



# Social and Economic Education for Development

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## Building Coalitions by Managing Turf Issues

### Coalitions

A coalition is a mechanism for increasing the power or leverage of groups. Situations that might be difficult or impossible for individual organizations to overcome or manage, may be dealt with more quickly and efficiently by acquiring the right allies. This is the purpose of coalition-building. You begin by analyzing the problem: What do you want to achieve? Who can help (or hurt) your efforts? What are the rewards for becoming a part of a coalition? What action is needed to meet the objectives? A coalition should be structured to:

- Involve all key players
- Choose a realistic strategy
- Establish a shared vision
- Agree to disagree in the process
- Make promises that can be kept
- Build ownership at all levels
- Institutionalize change
- Publicize successes

### Turf Problems

Perhaps the biggest stumbling blocks to building a successful coalition are "turf problems." Turf problems are represented by non-cooperation or conflict between organizations with seemingly common goals or interests. Logically they should be willing to work together to achieve their common goals, but they don't. So the question is why?

Each organization has its particular "turf" or "domain" of operation and action. Each also has human and material resources, goals, and tasks related to the goals. In most areas of social life, organizations often develop overlapping domains, and this may make them reluctant to enter into coalitions for common action because coalitions almost always require some exchange of organizational resources.

Conflict usually involves perceptions of incompatible goals or threats to relationships. These perceptions lead to "turf protection" as organizations decide to defend their domain rather than share with other organizations. The basic factor in triggering a "turf battle" is the degree of power surrendered or gained by the organizations involved. Power in this context means the ability to control or manage resources to accomplish a goal. If the possible participants in a coalition feel they will gain by working together or having access to an equal degree of power, cooperation continues. But if one organization feels it has too much to lose by continued cooperation, it begins to defend its turf.

Turf battles can take place for several reasons. Some are related to the perceived effect on power.

- (1) If one organization perceives the other as a direct and regular competitor for resources that are not likely to be shared;
- (2) If one organization perceives a "marginal cost" to the proposed cooperation in money, time, or energy that is greater than the perceived benefits of the collaboration; and
- (3) The degree to which the organization feels it is flexible to change its current goals, tasks, and philosophy to adopt the course of action being proposed.

Turf battles can also erupt due to a lack of knowledge or mistrust of the other organizations. All too often, even though organizations may operate within the same community, they know little about each other's missions, goals, objectives, or procedures of operation. Or, they may have encountered each other in the past in ways to suggest they worked at cross-purposes, and so there is a mistrust of the mission, goals, or intentions of other organizations. Finally, turf battles can arise if one organization feels the exchange will be unequal. They may feel the proposed course of action is unilateral, that is, they have no real voice in deciding what or how it will happen. Or, an organization may feel that collaboration will cost them too much in resources compared with the proposed benefit, or that the other participants will gain more resources as a result of the collaboration than they will.

#### **Overlapping Domains of Action and Turf Battle**

Although a collaborative effort may represent only a fraction of the total activity of the participating organizations or agencies, it is important to recognize that there are six different ways in which the domains of organizational or agency action can overlap. In each case, there is the possibility that non-cooperation or conflict among organizations or their representatives may develop, hampering the emergence or effective functioning of coalitions.

1. **Over Goals** - Although one or more of the goals of participating organizations may seem mutually dependent, a particular proposal for collaborative work may be perceived to work against the interest of one of the organizations or against another goal held to be a priority by one of the participants. In this case, coalition members must be willing to look at the larger picture of how collaborative efforts in one domain of action may contribute to success in other mission areas. This may mean a willingness to modify the priorities assigned to organizational goals.
2. **Over Resources** - Public and private resources to support organizations and agencies always are less than the demand or need. Therefore, proposals for collaborative projects may be perceived as drawing resources away from general organizational support (e.g., if we do this, then there will be less public or private funds to support other priority activities). Moreover, there may be a perception that not all participants in the collaborative effort will share equally in the resources allocated to a particular project. In this case, it is imperative that the coalition clearly define its focus of action and clarify how the resources of participating organizations might contribute to achieving a mutually agreed upon common goal. To succeed, coalitions must avoid trying to tackle a large, vaguely defined problem by being capacity-centered and resource-centered rather than problem-centered.
3. **Over Geography** - Organizations and agencies often have geographically defined service areas. A proposal for collaborative action in a particular region, community, or neighborhood may be perceived to imply that an organization servicing clientele in that area has not been effective. Or, there may be concern that clientele will be confused

by new programs or see them as duplicating existing efforts. A successful coalition spends some time building an understanding of the advantages of targeting certain problems for collaborative action, both among its participating organizations and the larger community.

4. **Over Methods** - Organizations may have general agreement on goals for collaborative efforts, but some may feel that a proposed strategy would be ineffective or actually neutralize their efforts towards other goals. Sometimes, organizations or agencies have a sense of "ownership" over a technique or activity that has been identified as a method for achieving a coalition's goals. In a successful coalition, participating organizations are willing to negotiate and temporarily set aside some of their action preferences in order to achieve a larger goal.
5. **Over Identity or Public Perception** - Organizations or agencies may perceive a collaborative effort as changing how their clients or the larger public view them. The concern is the extent to which participation in a collaborative effort may change the public's perceptions of the participating organizations. Coalitions must carefully plan to inform the public of their goals, strategies, and accomplishments. These communications must highlight how each participating organization have contributed to defining the coalition's goals and strategies and, share responsibility for accomplishments.
6. **Over Personalities** - Organizations are represented by individuals in collaborative efforts, and frequently, there are personality clashes among representatives. Or, representatives may perceive the collaborative effort as threatening their position within their own organization or agency. Successful coalitions remain task-oriented (i.e., why are we here?) and keep their focus on the coalition as a whole rather than on individual organizations.

### Summary

Typically, organizations can work together to achieve common goals, but when turf problems develop, it is critical to understand why they emerge and their roots, and to act to resolve the tensions. When left unresolved, turf issues can often seriously damage the efforts of some or all the members of coalition to work together effectively in reaching a common goal.