

Sustainability Of Coalitions

by Tom Wolff, AHEC/Community Partners

A graphic consisting of two overlapping rectangular boxes. The top box is white with a black border and contains the text "Coalition Building Tips". The bottom box is a slightly larger white rectangle with a black border, partially overlapping the top one from the bottom-left.

□ Sustaining the Effort

Sustaining coalitions over an extended period of time is a little-explored issue. There is very little literature, even anecdotal literature, on coalitions that have lasted over many years. What happens to these coalitions over time? What are the developmental stages and forms of long-standing coalitions? And what leads to the continued viability, and success or failure, of sustaining efforts?

In general, sustaining coalitions is like sustaining any other organization. It relies upon the capacity of the organization to be flexible and adaptive to changing environments and changing times. In coalitions, we would expect that the mission and goals would evolve over time, and that various task forces set up by the coalition would adapt to changing issues in the community. We would expect membership to keep changing, so that each year new people join, while others might drop out. Leadership would also rotate: In a healthy, long-standing, sustainable coalition, new leaders would constantly emerge and be given positions of responsibility — leading a task force, managing a special project, or chairing the coalition itself. The bottom line for sustaining a coalition, however, would be the same as that for any successful community venture; that is, the capacity to act and have an impact on the community. Our experience is that long-lasting coalitions keep on acting — visibly, energetically, and effectively.

□ Sustaining Coalitions After the Funding Dries Up

The sustainability of coalitions has another key dimension, and that has to do with outside funding. One of the great dilemmas in human services for government and foundations has been how to go about seeding a new idea with money, and then sustaining that idea over time as funding draws to an end. We have all been involved in too many projects whose life is as long as the funding; projects which die when the funding disappears. So how can we sustain externally-funded coalitions? This Tip Sheet explores a fourfold approach. Each approach may be appropriate to different degrees, depending upon the coalition and the community's needs. Each carries with it some advantages and some disadvantages. In general, a mixture that employs all four strategies is most likely the soundest approach.

○ Fund-raising and Incorporation

The knee-jerk reaction of almost any project or coalition is to find new funding to replace the old. In this approach, sustaining the effort means finding another funding source. Thus, mature coalitions often write grant applications, throw fund-raisers, create membership schemes — all ways of generating new dollars. Incorporating the coalition as a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization and applying for tax-exempt status frequently go along with this, so that the coalition is in proper legal form to receive state, federal, corporate and foundation money. The rationale is simple — finding a new funding source will allow the successful coalition to continue its success. The advantage of this approach is that the coalition can continue to fund staff and programs it has created. The peril is that it is often seen as the only way to sustain the effort, and doesn't allow for considering other ways to sustain — ways which may involve greater community ownership and less professional management. With this strategy, the possibility increases that the coalition becomes just another community agency.

Fund-raising has its peaks and pitfalls. For a more through examination of this issue, see the March/April Tip Sheet: Money and Coalitions. It is my suggestion that this approach might be the last one considered, after looking at the following three.

○ Institutionalizing Efforts

In this strategy, the coalition supports efforts — or even better, plans efforts — so that each initiative developed could be incorporated into an existing community institution. For example, a coalition can begin an after-school program, and plan for the YMCA to pick up the program after a few years; or develop a school prevention program, with the goal of shifting its management to school health educators; or start a program to prevent homelessness, and work with an interfaith council to adopt it. In this strategy, the coalition's role is as catalyst; it acts to create innovations and change that can be adopted and institutionalized in other community organizations.

○ Policy Change

Some coalitions have found effective ways to sustain their efforts through changes in rules, regulations, and laws of the community. By employing advocacy and social-change mechanisms that permanently alter policies, practices, and procedures within a community, these coalitions continue to fulfill their mission. Good examples of this can be found in anti-tobacco coalitions that worked to have boards of health change the laws and consequences of under-age purchase of cigarettes and tobacco products; or anti-drug and alcohol coalitions that work to create local keg licensing laws, to change practices regarding large parties where kegs of beer are consumed. Another topical example would be an AIDS coalition that successfully lobbies for condom distribution in schools. In these cases of policy change, sustainability occurs by incorporating change into the community's laws and regulations. Here the role of the coalition is as advocate for policy change.

○ Turning To The Community

The fourth, and most provocative sustainability strategy, is to turn over what the coalition has begun to the citizens in the community, using an approach stressing empowerment and community development. Here the basic premise, both in sustainability and also initial design, is keeping the coalition's efforts alive by having citizens own and lead the initiatives. Projects that focus on the development of citizen leaders are used to build the skills and capacities of individuals and organizations in the community. One such program is The Right Question Project (based in Somerville, MA), which helps low-income parents become monitors and advocates for their children's education. Sustainability occurs because individuals and home-grown organizations are better able to help the community solve its own problems. The role of the coalition here is as capacity builder.

With each of these four strategies, the role of the coalition differs. If fund-raising and incorporation is the dominant approach, then the role of the coalition can be that of another human service agency. If its strategy is institutionalization, the coalition's role is that of catalyst. If it's policy change, the role is one of advocacy. If it's empowerment, then the role is capacity builder. Ideally, as funded coalitions look to sustainability, which they hopefully will do when they start (as opposed to in the last twelve months of funding), they will use a mix of these four strategies and develop others to create the most effective way to sustain their efforts.

Yet possibly the most important sustaining force is the vital energy within the coalition — what we might also call its spirit. Coalition members should see themselves as keepers of the flame. If the flame dies down, if it becomes embers, it's much harder to keep going and to do good work. How to keep the flame, and fan it, is certainly the million-dollar question. A track record of success surely helps. So does modeling by the leadership, over and above routine management of functions. The bonds among the membership, the willingness to celebrate even small successes, will help as well. A coalition which can find ways of nourishing its own inner spirit will have a much greater chance of continued success.

One in a series of tips on building coalitions.
May/June, 1994

AHEC/Community Partners
24 South Prospect Street
Amherst, MA 01002

