Decision-Making in Coalitions

Background

Coalitions often include multiple partners with differing perspectives, which can make it challenging to agree on next steps. This resource helps coalitions establish clear decision-making processes and move their work forward.

Establish Decision-Making Processes

There are several methods that can help your coalition make decisions:

Consensus. This method requires all coalition members to agree on an approach before moving forward. It involves discussing potential options and adjusting proposals to reach a compromise. Facilitation strategies such as levels of consensus in which coalition members rate their level of support for a decision (5= full support; 1 = no support) and discuss their ratings—can help groups identify and address concerns. Although achieving consensus takes time, it often leads to higher levels of buy-in and long-term support.

Majority rule. With this method, coalition members vote on potential approaches, and the option with the most votes wins. This method is faster than consensus but may result in weaker support from those who voted against the winning approach. To encourage broader support, consider voting rules such as requiring at least 70 percent agreement (the 70/30 rule)—allowing only one vote per member organization—or specifying a quorum requirement for votes.

Leadership makes the decision. Although coalitions should avoid having leaders make all decisions, this approach can be appropriate when decisions are minor or time is limited.

Coalitions can use a combination of approaches. For example, majority rule can serve as a backup when you cannot reach consensus. If your coalition has work groups, they can reach consensus internally and then seek approval from the full coalition through a majority vote.

Key consideration: Document your processes and rules

Your coalition should clearly outline its decision-making processes and rules in a group charter or similar document that all coalition members can access. For example, the Strengthening Families Through Behavioral Health Coalition in Washington, DC, specifies in its charter which decisions require a coalition vote and describes its voting procedures. Decisions related to budget, advocacy goals, and charter amendments require a coalition vote, and members have a week to cast electronic ballots after issues are raised at meetings. See the *Coalition Governance* resource for guidance on creating a charter.

Decide who participates in decisions

In addition to specifying decision-making processes and rules, your coalition should ensure that the members making decisions are active coalition participants. Establish participation expectations that members must meet in order to vote on or otherwise contribute to decisions. Consider outlining these requirements in a letter of commitment that members sign (Figure 1 has a template).

Figure 1. Template for a letter of commitment

[Organization/Name] commits to being an active member of the XYZ Coalition. [We /I] support the coalition's vision, goals, and objectives. [We /I] commit to planning and collaborating with the coalition and understand that this work will take time and sustained efforts. [We/I] acknowledge and respect the contributions of the coalition members.

Benefits of membership include:

- [*For community members:* List benefits such as compensation, professional development opportunities, educational events, networking, etc.]
- *[For organizations:* List benefits such as access to coalition resources and data, educational events, connections to other members and priority populations, etc.]

As general evidence of our commitment, [we/I] agree to do the following:

- [*For community members:* regularly attend coalition meetings, participate in coalition events, etc.]
- [*For organizations:* appoint a representative(s) to attend meetings and activities; authorize representative to make decisions; share relevant information with organizational members or employees through electronic mailing lists, websites, and newsletters; inform the coalition of our organization's activities; etc.]

[*Organizational contributions, if applicable*] Our organization will commit the following resources to the coalition: [list those that apply such as volunteers for coalition tasks; a financial contribution (specify amount); in-kind staff time or materials; meeting space or refreshments; connections to other key organizations/individuals; etc.].

Name of organization or community member _____
Signature _____
Date _____

Adapted from: Butterfoss, F.D. *Ignite! Getting Your Community Coalition "Fired Up" for Change.* AuthorHouse, 2013.

Key consideration: Document and share decisions with coalition members

When your coalition makes decisions, be sure to document them and share your documentation with coalition members. You can consider keeping a decision log or record of key decisions with the date the decision was made; how the decision was made (such as coalition consensus, vote, etc.); and any other important information.

Sources

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

- Urban Institute. "Building a Cross-Sector Mobility Coalition." April 29, 2025. https://upward-mobility.urban.org/toolkit-increasing-upward-mobility/2-building-cross-sector-mobility-coalition.
- Butterfoss, F.D. *Ignite! Getting Your Community Coalition "Fired Up" for Change*. AuthorHouse, 2013.
- Butterfoss, F.D. *Coalitions and Partnerships in Community Health.* Jossey-Bass, 2007.