

Working in Networks and Coalitions

Advantages



1. Enlarges your base of support; gives strength in numbers: you can achieve more together than you can alone.
2. Provides safety for advocacy efforts and protection for members who may not be able to take action alone.
3. Magnifies existing financial and human resources by pooling them together and by delegating work to others in the coalition.
4. Reduces duplication of effort and resources.
5. Enhances the credibility and influence of an advocacy campaign, as well as that of individual coalition members.
6. Helps develop new leadership skills amongst members
7. Assists in individual and organisational networking
8. Facilitates exchange of information, skills, experience, materials, opportunities for collaboration etc
9. Brings together a diverse range of people who would not otherwise meet
10. Provides peer support, encouragement, motivation and professional recognition

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Disadvantages



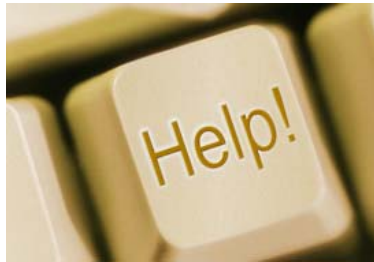
1. Can lack clear objectives, or be difficult to agree common objectives
2. May be dominated by one powerful organisation. Power is not always distributed equally among members; larger or richer organisations can have more say in decisions.
3. May require you to compromise your position on issues or tactics.
4. Can be bureaucratic - decision making processes can be slow.
5. Can often be constrained by a lack of resources.
6. Potential for donor interference (e.g. a donor is interested in funding certain activities but there is a danger of planning activities only because you know you can get the funds)
7. You may not always get credit for your work. Sometimes the coalition as a whole gets recognition rather than individual members. Or certain members get or claim more recognition than others, causing conflict and resentment.
8. If the coalition process breaks down it can harm everyone's advocacy by damaging members' credibility.
9. Coalition activities can be difficult to monitor and evaluate

HEALTH WARNING!

All these problems can be overcome and are not reasons to not get more involved in coalitions - they just things to be wary of.

Case Study

A Coalition Catastrophe



The Association for the Advancement of Education (AAE), a [fictional] formal, multi-issue coalition consisting of the top ten children's, teachers' and education organisations in the country, began its campaign to increase education funding for secondary school development last January.

AAE had previously succeeded in increasing the number and quality of primary schools and felt it should now turn its attention to secondary education. In October, the group had debated the relative benefits of two advocacy objectives: increased funding for new secondary schools, or increased funding for teacher training, curriculum development and supplies/infrastructure for existing schools.

The consensus of the members present (several of the teachers' organisations could not attend the October coalition meeting) was to pursue increased funding for new secondary schools and to work on improving quality later. At the next coalition meeting in November, the teachers' unions objected to the decision and felt left out of the process. They were particularly upset that the coalition leaders had neglected to ask them for their opinions before a decision was made, and that they were not informed of the results of the discussion held in October.

After several apologies and explanations the teachers' groups were quieted and reluctantly accepted the chosen advocacy objective. The campaign progressed nicely during the following months in which AAE released an outstanding report on the need for more secondary schools, held several well-attended press conferences and met with key officials in the government. The coalition management also paid special attention to the needs of the teachers' unions which improved relations.

In February, as the funding increase gained substantial government support, the coalition learned that the government's plan was to raise a portion of the funds for the increase by decreasing teachers' pensions.

Knowing that the teachers' unions would not accept this trade-off, the director of AAE held a private meeting with the unions to see whether some alternate source of funding could be found. They explored options such as drawing from military or higher education budgets and agreed that these ideas should be conveyed to key government staff on the committee working on the education funding increase.

When the AAE director met with the committee staff to propose paying for the increase with funds from other budgets, he learned that AAE's proposal came too late; the committee had already decided to present the original proposal to parliament. The powerful teachers' unions then began a massive campaign to defeat the funding increase for secondary schools.

The education and children's groups steadfastly supported the increase despite the cut in teachers' pensions, arguing that only 10 percent of the increase was coming from pensions and that government was going to cut pensions anyway. AAE itself could no longer play an advocacy role because its membership was now split on the issue.

In March, the increase for secondary school development was defeated in parliament by a narrow margin.

The coalition survived this episode, but relations between the teachers' unions, other coalition members, and AAE are strained, at best. In addition, the credibility of AAE is diminished as officials in the government are uncertain whether AAE speaks clearly for its membership.

For discussion in your groups

- 1. What went wrong?**
- 2. How could AAE have avoided these problems?**
- 3. What could coalition leaders do to fix the situation now?**