



Coalition Building I: Starting a Coalition

Main Section

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What is a coalition?

Why start a coalition?

When should you start a coalition?

Who should be part of a coalition?

How do you start a community coalition?

Youth violence in Pumpkinville was getting out of hand. There were more and more guns, and the kids carrying them were getting younger and younger. In some neighborhoods, neither adults nor teens dared to go out at night. There had been several attempts at drive-by shootings in the past several months, and it was almost miraculous that no one had yet been killed. It seemed that it was only a matter of time.

Several groups were either affected by or trying to deal with the problem. The police were frustrated by their apparent powerlessness, and by their inability to establish relationships with the youth who were most at risk for being both perpetrators and victims. Teachers and principals struggled desperately to keep the violence simmering just below the surface under control while the kids were actually in school. Gang members were constantly at risk, even in their own territory. Parents and uninvolved youth were terrified. Merchants felt that the knots of teens hanging out on the main street were scaring customers away. No one seemed to know what to do.

Pumpkinville Youth Services was a community-based organization that worked with teens at risk, including many of those who were most involved in the violence. The PYS staff was worried, too, but they felt the problem could be dealt with if all the people who cared about it would get together. They decided to try to start a coalition to address youth violence in the community.

Often, community problems or issues are too large and complex for any one agency or organization. In those circumstances, putting together a coalition of groups and individuals can be an effective strategy for bringing the community's resources to bear, and getting everyone moving in the same direction. In this section, we'll discuss just what a community coalition is, why and when it can be a good strategy, who should belong to it, and how to get it started. In the next section, we'll examine how to maintain a coalition once it's a going concern.

What is a coalition?

In simplest terms, a coalition is a group of individuals and/or organizations with a common interest who agree to work together toward a common goal. That goal could be as narrow as obtaining funding for a specific intervention, or as broad as trying to improve permanently the overall quality of life for most people in the community. By the same token, the individuals and organizations involved might be drawn from a narrow area of interest, or might include representatives of nearly every segment of the community, depending upon the breadth of the issue.

Coalitions may be loose associations in which members work for a short time to achieve a specific goal, and then disband. They may also become organizations in themselves, with governing bodies, particular community responsibilities, funding, and permanence. They may draw from a community, a region, a state, or even the nation as a whole (the National Coalition to Ban Handguns, for instance). Regardless of their size and structure, they exist to create and/or support efforts to reach a particular set of goals.

Coalition goals are as varied as coalitions themselves, but often contain elements of one or more of the following:

- *Influencing or developing public policy, usually around a specific issue.*
- *Changing people's behavior* (reducing smoking or drug use, for instance).
- *Building a healthy community.* This term generally refers both to the community's physical health (which may include not only medical and preventive or wellness services, but the environment, community planning, housing, hunger, substance abuse, and other factors) and its social and psychological health (encompassing diversity, education, culture and the arts, violence prevention, youth development, employment, economic development, mental health and other human services, etc.).

In November of 1986, at an international conference on health promotion co-sponsored by the Canadian Public Health Association, Health and Welfare Canada, and the World Health Organization, participants drafted what has become known as the Ottawa Charter. This document set out guidelines for attaining healthy communities and a healthy society, and laid the groundwork for the Healthy Communities movement. Perhaps its most important statement is encapsulated in these two sentences:

"The fundamental conditions and resources for health are: peace, shelter, education, food, income, a stable ecosystem, sustainable resources, social justice, and equity. Improvement in health requires a secure foundation in these basic prerequisites."

Why start a coalition (and why might it be difficult)?

There are a number of reasons why developing a coalition might be a good idea. In general terms, it can concentrate the community's focus on a particular problem, create alliances among those who might not normally work together, and keep the community's approach to issues consistent.

Consistency can be particularly important in addressing a community issue, especially if there are already a number of organizations or individuals working on it. If their approaches all differ significantly, and they're not cooperating or collaborating, it can lead to a chaotic situation where very little is accomplished. If, on the other hand, they can work together and agree on a common way to deal with the issue and on common goals, they're much more likely to make headway.

Some more specific reasons for forming a coalition might include:

- *To address an urgent situation.* The youth violence example that introduces this section is a good illustration of this reason.
- *To empower elements of the community - or the community as a whole - to take control of its future.* This may mean addressing the place of youth in the community, for instance, or looking at economic development in light of globalization and community resources.
- *To actually obtain or provide services.* It may take a coalition - either initially or over the long term - to design, obtain funding for, and/or run a needed intervention in the community.
- *To bring about more effective and efficient delivery of programs and eliminate any unnecessary duplication of effort.* Gathering all the players involved in a particular issue can result in a more cohesive and comprehensive intervention. Rather than duplicating their efforts, organizations can split up or coordinate responsibilities in ways that afford more participants access to programs and allow for a greater variety of services.

When discussing duplication of effort, "unnecessary" is a key word. In most instances, a number of organizations providing similar services, or services to the same population, are addressing a need greater than even all of them together can meet. The important thing here is to explore whether a unified approach can in some way increase or improve the services currently available.

- *To pool resources.* A number of organizations and individuals together may have the resources to accomplish a task that none of them could have done singly. In general, people and organizations join coalitions to do just that - accomplish together what they cannot alone.
- *To increase communication among groups and break down stereotypes.* Bringing together groups and individuals from many sectors of the community can create alliances where there was little contact before. Working together toward common goals can help people break down barriers and preconceptions, and learn to trust one another.
- *To revitalize the sagging energies of members of groups who are trying to do too much alone.* A coalition can help to bolster efforts around an issue. For people who've worked too long in a vacuum, the addition of other hands to the task can be a tremendous source of new energy and hope.
- *To plan and launch community-wide initiatives on a variety of issues.* In addition to addressing immediately pressing issues or promoting or providing services, coalitions can serve to unify efforts around long-term campaigns in such areas as smoking cessation, community economic development, or environmental preservation.
- *To develop and use political clout to gain services or other benefits for the community.* A unified community coalition can advocate for the area more effectively than a number of disparate groups and individuals working alone. In addition, a wide-ranging coalition can bring to bear political pressure from all sectors of the community, and wield a large amount of political power.
- *To create long-term, permanent social change.* Real change usually takes place over a period of time through people gaining trust, sharing ideas, and getting beyond their preconceptions to the real issues underlying community needs. A coalition, with its structure of cooperation among diverse groups and individuals and its problem-solving focus, can ease and sometimes accelerate the process of change in a community.

Barriers to starting a coalition

There are often barriers to starting a coalition, and it's important to be aware of and anticipate them, because they may dictate the process the coalition will have to follow in order to begin successfully. Among the most likely:

- **Turf issues.** Organizations are often very sensitive about sharing their work, their target populations, and especially their funding. Part of the work of starting a coalition may be to convince a number of organizations that working together will in fact both benefit all of them and better address their common issues.
- **Bad history.** Organizations, individuals, or the community as a whole may have had experiences in the past that have convinced them that working with certain others - or working together at all - is simply not possible. A new coalition may have to contend with this history before it can actually start the work it needs to do.
- **Domination by "professionals" or some other elite.** All too often, agency people with advanced degrees, local politicians, business leaders, and others, in their rush to solve problems or to "help the disadvantaged," neglect to involve the people most affected by the issue at hand and other community members. Creating a participatory

atmosphere and reining in those who believe they have all the answers is almost always part of starting a coalition.

Part of a solution here may often be providing support for those who aren't used to the "professional" way of holding meetings and reaching conclusions, while at the same time training professionals and others to include those whose opinions are likely to be far more accurate and important to the solving of the problem than their own. This might mean bringing in an outside facilitator, or simply paying careful attention to guiding the process from within the group.

- **Poor links to the community.** A first step may have to be the development of hitherto nonexistent relationships among agencies and the community at large.
- **Minimal organizational capacity.** It might be necessary to find a coordinator, or for one or more individuals or organizations to find a way to share the burden of organization for the new group if it is to develop beyond - or as far as - a first meeting.
- **Funding.** The difficulty of finding funding is an obvious obstacle. Less obvious are the dangers of available funding that pushes the coalition in the wrong direction or requires it to act too quickly to address the issue effectively. New coalitions have to be alert to funding possibilities from all quarters, and also have to be vigilant about the kind of funding they apply for and accept.
- **Failure to provide and create leadership within the coalition.** Coalitions demand a very special kind of collaborative leadership. (Please see [Chapter 13, Section 11: Collaborative Leadership](#), for more on this issue.) If that leadership isn't available and can't be developed from within the coalition, its existence is probably at risk. It may be necessary to bring in an outside facilitator and/or training in collaborative leadership to salvage the situation.
- **The perceived - or actual - costs of working together outweigh the benefits for many coalition members.** The task here may be to find ways to increase benefits and decrease costs for the individuals and organizations for whom this is the case if the coalition is to survive.

If you understand the potential barriers to forming a coalition in your community, you can plan for them, and increase your chances of success.

When should you develop a coalition?

A coalition needs to have a purpose if it is to be successful. As discussed above, the purpose may be broad or narrow, but it's unlikely that a diverse group will come together unless there's a reason to do so. At particular times, circumstances help to move the formation of coalitions.

1. **When dramatic or disturbing events occur in a community.** In a town of 6,000 in western Massachusetts, four women were murdered by their domestic partners in a space of less than a year. These murders spurred the formation of a coalition to address not only

domestic violence, but the whole issue of violence against women, and such related problems in the community as drug dealing and the lack of responsiveness of the courts.

The events leading to the formation of a coalition don't necessarily have to be local. In the wake of the destruction of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, many communities formed local coalitions to contend with such issues as intolerance toward Muslims and the psychological effects of the disaster on children and families.

2. When new information becomes available. The latest unemployment figures may show that the community's jobless rate is rising rapidly, motivating the formation of a coalition to deal with economic development. A new study may alert a community to the fact that African-American males - a significant part of its population - are at very high risk for heart disease, and community health providers may respond to that risk with the formation of a coalition to provide information, testing, and treatment to that population.

3. When circumstances or the rules change. After the state passed welfare reform legislation, an already economically depressed rural county found itself faced with the prospect of finding permanent jobs for a large number of welfare recipients within the next two years. As a result, the local welfare office, the local branch of the state employment agency, and several other agencies that worked with welfare recipients and their families formed a coalition to try to deal with the situation.

4. When new funding becomes available. A new Request For Proposals (RFP) from a state agency or other source of funding may either require a coalition to obtain funding for a particular service, or a coalition may form in order to create a comprehensive proposal that would spread the funding as widely as possible throughout the community.

An anti-poverty agency in Hampshire County, Massachusetts, took the lead in establishing a coalition of educators, health professionals, child care and human service providers, and parents to act as the required community oversight committee for a Department of Education grant that offered services to the families of children aged three and under. The group planned the grant proposal, and then continued to act as the advisory group for the administration of the funds after the proposal was successful. The members of the coalition also used it to refine and improve their cooperation and collaboration with one another in all their work, resulting, over the long term, in better services across the board in the county. (For a more detailed description of this group's establishment and work, please see the example for [Participatory Approaches to Planning Community Interventions: Chapter 18, Section 2.](#))

5. When there's an outside threat to the community. Communities have formed coalitions, for instance, to prevent their local hospitals from being purchased by national, for-profit health providers; to keep out unwanted, pollution-causing industry; and to preserve open space from development.

6. When a group wishes to create broad, significant community change. Sometimes a problem or issue is so complex and deeply-rooted that only major changes in the way the community views things, or even in its social fabric, can have any effect. In that situation -

again, the Pumpkinville youth violence problem is an example - a broad coalition is necessary to draw in all affected elements of the community, and to approach the problem on a number of different levels.

A coalition for social change can be a different proposition from one dedicated to much narrower or shorter-term goals. For one thing, social change takes time - years, or even decades, not months. Coalition members have to make a commitment for the long run, and they -or their organizations, as individuals come and go - have to honor that commitment.

A second point is that a social change coalition has to be held together by a coherent, shared vision. Such a vision is usually not possible without a group process that can articulate the vision and help others see it as a reachable goal.

Third, social change coalitions often have to settle for small gains that add up only over time. Members must be able to be satisfied with small victories and to weather the inevitable setbacks that sometimes cancel those victories out. Taking the long view is as important to successful social change as making a long-term commitment.

7. When you have not only a good reason for starting a coalition, but also the possibility that one *can* be started successfully in the community. This is an extremely important issue, one that is dependent upon a number of factors:

- *Is the issue or problem clear enough that everyone can agree on what it is?* If there's no agreement that it is an issue, it's unlikely that you'll be able to form a coalition around it. It needs to be clearly defined, even if the solution is not.
- *Is there at least some level of trust among the individuals and organizations who'd make up the coalition?* Community history, or the history of particular organizations, may present what seem to be insurmountable barriers to the formation of a coalition. Community divisions along racial, ethnic, class, religious, or political lines; old feuds; turf battles among agencies; or past failed coalition efforts may mean that a great deal of groundwork has to be done before the community is willing to consider the possibility of a coalition. It may take a long time to build up trust to that point.

Even if there is enough trust to start a coalition, be aware that it is not only possible, but just about inevitable that there will be bad feeling among some groups or individuals. That's a reality in any community, and the coalition will probably have to face it. In many cases, working together toward a common purpose can do a lot to change attitudes and to smooth over the past...but in other cases, it won't make any difference at all, and old enmities will surface.

- *Is a coalition in fact the best response to the issue?* Assuming that neither issue definition nor mistrust is a problem, there is still the possibility that most people will not see a coalition as the most effective way to handle the situation (and that they may be right). Some questions need to be answered in the affirmative before you try to start a coalition:
 - Can the issue be better addressed if all concerned parties are working together, and will a coalition help to accomplish that purpose?

- Will a coalition increase the likelihood that all the factors impinging on the issue are identified and attended to?
- Will a coalition increase the coherence, strength, and effectiveness of the community's response to the issue?
- If the community already has a number of coalitions, is yet another the best response to this issue?

A coalition will only be formed when it *can* be.

Who should be part of a coalition?

In general, the broader the membership of any coalition, the better, but there are certain people and groups whose representation on a coalition is absolutely essential.

1. **Stakeholders.** These are the people who have a stake in the success of the coalition's efforts. They can include:

- *Those most affected by the issue.* These may comprise current or potential participants in programs, people who lack such basic amenities as health insurance or decent housing, sufferers from particular diseases, or - in the case, for instance, of many environmental and public health issues - the community as a whole. It makes no sense, and is patently unfair, to make decisions that affect people's lives without including them in the process.
- *Formal and informal helpers, those charged with carrying out community functions related to the issue, and others affected by what the coalition might do.* The staffs of health and human service providers or other organizations and community agencies, police, school personnel, the probation and court system, local employers, landowners - some or all of these and/or many others may be directly or indirectly involved in the results of coalition initiatives.

2. **Community opinion leaders.** It's extremely useful to save seats at the table for those who can influence large numbers of others. Clergy, business or civic leaders, or people who are simply highly credible in the community may fall into this group.

Involving *emerging* leaders is equally important. These are people, often without a particular position, whom others look to for guidance. They may be leaders of volunteer efforts, youth highly respected by their peers, active parents, or just those with clear leadership potential. They are important to have on board, both for their ideas and energy, and for the influence they wield and will wield as they become more widely known and respected in the community.

3. **Policy makers.** The participation of local political leaders, state representatives, and others in policy-making positions will both add credibility to your enterprise and increase the chances that you can actually influence policy in your area of interest.

In addition to these specific groups, virtually any coalition can benefit from the membership of at least some concerned citizens who may have no direct connection to the issue at hand. Such people can both act as barometers of the attitudes of the community at large, and can bring information back to the community that helps to explain the work of the coalition and give it a higher profile.

Another group that you might want to involve, but in a slightly different way, is the media. Rather than trying to get media members to join, you might want to contact them to publicize and cover your coalition and its efforts. If they join, there may be ethical limitations on the amount of coverage they can give you.

How do you start a community coalition?

So...you've decided a coalition is indeed the way to go in your community. How do you actually go about starting one?

1. **Put together a core group.** You're probably already not alone in your concerns about the issue at hand, and you may already have a core group - a few individuals or organizations - ready to work at forming a coalition. If not, your first step is to find and make contact with those few individuals and organizations most involved with the issue.

Some reasons why a core group, rather than an individual, should lead the effort:

- A core group will have more contacts and more knowledge of the community than a single individual.
- It will give the idea of a coalition more standing among potential members.
- It will make finding and reaching potential members a much faster process.
- A core group will make the task easier on all the individuals involved, and therefore more likely to get done.
- It shows that the effort has wide support.

There are a few ways to approach assembling a core group:

- *Start with people you know.* If you're a longtime activist on this issue, or if you've been living or working in your community for a while, you have lots of contacts, particularly among others concerned with the same things you are. Use those contacts now, either to pull them into the circle, or to get the names of others who might be part of a core group. Someone who knows you - assuming you have a positive relationship - is usually more easily persuaded than someone who doesn't.
- *Contact people in agencies and institutions most affected by the issue.* Pumpkinville Youth Services, in its drive to start a coalition on youth violence, went to both the Chief of Police and the Superintendent of Schools for support. As a result, a Community

Affairs officer and an Assistant Superintendent both became part of the core group that set out to put the coalition together.

- *Talk to influential people, or people with lots of contacts.* These may be business or civic leaders, ordinary citizens with high credibility, or people like the United Way director, whose job it is to know nearly everyone.

Try to recruit to the core group some members of the group most affected by and concerned with the problem. A youth violence coalition should look for teens - perhaps gang members - to be core group members; a homeless and housing coalition should try to recruit current or former homeless people. Incorporating such people into the core group will give you a built-in reality check, provide a link to the group they represent, add credibility to your effort, and make clear your commitment to a participatory process.

See [Chapter 9, Section 2: Choosing a Group to Create and Run Your Initiative](#), for more on how to form a core group.

2. Identify the most important potential coalition members. Especially if your coalition has a narrow and time-limited purpose, there are probably people or organizations you can't do without. It's important to identify them, and to target them specifically for membership. This may mean courting them - an initial meeting over lunch where you pick up the tab, for instance, or a promise of a place on the steering committee.

Most of these individuals and organizations are referred to in "Who should be part of a coalition?" above, but each community is different. In yours, there may be a specific person among the target population, or a particular town official, without whom nothing can get done. The chances are you - and if not you, then other members of the core group - know this person, or at least know who she is, and have some connection to her.

She may not even need to be an official coalition member, but simply to lend her support. Whatever the case, don't neglect her. Remember the story of the fairy who wasn't invited to the christening - she cursed the baby, who then became Sleeping Beauty, and was lost to the world for 100 years. The same thing could happen to your coalition, if you ignore the wrong person.

As mentioned earlier, none of this is to say that you shouldn't recruit many other people and organizations to your coalition as well. It simply means that you need to make a special effort to enlist these crucial members.

3. Recruit members to the coalition. Now that your core group is in place, and you've decided on the potential members who are necessary to the success of the coalition, you can start recruiting members. Although it's important to start with the individuals and groups mentioned above, you'll probably want to be as inclusive as possible. It's unusual to hear about a coalition suffering because it has too many members.

Use the networking capacity of your core group to the fullest. The core group can brainstorm a list of possible members, in addition to those deemed essential. Then each member can identify individuals on the list whom he knows personally, or organizations where he has a personal contact. If there are names left on the list without a contact, they can be divided among the members of the core group.

There are, obviously, a number of ways to contact people and organizations, including:

- Face-to-face meetings
- Phone calls
- E-mail
- Personal letters
- Mass mailings
- Public Service Announcements or ads in the media
- Flyers and posters

These are listed here in their approximate order of effectiveness, with direct personal contact being the best. It also takes longest, however, and probably should be reserved for those "must-haves" we discussed earlier. Most people are likely to be recruited by phone. See [Chapter 7: Encouraging Involvement in Community Work](#), particularly Sections 3-7 ([Methods of Contacting Potential Participants](#); [Writing Letters to Potential Participants](#); [Making Personal Contact with Potential Participants](#); [Involving Influential People in the Initiative](#); and [Involving People Most Affected by the Problem](#)), for a much more detailed description of the recruiting process.

Be sure to ask those you talk to for suggestions about other potential members, and try to have them make the contact. That will spread out the work, and also give the invitation more credibility, since it comes from someone the contacted person knows. If you are successful, you could end up contacting and recruiting several times the number of people and organizations on your original list.

When you contact people to recruit them to the coalition, make sure you have something substantive to offer or to ask them to do. An invitation to a first meeting - at a specific time and place far enough in the future that schedules can be arranged to fit it in - is perhaps the most common offer, but you could also, for instance, ask people to contact their state representative or to work with a small group. An appeal to join without something specific attached to it will often fall on deaf ears. People's time is valuable, and they want to know that it won't be wasted.

4. Plan and hold a first meeting. The first meeting of a coalition is important. If it's a high-energy, optimistic gathering that gets people excited, you're off to a good start. If it's depressed and negative, or just boring, it's a good bet that a lot of people won't come back. It's up to the core group - in what may be the last official task they undertake - to plan a meeting that will start the coalition off on the right foot.

There are really two concerns here: the logistics of the meeting (where, when, how long, etc.) and the content of it. Please see Tool #1 for a discussion of the logistics; we'll look at content here.

There are a number of possibilities for the content of the first meeting. The agenda should depend on your particular issue and purposes, and on the needs of your community, but you'll probably want to include some of the following:

- *Introductions all around.* Everyone present should give a brief statement of who they are, the organization, if any, they're connected with, and the nature of their interest in the issue.
- *Start defining the issue or problem around which the coalition has come together.* This might mean the group coming up with an actual statement, or it might entail an initial discussion, followed by a small group being asked to draft a possible definition for the next meeting.
- *Discuss the structure of the coalition.* What kind of group will it be, how (if at all) will it be run, what kinds of things will it actually do? Is hiring staff a reasonable goal, either currently or eventually?
- *At least start the process of creating a common vision and agreeing on shared values about the direction of the coalition.* This is the first step toward developing the vision and mission statements that will define the coalition and guide its work.
- *Discuss a procedure for forming an action plan.* Again, this may result in an actual, or at least a preliminary, plan, or it may lead either to the appointment of a smaller group to draft a plan, or to the establishment of a procedure by which the larger group will generate a plan over a set period of time.
- *Review the things to be done before the next meeting, and who has agreed to do them.* As mentioned above, it's important that people leave the first meeting feeling that something has been accomplished. If there are tasks being worked on, and specific results expected at the next meeting - even if those results are simply statements or preliminary plans to react to - coalition members will have that feeling.
- *Schedule at least the next meeting.* It may be possible to develop a regular meeting schedule at this first meeting, or it may make more sense to schedule only the next meeting and wait until the membership stabilizes and some other people join before creating a long-term schedule.

5. Follow up on the first meeting. You've held a successful first meeting - terrific! The job of building a coalition has only begun, however. First, you have to follow up to make sure that there will be a well-attended second meeting at which work can continue.

The list that follows is one for whoever is actually putting the coalition together. That may be an individual, a core group, a staffer, or even a new coalition governing body of some sort. Whoever it is, someone has to be responsible for keeping an eye on the larger picture and making sure that the jobs get done. Without some level of coordination from somewhere, it's very unlikely that a coalition will survive and succeed.

- *Distribute the minutes of the first meeting and reminders about the next meeting to those who attended, and send them out with invitations to potential new members as well.* Try to widen your net as much as possible. Get to the folks you missed the first time, or to those whose names you've gotten from people who attended the first meeting.
- *Follow up on the groups or individuals who are working on tasks assigned at the first meeting.* Offer help, attend meetings, try to involve other people with relevant skills or knowledge - do everything you can to make sure those tasks get accomplished.
- *If there are committees or task forces forming, try to recruit new members for them.* The real work of the coalition will probably be done in these small groups, so it's important that they have the right members. If you know people with expertise that could be used in particular ways, grab them. Most people will respond if they're asked, especially if they're asked because you value what they bring to the task.
- *Keep looking for new coalition members.*
- *Keep track of the fundamental building blocks of the coalition that aren't in place yet.* If the group hasn't yet decided on a structure or a coordinating body, you need to make sure that the decision doesn't get pushed aside, but that it's either in the works or being actively considered. If there's no action on an action plan, you need to provide the push to get it going.

6. Next steps. There are a number of specific things - some of which you've already started in that first meeting - that need to be done to make sure that the coalition keeps moving forward.

- *Gather information.* In order to plan for action, you need as much information about the problem or issue - and about the community - as possible. Many organizations, particularly those most involved with the issue at hand, are likely to have statistics or other info on hand. The U.S. Census can be a good source of demographic information, as can local colleges or universities and local government departments. The more information you can gather, the easier it becomes to define the problem, to know if you're addressing something that's actually a major community issue, and to plan a strategy that will address it effectively.
- *Finish creating vision and mission statements.* These can be hashed out in a small group after everyone has had input in a larger meeting, or you can actually try to generate them in the larger group itself (perhaps by splitting people up into smaller groups, then coming back together to reconcile differences). It's important that there be agreement on the wording and intent of these statements, because they will be the foundation of the coalition, referred to again and again over time as the group tries to decide whether to tackle particular issues. Everyone has to feel ownership of them if the coalition is to develop an identity.
- *Complete an action plan.* The coalition's action plan is, obviously, intertwined with both its structure and its vision and mission. In practice, coalitions often start with a sense of what they need to do, and their structures, visions, and missions grow from that.

Please see [Chapter 8: Developing a Strategic Plan](#), for more on generating vision and mission statements and developing an action plan.

- *Finish the work of designing a structure for the coalition.* Again, this has to be a shared task, with everyone having a chance to contribute ideas. There is such a broad range of possibilities here - from practically no governance to a very clear, formal hierarchy - that it's crucial that the group come up with a form that everyone can live with. Once a structure has been agreed upon, there may still be the need for writing bylaws and otherwise formalizing it. (See [Chapter 9: Developing an Organizational Structure for the Initiative](#), particularly [Section 7: Writing Bylaws](#).)

The author has been a member of several coalitions. One was governed by a formal Board of Directors, with officers and an Executive Committee that included the officers and committee chairs. Another was essentially run by a paid director, with a good deal of input from coalition members, but only nominal oversight. A third was coordinated by a steering committee whose membership was open to any member of the coalition. All of these coalitions worked reasonably well, accomplishing their goals largely through committees or task forces. The first and third began without professional staff, and became successful enough that they were able to obtain funding for full -time directors.

What all these coalitions had in common were strong leadership and a clear sense of where they were going at any given time. (The goals and purposes of all of them changed from time to time, in response to external conditions and the needs of their members and communities.) The need for strong leadership - whether individual or collaborative - cannot be overstressed. The ideal, in many ways, is to have the leadership dispersed throughout the coalition so that the departure of an individual doesn't create a vacuum. But however it's distributed, leadership is the one thing a coalition can't do without. (Please refer to [Chapter 13: Orienting Ideas in Leadership](#), particularly [Section 1: Developing a Plan for Building Leadership](#); [Section 2: Servant Leadership: Accepting and Maintaining the Call of Service](#); [Section 3: Styles of Leadership](#); and [Section 11: Collaborative Leadership](#) for more on this issue.)

- *Elect officers, or a coordinating or steering committee.* Once there's agreement about the structure of the coalition, it's time for members to decide whether they want some sort of governing body, and to choose it so that the work of the coalition can go ahead.
- *Examine the need for professional staff.* Depending on the scope of its work plan, a coalition may feel that it needs professional staff - at least a coordinator - to be effective. If it has the resources, a community coalition may be able to hire a full- or part-time coordinator. Or it may see the need for one and set out to find the resources. In addition to direct grants to the coalition, one or more member organizations may be able to provide funding, or employers or other elements of the community may be willing to fund all or part of a coordinator's salary if the work of the coalition is relevant to their concerns.

[Chapter 9: Developing an Organizational Structure for the Initiative](#), has more on designing a structure that will work for your particular coalition. [Chapter 10: Hiring and Training Key Staff of Community Organizations](#), will help you find, hire, and train paid staff.

- *Determine what other resources - financial, material, informational, etc. - you need, develop a plan for getting them, and decide who's going to be responsible for carrying it out.* If you already have funding for a paid staff person, finding resources may be one

of her primary responsibilities...or it may not. A committee of the coalition may have that responsibility, or someone may simply take it on. Part of creating a strategic plan that encompasses your vision, mission, and action plan is looking at the resources you'll need to reach your goals and planning for obtaining those resources. Man may not live by bread alone, but it sure helps when he's trying to make a peanut butter sandwich. (Please see [Chapter 42, Section 1: *Developing a Plan for Financial Sustainability*](#); [Section 4: *Applying for a Grant: The General Approach*](#); and [Section 5: *Writing a Grant*](#); [Chapter 43, Section 1: *Planning and Writing an Annual Budget*](#); and [Chapter 46: *Planning for Long-term Institutionalization*](#), particularly [Section 4: *Attracting Support for Specific Programs*](#); [Section 6: *Sharing Positions and Other Resources*](#); [Section 11: *Soliciting Contributions and In-Kind Support*](#); and [Section 15: *Acquiring Public Funding*](#), for more on resources.)

- *Start the hard work of maintaining the coalition over time.* Once your coalition is a going concern, it still needs care and feeding. After it's been around for a while and had some success, people may start to take it for granted, or the original members may start to burn out or to get stale. Careful maintenance for the long term is an extremely important task. This issue will be covered in detail in [Chapter 5, Section 6: *Coalition Building II: Maintaining a Coalition*](#).

7. Some general guidelines for getting a coalition off the ground. In addition to the specifics above, there are some more general elements to starting a coalition:

- *Communicate, communicate, communicate.* Make sure that lines of communication within the coalition and among the coalition, the media, and the community are wide open. Open communication will assure that no one feels left out of the loop, and that everyone has the information necessary to make coalition efforts successful. Good communication with the media and the community will increase your chances for publicity and support when you need them. (Please see [Chapter 6, Section 1: *Developing a Plan for Communication*](#), and [Chapter 15, Section 4: *Promoting Internal Communication*](#).)
- *Be as inclusive and participatory as you can.* Work at making the coalition a group in which anyone in the community will feel welcome, and continue to invite people to join after the first meeting. Try to involve everyone in the coalition in generating vision and mission statements, planning, and major decisions. The more people feel ownership of the coalition itself, the harder they'll be willing to work to achieve its goals, and the less likely they'll be to allow turf issues or minor conflicts to get in the way of the coalition's progress.
- *Network like crazy.* Try to involve, or at least to keep informed, as many other groups in the community as possible. Let them know what you're doing, invite them to coalition meetings (to make presentations, if appropriate, or just to see what's going on), invite them to join if they're interested, educate them about the issue. If groups in the community are informed about your work, they're more likely to be supportive, and to tell others about what you're doing as well. They may also have better connections to policy makers than you have, and may be able to help you approach them.
- *Try, at least at the beginning, to set concrete, reachable goals.* Success is great glue - achieving reachable goals early can help a coalition develop the strength to later spend the years it may take to pursue and achieve long-term goals.

- *Be creative about meetings.* Community activists and health and human service workers often feel that they spend their whole lives in meetings. If each coalition meeting can be different, and have some elements of fun to it, you'll be much more likely to retain both membership and interest in the coalition. Some possibilities include rotating the responsibility for meetings among the groups comprising the coalition; having only a small number of meetings a year, each with a particular theme, and doing most of the work of the coalition in committees or task forces; or regularly bringing in exciting presentations on the issue or in areas that relate to it.
- *Be realistic, and keep your promises.* If you're not sure you can do it, don't say you will. If you say you will, be sure you do.
- *Acknowledge diversity among your members, and among their ideas and beliefs.* Your coalition will probably mirror the cultural, economic, racial, ethnic, and religious diversity of your community, and will certainly represent a diversity of opinion. Not everyone will agree with everything the coalition does or wants to do, and sometimes the minority opinion will be right. Make sure to take everyone's opinion and restraints into account, and to use diversity as a spur to discussion, rather than a source of division.

By the same token, it's important that there be a mechanism for getting things done when there is a disagreement, whether it's a majority vote or something else. A long-term disagreement over strategy or tactics can hang up a coalition permanently, and make it totally ineffective.

- *Praise and reward outstanding contributions and celebrate your successes.* In addition to success itself, the celebration of success is a great way to cement the bonds among members of a coalition. Whether through individual or group awards, or through parties or other events, celebration of achievement will help your coalition thrive, and will give you a much-needed opportunity to remember that there's a reason you're doing all this.

To sum up

In situations where issues are too large and complex for a single organization to address, a coalition of groups and individuals working together may be the solution. A coalition can develop a coordinated response to an issue, increase the efficiency of service delivery, pool community resources, create and launch community-wide initiatives, build and wield political clout to influence policy, and work effectively toward long-term social change.

Coalitions may form in response to:

- Significant or disturbing community events
- New information
- Changes in circumstances or regulations
- The availability of funding

- An outside threat to the community
- The need to create significant change in the community

Whatever the reason, coalitions can only form when the possibility - in the form of mutual trust and a perceived need - exists. They should encompass all stakeholders - those affected by the work of the coalition and by the issue it addresses - as well as community opinion leaders, policy makers, and community members at large.

To start a coalition, it's best to begin with a core group and work outward, pulling in the necessary members mentioned above, as well as a more general membership from the community and from other, more peripherally-involved organizations. Holding an exciting first meeting at which there are real accomplishments and/or the work of the coalition is set in motion will help to launch the enterprise successfully.

Even more important is following up before the second meeting to make sure that groups are doing the work they said they would do, that attendance won't fall off, and that new members will be added. Areas that must be addressed are

- An agreed-upon definition of the issue or problem the coalition is addressing
- The creation of vision and mission statements
- The development of an action plan
- The design of a structure for the coalition
- The need for professional staff
- Resources

Finally, you have to continue to pay attention to some general rules for forming and running a coalition:

- Communicate openly and freely with everyone.
- Be inclusive and participatory
- Network at every opportunity
- Set reachable goals, in order to engender success
- Hold creative meetings
- Be realistic about what you can do: don't promise more than you can accomplish, and always keep your promises
- Acknowledge and use the diversity of the group

A coalition can be a powerful force for positive change in a community. If you can form one that lasts and addresses the issues it was meant to, you've done a major piece of community building work.