be overwhelming. The coalition needs to take a long-range view, understanding that successfully tackling its agenda will take time and persistence. Although some single issue coalitions are defined as short-term efforts, the coalitions described in this model will create the desired societal changes only within longer time frames. Taking on big issues in manageable pieces is a strategy for success in both long- and short-term efforts.

How often we find coalitions being pushed, both by funders and from within, to produce results quickly. As a society we are increasingly addicted to the "quick fix," and our tolerance for long-term, developmental or preventive approaches is low. Coalitions face the challenge of producing some short-term products without turning away from the long-term commitment and strategies that hold the greatest promise for building healthier communities.

MONITORING AND ASSESSMENT

The process of developing an effective coalition to address quality of life issues in a community is obviously very complex. While the literature can provide us with some direction, each coalition's efforts must be guided by its own internal review and evaluation process. Whether this review is done at an annual meeting discussion of the coalition's process and outcomes - or through a more rigorous evaluation scheme, an effective coalition needs to have the capacity to learn from its successes and its disappointments, for it surely will have both.

A paper published by AHEC/Community Partners, entitled "Monitoring and Evaluation of Coalitions," describes one approach to this process. It uses several tools: a logging system for accumulating and graphing information about coalition actions and outcomes; a Membership Satisfaction Survey; and a Critical Events Report. While each of these can be used independently, together they offer views of the group from three complementary perspectives.

At a minimum, an annual review of the prior year - verbal and/or written - is essential. The review offers opportunities for participants to share both the benefits they have gained - for themselves, their organizations and those with whom they work - and the frustrations they have felt. Reflecting on benefits focuses on the coalition's strengths, things that can be enhanced for greater success, and rekindles the sense of commitment. Allowing members to air their concerns offers the opportunity to revise internal policies or practices that may be detracting from the coalition's effectiveness. The shorter the interval between monitoring activities, the more effective the process will be in helping the coalition make mid-course corrections if it is getting bogged down or away from its goals and plans.

CONCLUSION

The growth and development of each community coalition is unique, depending on its membership, its purpose and its context. It is also a complex process which is difficult to fully capture. As our experience with, and study of, coalitions grows, however, we discover increasing commonalities across many types of coalitions. Some lessons address how to adapt basic organizational development and group process principles to the coalition context; while others relate to the specific "life history" of coalitions.

The above principles are a 'work in progress'. We hope they can be used as helpful hypotheses to be tested in various communities. We welcome your feedback, suggestion, disagreements and additions.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Much of what we have learned about coalition building is the result of the generosity of the coalitions with which we have worked. Coalition leaders, members and staff have allowed us to participate in their work and given us the benefit of their insights into the life of their coalitions. In exchange, we have provided consultation, technical assistance and other resources.

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COALITION-BUILDING MATERIALS

The materials referenced in this paper can be ordered by contacting:

AHEC/Community Partners
24 South Prospect Street
Amherst, MA 01002
(413) 253-4283
(413) 253-7131 [fax]
info@ahecpartners.org
www.ahecpartners.org