

Barriers to Coalition Building

Barriers to coalition building and meeting goals take many forms. Some are internal, some external. Each of these areas is dealt with in turn below. Your ability and skills in overcoming these barriers is crucial to the successful development of community coalitions and neighborhood groups. This is information you can share with those you work with.

Internal Barriers

Internal barriers include inexperienced leadership, fragmentation, lack of clear goal setting, lack of commitment by participants, burnout, unrealistic goals and lack of education in specific skills.

Solutions

Inexperienced Leadership: Training of Leaders. Provide training to help develop leadership skills. It is also important to work leaders into the process and by setting good examples of leadership.

Fragmentation: Ensure that the plan made at the beginning is the plan you stick to (you can adjust it, change it, but keep consistent goals in mind). Avoid effort that might divide the group. For example, if there is a disagreement about an issue take a vote of hands (who supports, who opposes) then ask the side that did not prevail if they are comfortable with the decision. Try to avoid conflict when it isn't necessary. Most important help remind people that ideas generated from within are most important. It will be easy for outside groups to suggest ideas to people. When this occurs, you need to stick to your plan and avoid distraction. Also discussions over elections and bylaws can fragment a group and distract you from your original goals. Avoid going in this direction (election, bylaws) if you do not need to.

Lack of clear goal setting: Similar to above, it is easy for groups to fragment when goals are not clear. Persons tend to wander from idea to idea unless there is some kind of structure. Set clear timelines and locations for activities; lay out who is responsible and what is needed for the goal to be met. When conversations deviate from these points or bounce around from point to point without finishing one, bring the groups attention back to the points that need to be covered. Record all actions (without a record, there are no clear goals.)

Lack of commitment by participants: Remember the rule: If no one is going to commit to an idea, it may be a good idea, but it is not a good idea for the group. Commitment needs to be asked for and it needs to be affirmed. Ask people to raise their hands, divide into groups, or some other action that commits people to participation. I will often ask others to scribe or take notes to ensure greater participation. Also remember that when someone brings up an idea, they should at the very least, be willing to commit to follow the idea through.

Burnout: Overcoming burnout means increasing commitment and ensuring that participants are not over extended. If more people are involved and if they realize that their commitment is only part of the whole, then burnout is easier to avoid. Remember that no one needs to take on all

tasks. Also remember that if 5 people give 3 hours a month it's 15 hours, if 30 people give three hours a month it's 90 hours. That is a lot of work shared by a number of people. Also remember that you should set out to have no more than two immediate actions on the plate in any one time period. Any more may mean that you are trying to do too much and you will exhaust your resources.

Unrealistic goals: If an unrealistic goal is suggested you should not point out the barriers that exist. Rather, you should emphasize the strong points of the goals and how those points can be realized. When one parent suggested that she would like to see every parent in her school out on the streets every morning wishing their kids off to school, she was proposing an unrealistic goal. However, the goal of having every parent on her street on one day do this was realistic and could be accomplished. Once accomplished, it can be expanded and the formerly unrealistic goal becomes more realistic.

Lack of education in specific skills: Identify the skills and seek formal training and informal experience to help meet these deficits.

External Barriers

External barriers include lack of access to traditional power structures, inability to know how bureaucracies run, lack of capital or access to capital, negative media, and inability to get your message out.

Solutions

Lack of access to traditional power structures: The best way to bridge access, is to let power structures know you exist, invite them to your meetings, and present to them your current approach to problems and your strong internal structures. In other words: do not invite power structure representatives until you have your internal ducks in a row. The appearance of realistic goals and lots of people make a good impression on elected and unelected policy makers.

Inability to know how bureaucracies work: This requires education and invitation. People need to be taught that they can pierce the bureaucratic veil if they read the books (regulations, statutes, ordinances and policy books.) Also, as you expand groups and invite more people in, power structure members will become more involved. You need to encourage them to teach you how their systems work. Gathering knowledge is one sure way of understanding systems. One caution: do not try to understand everything at once. But as you only have two projects or goals on the plate at one time, you should work on understanding one or two structures at a time, not every structure at one time.

Lack of capital or access to capital: "When money is in the driver's seat, you are just a passenger." You get access to capital by building strong professional relationships. You do not run into problems getting access to capital if you do not build a dependency on it. There are a tremendous number of free and donated resources available. However, you will not encounter these if you go into a project looking for money first. Expect that it won't be there, and seek ways around the barrier.

Negative media: Never react negatively to negative media. If you must respond, do so with the facts and with numbers. The more letters to media outlets expressing disagreement with a representation, the stronger you are and more apt you are to build a better media base. If you are negative, the media will respond in kind. The best way to build positive media is to invite the

press in and speak openly about your work. Suspicion of the press in and speak openly about your work. Suspicion of the press always ends in disappointment. The strength of your organization, its preparedness, its contact to the system and its realistic goals all are ways to ensure a positive media profile for your group.

Inability to get your message out: This is tied to the need to build a strong relationship with the media. Regular press contact, press releases and involvement of key policy makers is essential to getting your message out.