

Dealing With Conflict in Coalitions

Expect that conflicts will happen! Coalition members bring diverse values, organizational styles and cultures, and agendas to the process. Sometimes a coalition's members have had problems with each other in the past, or lack trust. No matter how long the history, working together is not an easy process, and competition over turf, funds, or visibility is likely to occur. Coalitions are dynamic, constantly changing. Review agreements periodically.

Most common conflicts that occur in coalitions:

Power: Differences in perceived or assumed power among members may pose problems. Coalitions must develop some form of equalizing power and/or accept the legitimacy of different levels and types of power (youth and adults, lead agency and coalition member).

Autonomy and Accountability: A coalition must have enough autonomy to take independent action and enough accountability to its member organizations to maintain the base which is its essence. Conflicts arise if: 1) the coalition takes action without approval from its membership; 2) coalition member organizations are unaware of commitments and decisions that their representatives make; or, 3) the coalition cannot take action because certain members hold up or block the process.

Unity and Diversity: Coalitions need enough unity to act together and enough diversity to accomplish their goal and to represent a broad base.

Mixed Loyalties: Coalition members with organizational alliances are always wearing two hats – one for the joint effort and one for their own organization. It's natural for them to place the needs of their own organization over coalition resources but this self-interest can cause tension in the group which may affect what the coalition can expect from them.

Viewing the Coalition as a Means or as a Model: Members who are more goal oriented want action and results and grow impatient with the process of coalitions such as structure and operations. Those who see coalition as an end in itself may be more willing to take time to build strong foundations.

Goals and Strategies: Conflicts often erupt over differences in members' individual goals and interests and how to approach the goals.

Division of Labor: The roles and responsibilities of coalition members may not be clear or the coalition may expect more work or commitment than members are willing to provide. Resentment and lack of ownership may grow as a result. Conflict over division of labor is sometimes worse when funding is involved.

Interpersonal Conflict: Members may have different value systems or philosophies that reflect their own personality, culture, and style.

Underlying Causes of Conflicts: Regardless of which type of conflict, it is helpful to explore its underlying cause, in order to resolve or manage it. Most conflicts boil down to a few different underlying causes:

- Past negative experiences among members
- Self-interest or hidden agendas
- Incorrect or incomplete information, different access to information, different understanding of same information
- Poor communication or misunderstandings

Responses to Conflict

There are several ways for coalitions to deal with conflict: Prevention, general approaches, short-term intervention, conflict resolution, consensus problem-solving, or mediation.

Prevention

- Participants and motivations
- Autonomy/accountability: What situations will require approval from different levels within the coalition and how will this be done?
- Goals/purposes
- Processes and structure: Establish a multi-layered division of labor, fiscal and program management and accountability. Concerns with amount and level of power among members can be addressed by:
 - One group/one vote
 - Voting/not voting membership
 - Caucuses for less powerful groups
 - An agenda that gives less influential members the advantage
 - Making powerful groups affiliates or honorary members
 - Providing technical/advisory status for powerful groups

General Approaches to Dealing with Conflict

- Use gripe boards, special feedback meetings, or retreats to help people vent feelings, raise questions and clarify issues
- Finding areas of agreement and opportunities for cooperation
- Focus on common ground and play down differences
- Arrange opportunities for dialogue and build relationships
- Help members recognize and express the reasoning behind conflicting opinions
- Decide on criteria for decisions and use as basis for resolving conflict
- Discuss acceptable and unacceptable aspects
- Break down conflict into bite size chunks and get incremental agreements
- Work with facilitators or third party mediator who help create a safe environment, provide information, etc.

Short Term Interventions

- Defuse arguments
- Take a break
- Change chairpersons

- Organize a conflict resolution committee or grievance committee
- Hold caucuses

Conflict Resolution Process

1. Diagnose – what do the parties want to get out of the situation?
2. Plan/Strategize – Weigh all the variables
3. Implement the Process – set the tone, encourage dialogue, reach agreements, document agreements
4. Evaluate outcomes – evaluate the effectiveness of chosen solution, follow-up

Consensus Problem Solving Process

A cooperative way of approaching large scale conflicts or issues in which many people must be satisfied with the solution. It takes time – usually several days.

1. Hold a series of sessions for all stakeholders
2. Agree on what the issue or concern is
3. Brainstorm all possible solutions
4. Discuss the ideas, and try to combine them, where possible
5. Plan to put the solution into action
6. Follow-up and evaluate solutions

Mediation

Problem-solving tool for deadlocked interpersonal conflict that prevents people from working together. Steps:

1. Before starting, agree to go through the process and agree about outcomes
2. Express all resentments, hurt and anger that impact communication
3. Discuss perceptions of the problem. Check out assumptions, expectations, fears
4. Do a mutual critique of the problem. See how your own actions and behaviors contribute to the situation
5. Bargain. Ask for what you want and give the other party chance to do same
6. Listen to what the other party wants. Consider what you can give up or do differently
7. Make agreements about changes. Develop written contract or agreement and promise to work on specific behaviors for a given period of time