GLSEN

Field Department Resource

Coalition Building
Starting a Coalition

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What is a coalition?
A coalition is a diverse group of individuals and organizations that work together to reach a common goal. That goals might be a number of things, but often includes one of the following:

- Adapting, creating, or developing public policy
- Influencing people's behavior (for example, reducing the number of people who smoke)
- Building a healthy community

Why develop a coalition?

- To bring about more effective and efficient delivery of programs and use of resources and eliminate any duplication of services
- To increase communication between groups and break down stereotypes
- To revitalize the sagging energies of members of diverse groups who are trying to do to much alone
- To plan and launch community-wide efforts on a variety of topics
- To create social change

When should you develop a coalition?
A coalition is a lot of work, and may not always seem as if it's worth the effort. There are certain situations, however, when it seems to make sense to do something, and a coalition can be one of the best ways to go about it. These times might include:

- When dramatic or disturbing events occur in a community. For example, a woman being murdered by her husband might serve as a catalyst in a community for coalition on domestic violence.
- When new information becomes known. For example, a survey is given at the local high school, and the results state that over half of all teens smoke regularly. Such information might serve as a catalyst for the formation of a coalition trying to reduce smoking by young people.
- When a service is being duplicated (or triplicated, or being offered by half a dozen community agencies), and none are being used to their potential. For example, suppose a new resident of a community has a son with cancer. Should she call the cancer association? The local hospice? The parent's support group? She may not know which of a dozen places to call, and is given the added stress of being bounced between agencies until she finally gives up, calls her sister, and decides just to tough it out on her own.
- When a group wishes to create broad, significant community change. For example , a community wishes to address issues of youth, such as substance abuse and/or lack of jobs in their community.
- To respond to outside threats to a community. For example, a for-profit hospital organization wishes to buy a non-profit hospital or HMO.

How to build a community coalition

So you've decided to take the plunge and start a coalition. You're dedicated; you're excited; you're scared as hell. How do you go about starting a coalition? And what makes a coalition successful? Below is a brief overview of the basics of coalition structure; most sections are linked then to other, more detailed sections of this complex (but do-able) process.

Starting a coalition

- First and foremost, decide if a coalition is really the best way to solve a problem. There are a lot of reasons, explained in the "Why" part of this section, to form a coalition. Be sure to have a well thought-out answer as to why it is the best idea for your particular situation, however, because you can be sure that people will be asking you just that.
- Analyze the problem or issue that you are trying to change. What exactly do you want to achieve? How large is the scope of the problem?
- Determine the community support you have for the proposed change. Do members of the community believe this issue is important? If not, how can you educate them on its importance?
- Determine what action is needed to solve the problem. Will providing information be enough? Are there needed services that are missing from the community?
- Determine who (what organizations) can help to obtain your goals, and develop a plan that explains how to best involve them in the coalition. Consider offering incentives (such as co-chairing the coalition) to members of groups you would particularly like to see join..
- Work to develop an open, diverse membership for your coalition.
- Along the same vein, try to involve all of the "key players," such as elected officials, journalists, area professionals, etc., as you can in the initiative

Structuring a coalition

- Together with those you have recruited, develop shared vision and mission statements that are concise, adaptable, and representative of what the coalition is all about.
- Next, develop feasible goals that are in keeping with the vision and mission of your objective.
- Next, it's time to plan how you are going to achieve your goals.
- Make sure you review what you have decided on as a vision, a mission, and as goals.

Develop your plan using realistic strategies and specific action steps.

- Determine what you will be able to do with the money you have. Continually be on the look out for more grants and other moneys you might be eligible for to aid your organization.
- Don't underestimate the importance of competent, communicative leadership. Also, make sure that the leadership is dispersed throughout the organization, so that a coalition doesn't fall apart if someone chooses to move on.
- Hire, train, and support a staff of paid workers and/or volunteers. ("If only it were that easy!" you sigh!)
- Set up meetings that are well structured and timely. Be sure to record all meetings, either with a tape recorder or ask a member to take notes.

Now that you have everything set up, put into effect all of your hard though out plans!

Operating a coalition and making it thrive

Communicate, communicate, and communicate! Effective communication is one of the most important things you can do to make your group successful. Make sure that the lines of communication are wide open, both with the media and those who are not part of your organization as well as with paid and unpaid members of your coalition. This will help to build a satisfied, dependable staff of paid workers and volunteers, who get the job done and make your organization successful.
Effective, personal communication can be insured by:

- Making sure you are an *active listener*, that is, that you focus all your attention on the speaker, making sure there are no distractions, and that you are concentrating on what message the speaker is trying to get across.
- Keeping those you are talking to from taking the defensive. A great way to do this is by using "I" instead of "you" to start sentences. For example, "I'm not sure I understand the approach you're taking on the media campaign. Could you explain it to me?" is sure to get a clearer, more open response than "You aren't getting anywhere on the media project, are you?"
- Making sure communication is complete; never assume that staff members or volunteers know what is supposed to be done or how you feel about a certain issue.
- Keeping coalition members up to date on what the coalition as a whole is doing, and on what groups who are members of the coalition are doing on their own.
- When you are developing the objectives of your coalition, make sure that your goals are discussed and shared by all the members of your coalition.
- Make your presence known in the community. A coalition that is not well known in a community is probably a coalition that is not very effective. Recruit and train teachers and students involved in drama clubs, journalism and other clubs to begin youth presentations and support group activities about teen sexuality.
- . Ask local officials to endorse your plans. Endorsement from community leaders can give your coalition greater respect and prestige in the eyes of other community members.
- Delegate leadership and authority throughout the coalition. If a single person dominates a coalition, you run the risk of the group falling apart if she decides to leave. An organization with shared leadership is much less vulnerable than one that is not.
- Keep a constant look out for new members to add a fresh perspective and new enthusiasm to your group.

- As important as new members are, though, don't forget the long-term workers who have done so much for your coalition. Be sure to give them the recognition and support they deserve.
- Keep your promises. If you're not sure you can do it, don't say it.
- Set winnable goals; break problems down into smaller "sub-goals" that are achievable, and that you can celebrate along to way.
- Acknowledge diversity among your members, and among their ideas and beliefs. One way to handle sensitive issues (over which members of your group disagree) is to hold open forums discussing them, instead of coming out with a hard and fast policy. A second possibility is to add non-binding resolutions to your coalition's charter (or action plan, or other document), that recognize that not everyone is in agreement with these parts of the coalition's actions.
- Be persistent. You are most likely working to change conditions that have been a certain way for years; you can make a difference, but it probably won't happen overnight.
- Evaluate what you have done: what went well, and what you should change for next time.
- Celebrate your accomplishments, and take a little bit of a breather. GLSEN

Resources

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This resource is provided to GLSEN chapters free of charge by the GLSEN Field Department

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