

How to Organize a Network or Coalition

1. Why Organize a Network or Coalition?

There are two main, very good reasons to organize a network or coalition of citizen groups to support the changes you are proposing. First, by working together groups show governments and corporations and other powerful institutions that there is broad support for proposed changes to laws, policies, activities of these institutions, and proposed solutions to problems. Second, by working together groups can save money, staff time and volunteer time instead of having people at different groups doing the same things.

It is often worth the time and effort to try to organize a network or coalition, even if the network or coalition does not actually get off the ground. The effort of trying to get groups to work together will educate each group about your issue or problem, and by trying to help the other groups understand your issue or problem, and your proposed solutions, you will likely get responses that will change how you explain your problem and solutions to others, and increase your ability to educate governments, corporations, the media and the public about the problem and your proposed solutions. In addition, the other groups will likely suggest strategies/approaches and/or tactics/activities that your group can go on to use in your campaign.

2. What are the Differences Between a Network and a Coalition

A **network** involves several groups that all work on the same issue or problem. Groups in a network usually meet with each other, or communicate with each other, regularly. However, groups in a network do not usually work together on strategies/approaches or tactics/activities. In other words, the groups share a concern about an issue or problem, but they all want to do their own thing to try to solve the issue or problem.

Often the one thing groups in a network will do together is produce news releases and/or reports that set out a common position on the details of an issue or problem, and common solutions. While working as a network allows each group to use its favourite strategies/approaches and tactics/activities without having to have the other groups agree, what can happen is the different groups different activities can conflict with each other, and make it appear to a government or corporation that there is not actual broad support for proposed solutions.

A **coalition** also involves several groups that all work on the same issue or problem. Groups in a coalition also usually meet with each other, or communicate with each other, regularly. Unlike a network, a coalition of groups also works together on strategies/approaches and tactics/activities. The difficulties of having groups in a coalition agree on strategies and tactics mean that networks are more common than coalitions. However, by working together in every way, coalitions are often more effective than networks because they clearly show broad support for proposed solutions.

3. Key Steps in Organizing a Network or Coalition

(a) Invite All Groups That May Join to an Initial Meeting

The first step in organizing a network or coalition is to figure out what groups may be interested in working on the issue or problem, and to invite them to an initial meeting (these days, sometimes the initial meeting may take place through email, or an Internet conference).

Your invitation should include the following things:

- a clear summary of the issue or problem you propose the network or coalition tackle;
- a summary of your proposed solutions (but make it very clear that you want the network or coalition to review and approve your proposals, and to develop additional solutions);
- a summary of your proposed strategies/approaches and tactics/activities (but make it very clear that you want the network or coalition to review and approve your proposals, and to develop other strategies and tactics);
- a draft agenda for the meeting (see details below);
- the date, time and location of the meeting (often, you will propose 2 or more possible meeting dates and times, and then pick the one that works for most of the groups); and
- how the groups can get respond to the invitation to confirm their attendance at the meeting.

Leave lots of time between when you begin to invite groups, and the proposed dates of the meeting so that you will have time to plan for a great initial meeting.

(b) Get, and send out, key information before the initial meeting

Meetings can be used just to exchange information, but are more useful to most people if they are used to make decisions. These days, many groups have access to email and the Internet which can be used to exchange information before a meeting, so the meeting can focus on moving the network or coalition forward in its plans, strategies, and tactics.

You should try to get the following information from each group before the meeting (some groups will be coming to the meeting to find out about the issue or problem and so won't be able to answer some of the questions set out below):

- What is their group's interest in the issue or problem?
- What solutions does their group think will solve the problem?
- What strategies/approaches and tactics/activities does their group think will help win the solution to the problem?
- What is the decision-making process of their group, and how long does it usually take to make a decision? (if you have this information, you will know what decision-making process groups will likely approve, and whether final decisions can be made at the meeting, or whether only tentative decisions can be made at the meeting).
- Does the group think there is only one strategy/approach and one tactic/activity for solving problems? (if most of the groups at the meeting belief in only one strategy and/or tactic, it is very likely that the meeting will lead to forming a network, not a coalition);

- Are there any strategies/approaches and/or tactics/activities that the group would never use? (this information will also give you a clue about whether the meeting will lead to forming a network or coalition);
- Is the group “non-partisan” (non-partisan means the group does not support any political party) or partisan (aligned with a political party)?
- If the group decides to join the network or coalition, what money, staff time and/or volunteer time would the group likely be able to put into the efforts of the network or coalition? (this will give you a rough idea of the total resources the network or coalition will start out with)

Again, not all groups will be able to answer all of these questions before the initial meeting, or because of lack of time you may not get all the information you want. However, take whatever information you can gather and send out the following information to the groups who will be attending the meeting:

- answers to groups’ questions about the issue or problem;
- a re-worked summary of proposed solutions including solutions proposed by the other groups;
- a re-worked summary of proposed strategies/approaches and tactics/activities (based upon the likely resources the network or coalition will start out with);
- a re-worked agenda for the meeting; and
- the final date, time and location of the meeting.

(c) Hold the Initial Meeting

Often you cannot get every group you want in the network or coalition to attend an initial meeting. Do the best you can, as you can always make tentative decisions at the first meeting and then have the other groups approve those decisions after the meeting.

The biggest mistake made at an initial meeting is that groups spend all the time talking about the problem, instead of figuring out how they are going to work together. This is a very common mistake because many people involved in citizen action are mainly interested in problems and solutions, not in decision-making processes and planning meetings. However, this is also a very dangerous mistake because if there is no sign at the initial meeting that groups are going to work together effectively, often many groups will not come to a second meeting. The best way to avoid this mistake is to send all groups background information about the issue or problem at least 2 weeks before the meeting, and allow a very short question time at the beginning of the meeting.

Another good thing to have at the initial meeting is a person to chair the meeting who is not from your group or any of the other groups. This person will be able to focus on keeping the meeting on schedule and ensuring that everyone has a chance to speak, leaving you to focus on representing your group at the meeting.

Set out below is a model agenda for an initial meeting:

- 1. Introduction of Your Group** - thank everyone for coming to the meeting, introduce your group, and your hopes for the meeting, and your hopes for the network or coalition, in about 5 minutes;
- 2. Review of meeting agenda** - everyone should have received the agenda

before the meeting and been asked to respond with concerns so that you can change the agenda, if necessary (if you don't do this, often the review of the agenda can take a long time);

3. **Introductions** - only allow each person 1-3 minutes to introduce themselves, and their interest in the issue or problem (including questions they have), and what their group's position is about working in a network or coalition (from the information you have gathered before the meeting, you should have a good idea of what everyone will say);
4. **Answer questions** about the issue or problem - keep this brief (5 -10 minutes) so that discussion of the problem does not take over the meeting;
5. **Outline the structure of the network or coalition** - from the information you have gathered before the meeting, and the introductions, you should have a good idea whether you are forming a network or coalition so take the time to present your proposal for forming either a network or a coalition;
6. **Decide whether you are forming a network or coalition** - this is obviously a key step in the meeting, as you try to figure out what structure will both keep the most groups involved and also be the best for winning your goals; it is usually best to try to reach a broad consensus -- be aware that some groups may not stay involved depending on what is decided;
7. **Decide on the decision-making process for the network or coalition** - while you may use consensus decision-making to decide whether you are forming a network or coalition, once it is formed the groups involved may decide that majority approval, or two-thirds majority approval, will be all that is needed to make other decisions -- you will also want to decide how long groups will have to consider proposals before decisions are made, and how you will send proposals to them and have them respond.
8. **Outline proposals** for budget, strategies/approaches, and tactics/activities - often you will only have time to outline these things at an initial meeting, not to finalize anything, in part because many people at the meeting will have to check any decisions with their group
9. **Figure out next steps**, and who will do them - it is very important that next steps are figured out (for example, hiring staff, finalizing budget, strategic plans and timeline, setting up a website) -- make sure you avoid the common mistake of setting out next steps, but not figuring out who will do them!
10. **Set date for next meeting**, if necessary - you may decide to have a next meeting, or you may decide to communicate by email or fax.

Also, at the initial meeting make sure you pass around a sign-up sheet to ensure you have a full list of everyone at the meeting.

4. Model Structure for a Coalition

If you decide to form a coalition, you face an ongoing challenge of having many groups make many decisions together.

Many citizen groups have very limited resources, and may want to join the coalition but do not have the time to participate in decisions. Some groups may join the coalition, but then not end up having the time to participate in decisions. These two problems can limit a coalition from

growing, and also make it very difficult for a coalition to function.

If you use the model structure for a coalition set out below you can avoid these problems:

(a) Allow Groups to be Members or Supporters

If you allow groups to play different roles in the coalition, you can often build a larger coalition. A good idea is to have **Member** groups (which participate in all decisions and activities of the coalition) and to allow groups which don't have the time to participate in decisions and activities to be **Supporter** groups of the coalition.

(b) Set Up a Coordinating Committee

Even if you have lots of Member groups who have staff time and resources to devote to the coalition, there are things to do in running a coalition that all groups do not have to be involved with, and so setting up a representative Coordinating Committee to do these things is usually a good idea. Coordinating Committee serve in key roles for the coalition, such as Chairperson (who facilitates meetings of the coalition) and Spokesperson (or you may have more than one spokesperson who talks to the media or government or corporations or the public on behalf of the coalition).

Networks usually also have a Coordinating Committee, for the same reasons.

(c) Set Up Working Groups

As with coordinating tasks, there are other things to do in a coalition that not all groups need to be involved with, and so setting up working groups that involve only some groups in the coalition can help save time and money.

Often coalitions have working groups that work on things such as: research; a report that sets out your proposals for change; developing public education materials; media relations; and lobbying. Usually working groups will develop draft reports and plans that they present to the whole coalition for approval, and then the working group takes actions as decided by the whole coalition.

5. Conclusion

Working together is not easy, but the benefits often are greater than the costs. A key thing to do is to ensure that a network or coalition works openly and that the Coordinating Committee and working groups are accountable to the whole coalition. Operating openly and accountably will build the trust of coalition groups, and strengthen groups commitment to the coalition.

It is also a good idea to evaluate the coalition's activities regularly, for example as each step in your strategic plan is taken, to learn from your experiences and mistakes and ensure you are staying on track for winning your goals.