Coalition Governance

Background

This resource helps coalitions of all sizes establish a leadership structure to guide their activities and create documents like charters and bylaws to develop their rules. Coalitions should tailor the strategies in this resource to fit their needs.

Establishing a leadership structure

Coalition leadership. Coalitions generally have a steering committee or a group of leaders who focus on the coalition's strategy and help move its work forward.

Selecting leaders. Coalitions vary in how they elect or designate leaders. It can be helpful if leaders are decision makers who can encourage organizations or community members to support coalition activities. In a smaller coalition, the leaders may be two or three people who are regularly engaged in the work. In larger coalitions, a steering committee should reflect the diversity of the coalition and the community, including people who live in the communities the coalition serves or have direct experience with the issues the coalition addresses. Larger steering committees may include positions such as chair, vice chair, secretary, treasurer, and chairs of work groups.

Key resource: Steering committee toolkit

This toolkit provides templates for:

- Selecting coalition leaders
- Defining the leaders' roles and responsibilities
- Developing agreements with steering committee members
- Facilitating leadership meetings

Setting expectations. It is important to clearly define the roles and responsibilities of coalition leaders, whether the leadership includes formal positions or not. It can also be helpful to specify when the leaders can make executive decisions on behalf of the coalition or when they must consult with the broader coalition. For example, one coalition leader (or a chair in a steering committee) could be a tiebreaker in coalition votes, or have the final say when the coalition members are undecided on an issue.

Work groups. In addition to a steering committee, larger coalitions can establish work groups.

Work group objectives. Work groups are often responsible for accomplishing a specific set of the coalition's goals and objectives. In rural or geographically dispersed areas, coalitions can organize work groups by location.

Work group processes. Work groups may continue throughout the course of a coalition's work, particularly if they are location-based, or they may convene to address a goal and disband once that goal is achieved. As with steering committees, coalitions should have written guidelines and expectations for work group members.

Key consideration: Nonprofit status

Your coalition may have a lead (or backbone) organization that handles the budget and organizes meetings. You may also want to consider becoming a nonprofit, which allows your coalition to apply for funding and operate without a lead organization. Nonprofits have a specific 501 (c)3 tax status and are required to have a steering committee and formal bylaws. Although nonprofit status may be time-consuming to obtain, donations to nonprofits are tax deductible, which may encourage donors to contribute.

Creating charters, guidelines, and bylaws

Governing documents help coalitions run smoothly. Your coalition can create informal guidelines and a charter or develop formal bylaws depending on your needs. Smaller coalitions often start with informal guidelines and a charter, which they can expand into bylaws as they grow.

Charters. Coalition charters outline the purpose and structure of a coalition. They may include an overview of the coalition's mission and vision, leadership structure, and how decisions are made by the coalition. Your coalition can make regular updates to its charter.

Guidelines. In addition to a charter, your coalition may develop guidelines, which are ground rules that help organize day-to-day work. For example, guidelines might specify rules about distributing work evenly or allowing enough time to review materials.

Bylaws. Bylaws are similar to charters—they outline the coalition's purpose, governance structure, and decision-making process. However, they are considered legal documents. Your bylaws must include sections on how any changes to the bylaws will be approved, and what will happen to your coalition's property or funds if it ends its work. Bylaws should strike a balance between including enough detail and avoiding frequent updates, because changing bylaws typically requires a majority vote from coalition members.

Key resource: Templates and examples of charters and bylaws

The Center for Nonprofit Education developed these templates for creating charters and bylaws:

- Community Coalition Charter Template
- Coalition Bylaw Template

The Community Action for Healthy Living Inc.'s bylaws are also a helpful example of completed bylaws for coalitions.

Sources

The content in this document was informed by the following resources:

- Butterfoss, F.D. *Ignite! Getting Your Community Coalition "Fired Up" for Change*. AuthorHouse, 2013.
- Center for Nonprofit Education. "Action to Impact: A Coalition Building Roadmap - Set." 2017.
- Center for Nonprofit Education. "Coalition Bylaw Contents." 2016.