

Building Coalitions: Coalition Functioning¹

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Introduction

Building Coalitions is a series of publications that provide information on the needs, preparations, skills, and work required for community and other groups to establish and sustain coalitions for collaboration on common causes. This publication is one of the fifteen-part series of fact sheets compiled by The Ohio Center for Action on Coalitions. It has been adapted for UF/IFAS Extension Faculty in Florida to facilitate collaboration with local and regional organizations and groups, such as nonprofits, cooperatives, county Extension associations, and others that may benefit from a plan for working together to achieve mutual goals.

A Committee in Disguise

Starting and maintaining a coalition is not a big mystery. It is similar to starting and maintaining a committee where there is a need and there are people interested in finding a solution. The United States started as a coalition of colonies with a need (problem) and people interested in finding a solution.

Though the functions of a committee and a coalition are very similar, the word "committee" may need to be avoided. Negative comments have often been made about committees. For example: "The camel is just a horse put together by a committee." "The fewer committee meetings the better." "Too much of my day is used up in useless committees."

Elements of Success

- **Common Goals**—What is the expressed need (or "problem equals...") the group agrees is a priority? What is the desired change? These need to be understood by all involved.
- **Communication**—Use common language that everyone can understand. Avoid professional jargon. Each member needs to know what is expected. For example, minutes of meetings should be distributed to all members.
- **Each Member Is Important to the Coalition**—Each participant should be able to perceive themselves as an important part of the whole, contributing to its success.

- **Opportunity to Participate**—Each member should have input into goals, methods and decisions, as well as discussion.
- **Ownership**—Feeling a part of the coalition and responsibility for some action is an important result of participating in the decision-making process.
- **Delegation**—Delegate to each entity a part they can control. That provides an opportunity for individual accomplishments as well as contributes to the overall success of the coalition.
- **Efficient, Effective Meetings**—Keep the meetings moving toward the agreed goals. Each goal should show progress toward the overall target(s) and participants should recognize this progress when they leave.
- **Process and Pattern**—Establish a format for conduct of meetings and decision-making early in the development of the coalition.
- **Shared or Situational Leadership**—It is important that many people or groups share leadership responsibilities.

While attention to group goals and objectives is essential, developing and maintaining committees and coalitions is also an interpersonal process. This requires close attention to group process and skills.

Summary

The principles that relate to effective coalition functioning coincide with the principles of effective committee functioning.

Acknowledgment

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It has been adapted for county Extension faculty in Florida to facilitate work with local and regional organizations and groups such as nonprofits, cooperatives, county Extension associations, and others that might benefit from a plan for working together to achieve support for mutual goals.

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