

Building Coalitions: Coalition Facilitator Guide¹

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Coalitions and collaborations don't just happen. They come about because of a common problem and goal. But, it still takes a person (or small group of persons) to provide the impetus to bring a group together and start things moving. This person (or persons) may or may not also assume the role of facilitator. The facilitator conducts meetings, is able to bring diverse ideas together, and also helps the group in working toward mutually identified and achievable goals. Also, the facilitator should be perceived by the coalition participants as trusted and neutral.

Role of the Facilitator

The most important role of the facilitator is to lay the groundwork for trust to grow as the partnership develops. Openness and informality, the absence of "power plays," and sharing ideas help create ongoing relationships. The facilitator builds a foundation of trust and commitment by:

- Teaching people to think in new ways about sharing information and resources.
- Establishing brainstorming sessions to allow all ideas to flow without worrying about methodology.
- Helping tie together various comments, questions and concerns raised in discussion.
- Being sure everyone is aware of decisions being reached.

- Involving the "quiet" people during the meeting.
- Being process and goal oriented. Keeping the meetings and discussion focused on the objective of the group. Being alert and sensitive to the fine line between diversionary and related, helpful discussion.
- Discussing controversial issues thoroughly. Rather than pushing things through, attempt to reach a consensus.
- Being aware of decision-making processes and those used by other coalition members.

Qualities of Facilitators

If the coalition is to succeed, the facilitator must recognize the usefulness and importance of sharing with others across and within systems. Qualities of a successful facilitator are:

- A positive mental attitude, especially when people predict failure before the project is given a chance to succeed.
- Strong commitment to the goals of the group.
- Ability to listen and reflect on what was presented.
- Neutrality. If controversial issues arise, he or she needs to ensure everyone in the group has equal opportunity to express their views in an atmosphere of comfort and confidence.

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- Awareness of what is not being said and how to have it stated.
- Awareness of when to facilitate and when to participate.
- Ability to “seize the moment.” When to conclude the discussion and move to the next step by consensus.
- Good interpersonal communication skills including equal treatment and listening.

Factors Which Inhibit Coalitions

- Competitiveness.
- Dominating rather than shared leadership that discourages group-decision making.
- Inflexibility in scheduling meetings and activities.
- Lack of understanding about how schools and community agencies operate.
- Hidden agenda for personal advancement.
- Cynicism about the advantage of information sharing.
- Time constraints and pressure to “push things through” without giving adequate time for discussion and to work through conflicts.
- More emphasis on talking than listening.
- Preferring to do things alone rather than spending time negotiating.
- Prescribing actions for a partnership (coalition) from the top down.
- Lack of procedure for making decisions and solving disagreements when they emerge

A Tip for the Facilitator

Keep a journal. It can:

- Track the process of coalition development. It will help analyze, compare and determine overall progress.
- The abilities of the facilitator can determine the success of a coalition group. Walking the tightrope of neutrality, developing trust, and guiding the group toward consensus goals will go along way toward having a successful coalition.

References

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