



COALITION-BUILDING

Are you having difficulty getting a legislator's attention? Have you been wondering if you will ever get another fresh idea about how to approach your legislative agenda? Did the last few monthly financial reports show that the budget for government affairs activities was coming close to its annual limit? Is your most reliable government affairs colleague suddenly tied up with other professional or personal business? Do you worry that your government affairs work will have few accomplishments to reflect for all your effort?

If so, "coalition-building" may be the strategy to pursue for effective problem solving. Building collaborations, or partnerships, or alliances, or coalitions, whatever the term, is not an easy undertaking – but neither are government relations work and the making of public policy. Policymaking and coalition-building are demanding. Each is time-consuming, labor-intensive, and sometimes complex to the point of causing frustration. These are not uncommon conditions for nurses. Successful nurses approach these conditions as puzzles and challenges – as learning situations, not barriers, on the way to attaining desired goals.

This document briefly highlights some critical factors to help you strategize and begin the coalition building process. For starters, keep in mind that a successful coalition typically has these traits:

- A well-defined mission statement
- A strong leadership group
- Broad-based stakeholders
- A strong communications base and timely outreach.
- Dedicated fiscal and human resources

A Well-Defined Mission Statement

Developing a defined mission statement is key to any group of collaborators. Interacting, as expressed through a coalition, involves merging the interests of disparate groups for mutual benefits. A group's mission should never be assumed, for its members may have multiple individual reasons for involvement. A clear mission statement has these elements:

- A statement of purpose focusing on desired results, not problems
- A description of what will be accomplished, when, where, how, and for whom
- The scope of work

A mission should be stated and agreed upon by all group members. Secure the commitment of the group to keep the collaboration focused on its main purpose. This may seem obvious, but it is easy for coalitions to lose focus out of a desire to accommodate other's concerns. Spend time establishing the group members' agreement and commitment to the mission and goals. Once a collective mission is established, reaching consensus on the means to achieve the group's goal will be easier. If partners are reminded of their agreement about the goal, they will find a way to agree on the means for reaching it.

A Strong Leadership Group

A clear vision of, and commitment to, the mission accomplishes little absent a strong leadership group. “Strong” does not refer to wielding force or pronounced toughness. A leadership group is strong because its members – individuals and organizations – are credible in various ways. For some, credibility may be based on the authority held by an organization partner, or by virtue of being a well-positioned decision-maker within a member organization. Credibility of a leadership team also is measured by the track record of achievement that individuals have and the content and technical expertise that individuals can bring to the coalition. The credibility and value of collaboration are readily seen in the diversity of skills brought to the group. Working together and interdependence brings a strength surpassing the capabilities of any one individual.

A successful group reaps the benefits of advanced planning and groundwork. Some members may be impatient with the group-building process because they joined to do something about a problem and want to act immediately. However, no project will be successful if the group implementing it is not cohesive and effective. Conflicts often arise due to lack of understanding about the other partners in the group. Many misperceptions and myths may exist among professionals who interact with each other daily. Strong leaders can preempt conflicts by taking the time to facilitate understanding of each member organization, as well as building a common vocabulary and a *modus operandi* (method of operation). The *modus operandi* should involve the entire coalition in forming ground rules, communication methods, necessary functions, and organizational roles and responsibilities for the group's successful operation.

Coalition success also is dependent upon the maintenance of extensive, continuous interaction among the members of the alliance, who before the collaboration have been productive by working and making decisions alone. Strong leadership uses shared decision-making for producing mutually beneficial situations for all coalition members. Effective shared decision-making relies upon continuous information sharing, and skills in listening to and understanding others' perspectives. Each member organization has its own language and culture that may be unfamiliar to others. Each member also has a distinct definition of the problem to be solved. When communication is open and honest, free from reprisal or ridicule, and acknowledged as valuable, partners are more likely to seek out compromises to overcome an impasse. Moreover, when leaders seek opinions from all members, there will be ownership of the decision by all. Successful leaders know that without others, there would be no credit to share.

Broad-based Stakeholders

The broader the base of stakeholders involved, the greater the potential for success. It is important to include all those who may have a stake in the issue being addressed, including:

- Those who want to solve the problem
- Those who have the resources to solve the problem
- Those who may benefit from the solution
- Those who may benefit from the problem's existence
- Those who have the problem – the target audience

Considering other criteria for membership – such as familiarity with previous efforts in the issue area, the variety of skills and disciplines represented, and the potential member's ability to work with others, or to influence others to be involved – may also be important. While you may be tempted to exclude those who are likely to disagree with you, this will often cause problems during implementation. Including these people in the ownership of the coalition may strengthen collaborative work and encourage them to consider constructive ideas. The whole point of collaboration is to explore differences and devise solutions that allow for these differences.

If you are attempting to recruit an organization to the coalition, the following questions should be explored:

- What are the organization's or profession's mission and goals?
- What is the organization's jurisdiction?
- Are there any informal etiquette rules or protocols to observe in dealing with the organization or profession?
- What part of the organization handles the type of project in which you are interested?
- Who would be the best contact within the organization?
- What organizational channels or chain of command would your contact have to go through to gain approval for the organization's involvement?
- Are there any individual or organizational limitations or restrictions to involvement?
- What are the potential liabilities of involvement?
- What does the organization see as its role in the project?
- What does the organization hope to gain from its involvement?

If you are attempting to bring a legislator into the coalition, the following is a sample agenda for meeting with this potential collaborator:

1. **Introduce yourself.** Give your name, professional status, and relationship with the legislator (e.g., constituent, consumer).
2. **Introduce your organization.** Explain mission and goals, size, and relationship of organization to the legislator. Have printed background information to share.
3. **Seek clarification about the legislator.** Seek to learn more about the goals, values, priorities, and current projects of the legislator. These questions may offer insight into the potential for involvement and the ways in which the coalition might offer the legislator support. Before meeting, find out as much as possible about the legislator so that you are able to ask informed questions.
4. **Explain your project.** Briefly explain the "who, what, when, where, why, and how" of the project. Share your experience and why it is important, giving the legislator motivation for involvement. Have a short (e.g., bulleted) fact sheet with you to keep you on track and to leave behind. Give the legislator a chance to ask questions and express concerns.
5. **Explain potential legislator role.** Be specific about how the legislator could contribute to the project. Be well informed about the legislator's relationship to the issue and related issues in the past, the benefits of becoming involved, and the potential liabilities of involvement. Offer strategies for counteracting the liabilities.
6. **Discuss ways for the legislator to become involved and seek mutual agreement on future interaction.** Discuss and agree on a time-frame for the next action (if any) to be taken by both parties. Establish a contact person for each organization.
7. **After the Meeting.** Make written notes about the discussion points and agreement. Send a thank-you letter, regardless of the meeting outcome. Follow up as agreed at the end of the meeting. Strong, credible leadership ensures reliable follow-up where conversations made in confidence are honored and commitments made are fulfilled.

With a broad-based coalition membership, it is normal for conflict to surface at some point. Working through differences can be facilitated through a variety of methods. Often the source of conflict is power, for power is usually unequal among group members. However, in coalitions it is **equity** within a group's value system that is sought, not **equal** power. Equity has more to do with each member having some form of power, such as connections, expertise, resources, position, charisma, integrity, and time. Each group member can contribute in a different way at

varying levels and at various times. All forms of power must be acknowledged and equally valued to maintain equity.

Dedicated Fiscal and Human Resources

A full commitment to the coalition is demonstrated by a contribution of time, resources, and power. The coalition's modus operandi should include a clear, dedicated commitment by the partners to pool or jointly secure the resources necessary for achieving the alliance's goals.

Resources are scarce, but by leveraging them, collaboration enhances the probability of success and allows coalition members to share equally in the results and rewards. By combining personnel, power, expertise, materials, and time, collaboration also empowers group members. The investment unites and extends strengths, minimizes weaknesses, and yields new ideas and more results, all of which benefit each organization's development.

Strong Communications Base and Timely Outreach

A successful coalition depends on well-defined communication channels operating among all the members. Continuous information exchange and the building of connections will provide the foundation for the communication, trust, and sharing that are integral to vibrant partnerships. Collaborators should feel that they are in the loop. They should be aware of what is going on and know that they are wanted group members whose contributions to group communication are needed to keep the coalition current with the ever-changing public policy process.

In addition, well-defined communication channels should be in place for a coalition to reach its goals successfully. The traits that are necessary for effective coalition operations include:

- Developing rapport with legislators and administrative staff
- Building grassroots advocacy
- Interacting with and energizing the media
- Providing refined spokesperson commentary
- Delivering digital and Internet-based communications
- Establishing and maintaining credibility by speaking truthfully, openly, and consistently

Follow-up

Follow-up is often discussed in government relations work. It is essential to establishing credibility. But follow-up also is important within the coalition. A successful partnership is constantly seeking ways to improve its group processes. Coalition members should rate the group on its inclusion, leadership, decision-making, and workload distribution. Evaluation of the group's process should be incorporated into its modus operandi. Success is not only about the project, it is also about the success of the coalition. Some questions to ask in the evaluation might include the following:

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| ▪ Are the group's efforts effective? | ▪ What is changing in our collaboration itself? |
| ▪ Did it have a measurable result? | ▪ What needs to change? |
| ▪ Did the group efficiently use available resources? | ▪ What is our highest priority for improving our coalition next year? |
| ▪ What lessons have we learned? | |