AHEC/Community Partners

Building Healthy Communities

Coalition Building:
Is this Really Empowerment?

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COALITION BUILDING: IS THIS REALLY EMPOWERMENT?

The language and practice of health and human services in the 1990's is dominated by two catch phrases: coalition building and empowerment. Both are often used quite loosely and in an ill-defined manner. Frequently these two phrases are linked. We see funding initiatives from federal, state and local governments and from private foundations that urge applications involving coalition building as a method to provide for empowerment. This combination of two ill-defined phrases can lead to even more misunderstanding and potentially misdirected programming.

Many of us have seen this mismatched pair of phrases go astray in coalitions in our communities. Some examples include:

- A minority coalition gets linked to a community health center to apply for a federal minority health grant. When the dollars arrive, the minority health coalition gets left out of staff hiring, and only select members of the Coalition become members of the health center advisory board to the project. The coalition splits from the health center. Is this coalition building? Is this empowerment?

- A Center for Substance Abuse Prevention Community Partnership experiences a total change in staff when the mayor of the city loses his bid for re-election and a new mayor takes office. Coalition staff change with elected officials? Is this coalition building? Is it empowerment?

- A Robert Wood Johnson Fighting Back coalition decides to expand its mission to focus on minority substance abuse issues by applying for a CSAP Community Partnership grant. It turns to the minority community for support of its application. When in turn the minority community requests that the Board of the Fighting Back agency have more minority representation, it labels the request a "terrorist action". Is this coalition building? Is this empowerment?

- A substance abuse treatment agency becomes the lead agency for a CSAP Partnership, with a focus on empowerment. As the agency experiences financial difficulty, it taps into over $100,000 of the CSAP funds to cover its own debts. When it finally goes bankrupt and belly-up, the CSAP Partnership is $100,000 short. Is this coalition building? Is this empowerment?

- A teen pregnancy prevention coalition receives a large state grant and sub-contracts out services through a variety of community agencies. The Coalition becomes the planner, provider and monitor of a wide range of clinical services. Is this coalition building? Is this empowerment?

- A coalition engages in a visioning exercise. As they envision the state of the community in 10 years, someone asks how many of those in the room live in the community. Less than 1/ 2 of

those in the room are residents, yet they are designing the community's future. Is this empowerment? Is this coalition building?

I am sure that there are many stories that each of you in the audience can tell that raise some of the same questions. The first step in bringing clarity to these issues requires defining both terms.

What is a coalition?

Cheri Brown (1984) defines it as, "An organization of diverse interest groups that combine their human and material resources to effect a specific change the members are unable to bring about independently." LaBonte (1993) suggests that coalitions are, "Groups of groups with a shared goal and some awareness that 'united we stand, and divided we fall.' " Feigherty and Rogers, (1990) differentiate three types of coalitions based on their membership - grassroots, professional, and community based.

Coalitions are generally aimed at trying to promote collaboration, and this term can also be a definitional nightmare. The National Assembly of National Voluntary Health and Social Welfare Organizations (1991) suggests that collaboration is, "The process by which several agencies or organizations make a formal, sustained commitment to work together to accomplish a common mission. Collaborations require a commitment to participate in shared decision making and allocation of resources related to activities responding to mutually identified needs." And as both Himmelman (1992) and Habana-Hafner (1989) suggest, collaboration is more than networking, coordination and cooperation. Himmelman (1992) defines collaboration as a "voluntary, strategic alliance of public, private and non-profit organizations to enhance each other's capacity to achieve a common purpose by sharing risks, responsibilities, resources and rewards."

Coalition building can have as its goal simply networking, which is often defined as exchanging information. Or coordination, which is exchanging information and altering activities for mutual benefit. Or cooperation, which additionally involves sharing resources for mutual benefit to achieve a common purpose. They do not have to be aimed at the most elaborate form of partnership, which is defined as collaboration.

So at its heart, coalition building is a technology, a methodology. The goals and values are not always clear; the degree of intensity of the partnership can range from networking, to coordination, to cooperation, to collaboration with an increase in complexity of purpose, intensity of linkages and formality of agreements [Himmelman (1992) and Habana-Hafner (1989)]. So we see that there is a wide range of possibilities under this term coalition building.

Empowerment also has a extensive literature regarding definition. In its simplest form, it is defined by Minkler (1989) as "The process by which individuals and communities gain mastery over their lives." The Cornell Empowerment Group (1989) states that "Empowerment is an intentional, ongoing process centered in the local community, involving mutual respect, critical reflection, caring and group participation through which people lacking an equal share of valued resources gain greater access to and control over those resources." Wallerstein (1992) states that "Empowerment is a social action process that promotes participation of people, organizations and

communities toward the goals of increased individual and community control, political efficacy, improved quality of community life and social justice." She points out that most commonly, the term empowerment is used as an individual term, but her work expands the definition to include organizational and community empowerment as well.

LaBonte (1989) explores the political aspects of empowerment and offers some cautions regarding its universal use in the l990's. He notes, "Empowerment is a noble word, but the reality of political and economic distribution of power does not yield win-win scenarios. Socially disadvantaged communities empower themselves, in part, by reducing the constraints imposed upon them by wealthier and more powerful interests." He raises concerns that given the prominence of empowerment in health promotion discourse, it is surprising how little the concept of power has been addressed.

Given the range of definitions of the terms coalition building and empowerment, how do we differentiate and understand the relationship of these two terms? Two models are especially helpful in doing this. Chavis and Florin (l990) differentiate between community based and community development approaches. Himmelman (1992) distinguishes between collaborative betterment and collaborative empowerment. Both of these allow us to see some of the assumptions and values that underline these approaches and lay the basis for actually being able to assess coalitions as to whether they are indeed promoting empowerment or not.

Most coalition building efforts can be divided into two approaches - community based vs. community development. Chavis and Florin point out that these approaches represent opposite ends of a continuum and elements of each can be present in any given program.

- The <u>basis</u> of the community based approach is a focus on weaknesses, and solving problems by addressing deficits. The community development approach builds on strengths and competencies.

- The <u>definition of a problem</u> in a community based approach is made by agencies, government, and outside institutions, and in the community development approach the community defines the problem.

- The primary <u>vehicles for creating change</u> in the community based approach are information, education and improved services, whereas the community development approach involves building community control and increasing community capacity.

- In a community-based approach, the <u>professionals</u> are the key and central decision makers, whereas, in a community development approach, the professionals are a resource to the community's problem solving.

- The <u>primary decision makers</u> in a community based model are the agency representatives and the government representatives and other appointed leaders. In the community development model the key decisions are made by the indigenous, informal and elected leaders from the community.

Himmelman (1992) arrives at a very similar understanding in differentiating the terms collaborative betterment and collaborative empowerment. Both are forms of multi-sector collaboration. Himmelman (1992) notes that, "The ownership of any social change process is among the most, if not the most important of its characteristics. Ownership is a reflection of a community's capacity for self-determination and can be enhanced or limited depending upon how collaboration is designed and implemented." He makes a series of differentiations between betterment and empowerment initiatives.

- First, he asks who starts the coalition. If it started outside the community, it's a collaborative betterment process, if it started from inside the community, it is a collaborative empowerment process.

- In the collaborative betterment process, the role of the community is to be invited in; whereas in a collaborative empowerment process the community is central to the effort and is the starter.

- Who controls the decisions again differentiates: in collaborative betterment efforts large institutions are in control, while with collaborative empowerment it is the community.

- The outcomes of the collaborative betterment process are policy changes and improved program delivery and services, whereas the outcomes of the collaborative empowerment process include both those things accomplished in collaborative betterment plus long term ownership and enhanced community capacity for self determination.

Both Chavis and Florin (1990) and Himmelman (1992) point out that the empowerment-community development approach leads to increases both in community ownership and in individual and community control over their own destiny.

So for those who wish to do coalition building to promote empowerment, and for those who wish to fund coalition building to promote empowerment, how do we differentiate various community efforts? How can we produce an assessment process that allows us to differentiate between these various partnership/collaborative efforts?

We have argued earlier (Wolff, 1992) that coalition building as one path to empowered communities holds great hope for building healthy communities that have both competent and responsive helping systems and an empowered and mobilized citizenry. However, if coalition building is used to describe merges of health and human service programs in the quest to become mega-agencies and empowerment is used to describe attempts by human service providers from outside the community to design services for local citizens, then we will have undermined the great potential inherent in both these approaches.

This paper proposes a self-assessment process to allow coalitions to determine their present status in relationship to the processes and outcomes of empowerment. Not all coalitions are committed to empowerment. There are many legitimate definitions of coalition, and many coalitions are

committed to specifically increasing the competence of health and human service systems. However, many coalitions attempt to include empowerment in their vision, and for those that do, this self-assessment process has been designed as a way to gauge how well they are reaching that end.

The self-assessment process covers: goals and objectives, membership, communication, decision making, leadership and leadership development, use of resources, coalition activities and coalition outcomes.

Coalition Empowerment Self Assessment Process

Issue I - Goals and Objectives

The first critical question is whether empowerment is a stated goal of the coalition. Often it is an implied goal, one assumed by many members but never stated. Or it can be stated goal of the funder and thus included in the funding application but not in the ultimate goals of the coalition.

1. Do the goals and objectives clearly state that empowerment is one of the desired outcomes of the coalition effort?

2. Are there specific objectives that translate the goal of empowerment into more specific terms, such as leadership development, advocacy, increased capacity of communities or individuals to solve their own problems, etc?

3. If empowerment is a stated goal is there any specification of not only how empowerment will be described but also WHO is to be empowered (residents, agencies, government, business)?

A coalition that is serious about creating empowerment outcomes and process will include empowerment in the goals and objectives, and will clearly and specifically define both what they mean by empowerment and who will be empowered.

Issue II - Membership

Coalition membership will vary in part depending on how seriously a coalition takes its commitment to empowerment.

1. Is membership inclusive or exclusive? That is, can anybody join?

2. Are there financial barriers to membership, does someone have to pay or appeal for scholarships to join?

3. Is membership limited to a select group of community leaders with designated posts, i.e. superintendent of schools, police chief?

4. Are new members welcomed and oriented to the coalition?

5. Is the membership of the coalition representative of the community?

6. Are all sectors of the community represented (schools, religious, business, law enforcement, media, health and human services, neighborhood/citizen groups)?

7. Is there an explicit attempt to engage residents in the coalition? If so, what role do they have? Is this role explicit in the coalition's goals and objectives?

8. Do residents and citizen groups actually participate in the coalition? If so at what level and in what ways?

Coalitions that wish to be successful at accomplishing empowerment goals need to have open and inclusive membership, limit barriers to coalition membership for all residents, be diverse and multisectoral and most importantly have citizen and citizen group membership in the coalition.

Issue III - Communication

How a coalition communicates information to its members and to the community at large is critical to being able to produce empowerment outcomes.

1. Is information on coalition activities and decision making easily accessible and available, or is there a lot of "insider" information?

2. Can new people join the coalition and receive information that allows them to know what's going on and not feel like an outsider for an extended period of time?

3. Do community residents have full access to coalition information?

4. Does the coalition use the media to get the word out to those who are not in the coalition?

5. Are meeting and materials presented in languages that are accessible to members of the coalition and the residents of the community?

Himmelman (1992) points out that the degree to which "language, data, information and other forms of communication encourage grassroots participation" is critical to collaborative efforts being successful in their pursuit of empowerment.

Issue IV - Decision Making

Himmelman (1992) and Chavis and Florin (1990) both indicate that the degree to which "those most affected by the collaborative mission, goals and actions shape the mission, goals and action" is critical to a coalition process being an empowerment process.

1. Are the key coalition decisions made by the people who will be most affected by the decisions? These decisions include, at least:

a)   Coalition start up
b)   Coalition mission/goals
c)   Coalition ending
d)   Coalition activities
e)   Allocation of resources
f)   Hiring of staff

2.   Is the decision making process spelled out in writing and understood and accepted by all in the community?

3.   Is decision making in the hands of an individual or small group, or is there broader power sharing around decisions?

4.   Do all appropriate groups have a say in coalition decisions?

5.   If a sub-group like a steering committee makes decisions for the coalition, is that group democratically chosen and representative of the community?

6.   What is the organizational chart for the coalition and how much does it represent a typical hierarchical organization vs. a more lateral organization that spreads out decision making, power, communication, etc.?

A critical question in decision making centers on who is a "representative of the community." In coalitions defined by geography it is critical to clearly define the boundaries and what it means to be a representative of the community. Being a citizen or resident of the community is generally the core criteria for defining community representatives. Although this may seem obvious we often see coalitions where people who provide services within the community but live elsewhere are designated as representatives of the community. Citizen helpers are people who live in the community and are of the community but also have a formal helping role such as agency directors or social workers who also live in the community. There can be helpers who are active in the community who do not live there who are essential members of coalitions but who are not to be mistaken for representatives of the community. Their input has to be taken in that light. This can be especially complicated in dealing with racial and ethnic groups but it is just as important in that situation to distinguish between Hispanic or Afro-American coalition leaders who may be deeply committed to that community but who do not live in that community. Although they may be members of the same racial and ethnic community they are not part of the same geographic community and that differentiation can be important in some coalitions. The bottom line in assessing a coalition's commitment to empowered decision making is whether those most affected by the decisions are the key architects of the decisions.

Issue V - Leadership and Leadership Development

In coalitions committed to empowerment, the opportunities for coalition leadership and the efforts at leadership development are critical. Coalition leadership roles are numerous and can include: coalition coordinators, steering committee members, task force chairs or someone willing to take the lead on a single event. Empowerment involves a process of working WITH people rather than doing FOR people, thus leadership issues are paramount in distinguishing the reality of a coalition's commitment to empowerment. If the coalition leadership roles continue to be filled by all the 'same old faces,' then one can see that leadership development is not occurring.

1. Is coalition leadership confined to an individual or a small handful of individuals?

2. Do new members of the coalition have the opportunity to take leadership roles?

3. Are there more professionals or residents in leadership roles?

4. Is leadership inaccessible to individuals because of age, gender, race, religion, ethnicity, class? (Do women, people of color, and low income people hold leadership positions?) Do those in leadership roles reflect the diversity of the membership?

5. Is the leadership sensitive to cultural issues in the coalition?

6. Is there an explicit commitment to leadership development of residents and residents by the coalition?

7. If so, is there a reasonable plan and commitment of resources to implement such leadership development?

Coalitions that attempt to promote empowerment create leadership opportunities for all coalition members and actively commit themselves to the development of new leaders not just in the coalition but throughout the community - leaders in low income populations in minority groups, in neighborhoods and among youth.

Issue VI - Use of Resources

Money talks. So how a coalition uses its resources is an excellent indication of its commitment to empowerment. Resources not only means dollars, but access to training, travel, consultation, literature, and special events.

1. Does everyone have access to coalition resources or are they only available to a small handful of people or a small handful of people who have certain connections?

2. Who controls decisions about the use of coalition resources?

3. What use is coalition funding put towards? Is it committed to expanding the effectiveness of the coalition in its catalyst role, or to the coalition as a program developer?

4. If the coalition runs programs, do these programs have empowerment goals?

5. Is the coalition's running of a program any different from any other agency's delivery of service? If so, how does that reflect on empowerment?

6. Are the long term resources generated by the coalition retained by those who were without them at the coalition's start? [Himmelman (1992)]

7. Who financially supports the coalition? What constraints, if any, do they impose on the issue of empowerment? Can the coalition take any stance on the empowerment issue without running into trouble with the funders?

The use of money and other resources in a coalition can be very telling regarding a commitment to empowerment. Coalitions that use their resources to become service providers, especially of services that are not focused on empowerment may be no different than any other human service agency. McKnight's (1989) critique of service provision is critical here. McKnight suggests that professional human service approaches overemphasize the deficits and needs of individuals and communities rather than their assets and capacities. He states that "As the power of professionals and service systems ascend the legitimacy capacity and authority of citizens and community descends." (1989)

If a coalition is committed to empowering the community then its processes of allocation and use of its resources should reflect that commitment.

Issue VII - Coalition Activities

Fawcett (1991) points that the key activity of a coalition that illustrates empowerment is whether the coalition takes community actions that occur outside the coalition and attempts to change community policies, practices or programs related to the coalition's goals.

1. Does the coalition take actions outside of the coalition in order to create community changes?

2. Does the coalition provide community organizing and community education activities?

3. Does the coalition engage in advocacy?

4. Are the advocacy efforts just to obtain funding for services delivered by coalition members or also for empowerment purposes such as citizen and neighborhood groups?

5. Does the coalition have a relationship with local government officials - city, town, state, federal? In that role does the coalition advocate for the needs of residents or agencies?

The extent to which the activities of the coalition reflect empowerment outcomes is a critical differentiating point. Coalitions that claim to focus on empowerment but essentially provide services that support the status quo service delivery model are unlikely to be empowering coalitions.

Issue VIII - Coalition Outcomes

The proof is in the pudding. If coalitions are committed to empowerment then the coalition outcomes should reflect this priority. If what a coalition claims as its successes are programs designed and implemented by professionals, then the empowerment commitment must be questioned.

1. Are community groups and individuals better able to define and resolve their own concerns?

2. Is there an increase in resident participation in various aspects of community life?

3. Do residents report feeling a greater sense of community?

4. Do residents and the community at large have access to and control over more resources to meet their needs?

5. Have more and new citizen leaders emerged?

6. Has the quality of life in the community improved?

Although increases in empowering processes are important, the ultimate (and often long term) empowerment outcomes are the critical measures of whether the original empowerment goals and objectives have been achieved.

Conclusion

Coalition building holds great promise as a technology to help communities foster empowerment. But not all coalition building efforts are truly committed to empowerment and for those that are committed to empowerment, we have not created criteria to assess that commitment. The Coalition Empowerment Self-Assessment Process proposes a beginning set of criteria to assist coalitions in examining the depth and clarity of their commitment to empowerment both as a process and an outcome.

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Table 1

Service System Concerns, Community Goals,
and Coalition Building Tactics

Concerns with the Health and Human Service System	Community Goals	Examples of Coalition Building Tactics
1. Duplication of effort	Coordination	Information sharing meetings Problem solving task forces Service Guides
2. Fragmentation of services	Systemic/holistic approach	Comprehensive service protocols Collaborative planning
3. Competition	Cooperation	Problem solving task forces Topic-focused monthly meetings Develop resources for collaborative
4. Crisis orientation/remediation	Prevention	Develop new prevention projects Coordinate existing prevention efforts Elicit community support for prevention
5. Multi-cultural insensitivity	Culturally relevant services	Develop coalitions in communities of color Challenge larger system to address issues of cultural relevance

6. Excessive professionalism	Integration of formal and informal helping network	Create ways to meaningfully involve clergy, business and citizens Bring formal and informal providers together Neighborhood organizing
7. Limited and inaccessible information	Effective and accessible communication	Coalition newsletters, service guides Work with media Create settings to encourage members to get to know each other
8. Lack of planning	Long-term planning	Systemic identification of priority issues Problem solving task forces on current and emerging issues Regular review of issues, goals and plans
9. Inequality	Equal access	Advocacy for change of state/local programs Address barriers by developing new systems
10. Detachment from community and clients	Connection to the community	Bring community and providers together Involve community in defining issues, gathering data and mobilizing resources

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