

ADVOCACY INSTITUTE

MAKING SOCIAL JUSTICE LEADERSHIP STRATEGIC, EFFECTIVE, AND SUSTAINABLE

BALANCING THE TENSIONS IN COALITIONS

Avoid formal structure unless necessary Coalitions are actually more difficult if you try to formalize them with dues, bylaws and the like. This makes it harder for some groups to participate. Creating ways to work together on concrete projects is usually a more effective way to build coalition relationships.

Understand each group's constraints All organizations have internal rules that need to be respected. In particular, be mindful of constraints on:

- the process required for formal support by the group.
- the tactics the group feels comfortable using.
- the ability of groups to cross over in new issues.

Delegate responsibility Coalitions, whether of groups or individuals, work best when each member has a specific task that they are responsible for. The challenge is to divide up the work at hand into separate tasks and to match each with the skills of each member.

Make key decisions as a group It is easy for the leadership of a project to fall to a small group willing to take the initiative. Try to involve all major coalition partners in key decisions. This will give your process broader insight and will give more groups a stake in carrying out the strategy.

Keep everyone informed Maintain a complete mailing list and send out updates on an ongoing basis to keep the broad coalition informed. Also, you likely have a core group of key advocates who should meet regularly to steer your project.

TIPS FOR ANTICIPATING AND OVERCOMING TENSIONS IN COALITION BUILDING AND ACTIONS

- **Recognize that conflict will occur** no matter how good all participants' intentions are.
- **Mixed loyalties are unavoidable.** Coalition members owe their primary loyalty to their own organization.
- **Coalitions have to be accountable to their purpose and mission.** They must sometimes take fast action but must do so without surprising their members.
- **Balancing unity and diversity is demanding.** You can avoid problems by examining whether potentially troublesome matters will be addressed. Consider:
 - Goal differences.
 - Ideological differences.
 - Different expectations on results of actions or efforts.
 - Power differences within the coalition.
 - Differences of commitment and intensity to coalition objectives.
 - Dealing with differences in financial and in-kind commitments.
 - Differences in organizational style among different sized groups.