

THE EIGHT STEPS TO EFFECTIVE COALITION BUILDING

Increasingly, the problems that communities need to resolve are complex, requiring comprehensive solutions. Addressing issues such as health promotion and chronic disease prevention requires the inclusion of people from diverse backgrounds and disciplines. Work in partnerships, collaborations and coalitions can be challenging but a powerful tool for mobilizing individuals to action, bringing community issues to prominence and developing policies. These associations are also an effective means of integrating health services with other human services so that resources are not wasted and efforts are not needlessly duplicated. Coalitions are often best equipped to utilize the resources and findings of participants and apply them more effectively than any single group or organization.

The Eight Steps to Effective Coalition Building is a framework developed by Larry Cohen, et. al., for engaging individuals, organizations and governmental partners invested in addressing community concerns. The complete document (available at www.preventioninstitute.org) offers concrete steps towards building effective partnerships and provides tips for making collaborations and partnerships work. Rather than creating new projects or programs, effective coalitions can harness existing resources to develop a unique community approach and achieve results beyond the scope of one single institution or organization.

1. Discuss and analyze the group's objectives and determine coalition need(s)

A coalition is a prevention *tool*, so groups must be specific about what needs to be accomplished. After the needs have been determined, the group must consider if a coalition is the best approach to meet the identified needs. Groups must ask the following questions: What are we trying to accomplish? What are our community's strengths and needs? What are the pros and cons associated with the proposed collaboration? What are our objectives and what types of activities seem logical? Cohen suggests using the *Spectrum of Prevention* to help define a group's possible actions.

2. Recruit the right people

The group's objectives will prescribe the type of coalition developed. Some groups may choose to start small to accomplish specific tasks and then strategically expand. Depending on the needs of the coalition, either program directors or front-line staff should be encouraged to attend. In addition, invite community members, youth leaders, and politicians. The size of the group matters. It takes large groups longer to define and agree on common objectives and activities. Yet large groups may have access to greater resources that may be required for accomplishing certain tasks.

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3. Adopt more detailed activities and objectives suiting the needs, interests, strengths, and diversity of the membership

A key to a successful coalition is the early identification of common goals and benefits of working together. The coalition must avoid competing with its members for funding. An important consideration for adopting specific coalition activities is to identify some short-term outcomes. For example, if a coalition's objective is to increase public knowledge about chronic disease as a preventable community problem, a short-term outcome could be the publication of two editorials in the local newspaper.

4. Convene coalition members

A coalition can be convened at a meeting, workshop, or conference. The lead agency should plan the first meeting using a time-specific prepared agenda, a comfortable and well-located meeting area, and adequate refreshments. It is appropriate to prepare a draft mission statement and proposal for coalition structure and membership. Anticipate that not all invited members will become coalition members.

5. Develop budgets and map agency resources and needs

Lead agencies usually provide staff time to keep the coalition up and running and to handle detail work. Though coalitions can usually run on a minimal budget, each member's time is a valuable contribution.

6. Devise the coalition's structure

Structural issues of the coalition include: how long the coalition will exist, meeting locations, meeting frequency and length, decision making processes, meeting agendas, membership rules, and participation between meetings by subcommittees or planning groups. Templates of different coalition structures should be collected prior to the meeting and presented for discussion to reduce the time needed to make management decisions.

7. Plan for ensuring the coalition's vitality

Methods for noting and addressing problems, sharing leadership, recruiting new members, providing training on identified needs, and celebrating success can help ensure a coalition's viability and success. It is very important to recognize both the individual and organizational contributions to a coalition each step of the way.

8. Evaluate programs and improve as necessary

Each coalition activity and event should include evaluations. This can be as simple as a satisfaction survey or it could be the more formal use of pre- and post-tests of specific subject knowledge.

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The full document, *Developing Effective Coalitions: An Eight-Step Guide*, written by Larry Cohen, Nancy Baer and Pam Satterwhite is available at: www.preventioninstitute.org