

WHY SHOULD YOU CONSIDER BUILDING ALLIANCES?



There are several reasons for creating strategic alliances, coalitions and partnerships. Benefits can include concentrating your audience's focus on a particular challenge, build and engage with new audiences (or communities) where your shared interests would be mutually beneficial.

This is not linear work and will often require courage in leadership.

Some will need to overcome historical threats to previous collaboration efforts and consistently push forward through the highs and lows of coalition governance and member participation.

Other reasons for creating a coalition might include:

- **Addressing an urgent situation:** i.e. the lack of food choices, access to quality healthcare and safe places for children and adults to recreate and live.
- **Obtain or provide essential services to constituents:** i.e. this could include the list mentioned above and more.
- **Bring efficiencies around program delivery and eliminate duplicative efforts:** Joining forces rather than acting in silos can result in organized and comprehensive interventions. Eliminating duplication can allow for more participants to access programs and allow for a greater variety of services.

Whenever possible, explore the option of a unified approach. That way you can:

- **Share resources.** You can accomplish more together collectively than going it alone and working in a vacuum.
- **Increase visibility, inclusivity and communications.** Bringing together organizations and individuals from a variety of sectors or communities and engaging with them on a consistent basis can reap many benefits.
- **Revitalize long standing issues that have not been addressed.** A coalition can help bring new energy and hope to initiatives that have withered under a lack of cohesion.
- **Launch a variety of important initiatives.** Strategic alliances can serve to unify efforts around long-term campaigns like drunk driving, community economic development or climate preservation.

- **Use political clout to gain benefits for the community.** A unified coalition can advocate more effectively than several disparate groups and individuals working alone.
- **Create long-term change.** Substantial change happens over time by gaining trust, sharing ideas, and getting beyond preconceived notions or stereotypes for addressing real community needs. A coalition, with its structure of cooperation among diverse groups and individuals, can ease and more often accelerate the process of change in a community.

BARRIERS TO SUCCESS:

There are often barriers to starting a coalition, and it's important to be aware of and anticipate them. If you're not thoughtful about the potential challenges, it can be tough to get started. Some barriers to success include:

- **Turf issues.** Organizations are often very sensitive about sharing their work, target populations, and funding. Part of the work of starting a coalition may be to convince others that working together will benefit everyone and better address common concerns.
- **Bad history.** Organizations, individuals, or the community writ large may have experiences that have convinced them that working with certain organizations or individuals is a tall task. Therefore, a new coalition may have to contend with this history before it can begin the work it needs to do.
- **Domination by "uber professionals".** All too often, local politicians, business leaders, and others, in their rush to solve problems or to "help those in need," engage new audiences from a deficit point of view instead of approaching them with an asset perspective. Creating a participatory atmosphere and reining in those who believe they have all the answers is critical.
- **Poor links to the community.** If you don't know a particular community or audience, do your research and begin to approach and engage them in a transparent and authentic manner.
- **Minimal organizational capacity.** It might be necessary to find a coordinator or for one or more individuals or organizations to share the burden of managing and/or providing logistics for alliance planning, communications and meetings.
- **Funding.** Obtaining funding is a primary barrier to the success of your alliance. Available funding that pushes the coalition in the wrong direction or requires it to act too quickly to address an issue(s) effectively can be detrimental and unproductive. New coalitions must remain vigilant about the kind of funding they apply for and accept.
- **Lack of shared or creative leadership.** Coalitions demand a very special kind of collaborative leadership. If that leadership isn't available and can't be developed deeply and collectively, its existence is probably at risk. It may be necessary to bring in an outside facilitator and/or training in collaborative leadership to help mitigate potential challenges.

WHEN SHOULD YOU DEVELOP A STRATEGIC ALLIANCE?

A strategic alliance needs to have a purpose to be successful. However, it's unlikely that diverse groups will come together unless there's a great case to be made to work collaboratively. Consider a unified effort when:

Dramatic events occur in a community or sector or when new information becomes available. It might be wise to create a coalition of the willing regarding high incidents of community drug abuse, the importance of preservation and restoration of cultural artifacts threatened by blight and abuse or to study the long-haul impacts of COVID on mental and physical health.



New funding becomes available. Early in the Biden Administration \$85M was made available to communities nationwide to help restore America's wildlife, land and water through collaborative preservation and conservation efforts over several years. States, localities, foundations and corporations might have funding available for collaboratives to work on special and unique challenges.

An outside threat impacts the community. Communities have formed coalitions or alliances to prevent local hospitals from being purchased by national, for-profit health providers; to keep out unwanted, pollution-causing industries; or to preserve open space from development.

CONCLUSION

To consider building a strategic alliance, you should understand the need, potential barriers to success and determine if the timing is right to create these productive, yet somewhat unpredictable collaborations. Thoughtful research, deliberation, case strategy and patience are critical in launching an effective, mutually beneficial partnership. If you're not engaging your alliance in authentic and meaningful ways by spending time with the organizations and people in their networks, investing in them for the long-term or providing thought partnership; you could end up with an alliance that lacks trust and therefore becomes unproductive regarding the problem you want to solve. The business of running an alliance is messy, but brings great rewards.

Sources:

National Council of Nonprofits: 5 Tips for Nonprofit Collaborations, 2016

National Council of Nonprofits: Mergers Collaborations and Strategic Alliances