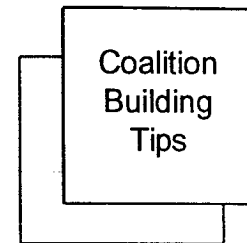# Coalition Barriers and How to Overcome Them: Part II

by Tom Wolff

In our last tip sheet we began looking at the barriers and difficulties that can get in the way of a coalition reaching its goals. There are many of them. Here we continue this examination. We then identify practical strategies your coalition can use to overcome barriers and difficulties you may face.

❑Barrier #4 — Dominance by Professionals

Although key professionals in communities are often important members of coalitions and can be especially helpful assets, they can also become barriers. This happens when professionals dominate the process. Most members might then be professionals, the view of the community is generated only by professionals, and the control of the coalition is in the hands of professional agencies. Since many agencies view citizens and communities from a "deficits" point of view (see John McKnight's writings), they then bring this viewpoint to the coalition's work.

We see this kind of barrier in action, for example, when a group of adult service providers decides to deal with teen issues in the community by developing a teen center. In one actual situation, providers went about designing and opening a teen center without any input from the teens themselves. When no teens showed up in the first months, the professionals perceived the teens as being apathetic and blamed the teens for the problem. The providers did not recognize that only by consulting with teens, and letting them decide how best to set up the teen center, did they have any chance of success. This happens much too frequently — and not only with individual agencies, but with entire coalitions.

Strategies

Active attempts to recruit citizens are critical to coalition success. One should also respect the important role of "citizen helpers." These are people who have professional roles in communities, but who are also active citizens of the community, and therefore can wear both hats. Having citizen **helpers** does not eliminate the need to have citizen **members** who are not in a professional, formal helping role. Often, to get citizen input requires the coalition to actively go out in the community, talk to citizens, and test out new ideas before they are implemented. Unless the coalition is constantly asking the community what it wants and then responding to it, it will be hard to overcome the dominance of both professionals and professional "deficit" models.

❑Barrier #5 — Lack of a Common Vision

Increasingly, we are seeing examples of coalitions, often funded coalitions, where there is clear disharmony and disagreement around the coalition's goals. When these are funded coalitions, it is often the case that the original group that formed the coalition did so because they were attracted by the dollars, not by a common vision. This does not automatically rule out a common vision, but certainly creates a barrier to that process. In these situations, it is often a matter of "Take the money and run" rather than "We are here to create a joint vision and joint changes for our community." The existence and failure of these coalitions because of a lack of common vision potentially threatens the success of the whole coalition movement.

Strategies

Clearly, the most helpful strategy would be to develop a common vision before the onset of the coalition. Grassroots community coalitions typically have that; for example, the neighbors in the community all get together to make sure that the community playgrounds are safe. Where the joint vision has not emerged at the start, or dissolves quickly after the writing of the grant application, then there needs to be a clear planning process which involves visioning, revisiting the mission,

clarifying the goals, and articulating objectives and action plans. This will help the coalition see whether there are indeed shared tasks that members wish to work on together. If there are not, the coalition needs to be brave enough to dissolve. If there are, the coalition can rewrite its mission statement and move forward. Coalitions are such vibrant and responsive institutions that this process of revisiting vision, mission, goals, and objectives needs to occur on a very regular, and at a minimum, annual basis.

❑Barrier #6 — Failure to Provide and Create Leadership

Coalitions have two leadership missions. One is to provide competent leadership for the coalition itself and for its tasks. The other is to create new leadership in all sectors of the community. Many coalitions struggle with one or both of these missions. There are coalitions where there is a lack of leadership — many lieutenants but no generals. The coalition then seems to flounder, not heading in any one direction nor accomplishing any one task. Often coalitions that manage to exchange information but never move forward to action suffer from the above difficulty. On the flip side, we see coalitions with a single dominant leader who does not delegate, who does everything him/herself. As with any other organization, we then find that the members or followers feel powerless, excluded, and increasingly less involved. One of the problems of bringing on coalition staff can be that these paid individuals take on leadership roles. The members can then easily say, "Well I don't need to do that, we'll let our staff person do it." The creation of that kind of staff role implicitly undermines the creation of new leadership roles among the members.

Strategies

Coalitions must consciously foster the development of leadership among all their members for coalition tasks, and also seek out new individuals to take leadership roles in the community. Leadership must be seen as multi-faceted and occurring in many ways — not just who runs the meeting, or who chairs a task force; but also who volunteers to get people to come to a meeting, who sets up refreshments, or who is the lead person behind the scenes making things work. Each of these are leadership roles. Coalitions must regularly evaluate how their organizations themselves are being led and how good a job they are doing at creating leaders.

❑Barrier #7 — Poor Links To The Community

The majority of coalitions seem to have little success in establishing solid links to the community as a whole. When coalitions begin with gatherings of human service providers or educators, the meetings that are scheduled are often inaccessible to working citizens in terms of time, space, and the language and culture of the meetings. Suppose a group of providers talks about funding sources coming from the state, using a variety of acronyms and initials; ordinary citizens quickly understand this is a world that they are not a part of; they may not return.

Strategies

Obvious strategies include not only making meetings more accessible in terms of language, time, space, and child care, but also having the agenda and process be citizen-driven. David Chavis has suggested that most of the basic institutions in our communities have become unaccountable to their citizenry; that the clergy is separated from its congregation, the schools from parents and students, the health and human service system from clients and patients. Rebuilding these links, and the accountability of the systems to the citizens, is a critical piece of coalition work.

In some ways, it seems that the major strategy here has to be an investment of funding into identifying and supporting and — if they are missing — creating citizen advocacy groups so that citizens can come to the table as representatives of constituencies like everyone else. In many communities, these citizen and neighborhood groups already exist. They should serve as equal partners. In other communities, funding and staffing may be needed to develop these groups and create that partnership.

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One in a series of tips on building coalitions.