

Coalition Politics – Challenges, Opportunities, and Disasters in the Land of “Collaboration”

Scenario #1

You are representing your local nonprofit organization, which serves immigrants and refugees, on a national coalition working to change federal immigration policy. The coalition is funded by several national foundations and is ‘invitation-only’ – the funders and the initial 5 national convening organizations they invited determined who else would be added. Currently, there are 32 member organizations, representing 25 states, and including small nonprofit organizations, grassroots regional coalitions, and large national organizations (including religious groups and trade unions). The coalition’s charter goal is simply “pass comprehensive immigration reform,” and decisions about strategy, disbursement of funds, and coalition processes are to be negotiated. At the first national face-to-face meeting, several issues of contention are raised: It is difficult for group representatives to make decisions on the spot and still be accountable to their local memberships, because they obviously don’t have time to discuss these decisions with them. Large national organizations sometimes do not share all of the information they have about legislative progress with the other members, because it was given to them in ‘confidence’ by members of Congress or their staffs. Funding decisions are based on organizations’ power upon entering the coalition, not what is expected of them as members. And the groups vary widely in terms of their politics – what are acceptable compromises to some represent unacceptable ‘selling out’ to others. As a member of this coalition, how would you approach these dynamics? What are your primary concerns as a representative of your local organization? What are your primary concerns as someone who wants to see the coalition proceed? What would be good objectives in the short and intermediate terms for the coalition? What are the advantages of a coalition structure in achieving these objectives? What are the disadvantages?

Scenario #2

You are the Executive Director of an organization that provides residential care to adults with mental retardation and developmental disabilities. Your agency has been very successful in the past several legislative sessions in preserving state funding for your consumers, and you have even won some increases in the Medicaid waiver program that provides much of your agency’s budget. This year, the state’s severely constrained budget worries you, though – it seems that it will be difficult to make the case that your organization and the people you serve deserve continued increases when so many parts of the budget will be cut so dramatically. You have been approached by a newly-forming coalition of organizations serving seniors, children with disabilities, and people with severe mental illness. These groups are coming together to present a unified case to the legislature for increased funding for social services, or at least no reductions in funding, in order to avoid competing against each other in the budgetary process. You are intrigued by this possibility. You believe that the organizations in the coalition are doing good work, and you think that legislators may respond positively to this kind of cooperation. You worry, though, that, since your track record is among the best, you may make yourself more vulnerable by associating with so many other organizations. What do you see as the advantages and disadvantages of affiliation with this kind of coalition? If the coalition is going to form anyway, does this

change your analysis? What kinds of structures or ground rules could be helpful in minimizing the disadvantages? What should you do before deciding whether to join?

Scenario #3

You are a community organizer celebrating a very successful community clean-up and neighborhood fair that was the result of months of hard work by a coalition of community-based organizations and neighborhood groups. Together, you recruited more than 400 volunteers and participants to your event, raised enough money to pay for all of your expenses and still have \$1500 left over, obtain positive media coverage in several outlets, and make significant physical improvements to some of your most blighted blocks. At the final meeting evaluating the project's success and thanking each other for all of the good work, some of the coalition members raise the idea that this group should continue to work together on other projects and issues, since this effort was so successful. You are skeptical—this was always conceived as a time-limited coalition, and none of the organizations signed on for a perpetual commitment. You acknowledge, though, the strong relationships that have been built and the way in which the organizations seemed to complement each others' strengths. There is some discussion about possible goals for further work together, and several ideas are thrown out, but there is no immediate consensus. What should you do next? What should determine if and how the coalition keeps working together? What changes would need to be made in the coalition's structure and process if it is to transition from a time-limited coalition to a permanent one? If you decide not to continue the coalition, how should you handle the termination of the coalition? If you decide to continue, should the membership stay the same? Who should make these decisions? What if the coalition members cannot come to consensus?

Scenario #4

In your role as a social work administrator, you are serving as a facilitator for a coalition working to redesign standards for the investigation of elder financial exploitation. The coalition membership is by invitation only and was formed by the state's department of aging, which is charged with the investigation but wants community leaders' insights into defining elder financial exploitation and establishing new protocols for culturally-sensitive investigations. The group, then, will work somewhat like a task group, but, because each member was chosen because of his/her organizational affiliation, it has elements of a coalition, in that all members are also representing their organizational interests. The members' organizational affiliations include financial institutions, long-term care facilities, community-based groups of older adults, and your organization, which specializes in credit counseling and financial education for low-income individuals. You are preparing for the coalition's first organizational meeting in a week. What do you want to do before then? Should you contact any members in advance of the meeting? What should the agenda be? What information do you need to communicate at the meeting? What information do you need to collect? How should the meeting be structured? How often will you meet, for how long, where? What roles do you want members to play? What can you do as a facilitator to ensure the coalition's success?