



Stronger Together: Coalition Governance & Capacity

Coalitions are powerful approaches to collaboration around a shared agenda. They bring organizations with a wide variety of expertise and capacity together to tackle a common goal. But any successful coalition requires careful planning and ongoing administration and management to achieve its purpose. It can be a lot to process but never fear! This tool will help you understand the options for coalition structure, leadership, and operations, as well as how to assess and address capacity needs. The result? A coalition in which all members know where the work is headed, the processes for decision making, and what to expect as the coalition moves forward.

Determining Your Coalition's Structure

By establishing well-defined structures, your coalition can effectively manage efforts and set sustainable long-term objectives. There is no one-size-fits-all structure for coalitions. The structure you design should best help all coalition members achieve the coalition's overall purpose.

Some coalitions rely heavily on a single organization or agency. Others use a board or committee structure to make decisions. Much of this depends on the size of your coalition, the amount of time already dedicated to your issues, and your coalition's ability to consistently meet or otherwise communicate with one another to make decisions. You may choose to have both: designated leaders/decision makers as well as general coalition members. That is OK, as long as the role and expectations are clearly laid out for both.

For example, Coalition X has an advisory committee that serves as leaders and decision makers. One organization on that committee has a staff member who coordinates meetings. There is a chair and vice-chair who lead the meetings. General coalition members are not required to attend advisory committee meetings but are always welcome. They are expected to participate in larger community events, outreach, and efforts.

What is a Coalition?

Coalitions are a form of collaboration. "Collaboration" is an umbrella term that describes the action that groups take together to achieve a shared agenda. Collaboration happens through coalitions, alliances, or networks. Coalition building is the process of bringing partners together and defining action to accomplish shared goals. Coalitions:

- ▶ Can be formal or informal.
- ▶ Can be local, regional, statewide, national, or international.
- ▶ Include like-organizations or organizations from different sectors, public and private.
- ▶ Often form in times of crisis or political pressure.
- ▶ Require administration, staffing, and financial resources to coordinate their work.

www.advocacyandcommunication.org

For more information about ACS, please contact us at info@advocacyandcommunication.org. Follow us on [LinkedIn](#).

Cleveland
1277 West 104th St.
Cleveland, OH 44102

Columbus
2612 Zollinger Road
Columbus, OH 43221

Washington, DC
300 New Jersey Avenue, NW
Suite 900, PMB 9005
Washington, DC 20001

Phoenix
207 North Gilbert Road
Suite 007
Phoenix, AZ 85234

Some options for structuring leadership in a coalition include the following:

- ▶ Build a small **core leadership team** made up of 2–4 leaders from local organizations or agencies (e.g., nonprofits, local government, foundations). Use this approach when decisions need to be made quickly and when leadership has a solid understanding of the direction in which they need to go. Even with a small group, this approach requires someone to coordinate meetings and take notes to memorialize decisions.
- ▶ Convene a **steering committee** comprising 5–12 community leaders. This approach can extend the reach of funding, marketing, advocacy, or other opportunities by including more people in the decision-making process. This is a good way to secure buy-in from individuals. This approach requires strong facilitation to bring the group to consensus on key decisions.
- ▶ Convene **action teams** made up of community stakeholders who know about the target issue(s) (e.g., nonprofit leaders, faith-based leaders, grassroots organizers, business leaders, philanthropy leaders, etc.) and know how to build relationships and connections and/or access different types of public and private funding around those issues. Action teams might address a specific aspect of the coalition’s work, such as research, communication, or policy advocacy. Or they might represent different geographies within the coalition’s footprint. This option is good for those who want input from a cross-section of the community and insight into community needs. It requires a strong facilitator to move each action team to decisions and a coordinator to ensure the decisions come together in a cohesive way for the overall effort.
- ▶ Combine **all of the above**. Some coalitions use all three approaches in different ways. If you would like to explore ways to use all three, outline who you think will be part of each group and what types of decisions they should make. For example, a small core leadership team could make final decisions based on recommendations from a steering committee and action teams. A steering committee made up of community leaders and experts could create and oversee the coalition’s plans for fundraising, public engagement, or public policy. Action teams could make specific recommendations about policy, communication, and local activities (if your coalition covers multiple communities) or take on specific research assignments to inform the coalition’s work.



Use the table below to help you think through your coalition's ideal governance structure and decision-making process.

Decision Making/Coalition Leadership

Who are the decision makers for the coalition? Why are you considering this approach (what is your rationale)?

What kind of decision-making structure will you use (e.g., core leadership team, steering committee, action teams, or all of these)? What decision-making authority will be given to each group? Outline them here with a rationale for the approach.

If you plan to use committees, action teams, or other sub-groups, use the table below to identify them and how they will factor into your overall coalition goals.

Examples are in italics below.

Committee/ Action Team Name	Purpose/ Focus Area	Proposed Members	Roles and Responsibilities	Meeting Frequency	Notes
<i>Fundraising Action Team</i>	<i>Secure financial resources</i>	<i>Jane Doe, Lead Suzy Queue, Researcher</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Research funders</i> • <i>Make recommendations</i> • <i>Complete and submit applications</i> 	<i>Monthly or as needed</i>	<i>Consider outsourcing to professional grant writer if needed</i>



Other Structural Factors to Consider

Day-to-Day Coordination/Facilitation

Effectively managing the day-to-day operations of a coalition takes a concerted effort. Larger coalitions may decide to ask members to dedicate a portion of their internal staff members' time as project coordinators or facilitators. Other coalitions may decide to outsource or hire someone for all the coordination or facilitation functions. An experienced outside facilitator may be especially valuable in coaching members of a newer coalition in all aspects of leadership and capacity, ultimately helping coalition members build trust with one another.

Financial Resources

Coalitions need money to operate successfully. Basic costs might include food for meetings or simple communication materials. Some coalition members might offer these things as in-kind donations in the early stages of the work, but it is not realistic to rely on the generosity of members for the long term. As a coalition's size, efforts, and impact grow, expenses may include space rental for offices or events; technology, education or communication materials; fundraising costs; or fees for research, evaluation, or other professional services.

Setting Expectations

Setting expectations means determining and explaining the roles and obligations of each coalition member. You might accomplish this by drafting a simple coalition "agreement" or by creating a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that all coalition members sign. This document should explain the purpose of the coalition, the anticipated time commitments, as well as human, financial, or other resources. It should also include the consequences when coalition members do not live up to their stated obligations and how the coalition will resolve any disputes.

Communication

Ongoing, two-way communication is key to a successful coalition, especially if you have multiple committees and/or action teams in play. What processes will you establish for ongoing internal communication among coalition members, between leadership and members, and between the coalition's spokespersons and the broader community? Who will be authorized to communicate externally on behalf of leadership, committees, or action teams?

Additional Questions to Answer as You Consider Structure

Use the questions below to think through the governance structure of your coalition. This exercise is crucial for achieving clarity in decision making and accountability and aligning your coalition's efforts with its mission and priorities. It also helps stakeholders understand coalition roles and responsibilities, demonstrating that the coalition is built for effectiveness and sustainability.

Day-to-Day Coordination

Who will coordinate the day-to-day work of the coalition?

(Think about the resources needed to coordinate the effort, schedule meetings, conduct follow-ups, locate or create documents and research, communicate with stakeholders, and manage the project timeline.)

Will there be paid coalition staff? If yes, do you have a job description?

Meeting Facilitation

Who will facilitate coalition meetings?

Financial Resources

Does the coalition have the financial resources to implement its work?

How will you close any financial gaps?

Setting Expectations

How will you help all partners understand the coalition and their role within the coalition? Will you create guidelines or a Memorandum of Understanding to help bring partners together? If so, capture key elements of the MOU here.

Communication

How will coalition members communicate with one another?

Understanding Your Coalition's Capacity

As the exercises above make clear, governing a successful coalition takes time, talent, and treasure. Many coalitions begin with good intentions and great enthusiasm, but that intention and enthusiasm must be matched by the capacity to engage fully in the coalition's work. Coalitions must honestly answer the following questions:

- ▶ What is the capacity of your coalition's member organizations' staff and leadership to do the necessary work of the coalition?
- ▶ Does the coalition have the financial resources needed to implement its work? Is there a plan to close any financial gaps? (See "Financial Resources" above.)
- ▶ Is there anyone missing from the leadership of this effort (from the coalition's overall membership or the community or communities who will be most affected by the work)? Think of individuals or organizations that can help fill capacity and credibility gaps.
- ▶ What commitment level is expected of leadership organizations in the coalition? What about the general coalition members (e.g., number of meetings a year, sending information out to their networks, etc.)? Is it realistic?

Having sufficient capacity is crucial to ensuring your coalition's long-term success. This requires understanding of internal and external capacity to build and grow your coalition and to govern it in an effective, sustainable manner. Conducting internal audits of coalition members' capacity and an external audit of potential partners can help fill any capacity gaps and keep your work moving forward.

Step 1: Conduct an Internal Capacity Audit

Rank the following skills in order of importance for your coalition, where 1 is "most important" and 7 is "least important" (each skill will be assigned one value between 1 and 7). Consider what skills will be especially important to your coalition's short- and long-term success.

Skill	Rank (from 1 to 7, where 1 is most important)
Fundraising experience and connections	
Relationships with community leaders (elected, appointed, and grassroots)	
Project management skills	
Communication skills	
Leadership skills	
Policy advocacy experience	
Strategic thinking skills	

As you fill out the table below, consider which coalition members possess the skills you ranked as most important and note if those coalition members have the capacity (time and resources) to take on the associated work.

Examples are in italics below.

Team Member Name	Connections/ Relationships	Skills	Coalition Role/ Responsibilities	Time Available for Coalition Work
<i>John Lee</i>	<i>Local media Marketing firms</i>	<i>Communication</i>	<i>Developing marketing materials and social media strategy</i>	<i>10 hours/month</i>

Once you have completed the table, use the information gathered to answer the questions below.

Based on your internal audit, where are the gaps?

For skills that are not represented in your current coalition team but are crucial to your coalition's success, can you hire or outsource to fill these gaps? What is the feasibility and what are the implications of hiring or outsourcing for these skills? Is there an individual or organization that makes sense to recruit to join the coalition to close the gap?

What systems and processes does your coalition have that will streamline day-to-day operations and maximize your team's time? If your coalition does not have these systems or processes, can you

Step 2: Conduct an External Capacity Audit

Based on your internal capacity audit, conduct an external capacity audit to identify potential allies (collaborators you may actively work with to achieve your shared goal) who can help bolster your coalition's initiatives. Consider organizations that may already be engaged in your coalition's work, those who you want in the fold but have not engaged yet, or those that will never be members of your coalition but can still be a good partner in the work. Use the table below to compile your full list of potential coalition members or allies who can help fill gaps in capacity. Keep this list as a "living" document that your coalition can update annually or more often as needed.

Examples are in italics below.

Current/Potential Partner Name	Organization Type	Contact Person	Coalition Role	Notes
<i>Local Arts Council</i>	<i>Government Agency</i>	<i>Jane Doe 222-555-5555</i>	<i>Leadership, Committee, Action Team, or other</i>	<i>Schedule meeting to explore collaboration opportunities</i>

Step 3: Fill Gaps

Once you have completed your list of potential members or allies, assign outreach responsibilities to coalition members. Provide them with talking points, an understanding of next steps if a new member/ally says “yes,” and a clear deadline. As new members or allies come on board, be sure that they understand what is expected of them, how your leadership structure works, and where they can add the most value to your shared work.

Conclusion

With a solid operational structure and a clear understanding of everyone’s capacity, your coalition will be poised to do great things together. Revisit your structure and capacity needs on a regular basis to make adjustments—especially when leadership changes or new members join. Keeping a clear-eyed view of how your coalition operates and where you might need to fill capacity gaps will help you successfully sustain your efforts over the long term.