

Money and Coalitions: Delights and Dilemmas

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Coalition
Building
Tips

Most discussions of funding and coalitions deal solely with the issue of how to find funding to sustain coalition groups. In this Tip Sheet, we would like to start with an earlier premise, and ask the question, "Is funding really needed for coalition development?" It is interesting to compare coalitions that were started by grassroots groups with no money, versus coalitions that were gathered specifically around a funding source. In those coalitions that developed around a grassroots community issue, whether it is substance abuse, violence, or teen pregnancy, we see genuine community interest at the outset. Often, they have little or no money. When we contrast that with those coalitions that were started by the potential lure of dollars, we do not necessarily see a great level of community involvement. There is no question that some community coalitions have been highly successful with virtually no funding. We have also seen very well funded coalitions (one might suggest over-funded) fail. The keys to success remain the core principles of coalition success, such as: clear mission, organizational competence, time and persistence, etc. (For more on this, see our Tip Sheet "Principles of Success"). This raises fundamental questions about whether funding is always required for coalitions - and, if so, how much and what that funding is used for, and what are the kinds of problems, dilemmas, strengths and resources that are created by funding.

In our experience, we have seen the full spectrum - coalitions that had virtually no money, a moderate amount of resources to sustain the coalition efforts, or those with large amounts of resources to both sustain coalition efforts and develop community programming - be both successful and unsuccessful. Funding in and of itself does not guarantee success or failure, but the degree of funding and the way in which decisions about the funding are made, create very different sorts of organizations.

How Much Funding

Coalitions often need a certain amount of funding just to sustain their basic efforts of coordination, collaboration and information exchange. The "basics" include money for mailings, agendas, rental of meeting space, and enough money for an annual meeting. The next increase of funding for coalitions often pays for part-time or full-time secretarial support to do the clerical work that goes along with coalitions: mailings, minutes, newsletters, etc. Many coalitions also see the need for more skilled staff to assist with coalition planning, direction, leadership, facilitation, or mediation. After funding for the basics, and potential funding for staff, the next direction for coalition funds is specific programming. The programs developed: substance abuse prevention, teen pregnancy prevention, tobacco cessation, etc. are often determined by the availability of a particular funding source. Our experience suggests that when funding is obtained for coalitions it is best first spent on basics, then staffing, and finally programming.

Funding For What

An important distinction should be made between coalition funding that goes to sustaining the process, the development, and the maintenance of the collaborative coalition process itself and coalition funding that goes into the development of programming. Once a coalition gets into the business of delivering programming itself, or subcontracting out dollars for programming to other agencies, it runs the risk of moving from a collaborative organization whose sole function is to promote coordination and collaboration to becoming another community agency. This can create a conflict where the coalition is in competition with its own members. Also risky is subcontracting program dollars to other agencies by coalitions. When a coalition does this, it needs to engage in a process of awarding and then monitoring the contracts. Subsequently, the coalition as a coordinating body also becomes a monitor of its own members, which creates an inordinately complex set of roles. In our experience, one set of functions often interferes with the other, meaning it is hard to be a collaborative partner with an agency if you are also monitoring a subcontract and potentially telling them that they are not doing a good job!

Issues Created By Coalition Funding

• Money As Motivator

When coalitions are gathered together around the lure of external funding sources, one can never be sure that the partners at the table are not there just for the dollars. This leads to great ambiguity in the start-up of these coalitions. The best one can hope for is an open discussion of what brings people to the coalition table.

• Lead Agency

When a coalition gets involved with significant funds it sometimes finds a lead agency to handle these dollars rather than just a fiscal conduit or financial manager. The lead agency may then take on roles, responsibilities and power that place it on an unequal basis with other coalition members. Since one of the core premises of coalitions is that all members come to the table with equal power in the coalition, this can create difficulties.

• Decision Making

If a coalition does have resources beyond the core functions of process and staff, questions arise about how resources get spent and who decides upon those directions and specific allocations. These money issues can highlight how democratic the overall decision making process is, or expose its authoritarian tendencies.

Money And Membership

If one of the major sources, or even one of the sustaining sources, of a coalition is participant fees, the money may limit membership in the coalition. As suggested in an earlier Tip Sheet, we propose a membership process that has no fees attached to it. There should be a coalition sponsorship process, which allows people to contribute on an annual basis, generally based on the size of their organization. Members of the coalition would include anyone embracing the coalition's mission and not be tied to paying a fee to join. This distinction between membership and sponsorship is helpful in making sure that dollars do not become a criteria for joining a coalition (For more on this, see Tip Sheet "Coalition Membership").

How Money Can Help A Coalition

In spite of the above warnings, money can help a coalition. Core funding for staffing and maintaining the process and development of the coalition is critical for the success of most coalitions. It is our belief that, although unstaffed coalitions can be successful to some degree, the capacity of the coalitions to take on multiple issues over a long period of time and have a significant impact can be increased with paid, facilitative coalition staff. Thus, finding the resources to fund such staff is enormously helpful. Even a halftime staff person and secretarial support can be enough to move a coalition forward in a rapid fashion.

Where To Find The Dollars

This, of course, is the million dollar question. The experiences of numerous coalitions across the country indicate that there are a variety of sources. Most larger coalitions have been developed around an initiative from state, federal or private sources soliciting coalition responses to issues such as violence prevention, teen pregnancy prevention, tobacco cessation, etc. Other sources of coalition funding include: a) sponsorship fees from members, b) community foundations, c) larger foundations and corporate giving programs, d) local cities and towns - especially through Community Development Block Grants and Small Cities Grants.

In sum, money can be a key force in moving coalitions forward or can be a major barrier to coalition success. The basic instinct to seek large amounts of dollars for coalitions should be tempered by a planning process that asks how much funding do we need? For what coalition functions? Who will decide how it is spent? Can we anticipate the benefits and the problems that funding might bring? It is only after coalitions have successfully asked and answered these questions that the search for funding should begin.

One in a series of tips on building coalitions.

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