



How to build COALITIONS

Mobilization

Coalitions can influence communities to mobilize for change that will benefit human needs. Each community is a microcosm of a nation. It includes many publics: professions, fraternal groups, women's clubs, civic clubs, business and industry, educational institutions, youth groups, media, labor groups, religious groups, and senior citizen organizations. The collective community may act differently than its individual parts. Communities can be mobilized when citizens take a stand, determine needs, and collaborate; when emerging community leaders are encouraged; and when the efforts for positive change outlast the coalition.

Prerequisites for mobilization

It takes time for community groups to be ready for coalition membership. Prior to commitment they need to define turf, develop trust, and assess common interests. The early stages need to be a time for free sharing of ideas and goals. The leaders need to carefully plan for some small collective successes. At the outset, coalition exploration should include agencies rather than exclude them. The new collaboration must not threaten or duplicate existing efforts. The group leadership needs to know that the public as well as individual members will expect action and results.

Mobilization needs

- Concerned citizens willing to work toward change
- Emerging leaders to inspire and guide the effort
- A common community vision of the results
- People who respect individual group efforts, but support the common goal
- Recognition and encouragement for involvement
- Plans to reduce "at-risk" situations for the coalition
- Leaders who encourage, build, develop

strategies, and share both work and recognition

- Awareness of human-relations impact on group action
- Time

Who should be involved?

Natural alliances for mobilization are made up of people who share a common interest in an issue. This includes both those individuals and groups directly affected by the issue as well as community-minded actors. The group should have linkages (either by representation or delegation) to the power structure, government agencies, key communicators, advisory boards, the business community, and the education community.

"The new coalition must not threaten or duplicate existing efforts."

Membership in a community coalition generally falls into one of three categories:

Activists—Those who take an active role and provide leadership, write grants, and serve on subcommittees and steering committees.

Helpers—Those who work on a limited basis or on specific designated tasks such as letter writing, newsletter distribution, etc.

Communicators—Those who communicate the work of the coalition to the outside through educational sessions and networks with other groups.

Formation strategies

Many strategies are successfully used to mobilize coalitions.

- A formal organization of diverse groups with a common issue
 - elected or appointed coordinator/facilitator
 - time intensive
 - ability to carry out large projects

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- Targeted population segment through informal networks
 - Works in smaller communities
 - Works in clusters of communities

Mobilization methods

Large group techniques such as a town meeting or “speak-outs” work well in the beginning when knowledge building or information sharing is needed. These early activities need to be process oriented and democratic. Follow the process activities with the work of subcommittees in which individual openness and candor are appreciated. Finally, add the concrete work of subcommittees that brings needed change for the community.

Public relations plan

An effective public relations plan will help concerned groups contribute to the creation of positive attitudes where none exist, intensify existing positive attitudes, and convert existing negative attitudes. Solid program stages will include the following:

1. Unveil the program to the whole community, churches, schools, service clubs, and any community organization that will listen.
2. Develop a program identity through an ad campaign, and promote it heavily.
3. Tell the story of the community people who developed the coalition.
4. Report on community acceptance of the coalition.
5. Report on community reactions to the coalition.
6. Tell the story of the program’s success.
7. Emphasize the advantages to the community.
8. Report on trends that support need or reinforce action.
9. Tell success stories of other communities and states.

Public relations task force

Appointing a public relations task force will move the coalition forward by assessing community attitudes, training for public relations within the coalition, and assisting in the development of a multi-year mobilization plan. The task force can help in public relations through personal contacts and use of local media.

The mobilization plan

The goal of the mobilization plan is to raise public consciousness about the issue, garner citizen support, and create a critical mass of active program participation. Its early focus should be on assessing attitudes, determining expectations, providing problem-impact information, and

developing and using information as a catalyst for community action and involvement. The plan should have specific goals including an action plan and time line. A multi-year plan should:

- Assess public awareness, opinion, and attitudes
- Evaluate current programs and services
- Study proposed programs and services
- Determine program strengths and weaknesses
- Evaluate internal and external resources
- Assess “environmental” factors:
 - Policy makers
 - Power structure
 - Citizen stakeholders
- Develop campaign theme
- Develop print and visual campaign materials
- Develop “Pitch Packets” for:
 - Policy makers
 - Power structure
 - Citizen stakeholders

“The goal of the mobilization plan is to raise public consciousness.”

Keeping established groups mobilized

The challenges to established groups include: avoiding a lack of outward growth, encouraging outreach and role modeling, meeting needs of established members, keeping all members up-to-date on issue information, and allowing for shared decision-making processes and limited term of office for leaders.

Barriers to mobilization

If the mobilization is to be maintained, it must be honest, clear, factual, and timely. Focus always must be on communication of needs and accomplishments to the community. Turf issues must be addressed as early as they are recognized. The community power structure is a key factor in the continued success of the coalition effort; keep them informed and interested in the success of the coalition. A successful coalition must be conscious of racial, ethnic, or social barriers in the community and work to embrace diversity, acceptance, and positive change as desired outcomes for most citizens.

Enhancing mobilization

Basic needs must be met before more advanced needs can successfully be addressed. Stakeholders are no longer interested in a basic need after it is met. A group, an organization, or an individual will remain open to challenge as long as there is a sense of security about basic needs being met.

Knowing groups, organizations, and individuals within the coalition in terms of differences and aspirations, and addressing them will help promote successful mobilization within the community. Factors that will enhance mobilization include:

- **Relevance**—The program is based on what the public cares about.
- **Convenience**—Successful programs make it easy for the public to participate.
- **Publicity**—Let people know what is planned.
- **Commitment**—A successful program demands time and commitment from the program staff and the public relations staff.

Summary

When the essential elements and conditions come together, a true sense of community evolves, one that inspires, energizes, and rewards members of the community as they resolve critical problems. Leaders take a positive and unified stand. The diversification of the community is recognized and used as a strength. The community is redefined as more than a place and more than the elements that divide people. It becomes the way in which people live and work together. The result is what some would describe as a mobilization of coalitions and alliances. Others may describe it as the “way we do things in our community.”

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