What Coalitions Are Not

by Tom Wolff

Coalition Building Tips

There was a time when one of my adolescent daughters would respond to many a comment with the ubiquitous "NOT," popularized by Wayne and Garth of the movie "Wayne's World." Now, when I hear all sorts of people saying, "Our initiative is a coalition," often, my first instinct is to respond, "NOT" as well.

But simply to quash people's beliefs without benefit of explanation is, at best, unfair. So this seems like an appropriate time to revisit the question of what coalitions are, and what they are "NOT."

While it is heartwarming for those of us who have been in the trenches doing coalition building for years to see that coalitions are now a hot new trend in program development, it is also disconcerting to see many initiatives using the term but stretching it beyond recognition. So let's start bringing the term back into shape.

Coalitions are **not** externally run or externally driven organizations. They must have a strong base in the community. That base should have a strong citizen component; but even for a coalition of agencies, those agencies must have deep community roots.

Coalitions are **not** human service organizations. This is another common misconception. We see numerous coalitions that hire staff and run programs only to become the next mega-agency on the block. There certainly is a legitimate place for human service agencies, but they should not be confused with coalitions. Coalitions work best as catalyst to action, the more they become service delivery centers, the harder it is for them to focus on their role of catalyst for community change.

Coalitions are also **not** an automatic link to the grassroots and "real people." Too often people think that creating a coalition will naturally create links to the grassroots. But this is unlikely if, coalitions are composed of institutional representatives rather than citizens. Coalitions must make special efforts (such as having outreach workers) if they are serious about reaching the grassroots.

And finally, coalition building is **not** a cure-all. Even the most successful coalitions are often limited by their focus on trying to solve the local community's problems; but this does not provide easy answers to dealing with the numerous issues impacting that community from outside. As the new Congress and the Contract with America create havoc in our communities, we are only too well reminded of the need for coalitions to be able to act outside their own communities, on the state, national and ultimately international issues that have increasingly immediate effects on community life.

In addition, there are several noted commentators on the subject of what coalitions are not. A representative collection is added here for consideration.

The MacArthur Foundation's Collaboration Project identifies several misconceptions regarding collaboration. Collaboration is central to coalition building. The first misconception is that collaboration is efficient. A collaborative effort through coalition building is not necessarily efficient, nor always desirable. It involves casting a larger and larger net to involve more and more people in both identifying and solving a community's problems. This requires building consensus and building trust, both of which take time. Coalition building is not a "quick fix," nor a one year project.

The second misconception is that collaboration saves money. We have yet to see any data supporting that assertion. We do hear, implicitly and explicitly, the idea that addressing issues collaboratively is being sought predominately as a money-saving venture. Often the hope or intent is that collaboration will bring together a range of human service providers who will find a single entry system for delivering care that will reduce overhead and duplication of services. Although there are multiple benefits to coalition-building -- it can, for example, reduce duplication of effort -- saving money is not one of them.

The third common misconception identified by the Collaboration Project is that collaboration is the only way to deliver services. Again, it's clear that there are times when collaboration is the most appropriate intervention, but there are also times when it still makes sense for individual organizations, whether neighborhood associations or human service agencies, proceed on an initiative individually.

Another commentator on what coalitions are not is Dail Neugarten, the Executive Director of the National Leadership Institute on Aging. She first indicates that coalitions are not formal organizations. She suggests, rather, that coalitions are "more like orchestras composed of autonomous and talented people linked together by a conductor and by a score."

Neugarten also notes that coalitions are not expert systems. Coalitions may indeed have some experts, but coalitions succeed because of their capacity to follow a collaborative problem-solving process – engaging the community and critical stakeholders in an effort to identify the issues, brainstorm new solutions and implement them.

Her third comment on what a coalition is not is that coalitions are not stable or predictable. Anyone who has worked with coalitions over a long period of time knows this to be an ultimate truth. Coalitions, even at their best and most engaging moments, are filled with passions, egos, turf battles, and ongoing difficulties. It's wonderful to walk in the sun, but the next thunderstorm may be moments away.

Finally, she notes that coalitions are not ends in themselves, but rather a means to an end. And certainly we have seen many examples of coalitions that have either outlived their usefulness or never actually found it, but have instead become forums for endless planning and contemplation rather than forums for action. At its heart, coalition building is a mechanism that allows communities to solve their own problems more effectively. Too many coalitions don't get to that problem-solving phase.

It's difficult to write a Tip Sheet on a topic that sounds as negative as "What Coalitions Are Not," but the most recent surge in interest and expansion of coalition efforts requires us to be clearer than ever about what we mean by the terms.

And let's end on a positive note. Coalition building, collaborative problem solving, and community development are some of the most effective interventions for change available to us today. Coalitions are partnerships of the many sectors of a community which gather together collaboratively to solve the community's problems and guide the community's future. When they are driven by citizen identified issues; citizens become involved in all steps of the problem solving process. Using this definition, coalition building becomes a powerful and enduring force for change.

References

MacArthur Foundation Collaboration Project, 140 South Dearborn Street, Chicago, Illinois 60603

National Leadership Institute on Aging, University of Colorado at Denver, 1445 Market Street, Suite 320, Denver, CO 80202

AHEC/Community Partners 24 South Prospect Street Amherst, MA 01002

One in a series of tips on building coalitions.