WORKING TOGETHER FOR KIDS

Region Nine Prevention and Healthy Communities Network

The Challenge

Across the nation, despite sometimes daunting odds, grassroots coalitions are demonstrating success in increasing the capacity of communities to solve complex problems and fully include all people in local problem solving and decision making. Citizen coalitions can make the difference between a community that turns the corner on its troubles and one that continues to stumble from crisis to crisis (Potapchuk and Crocker, 1999). Citizen engagement leads to better decisions, results, and real community change. A broad-based community coalition with representation from many community sectors is a powerful entity. Citizens can compel local government to listen to them. They can induce their religious organizations to participate in the change process. They know the influential individuals in any subgroup of the community.

Effective coalitions do not just develop overnight, however. Multiple factors contribute to successful coalition building, and multiple factors must also be in place to sustain viable community improvement efforts over time.

Citizen coalitions can make the difference between a community that turns the corner on its troubles and one that stumbles from crisis to crisis.

The Invention:

A broad-based coalition of community stakeholders that works on crucial local issues.

The Solution: Getting the Idea to Fly

Various theories about coalition building describe what works, what doesn't work, why people frequently don't trust "the system," and why the perspectives of community members are often disregarded by

---

By Anne Ganey of Ganey Consulting and Laura Bloomberg of the University of Minnesota

those in power. These insights are emphasized in the important works of McKnight (1995) and Potapchuk and Crocker (1999). We have found that our own work in building, sustaining, and evaluating community coalitions aligns with (and has been bolstered by) the insights of these social theorists.

McKnight (1995) posits that a community is more than just a place. It comprises various groups of people who work together on a face-to-face basis in public life, not just in private. Together these varied, often informal groups make up the civic capital of a community. People come together through associations such as the American Legion, a bowling league, a coffee klatch, small decision-making groups, or a block club. They meet in restaurants, beauty parlors, barbershops, bars, stores, and other businesses. They gather for interaction and transaction. However, it is from these associations that most "labeled people" are excluded, including low-income families and people of color, the disadvantaged, and people with disabilities. McKnight suggests that it is these associations into which all people need to be included in order to become active citizens in a democratic society.

Working Together for Kids

Potapchuk and Crocker (1999) developed a framework that explored the elements of civic capital which they describe as the engine that drives a community to overcome barriers, create accountability, manage change, and get things done. They theorized that the difference between a community that turns the corner on its troubles and one that continues to stumble from crisis to crisis is the ability to build strong connections among successes, deep relationships among diverse stakeholders, and a compelling vision for change that drives this shared work. Potapchuk and Crocker's framework outlines five elements of community capacity that we believe successful community coalitions must nurture:

- **Shared vision:** Developing a vision for a group is not just an exercise or in-group process. Working to define a truly shared vision can inspire and instill hope; it can push people toward new accomplishments; it can create a sense of "oneness." What is the need that brings this group of community members together? What does the group ultimately want for the community?
- **Inclusion rooted in trust:** True inclusion means bringing together people from all segments of a community who may contribute to—or be impacted by—the vision of the coalition. Diversity of membership

requires a sincere focus on building trust where trust may have been lacking in the past. Trust-building entails meaningful dialogue regarding the diversity within the group, whether that is race, class, culture, gender, or socio-economic status. Clear (and shared) decision-making processes and open, honest communication are fundamental to building trust within inclusive groups.

- **Public engagement to build political will:** Public opinion can have tremendous influence (positive or negative) over a community coalition's efforts. Consideration must be given to framing the vision and the key message of the group, backing it up with data that substantiates need, and showing the broader public how this vision fits within a community-wide public agenda.

ABOUT REGION NINE PREVENTION AND HEALTHY COMMUNITIES NETWORK (PHCN)

PHCN is a coalition of 13 local prevention initiatives across nine rural counties in south central Minnesota. Each partner community works on local issues and they have come together as a regional coalition to work on common issues for the past 13 years. PHCN's mission is "to build healthy communities, promote positive youth development and reduce alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use/abuse." The focus of PHCN includes a holistic view of prevention encompassing the "social fabric" and social justice issues of society and small rural communities. The strength of PHCN is the 13 local prevention coalitions and their activities. For example:

- In 2001, over 20,000 youth contact hours were documented by the coalitions.
- Youth performed over 3,000 hours of community service.
- Volunteers contributed 13,808 hours which, at the $15.39 per hour Independent Sector identified as the hourly volunteer rate, amounted to $212,505.
- PHCN evaluation shows "clear evidence that youth are making healthier decisions and communities are increasingly aware of the challenges youth face in Region Nine."

- **Leadership capacity:** Strong coalitions have strong leadership, whether it is provided by an individual or a group. Sustainable leadership is built through training and technical assistance; coaching; and allowing time for reflection and visioning. Sustainable community coalitions are always grooming new leadership.
- **Organizational infrastructure:** The breadth and depth of a coalition's infrastructure will depend on the nature of the vision, the age and size of the coalition, capacity, and the expectations of participants. Regardless, sustainable coalitions must consider such organizational elements as decision-making processes and the extent to which partnerships within the coalition can contribute to the vision. Special consideration should be given to the value of public-private partnerships and the importance of including catalytic 'spark plug' organizations as well as bridge-building organizations.

Working Together for Kids

Over the past several years we have found that our work with community coalitions focused on reducing drug use among adolescents aligns with these theories and shares many of the same strategies. As part of our research efforts we distilled the following critical components of coalition building from lived experiences:

- **Be welcoming of all who want to help.** As McKnight points out, resolving the most intractable community problems will require the collective capacities of all sectors of a community. Too often we seek to "work on" or "work for" a targeted segment of the population when we really need to be "working with." Building the trust that this requires takes time, but it's worth the wait. Nothing else of enduring value can grow until the seeds of trust have been sown. In some communities this takes a year; in some communities it can take as long as ten years.
- **Start where you are.** Although some may want to work on a specific issue, if another issue captures the burning passion of the group and it, too, relates to the vision, start there.
- **Keep your eyes on the prize.** Stay mission-focused. Many differences have the potential to divide people, but if you're all ultimately focused on the same mission, it's worth taking the time to muddle through the difficulties to get to the finish line.
- **Nurture effective leadership.** Effective coalitions plan for leadership stability and transition. One strategy of effective leadership is co-chairs or a vice-chair who successively become chair. Take a very broad view of

who or what constitutes (or could constitute) community leadership. In some communities, churches may offer leadership; in others it may be a neighborhood grocer or librarian, a group of matriarchs, or the guys at the coffee shop. Nurture your leaders and they will surprise even themselves.

- **Consider organizational structure** Many coalitions begin informally-people passionate about an issue begin to meet to work on solutions. Often, these groups remain informal for years, operating under the umbrella of a larger organization that may serve as a fiscal agent. Over time, if the coalition is to remain active, it is a good idea to formalize the structure, either as a part of the umbrella organization or as a freestanding nonprofit in the community. Nonprofit status is governed by the Internal Revenue Service and requires a $500 filing fee. The benefits of incorporating as a nonprofit include stability over time and limited liability for the people managing and governing the organization. Gaining nonprofit status requires establishing a formal board of directors, articles of incorporation, bylaws, and registration with both the Secretary of State and the U.S. Internal Revenue Service. Two national organizations that can provide helpful information about establishing a nonprofit are Independent Sector (www.independentsector.org) and Board Source (www.boardsource.org).

- **Understand the value of taking time to get it right.** Much of coalition work is about communication and information sharing. This takes a lot of time and increases as the coalition grows and more people are involved. The role of sharing information is crucial. It is easy to underestimate the amount of time communication in a coalition will demand.
- **Recognize the need for qualified staff.** When a coalition grows in size and capacity, its continued work may best be facilitated by adding qualified, paid staff with expertise in the issue area and community action. Depending, of course, on the size of the coalition and availability of funding, we've found that a core staff of two-and-a-half to three people seems to work well: a director or coordinator, a community organizer or outreach worker, and at least a part-time administrative support staff member. Look for staff with good facilitation skills, who listen, and who can develop leadership in others. Remember that volunteers provide their time and expertise but staff support may be required to maintain stability and keep the ball rolling over a sustained period.
- **Celebrate and have fun.** Even when progress seems slow to nonexistent, seek out "small wins" (and sometimes they may be really small, but tiny progress is still better than none at all!). Use small wins to introduce play and celebration into the work—it energizes people.
- **Be humble; be real.** In community work, some people may be impressed with professional jargon and outward displays of expertise, but it rarely helps others find their own voice or leadership capacity. Further, professionalizing community matters can serve to exclude population sub-groups that have most commonly been marginalized in our communities (e.g., low-income families, new immigrants, people with disabilities).

Measuring and Adapting: Did It Fly?

Evaluating, re-examining, and adapting are key elements of strong community coalitions. Experience tells us that the needs, assets, and priorities of communities shift, and coalitions must be prepared to adjust accordingly. Establishing effective and ongoing evaluation practices is an essential component of maintaining a coalition's vitality. Doing so creates an organizational culture of learning and growing.

Jacobs (1988) proposed a five-tiered approach to thinking about program evaluation that remains a helpful tool for community coalitions today as they seek to embed evaluation practices into ongoing

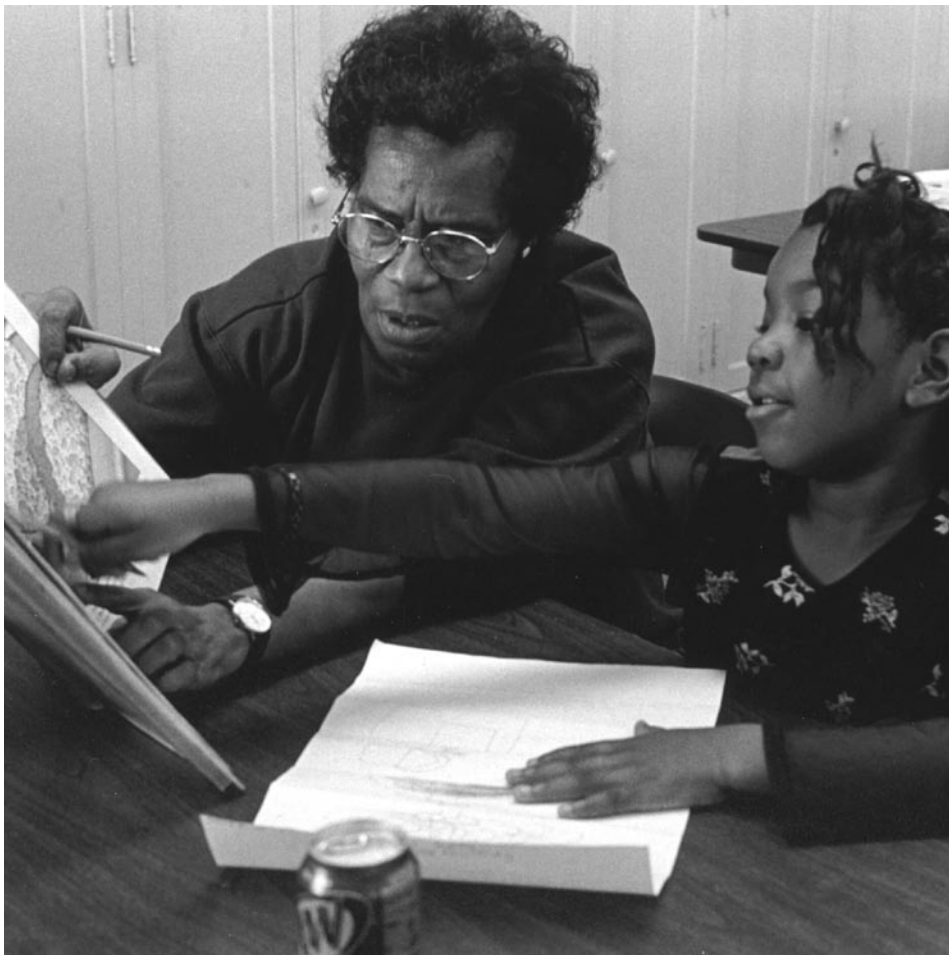
operations. Table One outlines Jacobs' evaluation levels and explains the evolution from needs assessment and program definition through measuring accountability and ultimately articulating long-term community impact.

TABLE ONE: A FIVE-TIERED APPROACH TO PROGRAM EVALUATION

Tier	Purpose	Tasks
TIER 1: PROGRAM DEFINITION	• To identify the needs of the community relative to the focus/vision of the coalition. • To justify proposed coalition efforts. • To define proposed coalition actions.	• Work with stakeholders to assess community needs and assets. • Review pertinent literature/experience base. • Describe the program's vision, mission, goals, objectives, and characteristics.
TIER 2: ACCOUNTABILITY	• To examine if coalition activities serve or support those they were intended to serve in the manner proposed.	• Identify all stakeholders • Document participation, activities, and implementation.
TIER 3: UNDERSTANDING AND REFINING	• To improve coalition efforts by providing program information to program staff, participants, and other stakeholders.	• Gather program satisfaction information. • Examine "fit" between information collected in Tiers 1 and 2. • Examine process-related information and lessons learned. • Identify program strengths and weaknesses.
TIER 4: PROGRESS TOWARD OBJECTIVES	• To document coalition effectiveness and outcomes.	• Select outcome indicators and identify measures that are considered valid by program stakeholders. • Decide on design and data analysis. • Report findings to immediate stakeholders and the broader public
TIER 5: PROGRAM IMPACT	• To demonstrate long-term improvements in quality of life for those involved. • To demonstrate program sustainability. • To suggest coalition models/strategies worthy of replication.	• Plan early to document long-term impact. • Provide evidence of sustainability. • Identify and document program components worthy of replication. • Distribute findings of impact

Source: Jacobs, F.H. (1988). The Five-Tiered Approach to Evaluation: Context and Implementation. In H. Weiss and F. Jacobs (Eds.), *Evaluating Family Programs.* NY: Aldine de Gruyer, 1988.

Working Together for Kids



The Ripple Effect: Expect it and Encourage it

As coalition members work on an issue, other issues will surface and create connected action. Expect this; it is a good thing. For example, as we worked on rural substance abuse issues, concerns about Latino youth dropping out of school surfaced. In response to this, part of the coalition worked on developing a culturally specific leadership development program for Latino youth. A strong prevention message was incorporated into the leadership program. In this way, the prevention work continued and reached new populations.

Other ripples may be started by leaders trained within the coalition. In one case, a woman who went through leadership training provided by the lead agency went on to develop an organization to prevent youth suicide. In the first two years the program operated, Department of Health statistics indicate youth suicides in the area dropped 61 percent. Several other coalition participants have gone on to run for elected office at the local and state level. They carry the messages of prevention they've learned with them.

Caution

Coalition work is rewarding but difficult! Both research and experience tell us that successful coalitions manage the following process issues well. When these areas are neglected, coalitions falter.

- **Respect people.** Everyone has a valuable role and something to contribute. Recognize that, and make sure others recognize it as well. The true heroes in communities are the volunteers. They often use their own resources, however limited, as part of their volunteer contribution. They give of their hands, their hearts, and their knowledge. Citizen volunteers play many roles. They serve as topical experts, mentors, organizers, connectors, resource developers, fundraisers, information brokers, policy makers, and evaluators. These are the experts on their community; it pays to listen to them.
- **Share information openly.** Information is a tool that can effectively mobilize whole groups of people and instigate action. It can also cause harm. When important information is shared selectively, it has the potential to create factions and marginalize individuals. In fact, withholding or misrepresenting information forms the basis for much of the mistrust existing in communities today while accurate information that is widely shared becomes a tool for change.
- **Be inclusive.** One danger in building a strong collaborative group with a high level of trust is that it runs the risk of becoming a closed system or "club." Communities change and so should the groups (formal and informal) which mobilize to meet the needs of the community. This infusion of new energy will necessitate an ongoing focus on trust building, celebration, sharing of information, etc. The process is cyclical, not linear.
- **Acknowledge the cyclical evolution of coalitions.** Coalitions, like anything else, have their ups and downs. At times, any given coalition looks like nothing can stop it. At other times, that same coalition may look like nothing can get it going again. Know this and persist through these times.

Coalition work follows the team development process of forming, storming, norming, and performing. Forming occurs as members are getting together and is usually characterized by extreme politeness. It's followed by storming as passion builds and people actively advocate for their perspective. Emotions can be heated and meetings may become tense during this time. Norming is underway when the group begins

to drop individual agendas to work together for the common good (remaining mission-focused is crucial during this time). The coalition will know it is performing when it hits its stride and looks like nothing can stop it. Members are working closely together, there is momentum in the community, and results are evident. As members come and go, this process may repeat itself. If (or when) a coalition that had been performing well suddenly finds itself dropped back to the forming stages, it is not the end of the world. It may simply signal an influx of new membership or new emerging leadership.

Working Together for Kids

Summary

There is a process to a coalition's work. First, awareness of the target issue must be raised through information sharing, data, and events like neighborhood or town meetings. Use of media and one-to-one conversations are helpful at this point. Second, small projects with built-in success create capacity and momentum. These lead to larger projects with more people involved and more impact. Finally, celebration, evaluation, and feedback help members know what is working and drive the refinement of strategies. Members will come and go according to the coalition focus, their own personal and family lives, etc. Change can be difficult, but it can also be the lifeblood of the coalition.

REFERENCES

Crowson, R, and Boyd, W. "Coordinated Services for Children: Designing Arks for Storms and Seas Unknown." *American Journal of Education,* 101(Feb.), 140-179, 1993.

McKnight, J. *The Careless Society: Community and its Counterfeits.* New York: Basic Books, 1995.

Potapchuk, W. and Crocker, J. "Exploring the Elements of Civic Capital." *National Civic Review,* vol. 88, 175, 1999.

Putnam, R. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community.* New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000.

Schorr, L. *Common Purpose: Strengthening Families and Neighborhoods to Rebuild America.* New York: Doubleday, 1997.

RESOURCES

Chrislip, D. D., *The Collaborative Leadership Fieldbook.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002.

Linden, R., *Working Across Boundaries: Making Collaboration Work in Government and Nonprofit Organizations.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002.