

# The Care and Feeding of Coalition Leaders

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Coalition  
Building  
Tips

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Coalition leaders play critical roles in sustaining the energy and direction of community coalitions. How do these leaders survive and grow? Having a job as a coalition coordinator or coalition leader is a new phenomenon. Ten years ago, one would have been hard pressed to find more than a handful in any state in the nation. Now, most states have dozens of people doing this work.

We have learned that the role of the coalition coordinator is an exquisitely complex one, involving numerous functions and a capacity to work with a wide variety of groups and individuals. Coordinators and leaders must be perceived as fair and able to deal with conflict; they must be able to help a diverse group create a vision and an action plan, and then move forward. In many cases, the role of coalition coordinator was created in response to a funding initiative. The coordinator's position, therefore, frequently does not sit within an organization with skilled staff to supervise the coalition leadership. Indeed, there are few skilled enabling systems to support coalition building, or other community initiatives as well.

Given this, what kinds of support should be provided for coalition leaders? What kinds of support should organizations offer when thinking about starting a coalition? Three types come to mind: administrative, fiscal, and supervisory.

## Administrative Support

Supporting community coalitions should include an administrative component. A support office should serve as the information hub and problem solving capital of its affiliated coalitions. Information, resources, and other types of administrative support should be readily available to coalition staff. Some examples of administrative support for coalition leaders might include:

- Researching coalition-specific information. In our case, we've checked out the best kind of copiers to buy, plane fares to distant places, and even per-capita lottery spending
- Sharing the news of one coalition's success with other connected coalitions
- Creating speciality items using advanced technology, e.g., newsletter mastheads, brochures, meeting fliers
- Assisting with the creation of bookkeeping systems
- Providing a shoulder to lean on and "gossip center," enabling coalition staff to feel that they are part of a work community — connected, supported, and never alone

Support organizations might also have a full library of materials that expand on coalition building and community development, advanced technology (such as computers, fax machines and copiers), and a training capacity (on new computer software and technology, such as computer networks and e-mail). Sending out a packet of current materials (newspaper articles of interest, funding announcements, conference brochures and the like) monthly to all affiliated coalition members is another way administrative support can help coalition leaders.

Many of these administrative services are easily found within larger organizations; but to the single staff person of a coalition they can be elusive. Finding this support is possible, however. Looking to the lead agency for bookkeeping support, polling other members of the coalition to see what they can offer, and hiring a part-time or shared administrative assistant are all ways to get needed help.

## □ Fiscal Support

The lead agency can give fiscal support too. Its overall fiscal goal, especially when it is supporting more than one community organization, is to establish order out of potential chaos. This can be accomplished in several ways.

- *Maintain flexibility without loss of accountability.* Establish procedures which give communities flexibility in how dollars are spent, but which maintain mutually-agreed-upon standards of accountability. For example, a coalition may want to establish a mini-grant program, and may need to provide funding to grantees in advance, because of the grantees' inability to front the money. The lead agency should be able to handle this request. At the same time, it is reasonable to expect the coalition to provide evidence of grantee monitoring and assurance that funds are spent appropriately.
- *Appreciate the need for a quick turn-around of funds and the occasional "emergency" request.* Coalitions operate on a shoestring; frequently, community residents either depend on coalition money as income, or have paid for expenses out-of-pocket. In these circumstances, it is essential that significant delays in reimbursement be avoided. This sometimes means that the lead agency must advance funds to the coalition for prompt payment of these expenses. To have community people wait to be paid can alienate them from working with the coalition again.
- *Provide adequate reporting in exchange for responsible spending.* Lead agencies should expect that community coalition spending be responsible — within budgets, on approved items, etc. In exchange, coalitions need comprehensive and regular reports on their spending patterns. The reports need to be clear and user-friendly; and lead agency fiscal personnel must be available to coalition people to answer questions, offer guidance, and clarify misunderstandings.
- *Do not isolate the community organization from the larger fiscal issues which the lead agency faces.* Coalitions and community organizations should be aware of and sensitive to overall constraints and regulations of the lead agency, such as fiscal year-end and auditing requirements. Submitting expenses in October for the previous May, when the fiscal year ended in June, is an all-too-common, yet avoidable problem. Similarly, if the funding source has certain guidelines which affect community planning, make sure communities know about them. For example, if the funder will not pay for equipment, make sure communities know it; if there are preferred, or required, vendors, make sure they know that too.

## □ Supervisory Support

Another component of support comes from those in supervisory positions. Supervisory support to coalition leaders creates a collegial problem-solving environment where the coalition leader can bring large and small problems and find a welcome and helpful ear. Issues raised may include immediate, urgent crises, but also longer-term problems and future planning. The difficult role of coalition leader requires someone available to help the leader think through, clearly and fairly, the many difficulties that can arise and find a range of solutions. Supervision can also be a place for the coalition leadership to look into the future, to plan for accessing fiscal resources to keep the coalition alive and growing, and also to clarify and modify the coalition's mission, goals, activities, and vision.

Supervision is also a place to tie coalition activities to the broader social environment, and to connect the coalition with additional resources and contacts outside the coalition area. The supervisor, for example, might make a linking phone call, or suggest a reading, or provide a framework from another discipline for the coalition leader's work.

Finally, supervision is also a place for the individual leader to examine his/her personal issues and how they impact the coalitions's work. These can be questions of style, time management, or conflict resolution.

In sum, at the heart of each coalition are one or more leaders who are critical to managing the coalition's development. The care and feeding of these coalition leaders are essential to the coalition's success.

