

Building coalitions

Introduction

Networking widely, forming alliances and building coalitions can be an effective way of improving a BMO's chances of success in influencing public policy. A coalition is an alliance or partnership of groups coming together in order to achieve a common purpose or to engage in joint activity. Coalition building is the process by which parties (individuals, organisations or nations) come together to form a coalition. Forming coalitions with other groups of similar values, interests, and goals allows members to combine their resources and potentially become more influential than if they each acted alone. The coalition represents the combined support of multiple organisations – each of which may have dozens or hundreds of members.

Benefits of coalitions

There are considerable benefits to be had from forming coalitions – and these go beyond increased power in relation to the target of the initiative. Coalition building may also strengthen the members internally, enabling them to be more effective in other arenas. Some other key advantages of coalitions include:

- A coalition can appear to represent more businesses, can show that business is speaking with one voice and can therefore increase the potential for success;
- A coalition can bring more expertise and resources to bear on complex issues, where the resources of any one organisation may not be sufficient; each group gains access to the contacts and relationships established by other groups;
- A coalition enables you to prepare more detailed research than you might have been able to do working on your own; it requires more discussion about the practical implications either of public sector proposals for regulation or, indeed, of your own proposals;
- Involvement in a coalition means there are more people who have a better understanding of the issues; it builds consensus amongst a number of stakeholders – and being able to speak with one voice is clearly much better than several disparate voices;
- A coalition, by virtue of the contacts and exchanges of information and other contacts, avoids duplication of efforts and improves exchanges and shared learning among key players;
- A coalition may raise its members' public profiles by broadening the range of groups involved in an issue and builds credibility, so is able to speak authoritatively for the sector; The activities of a coalition are likely to receive more media attention than those of any individual organisation;
- A coalition can develop new leaders. As experienced group leaders step forward to lead the coalition, openings are created for new leaders in the individual groups. The new, emerging leadership strengthens the groups and the coalition;
- A coalition can build a lasting base for change. Once groups unite, each group's vision of change broadens and it becomes more difficult for opposition groups to disregard the coalition's efforts as dismissible or as special interests;
- A coalition can fight on more fronts than a single organisation working alone, though there is little doubt that fighting more than one battle at a time is more difficult than sticking to just one issue.

Building successful coalitions

- **Recognise compatible interests:** early steps centre on the recognition of compatible interests once you have identified an issue (remembering that coalitions tend to form round issues which can have the benefit of bringing together otherwise unlikely allies). Sometimes this happens naturally. Other times potential coalition members must be sought out and persuaded that forming a coalition would be to their benefit. You will need to demonstrate that:
 - Your goals are similar and compatible
 - Working together will enhance all groups' potential to reach the goal
 - The benefits of partnership will be greater than the costs
- **Informal exploration:** Sound out your own board, key members and trusted stakeholders about the advantages to be gained in forming a coalition. Whilst generally there are advantages, this may not always be the case.
- **Form a working group:** Invite the possible partner(s) to come together for a meeting. If this goes well, then you may want to go on to form a Working Group, and appoint a convenor to set up meetings and keep notes. The Working Group should plan how to work towards formalising its mandate as a committee of the coalition. A key requirement is to agree on criteria for organisations joining the coalition and the basic principles or position they must support.
- **Identify other possible members:** Identify likely allies, every group with an obvious interest in the issue at hand. Once you have listed all the likely allies, think of some groups that are not so obvious, unlikely allies. You will not get as many of these, but having even a few "odd allies" in the coalition sends a signal that you are reaching out and talking to more than those who already agree with you. From the outset, coalition building should be aiming to create persuasive critical mass to push for an action.
- **Launch the coalition formally:** Once the preliminaries have been completed, you will need to become more formal. Convene a meeting to ensure that you really can agree a position on a specific issue, but then you will want to launch the coalition publicly. This has the advantages of achieving some early publicity for your cause, sends a message to policy makers that you are serious about seeking change, and may attract more partners to join your coalition.

Target partners

The obvious partners with whom to form a coalition are other BMOs, possibly apex bodies or Chambers who already bring together a wide range of interests, or specific BMOs who share with you an overlap of interest. You should not however restrict your partners to be in those. Other potential partners include:

- **NGOs**, especially those who may be able to work with new for small businesses (and which might include, for example, micro-finance institutions and business support organisation);
- **Research institutes**, not least because they already have research information on the issue but also because they will already have the requisite skills to undertake good research; research institutes may not always want to lobby openly for a particular position preferring instead to protect the independence, but you could nevertheless aim to get to know them.
- **Ministries, departments and agencies** – it may seem slightly curious suggesting that the public sector agency could be a coalition partner and, formally at least, they could not. However, it is not unusual for different government departments to have different objectives from other departments but which are unable to state publicly the position that they would like to take, at least until there is sufficient external pressure to encourage Ministers to adopt that position also. They may then be able to help with a background, research and intelligence on the position is being taken by other stakeholders.

- **Cross-border BMOs** – for some issues forming cross-border coalitions can be a powerful way of ensuring consistent messages are communicated to more than one government.

Disadvantages of coalitions

Despite the many benefits of working together in coalitions, some groups hesitate to join. Drawbacks include:

- **Getting agreement is harder:** On who votes, who takes responsibility for what, and matters of style. Often the participants who turn up for one meeting are not the same next time and this will sometimes cause back and forth or paralysis as consensus is being sought.
- **Reputational risk:** If one member of the coalition behaves badly, all may be tarnished
- **Credit, as well as blame, get shared:** Individual organisations may not get credit for their contributions to a coalition. And members that contribute a lot may think they did not receive enough credit. A highly active group may not get commensurate visibility.
- **Member groups can get distracted from other work:** If that happens, non-coalition efforts may become less effective and the organisation may be weakened overall.
- **Logistics become more complicated:** Convening meetings of several organisations is not easy.
- **Decision-making must be shared:** Some organisations have by-laws or Board structures that make it hard to submit to group decision-making.
- **A coalition is only as strong as its weakest link:** Each member organisation will have different levels of resources and experience, as well as different internal problems. Organisations that provide a lot of resources and leadership may get frustrated with other members' shortcomings.
- **Balancing interests can be problematic:** To keep a coalition together, it is often necessary to cater to one side more than another, especially when negotiating tactics. If a member prefers high-profile confrontational tactics, they might dislike subdued tactics, thinking they are not exciting enough to mobilise support. At the same time, the low profile, but conciliatory members might be alarmed by the confrontation advocates, fearing they will escalate the conflict and make eventual victory more difficult to obtain. So coalition choices can make one or more partners unhappy, perhaps so unhappy that they leave the coalition and thereby harm the entire effort.
- **Governance can be difficult.** The democratic principle of one group, one vote may not always be acceptable to members with a lot of power and resources. The coalition must carefully define the relationships between powerful and less-powerful groups.

Conclusion

Forming coalitions will be time-consuming, requiring good research, negotiation and, almost certainly, compromise. Organisational logistics become more complicated than with just one organisation, which can lead to frustration when organisations that have provided a lot of resources and leadership – and for whom the outcomes are relatively more important – get frustrated with other coalition members' shortcomings. But the advantages of credibility and resources will generally outweigh the disadvantages.

Bibliography

Spangler, Brad. (2003), "Coalition Building: Beyond Intractability", Eds. Guy Burgess and Heidi Burgess. Conflict Research Consortium, University of Colorado, Boulder. see www.beyondintractability.org/essay/coalition_building/