

Building Diverse Community Based Coalitions

"The world is changing and anyone who thinks they can get anything meaningful done without the input of all a community's leadership is simply not paying attention. Inclusion is more than a buzzword. It's a necessity."

-- Dr. Jewelle Taylor Gibbs, internationally recognized sociologist and author

Most activists have figured out that engaging a broad cross-section of people in support of an issue is a good thing. They can recite the litany of rationale: There's power in numbers; richness in variety of perspectives; value in diversity, etc. Yet, even with the intellectual understanding of how critical diversity is to collaborative leadership, many groups can't seem to "make it so." Many cite lack of contacts in professional, religious and/or racial and ethnic communities that are different from their own. Another barrier is fear of conflicts that may arise as various groups learn to work together.

In most cases, groups who aren't working together today have reasons deeply rooted in the past. Diversity, or lack of it, in a group only mirrors relationships in the "larger" community. Moving beyond the way things "are" to what they "could be" requires an understanding of past tensions that helped forge the current reality. The first step is to conduct a bit of research either through personal interviews, old newsclippings and documents, or both. Try to map potential allies using the guiding questions below.

YOU ARE HERE: MAPPING POTENTIAL ALLIES

- 1) How are resources allocated to support the various groups and/or communities with which I want to work? Have there been tensions over resources? How did these tensions evolve and who were the key players?
- 2) What is the group's experience with previous collaborations? Were they satisfying/did they meet their needs? Was it a positive or negative experience overall? Why?
- 3) What are the prevailing attitudes about collaboration? Are there issues (i.e., in professional training or culture, mistrust, etc.) that make collaboration difficult? Easier? What concerns the group most about getting involved with a collaborative project? How can those concerns be allayed?
- 5) Who are the key opinion leaders in the group? Who is most open to collaborating? Who is least open? Do we or someone we know have a relationship with any of them? List names.
- 6) What would the group need to get out of collaborating with others? What can we offer? What would the group be willing to contribute? What do they risk in joining us?
- 7) What interests do we both share? Will this collaboration offer a vehicle for mutual benefit?

Make A Plan

Once you have the answers to these questions, you are ready to frame an initial recruitment plan. A recruitment plan identifies prospective partners, their probable interests, and background information to help you begin the work of building relationships. It's important to choose candidates carefully because the first groups to accept your invitation will signal volumes to the rest of the community.

Candidates need not be the most prominent community members, only that they are trusted in their community, you share common ground, and they are concerned enough about the core issues to make a solid commitment. Big name affiliation without any commitment will not build working relationships. They just breed resentment and reinforce the status quo. Additionally, a big name usually means the candidate has more to risk when they do get involved. Collaborations require partners who are deeply concerned and have a strong self-interest in the initiative and low enough risk in getting involved to truly be "there" for other partners. Use the form attached to identify potential partners in your community.

Making the Pitch

Often, any candidate has at least one friend or colleague that you know as well. These "go-betweens" are excellent resources for information and may even consent to initiate contact with the candidate. If possible, discuss your pitch with a colleague who knows the candidate well. Try role-playing certain approaches and discussing the candidate's potential responses. A good recruitment pitch comes from detailed background information and plenty of practice.

The Comfort Zone

Once you've gotten a candidate to agree to join you, the hard work begins. Review your organizational structure. How are decisions made? Who holds the information and resources? Will there be room for your new partner to make a meaningful contribution to the initiative's direction? What steps do you have in place to make new partners feel at home with the group? What language, or level of language, is spoken at meetings and gatherings? Will it alienate or welcome new partners? In short, retaining new partners for the long haul means really integrating them into the team. Of course, this is not a blending process where everyone ends up acting and talking the same. It's more of a salad approach where every partner is tossed lightly until the new partner is "in." Some organizations develop new partner orientations and assign a partner to the new member to help with the transition. That partner makes the introductions, brings the new members up to speed and works with them to identify potential areas for participation. When possible, it really helps to recruit at least two people from a community to help minimize feelings of isolation.

"If you've done a good job of selecting people to participate, you're going to have -- in our traditional way of thinking about power -- dramatically different levels of power that people hold," observes John Parr, former head of the National Civic League and

seasoned veteran in creating public-private partnerships. "How do you create a situation where there is, in effect, a level playing field? In many ways it's a challenge to the facilitator to, frankly, spend some of their time coaching people -- both those with power and those without power -- about how to be a more effective participant."

Confronting Conflict

Conflict happens even in homogeneous groups. It is an inevitable fact of life. Yet, when conflict happens along group lines in diverse collaborations, partners are more likely to give up and walk away. The key to moving through the tough times is keeping the focus on the concrete, work related issues. What structural problems are exacerbating conflict? Are mechanisms for gathering input and making decisions clear? Are there contextual issues (i.e., group histories, resource sharing, external political forces, etc.) that are shaping organizational dynamics?

Facing conflict within a group requires a skilled facilitator and enough safe space in a discussion setting to identify concrete issues and outcomes. For example, a general discussion about perceptions and attitudes among partners will not be as useful as identifying barriers (including misperceptions) to working together toward the common goal, and strategies to address those barriers. Remember, not everyone is a skilled negotiator. Leave room for different styles of expression and try not to take it personally.



Good Ideas To Try At Home

Power Analysis

A long time community organizing tool, power analyses chart a community's power structures and identify places of influence and power. Start with identifying government, business and nonprofit organizations and their leadership. More informal channels of power will emerge in personal interviews. Identify self-interests, constituencies and connections between institutions as much as possible. By mapping the power "sources" in a wide range of communities, you also map potential venues for collaboration.

Move the Meeting

One way to build commitment and comfort is to rotate meeting locations and responsibility for meeting planning among the various partners. Encourage partners to be creative, and open and close meetings in ways that reflect their group customs, "culture," or identity. It also helps to attend each partner's own group meetings to get ideas for building a combined, "team" meeting culture.

Building Skills and Capacities

Training and professional development can be an effective tool for forging shared language and approaches to advancing shared work. It's a good idea to focus on best practices as there's no need to reinvent the wheel. Internet searches using keywords on the specific issue or more general terms like "capacity building," "community development," and/or "building diversity" can lead you to a treasure trove of resources.

It's also important to note that capacity building should not just focus on getting new partners to "understand" how to work with more established partners. Existing collaborations should regularly evaluate their form, structure and group process to ensure they are accessible to newcomers. Review issues like access for those with disabilities (i.e., offering sign language interpretation, or access for those using wheelchairs); the need for language translation (are there communities who can not participate because there is not translation capacity?); and the meeting times or settings. For example, are meetings during the day so only those with flexible work situations can attend? Are meetings late at night preventing senior participation? Is the meeting located near public transportation? Are youth and children welcome? Are there emerging groups in our community for whom we should be preparing to make room? How might their participation have an impact on the group?

Make It Policy

The best way to guarantee inclusion is to write it directly into a group's policy. By identifying "seats" for key constituencies -- like youth representatives, faith groups, etc. -- a certain degree of representation is assured.

Assessing Community Resources

List who shares this problem?	What would they get out of joining you?	Who else would they bring in?	Who would their presence alienate?

Rank each group named above from 1 to 5 (with 5 being the highest) with regard to your issues taking into account the following factors: self-interest, depth of concern, risk in joining you, and level of difficulty to reach/organize.

Group	Self-interest	Depth of concern	Risk in joining you	Difficult to reach/organize