



# COALITIONS

## Getting Together

### Defining a Coalition<sup>1</sup>

A coalition is simply a group of individuals or organizations who share a common interest and agree to work together to work toward a common goal. Coalitions usually begin as loose affiliations of groups or individuals addressing a specific issue with a finite vision. However, this does not mean that coalitions cannot grow and strengthen into more permanent groups with a continuing role and purpose. Coalitions can be incredibly varied in their focus, based at the community, region, state, or national level. While coalitions typically have a targeted purpose, broad goals shared by many coalitions include influencing public policy, changing behavior or social awareness, or building healthy communities. The power of coalitions rests in their ability to unify disparate, and sometimes disadvantaged, groups that would have little ability to affect the necessary change on their own.

Benefits of Coalitions <sup>2</sup>	Challenges of Coalitions <sup>2</sup>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Information sharing and mutual learning</li><li>• Strengthened relationships among stakeholders</li><li>• Consensus building that avoids duplicative efforts by similar groups</li><li>• Innovative and broad-based solutions</li><li>• More powerful, unified voice</li><li>• Greater capacity through shared resources</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Loss of autonomy</li><li>• Compromise on personal positions</li><li>• Managing complex relationships among stakeholders</li><li>• Developing a unified voice</li><li>• Detailed processes that may lose sight of on-the-ground results</li><li>• New and unfamiliar partners</li></ul>

### Successful Cooperation

While coalitions and the issues they address vary significantly in structure and scope, there are a few indicators of a successful coalition that will remain viable and effective in the long term:

- **Broad participation** ensures that all affected stakeholders are invited to participate in the process
- **Unifying needs** help to initiate a shared understanding of the specific issue and provide significant incentives for all stakeholders to work together
- **Political support** from key decision makers is vital
- **Ample resources** including money, staff, and time
- **Concurrent goals** are needed to provide a defined purpose and desired outcome
- **Trust, accountability, and transparency** allow stakeholders from varying interests to feel that they all have an equal voice in the discussion

<sup>1</sup> Spangler, Brad. "Coalition Building." *Beyond Intractability*. Eds. Guy Burgess and Heidi Burgess. Conflict Research Consortium, University of Colorado, Boulder. June 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Lowe, Kimberly and Ann Moote. "Collaboration as a toll for Forest Restoration." Ecological Restoration Institute, Northern Arizona University, Flagstaff. May 2005.

## **Building a Coalition<sup>3</sup>**

### **Assemble a Core Group**

The first step in the coalition building process is the gathering of a few like-minded individuals or organizations. It is often easier to start with a few interested parties than trying to amass a large network. Working with a small group at the outset will make it easy to define your purpose and establish common ground and a network to build upon. You may want to start with people you know through your previous activity on the issue, as they are more likely to share your ideals and be easily persuaded. From there, it is important to contact individuals in agencies and institutions that are directly affected by the issue, as they have unique experience to bring to the table. The strength of some coalitions lies in the power and influence of their members. For example, a prominent community leader may have wide community support and a broad range of contacts to further the interests of the group. Identify the key potential coalition members, those whose support you may not be able to go without and try to involve them from the outset to give further credibility to the group.

### **Recruit New Members**

The networking capacity of your core members is integral to growing a broad membership, so work as a group to identify potential members and use personal relationships to close the deal. Sometimes this may involve a “courting” process that will require continued communication and lobbying. Face-to-face meetings are usually the most effective, while mass media campaigns are usually the least.

### **Hold Meetings**

The first few meetings may involve introducing each other and getting acquainted. These initial meetings should deal with administrative issues like the structure of the coalition, and substantive issues like developing your common vision and action plan. Determine what needs to be done before the next meeting and schedule dates for further discussions. After the first few meetings, members will have a better feel for one another, and it may be easier to talk and divide up tasks. In order to keep the coalition moving forward, it is important to build on the foundations of the coalition and polish a formal mission/vision statement and a defined plan for affecting change. Begin to identify future technical, financial, and personnel needs and determine who will carry responsibility.

## **Maintaining a Coalition<sup>3</sup>**

### **Communicate**

Maintaining open lines of communication will ensure that all coalition members feel like they have avenues to voice their opinion and participate in the process. Communication with outside groups is also important, particularly the media who can serve to further your message and inform more potential members and influential decision makers of the coalition’s work.

### **Be Inclusive and Network**

Make sure that community members and stakeholders feel welcome to join the group. The more ownership people feel that they have in the process, the more effort they will show in achieving the coalition’s goals. Continue to grow the coalition through active recruiting of new members. As the coalition grows larger and more diverse, broader support will develop with a stronger voice.

---

<sup>3</sup> Rabinowitz, Phil. “Coalition Building I: Starting a Coalition.” *The Community Toolbox*. Work Group for Community Health and Development, University of Kansas, Lawrence. 2007.

### **Set Realistic Expectations and Monitor Success**

In order to promote a feeling of satisfaction with the group, it is important to set realist, attainable goals that the group can work towards and reflect upon. Many coalitions fail because they set goals that are too lofty and produce little change. Establish criteria by which the group can monitor itself and account for its efforts.

### **Acknowledgements**

This is part of a series of National Policy Training Materials for Community Forestry Practitioners, prepared through a collaborative effort of American Forests, the Communities Committee, the National Network of Forest Practitioners, and the Pinchot Institute for Conservation, with support from the Ford Foundation.