



Social and Economic Education for Development

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Building Coalitions and Collaborative Planning

Collaboration with other human services organizations can be an effective and rewarding method of enhancing the efficiency and quality of services. But, collaboration can be a double-edged sword with both advantages and disadvantages. Both should be weighed before entering a collaborative effort. Before considering these, let's be clear about the different ways of building coalitions.

A coalition emerges when organizations work together in a common effort for a common purpose to make more effective and efficient use of resources. A coalition can create a common effort in several ways. Organizations may simply identify those goals they have in common and coordinate their activities, or work together to accomplish common goals. Or, they may network, that is, share information, ideas, or resources in order to accomplish common goals or more efficiently reach their organizational goals. In some cases, organizations may choose to become partners, working together to accomplish a common goal with a shared sense of purpose and a shared responsibility for the outcome. Each of these are ways in which organizations can engage in collaboration, or, the process wherein organizations share resources and responsibilities to plan, implement and evaluate programs to achieve common goals.

Advantages

The advantages of collaborating are: more effective and efficient delivery of programs, professional development, improved communication, elimination of duplication, increased use of programs, improved public image, better needs assessment, consistency of information, and increased availability of resources. Combining the resources of two or more agencies can help to deliver more services for the same money or the same services for less money. The economies of scale, fewer duplicate programs and improve cost-benefit ratios will make the delivery of programs more effective and efficient.

Staff members will grow professionally by meeting with colleagues from other agencies. They will be exposed to new methods and ideas that may benefit them. They may be made aware of new resources that are available and how to obtain them for their programs. Improved communications between agencies will result in all participants in the collaboration providing more consistent and reliable information to their clients. Shared information can mean increased use of programs and more public support. Agencies can share information about policy and legislative issues that effect their clientele. A better understanding of work done by others may help when directing clients who need critical information. Better communication between agencies will provide a better evaluation of the total impact of programs.

Coordinated needs assessment can be a benefit of collaboration. Service providers who work together can identify gaps in programs. They also can see critical widespread problems and rate issues for the most efficient use of available resources.

Disadvantages

Some disadvantages of collaboration are: turf protection and mistrust; slow decision-making, limited participation due to limited resources; the diversion of resources from other priorities; disagreements if the coalition assumes a position contrary to policy; and, a loss of partners due to budget problems, or changes in mission orientation or administration. Turf protection and mistrust are the most complex of these disadvantages, the most difficult to overcome, and the issues most critical to the success of a collaborative relationship. If collaborators do not trust each other, they will not be open nor receptive of new ideas nor willing to share resources and burdens.

Collaborative relationships often make decisions about action priorities by consensus, and this means decisions may take more time than if made by individual organizations, because participants need to receive approval of a higher authority before going forward. Depending on how well the members communicate with each other or how often they meet, decision by consensus could make acting on a problem slow than if individual organizations acted on their own. Furthermore, there are times when a coalition may advocate a position that is inconsistent with the policies of one of its members, creating dissension among the participants and limiting the effectiveness of all collaborative efforts.

Sometimes, organizations which would be valuable contributors to the collaboration are unable to participate because they have limited resources, and devoting human or financial resources to a collaborative effort takes away from their organization's own high priorities. In other cases, the coalition may take a position on a public issue that is at odds with the policies of one of the partners, straining the willingness of partners to continue participating. Finally, a collaborative relationship may begin to unravel because one or more participants face internal organizational changes, such as budget cuts, a change in mission, or a change in administrative leadership.

Summary

Building an effective collaborative relationship is not easy, but the rewards for the participating organizations and their clientele can be enormous. The greatest benefits from collaborative efforts comes when all the participants have carefully assessed the advantages and disadvantages of involvement for their organizations and accept that success depends on a willingness to accept trade-offs between organizational interests and community goals.

If organizations and agencies in a community or region agree there is a need and they are interested in finding a solution, the following are the elements for building a successful coalition.

- **Common Goals** - What is the expressed need the group agrees is a priority? What is the desired change? This needs to be understood and agreed upon by all involved.
- **Communication** - Professional jargon blocks effective communication within a coalition. Agree upon a common language that everyone can understand, and be

sure all participants are kept informed of what is taking place and what is expected of them.

- **Each Member is Important** - Each participating organization or agency must see themselves as vital to the functioning and success of the coalition.
- **Ownership** - Each member must have opportunities to participate in discussions on identifying goals, choosing action strategies, and other coalition decisions. This is the only way to insure that members feel a part of the coalition and responsibility for its success.
- **Shared Leadership and Delegated Authority** - It is important to share leadership responsibilities among many participants, and this can best be accomplished by delegating responsibility for components of action that contribute to the overall success of the coalition.
- **Process and Pattern** - Establish a format for how meetings will be conducted and decisions made in the beginning. It is important for participants to know that each meeting will contribute to progress toward the overall goals.

Prepared by Lorraine Garkovich. Adapted from D. Jackson and W. Maddy, Building Coalitions: An Introduction. CFA-101, The Ohio Center for Action on Coalition Development, The Ohio State University, 1992; and, Bell, C.H. and P. Smith, Coalition Functioning: A Committee in Disguise. CFA-107, The Ohio Center for Action on Coalition Development, The Ohio State University, 1992.