



Coalition Building

Tools & Checklists

Contributed by Phil Rabinowitz Edited by Tom Wolff

Tools

Tool #1: Logistics of the first meeting

1. **Find a space that is comfortable, easily accessible, and big enough to hold all the people you expect.** Some possibilities are agency or business meeting rooms; the public library; the YMCA; the town hall; service clubs (Elks, Rotary); a church or synagogue; a community center; the high school; or a local college or university.

Depending upon the reason for the coalition, you may want to try to hold the meeting in a place that is significant to the issue. A coalition on homelessness might meet at a shelter, for example; one on education might meet at a school. This might give members a chance to look at the issue firsthand, and might also help to set the tone.

If there are divisions in the community, holding the meeting in a place that is seen as neutral - a neighborhood other than those of any competing factions or groups, a building or institution that isn't identified with a particular organization or group. It's important to be aware of what people identify as "enemy turf," and to be aware that the people in question can be human service workers or local government officials, not just gang members.

2. **At the same time, decide when and how long the meeting will be.** The time of the meeting should be geared to the needs of the people who most need to be there. The length of the meeting depends on what its goals are. If there's substantive work to be done, it should be long enough to accomplish it, or at least to get a good start.

In general, it's a good idea for a first meeting to have a practical goal of some sort. It doesn't

have to be huge - deciding who else should be in the room, for instance, or naming a group to draft a statement of the issue for others to edit at the next meeting - but people should leave with some sense that the meeting had a real point.

3. Think about how to arrange the space. Will chairs be in a circle? In rows, with the core group at the front? In small groups? Each of these arrangements makes a statement about how the coalition will operate. Our suggestion is that a circle is much more in keeping with the nature of a coalition, in that it implies no one leader, but assumes equality among members. It leaves open the possibility of different individuals or organizations taking leadership in different circumstances, and encourages a democratic process.

An important element is the availability of food and drink. The presence of food, as is mentioned elsewhere in the Tool Box ([Chapter 10, Section 7: Developing Training Programs for Staff](#), [Chapter 12, Section 4: Conducting a Workshop](#)) changes the climate of a meeting, making it more informal and encouraging interaction among those present. In addition, if the meeting is going to be long, food and drink will help people remain alert and make them more likely to stay till the end.

4. Decide who will run the meeting. Some possibilities:

- A member of the core group
- A community official or community leader
- Someone connected very closely with the issue (the director of the agency most directly responsible for it, for instance)
- A coalition member with particularly good facilitation skills
- An outside facilitator

Whoever is chosen should have good facilitation skills. She has to be able to make sure everyone is heard, that the discussion moves along, that the group addresses agenda items, and that the meeting is kept civil and productive. Perhaps most important, she should be flexible enough to change direction when it's necessary, and savvy enough to know when it's necessary.

The first meeting of a new coalition is always uncharted territory, and can be dangerous if the coalition doesn't have a competent facilitator. The meeting can be pulled from its course to pursue the concerns of a determined or single-minded individual, or can become bogged down in procedural issues or in unnecessary conflict. A good facilitator - particularly one who also has credibility among coalition members - can keep the meeting on the right track and help to assure the eventual success of the coalition.

And don't forget to make sure that someone takes minutes. The ideal is to ask someone beforehand to do it specifically for the first meeting, with the understanding that the group will

then either appoint a secretary, or create some other procedure to assure that meetings are properly recorded. (Please see Chapter 16: *Group Facilitation and Problem-Solving*, for more on effective facilitation and recording.)

5. Arrange for child care, transportation, or other services that some people may need in order to attend the meeting. This may be especially important if you're trying to attract young parents or low income community or target group members.

6. Finally, make sure that everyone knows about the time and place of the meeting. Even if people were told when they were first contacted about the coalition, send a reminder, or call again, or both. For most busy people, until something is in their appointment books, it doesn't exist. If the time and place are already written down, a reminder will help to cement the idea of the meeting in people's minds.

[return to top](#)

Checklist

Here you will find a checklist summarizing the main points of the section.

What is a coalition?

You know that a coalition is a group of individuals and/or organizations with a common interest who agree to work together toward a common goal

Why start a coalition?

To address an urgent situation.

To actually obtain or provide services.

To bring about more effective and efficient delivery of programs and eliminate any unnecessary duplication of services.

To pool resources.

To increase communication among groups and break down stereotypes.

To revitalize the sagging energies of members of groups who are trying to do too much alone.

To plan and launch community-wide initiatives on a variety of issues.

To develop and use political clout to gain services or other benefits for the community.

___ To create long-term, permanent social change.

When should you start a coalition?

___ You respond to dramatic or disturbing community events

___ You react to new information

___ You respond to changes in circumstances or regulations

___ You take advantage of new funding

___ You address an outside threat

___ You try to create significant change in the community

___ You form a coalition when trust and perception of a need make it possible

___ You recognize the barriers to starting a coalition.

Who should be part of a coalition?

___ You include stakeholders, both beneficiaries of the work of the coalition and those otherwise affected by it.

___ You include opinion leaders.

___ You include policy makers.

___ You include members of the community at large

How do you start a community coalition?

___ You form a core group.

___ You identify necessary coalition members.

___ You recruit coalition members, using appropriate means:

- Personal contact
- Phone
- E-mail

- Letter
- Advertising
- Posters and flyers.

___ You plan and hold an inclusive and exciting first meeting, where something actually gets done and people leave with assignments and the next meeting scheduled.

___ You follow up on the first meeting, checking on assignments, reminding people about the next meeting, and continuing to recruit new members.

You continue to pursue the important tasks started at the first meeting:

___ Defining the issue and drafting vision and mission statements

___ Developing an action plan

___ Working out an acceptable coalition structure

___ Deciding on the need for professional staff

___ Obtaining resources.

You continue to pay attention to the general guidelines for coalition success:

___ Free, open, and multidirectional communication

___ Inclusiveness and participation

___ Networking

___ Setting reachable goals

___ Holding creative meetings

___ Being realistic about what the coalition can do

___ Acknowledging and using diversity

___ Rewarding accomplishment and celebrating success