
HOW TO GROW YOUR COALITION

A GUIDE FOR NEWBIES
(OR “OLDIES” NEEDING A REFRESHER)



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Introduction

Most coalitions want to grow. Growth allows us to do more things and make a larger impact in our community. Let's face it, growth also is a bit of an ego booster, a confirmation that we're doing something right. On the other hand, when coalitions fail to grow or decline, we perceive it as evidence that what we're about isn't that important or that we're not doing as good a job as we should.

If you truly want to grow your coalition, this guide will give you some suggestions to make that happen. We're not guaranteeing overnight success though. Some of these suggestions will be harder to do than others, but don't get discouraged. Do what you can now and do the rest later. One step at a time.

Like most of our guides this manual is arranged so that you can skim through the parts that are the least important to you and focus on those segments that are pertinent to your situation. We're okay if you don't read every word written here, but don't be too hasty to skip over everything. You'll find important information in every section. Good luck on your quest for a larger coalition.

Part 1: Do you really want to grow your coalition?

Well, duh, that's obvious. Maybe it is, but maybe it's not. Stay with me a minute. I'll be brief. Growing your coalition has many potential benefits. Notice I said *potential* benefits. Growing a coalition can also lead to potential detriments. If you know the pros and the cons going forward, you can work to maximize the good things and minimize the harmful things. Let's start with the good stuff.

Reasons to Grow Your Coalition

1. **The more people you have, the more ideas you can generate to address the issues of your community.** Small coalitions often get stuck listening to the same ideas. It's not that they don't want new, fresh ideas, they simply can't think of them. Their knowledge and experience limits creative thought.
2. **The more people you have the more hands you have to help accomplish your mission.** Often, coalitions come up with great ideas, things that could truly help their community. The problem is, they don't have enough people to pull it off. As a result, members get discouraged. With more people, more things are possible.
3. **When you have more people, you have a larger variety of relationships to accomplish your mission.** The larger the coalition, the more likely members will have relationship connections to policy makers or "movers and shakers" in the community. This makes it more likely for the coalition to achieve community recognition and to accomplish significant projects.
4. **When you expand your coalition to include more key sectors, you gain broader insight into planning appropriate interventions.** Too often the coalition wants to address an issue related to an organization that is not present. Perhaps the coalition wants to help schools, for example, but no one from the schools is there to give input to the ideas. Or perhaps they want to help Child Welfare families but no one from DHS sits at the table.
5. **Expanding your coalition will reduce the "silo" affect which tends to produce duplication.** At times coalitions work hard on a project for weeks or

months only to discover that another organization is already doing it. Joining forces would have been much more efficient and so much smarter. Having more at the table reduces the possibility of overlapping efforts.

6. **Expanding your coalition, increases access to community information and resources.** The more people you have sitting at your table the more knowledge about community events and resources is available to everyone. Numerous times I've attended coalition meetings where someone shared a resource available to community members and someone else in the room said, "I've lived here all my life, and I never knew we had that."

I'm sure you can think of more good reasons to grow your coalition. You must have already thought of some or you wouldn't be reading this manual. It seems self-evident—a larger coalition means more success.

Before we jump to that conclusion, though, take a moment to consider the downsides to a larger coalition.

Reasons You May Not Want to Grow Your Coalition

1. **The more people you have, the more ideas you can generate to address the issues of your community.** Wait, that's the same thing as item one above. Indeed, it is. It's a downside to larger coalitions as well because the more ideas you generate to address issues the more difficult it becomes to decide which one you will do. Some coalitions become paralyzed by the multiple competing voices about how to best address a problem.
2. **Larger coalitions tend to spread their membership too thin.** We think if we can get more people on board then we'll have more people to help

with the projects we are working on. That was item number two above, remember? The flip side of that argument, however, is that the more people you have, the more projects you end up doing which means everyone is still spread too thin.

3. **The larger your coalition gets the more pressure is put on coalition leadership.** Larger coalitions require a great deal more time, planning, and organization from coalition leadership. Coalition leaders must juggle multiple projects, committees, and increased expectations from members. Coalition leaders need to weigh the cost of managing a more complex organization.
4. **The larger your coalition gets the more difficult it is to keep members involved.** When there are only a few of you at a meeting, everyone knows who is missing. However, when the coalition is large a member can easily miss a meeting or two or three and no one notices enough to follow up. In addition, the larger a coalition gets, the more likely members will think they are not needed.

So, there you have it—the good and the bad. I’m not suggesting you shouldn’t grow your coalition. I believe the pros outweigh the cons. However, I am suggesting that you consider the difficulties growth might produce for your group and make plans to address those problems.

Part 2: Why don’t people attend your coalition?

All of us wish there was some secret formula for growing a coalition. We think, “If we could just pinpoint the obstacle, we could remove it and our group would expand in no time.” The problem with that thinking is that there are

numerous reasons people choose not to attend your coalition, and each reason requires a different solution.

In this section, let's look at some of the reasons people don't attend your group (in no particular order). In the next section, we'll focus on solutions that will deal with all these problems.

“I don't have the time.”

This is a big reason many people don't attend coalition meetings. In many ways, it is a legitimate reason. Some people have so many responsibilities there doesn't seem to be enough time in the day to address all of them. But many people who *do* attend coalition meetings have the same problem. We're all busy (okay, some of us aren't). So, what's the difference? Eventually, it comes down to priorities. We all make room for the things in our lives that we think are important.

When someone tells you they don't have enough time, what they are really saying is, “It's not important enough for me to make it a priority.” The reason it's not important may vary. Maybe they don't understand the value that a coalition has for them personally. Perhaps they haven't considered how a coalition might partner with them to lighten their load. Maybe they don't realize the community good will coalition involvement gives their organization.

“I don't see the value.”

This reason for not attending a coalition is related to the first one. The reason many don't prioritize coalition meetings is because they see no value in them.

Let's be honest with ourselves. We all attend coalitions to get something out of them. If we saw no value, we wouldn't attend either. The value might be as small as an appreciative smile from a fellow

member for showing up. On the other hand, the value might be something much larger like referrals to your agency from coalition members or the satisfaction of helping remove a significant barrier to services for families.

For some it scratches an altruistic spirit. For others it may fill a need to be seen and heard. The point is, potential coalition members must understand the value a coalition can bring to their lives.

“Nothing happens when I go.”

I’ve heard people say after a meeting, “That’s an hour of my life I’ll never get back.” If a meeting is a waste of time, people won’t come.

If nothing substantive happens in a meeting, people will find something more productive to do. By “substantive” I mean something is accomplished, some goal is worked on, some new resource is identified, some connection is made that will benefit the participant in the future. Something. Anything. It doesn’t have to be revolutionary or huge. Individuals need to leave a meeting thinking, “I’m glad I came today.”

If your coalition meetings simply run through a tired agenda where people say the same thing they said the month before, perhaps you have a problem that needs to be addressed.

“Leadership isn’t prepared.”

We’ve all been to meetings that started late, had no agenda, members chased rabbits, and it ended late. You know the scenario. Perhaps the chair couldn’t make it so someone else was supposed to take over, but no one really knew who that was. Finally, someone calls the meeting to order but since there is no agenda, the group just wings it for an hour. By the end of the

meeting, small groups are having their own little meetings and the volunteer chair has lost control.

A worse scenario happens when the chair does show up and hasn't made any preparations for the meeting. They didn't make an agenda; they forgot the minutes from the last meeting. Again, nothing is accomplished.

Most people will forgive leadership for an occasional slip up like this, but if it happens regularly, they will stop coming to the meeting. This is especially true for those individuals (and I put myself in this category) who are task oriented. This kind of meeting drives these people crazy!

“No one has asked me to come.”

The world is divided into two types of people (okay, I know it's more complicated than that, but stay with me).

The first group of people are the extroverts. They're the people that actively look for ways to connect with others. They crave being with others. Being around others energizes them. These are the people that show up to a coalition meeting just because they heard about it and want to be part of something good.

Then we have the introverts who crave solitude. It's not that they don't like people. Rather, interacting with people drains their energy. It's an effort. Introverts will seldom, on their own, show up to a meeting where they are not personally invited. They must know that someone wants them there.

“I went once but didn't feel wanted.”

Regardless of why a person originally attended a coalition meeting, everyone wants to be wanted. I have attended coalition meetings in which no one (that is not an exaggeration) spoke to me. A quick moment to tell a new attendee how happy you are they

attended goes a long way. A follow-up email or phone call is a simple (and powerful) way to say, “I’m glad you came.”

Often what happens in groups like coalitions is that long-time members form cliques. I don’t mean that in a bad way. As people we develop friendships, connections with other people with whom we have things in common. So, before, during, and after the coalition meetings, it’s very natural for these affinity groups to congregate.

The new attendee is left out. In many coalitions, unfortunately, these natural friendship groups are hard to crack. If an individual feels isolated during a meeting and no one bothers to let them know they are wanted, they likely won’t return.

“I don’t think they need me.”

Feeling wanted and feeling needed are two different things. Feeling unwanted is when no one really seems to acknowledge your presence or genuinely tries to engage you in conversation.

Feeling unneeded happens when no one asks you to contribute. If a coalition is a well-oiled machine where coalition members are used to getting things done, they often have the same people they rely on all the time. This happens because these people are reliable and efficient. If you have such people, count yourself blessed.

The downside to that efficiency, however, is that others are not asked to participate, to share their gifts and talents. A new attendee begins to think, “This coalition doesn’t need me. I’ll find somewhere else to make a difference.”

“I didn’t know there was a coalition.”

This is a good reason not to attend a coalition meeting. If someone doesn’t know a coalition exists, they certainly won’t be attending. In the next section, we’ll talk more about how to get the word out about your coalition. For now, however, be aware that many people don’t know you exist and that you do good things.

We must remember that partner organizations we want to attend our coalition have constant turn over. New hires in their agency may not be told about the local coalition meeting and how important it is. Coalitions must constantly reach out to these new potential partners.

There are also individuals in your community that have lived and worked there a long time who don’t know your coalition exists. Somehow this knowledge has slipped past them for any number of reasons. They may not know you exist because no one has invited them. Even worse, maybe they don’t know your group exists because your group hasn’t made a significant impact on the community to draw attention to yourself.

“I used to attend but got burned out.”

Coalitions do tend to rely heavily on individuals who are willing to take on responsibilities. When these people who say “yes” to involvement are good at what they do, coalitions tend to place more and more responsibility on them.

At first, this is quite flattering to those who take these responsibilities, but the result is sometimes disastrous. The volunteer gets overburdened and burned out. If this progresses too far, they may even resign and step down from all responsibilities. Before long, they stop attending. They need a rest, and I don’t blame them.

When trying to reactivate these individuals, do it gently. Be sensitive to their hurt. In addition, take note of those who are overburdened now. Help redistribute their responsibilities to avoid burnout.

“I used to attend but things went sideways.”

I have worked with coalitions to help them identify potential members. Someone will name a person to consider and someone else will say, “Oh she used to come, but she won’t be back.” When I press them to explain they tell me of some historical “falling out” between this former member and others. Or they tell me a story of some great problem the coalition had years before where trust and relationships broken.

Overcoming this kind of hurt takes time and patience. Often, with the passing of time the coalition’s partners and purpose changes dramatically. Yet the former member still sees it as the same organization it was years before. These relationships can be restored but it will take gentle and sensitive prodding. It will take effort and time to convince them that the coalition is healthier now.

Part 3: Five steps to grow a coalition

As already mentioned, overcoming the drains on future membership isn’t resolved with one magic quick fix. Growing a coalition requires intentional planning and effort. Below you’ll find five steps to growing or turning around your declining coalition. Some will take more time and effort than others.

Although we speak of these as steps, they may be more like cornerstones of something you are building. I’ve placed

them in order like steppingstones because I believe the first two are the most important. In practice, you may work on all these at the same time in bits and pieces. It's possible to grow a coalition without doing all five. However, I don't think it's possible to grow a coalition long term without doing steps one and two.

Don't let the scope of the suggestions overwhelm you. When you do honest evaluation of your situation you may find that you are already doing some of these steps or that they might be accomplished fairly quickly. Focus on those areas that need the most work. Take your time and maintain realistic expectations. Sometimes change takes patient persistence.

Step One: Get your organization in order

The first idea most people have when thinking about growing your coalition is to invite more people. It sounds logical. However, if you skip to step four (inviting people to your coalition) without doing the hard work of getting your organization in order, your efforts will probably be wasted.

Your failure will be directly related to some of the reasons people don't attend in the first place that we discussed in section two above. The people you invite may attend once but will have negative experiences and not come back.

For new attendees to want to stay, the coalition needs to be a well-oiled machine that consistently demonstrates competence, welcome, and value. Several things need to be in place to make this happen.

- 1. Mission Statement.** A mission statement is the quick summary of what the coalition is about, what it is trying

to accomplish and how it goes about making a difference.

Simply writing a mission statement is not enough, however. Even many struggling coalitions have one of these. The key is leading your coalition members to truly buy-in to the mission, to share it enthusiastically, and to allow it to drive everything the coalition does.

If your coalition doesn't have a compelling purpose for meeting, it will continue to struggle with focus, organization, and community impact. All these are necessary to retain members long-term.

If you need help writing a mission statement, see our [How to Write a Good Mission Statement](#) manual.

2. **Bylaws.** I know few people get excited about bylaws. I'm one of them. However, bylaws lay out the rules and regulations for conducting your coalition's business. You need to know the answer to simple questions like:
 - How and when is leadership elected?
 - How long do leaders serve before being replaced?
 - How do you establish committees?
 - Who can be members of the coalition and what are their expectations?
 - What are the rules for collecting or spending money?

Bylaws address all these basic questions and more. If you don't have answers to these procedural issues, your coalition will always be uncertain and disorganized to potential members.

I'm not saying your bylaws need to be vetted by lawyers. They can be fairly simple. But they need to exist as a guiding document for month-to-month business.

3. **Strong Leadership.** Your bylaws will tell how and when to elect leaders. Some bylaws even outline some

of the qualifications you seek in good leaders. Whether they are spelled out or not, coalitions need to elect the best leaders possible. Look for people who are organized, personable, motivated, and committed to the mission of the organization.

That doesn't mean electing the same one or two persons over and over. Remember the caution from Part Two about burning people out. Leadership needs to be rotated and shared. This is everyone's coalition and the burden shouldn't fall on a limited few.

I can hear you complaining, "How are we supposed to share the responsibility when we have only a limited pool of leaders to pull from?" Coalitions have the responsibility to continually develop new leadership. Give individuals small tasks, then larger ones over time. Take the time to train leaders when they are elected. For help in this, see our guides: [How to Be an Effective Coalition Leader](#) and [How to Use Robert's Rules of Order for Your Coalition](#).

- 4. Agendas.** Every coalition meeting needs to have a written agenda so individuals can know what to expect and what is trying to be accomplished during the meeting. Agendas keep the organization on track and limit rabbit-chasing.

If members stray from the agenda the chair has a quick and easy way to redirect the group. She can remind the group of what the current topic is and suggest we add any new topics to the next month's agenda.

Agendas need to reflect the fact that something is happening or is going to happen. Too often I see agendas that are exactly like the previous month's agenda except for the changed date (and even that hasn't been changed sometimes). These agendas tell potential members that nothing new happens at these meetings.

See our guide, [How to Be an Effective Coalition Leader](#), for suggestions on what to include in a coalition agenda.

- 5. Consistent Meeting Times and Places.** Most coalitions we work with meet monthly at a set time and place. This consistency is highly recommended. Those coalitions that try to meet quarterly or every other month often make it confusing for members.

First, if the time between meetings is too long, members' commitment to the group wanes. Second, members forget when the meeting is exactly. *Are we meeting this month or is it next month?*

I'm aware of a few coalitions that meet in two different places, alternating between towns in their area attempting to be more inclusive for the members spread out across the county. You can already see the difficulty. *Are we meeting in place one or place two this month?* More than once I've gone to the wrong place. Your members will also.

The rationale behind the two places is sound, so I'm not saying this shouldn't ever be done. If, however, your coalition chooses to do this, it is imperative that there is good and constant communication to members and potential members about the location.

One final word about meeting times and places. If the coalition must cancel a meeting for some reason, please go to extra lengths to get the word out. Don't just announce it at one meeting that you won't meet the next month. Not everyone will hear this announcement. Make sure you send a clear notice out prior to the date of the canceled meeting.

- 6. Regular Reminders about Meetings.** Once your coalition has set their regular meeting date and times,

strongly encourage members to put these meeting on their calendars as a recurring event. Every month, you want a calendar reminder to pop up on their phone or computer. Better yet, send them an Outlook Calendar invitation that automatically populates their calendar with the information.

The problem with calendar reminders, however, is that the reminder often doesn't pop up until a few minutes before the meeting is to begin, which is often too late for them to drop what they are doing and attend. Even with it on their calendars, many people need additional reminders.

When you send a meeting reminder email to all your members a few days before the regularly scheduled meeting, it gives every member a heads up to make time for the upcoming meeting. It also lets them know that the leadership is anticipating their presence. Finally, it jumps starts some individuals to finish tasks they promised to have ready for the next meeting.

- 7. Create Member Expectations.** You may want to take a meeting or portion of a meeting and brainstorm with your members what the coalition expects from members. I hesitate to make a list here because your coalition needs to create their own list. I will say, the list may include things like regular attendance, participation, commitment to the mission, and civil interaction. Your list will be more complete.

These things may seem self-evident, but if they are spelled out and reviewed regularly members will internalize them making for more focused, orderly meetings. In addition, new attendees will understand the seriousness of the group.

Step Two: Make an impact in your community

Remember the old conundrum, “Which comes first, the chicken or the egg?” As it relates to coalitions the question is, “Do we need to get more people to attend the coalition in order to accomplish much, *or* do we need to accomplish more things to attract more people to our coalition?”

I argue for the “egg.” That is, coalitions need to be making a difference in their community to attract more members. Potential partners will see you doing things important to them and want to join the effort.

If you try to get people to a coalition that is not accomplishing much, they will think, “*I don’t see the value,*” and “*Nothing happens here worth my time.*”

I know it’s difficult to accomplish much with few in attendance, so start small. It doesn’t have to be anything huge. Set a goal, something small your group can do. Then do it well. While you’re doing the project and after you’ve finished it, let everyone know your coalition is behind it. You are your best publicist. You want the community to connect your great success with you.

The kinds of projects you may choose to do depends greatly upon the needs of your community. Start with the needs you know about. You don’t have to do a full-blown needs assessment to know, for example, that child abuse is a problem in your community, so why not plan an event for Child Abuse Awareness month? While you’re at it, invite Child Welfare to participate. Or maybe they are already planning an event that you can support.

One of the keys to success in growing your reputation is to invite potential members to be part of specific projects. Consider these examples.

1. **Reality Check.** Not long ago I worked with a struggling coalition in a rural community who

wanted to make an impact but weren't sure how with their limited membership. They knew they somehow wanted to help the schools, but schools weren't active in the coalition. They solved their problem by going directly to the school superintendent and asking how they could help. After several conversations, a coalition sponsored "Reality Check" event was scheduled, and school counselors began attending the coalition meetings. If you don't know, the "Reality Check" curriculum is available through the OSU Extension program. So, they got the local Extension agent involved as well. The event was a spectacular success, and everyone agreed to expand the event the following year.

2. **Xtreme Summer Fun.** Another coalition was concerned about the lack of healthy activities for kids to do during the summer. The small coalition decided to create a summer camp through the county recreation department. They reached out to banks, churches, and other organization for funding. They contacted the Oklahoma Food Bank and made arrangements for daily meals. They hired staff and publicized the event with great success. Was it a great deal of work? Absolutely, but it was so successful they expanded it the next year. Together with new partners they made a significant impact in the community and in the lives of children.
3. **Handle with Care.** Handle with Care is a collaboration between law enforcement, schools, and mental health to provide supports for kids who have experienced traumatic events. Several coalitions have embraced this program. One group that we worked with, wanted to make it happen in their city. The problem was no one from the schools or law enforcement attended their meetings. So, they reached out to both about their idea. After several meetings, both agreed to join the effort. Together they set up guidelines and protocols. When the time came to implement, everything worked smoothly.

Now that group is expanding the effort to all the other communities in their county and have served as trainers across the state. All because a small group decided to do something important.

Tackle one thing at a time. Include others who aren't part of your group, especially if the activity will benefit them. Do it well, and your reputation will grow quickly. A good reputation attracts members. People want to be part of an organization that is making a difference.

Step Three: Prepare to get the word out

One obvious reason coalitions don't grow is that few people know your group exists. That's an easy fix, you think. "We'll do a campaign of some kind." So, the coalition begins the process of creating a brochure and other marketing materials. Maybe they create a Facebook page and talk about getting the local newspaper to write something about the coalition.

These are all great things to do. However, creating this kind of campaign assumes your coalition structure is in order and that you actually have something to brag about to the community. I've attended coalitions that decided to create a brochure then struggled for months trying to figure out what to put in the flyer. They had no mission statement and they hadn't accomplished anything in recent years to brag about. This is why steps one and two are so vital. You don't want to start a campaign to recruit members on a broad scale until you know new members will find something of value when they get there.

So, let's assume you've accomplished the first two steps and are ready to move on. Let's talk about how to get the word out about your coalition to the community

1. **Create Promotional Materials.** These can be hardcopy materials like a brochure you can place in the hands of someone. But promotional materials can also be electronic, PDF attachments, emails, etc.

A great deal of thought needs to go into each of these, and they need to be of the highest quality. That doesn't mean you can't print a brochure on a desk printer, but it does mean it needs to be attractive, proofread, uncluttered, and informative.

Spend time thinking through what you want any materials to look like. What content do you want to highlight, what font is best, and what will attract a reader's eye?

We'll talk about distribution of your materials in the next section, but for now do quality work. Put together an ad hoc team maybe to assure more than one person is involved in the process. Make sure they get the final okay from the larger coalition before moving forward.

I worked with a coalition a few years ago that wanted to create a catchy logo to go with all their materials. A good idea, by the way. They decided to enlist the help of a young artist one of their members knew. When the first rendering was brought back to the coalition it was very well drawn but was way too detailed for a logo and frankly missed the point of the coalition's mission. Everyone looked at it with no comment. When no one else spoke, I finally shared what I thought. The coalition decided not to go with that particular logo. Afterwards, several thanked me for speaking up. They didn't want to be the one to hurt someone's feelings.

The point of the story is that whatever materials you create need to be exceptional. They represent your coalition. Give honest feedback. Think things through. If you have doubts about the product, step back and reevaluate.

2. **Use Social Media.** Practically everything I've said about promotional materials above can be said about

social media. It needs to be thought out, of high quality, and consumer sensitive.

The additional things about social media, whether it be Facebook or some other platform, is that it *needs to be regular*. Social media is a great way to get the word out about what your coalition is doing or what social issues the coalition is addressing. However, if no one from the coalition ever posts anything, they are useless.

Even worse, if someone posts inappropriate materials, your efforts at attracting others is instantly sabotaged. Make sure there are policies for posting that include appropriate gatekeeping. At the same time, make sure individuals from the group post regularly. This may be an agenda item for your meetings each month to make sure new material is continually shared.

Finally, for those of you who are social media literate, you know that social media is only successful if enough people like and share those posts. All coalition members need to actively participate in these efforts.

- 3. Use traditional media when possible.** Small town newspapers and radio stations are often looking for material. When your coalition accomplishes something good, someone from your coalition can write up an article and send it in. Let your community know what happened, who was involved, and the positive outcomes. Make sure they know the event or program was sponsored by your coalition.

I'm aware of one coalition where someone from the local newspaper attends the group's meetings on a regular basis looking for newsworthy items. I know of another community in which a local radio station offers PSA (public service announcement) time to the coalition every week. During the coalition meeting, they talk about which partner agencies will be assigned to do the PSAs for that month. The agencies that participate usually talk about some event happening in the

community or with their organization, but they always share that they're doing it in conjunction with the local coalition.

Look for opportunities to share your coalition's story. Take advantage of every free opportunity.

- 4. Target specific individuals.** The most successful way to get new people to your coalitions is through personal invitations (we'll talk more about that in the next section). Before making personal invitations, however, you need to make a list of potential members.

Make your list intentional. In other words, don't list everyone in town as a potential member. You want members who can contribute to your coalition's mission. Once coalitions start making such a list they tend to grow and become unwieldy. Ask yourself, "Do you really need city leaders to attend your health coalition? Do you really need those business leaders? What about law enforcement?"

The answer to these questions may be "yes" but be certain you know why you are inviting those individuals. I encourage you to brainstorm a long list of potential members, then go back and prioritize which members you think are most important to attend your group. Focus on those first.

Below is an incomplete list of agencies and organizations that have been known to attend the health coalitions in Oklahoma. You will not have all of these represented in your community, and you may not need each of these for your mission purposes. They are given here to help you imagine who might attend.

Go through the list with your coalition members and ask them to identify individual names for each agency or organization. We can't invite someone unless we have specific people in mind.

- Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services (ODMHSAS)
- Schools
- Daycares
- Department of Human Services (DHS)
- Office of Juvenile Affairs (OJA)
- Law enforcement
- Faith community (churches and other religious institutions)
- Domestic violence services
- Youth Service agencies
- Private counseling agencies
- Hospitals/health clinics
- Military bases
- Substance abuse services
- Suicide prevention services
- Drug (opioid, etc.) prevention services
- Alcohol prevention services
- Tobacco prevention services
- Tobacco Settlement Endowment Trust (TSET) grantees
- Health Department
- Boys and Girls clubs
- Recreation departments
- Libraries
- Community Action agencies
- Housing agencies
- Legal aid
- Families and Youth
- Tribes

As I pointed out, this is only a partial list. Give coalition members an opportunity to add to the list. Then take the time to research individual names from each agency or organization. Many of these names your coalition members will already know.

Allow me to expand on a couple of these on the list. First, a note about tribes. Tribes are a special case in Oklahoma because they may have multiple services beneath their umbrella such as Child Welfare, Juvenile Justice, prevention, clinics, family services, and more. Having just an individual or two to represent “tribes” in your coalition misses a great opportunity. There are multiple potential partners within the tribal structures.

Second, a note about Families and Youth. Too often coalitions plan events for families or youth in the community without ever getting input from these individuals. These events often fail. Few show up because the group didn’t take the time to hear from the target audience. Get input from families and from youth who will be the beneficiaries of your efforts.

That, of course, is easier said than done. Often coalitions meet during the day when family members are unable to come. Still, do your best to include their voices. Even if they can’t attend your meetings, try to reach out to them for input and evaluation. One coalition in planning an event for the school decided to run it by a group of students to get input. The school counselor took the proposal to group of kids, got important feedback, and brought the information back to the coalition. It takes a little more effort, but it is well worth it.

Step Four: Give personal invitations

Brochures, social media, and traditional media are all good and well. Each one gives one more contact point for potential members of your coalition. The more they see your information, your logo, and evidence of your

accomplishments, the more likely they are to want to be part of your movement.

Unfortunately, too many coalitions stop there, hoping that a blanket of information will attract new members. I hate to be blunt, but it won't.

The way to get new people involved in your coalition is through personal invitation. That's why you spent so much time in the last step making a list of specific people you want involved. Now that you have that list, you must get busy and invite them one-by-one, not just once, but time-after-time.

But before you start inviting, let's talk about a few important things.

1. Know what you are going to say. If you say, "Hey, why don't you come to our coalition," the person might show up just because they know you well and value your friendship. Then again, they probably won't. They must know more about the group before they show up. What does the group do? Who attends? Where does it meet? What time does it meet?

Answers to all these questions and more need to be thought through before approaching someone. In other words, take the time as a coalition to write out your talking points. Be ready to explain the answers to some of these questions:

- What is the purpose of your coalition (remember your mission statement)?
- What kinds of things has your coalition done to make a difference that this person might appreciate?
- Why do you want this particular person? That is, what value can they bring to the group?
- What's in it for this person? That is, what value will they receive by being a part of the group?

Many times, the general information about mission statement and coalition accomplishments can be included in a brochure that you can hand to the

individual. The specific information about individual people, however, needs to be personalized. The reason you want the school counselor at your meeting may be different than the reason you want the alcohol prevention specialist. In addition, these two individuals will have very different reasons for attending themselves.

- 2. Invite and invite again.** We think sometimes that if we invite someone once and they don't show they must not be interested. Seldom is this true. Maybe they couldn't make it that first time you invited them. Maybe they are extremely busy and aren't convinced yet of the meeting's value. Perhaps they are one of those introverts that feel uncomfortable in a group of strangers.

You mustn't give up after only one or two invitations. I'm not suggesting you stalk someone to get them to come. I guarantee that will have the opposite effect. I am suggesting that you be persistent. Invite them more than once. Have two or three coalitions members encourage the same person over a period of time. Eventually, these potential members will come to believe that if this meeting is important to several people in the community, perhaps it is worth investigating.

- 3. Phone, email, or in person?** You already know what I'm going to say. Research shows a face-to-face meeting is more likely to be successful than a phone call, and a phone call is more likely to be successful than an email, and an email is more likely to be successful than some brochure dropped in the mail. The best approach of all is a combination of these—phone call followed by a visit; an email followed by a visit; an email followed by a phone call, or vice versa. Be creative.

Unfortunately, most of our contacts to invite potential members is by email. Maybe we don't know them very well and think a visit might not be received well. Maybe

the email is just the easiest. Either way, the success rate is low.

One coalition I worked with wanted to engage the local school superintendent. I helped them out by calling him to make an appointment. Then, with coalition brochure in hand, I met with him to talk about the wonderful things the group was doing and how they wanted to help him. I followed that up with an email telling him how much I appreciated the time he gave me. He attended the next meeting of the coalition and brought a school counselor with him.

I know we're all busy and taking the time to meet with potential members can be time consuming. Perhaps you need to ask yourself, how much do we really want to grow our coalition?

Step Five: Keep new attendees coming back

Once a new attendee shows up to your meetings, your work is not over. Sure, celebrate the success, but you're only halfway to creating a faithful, involved member. Assuming you've done a good job of getting your coalition in order and making an impact in your community (steps one and two) here are a few additional things you can do to increase the likelihood your guest will return.

- 1. Make them feel welcome.** When someone you don't know shows up at your coalition meeting, take the time before or after the meeting to introduce yourself. A new potential member should never walk out the door without several people letting that person know how glad they are about their attendance.

People want to be recognized and valued. They need to know that they are in a place where others desire their presence. Too often we get caught up before and after

meetings talking to those people we already know well. We have business to conduct, questions to get answered, and catching up to do. That's all understandable.

But we still need to take time to connect with the new people. Take a moment to get to know them before talking to your friends. Exchange contact information or cards. Don't let them leave without a personal touch.

2. Follow up with new attendees after the meeting.

Once you have the contact information of the guest, take the time to drop them a quick email after the meeting to let them know how much you enjoyed talking to them and encourage them to be at the next meeting.

Even further, you could drop them a text or email a day or two before the next meeting to remind them to come and that you would like to see them again. Too often coalition members don't see each other between meetings. It's nice to know that someone is at least thinking about you and is looking forward to seeing you again.

A few coalitions have an elected "Recruitment Specialist" whose job it is to follow up with new attendees. If you have the right person in place, this can be successful. The problem with such a structure, however, is that recruitment is seen as the job of that one person rather than the task of every coalition member. Recruitment belongs to everyone.

3. Make sure new attendees immediately get placed on your mailing list.

I have attended a few community coalition meetings in which I had to attend for several months before I finally started getting email meeting invites. Each month I had to take the initiative to contact someone to make sure they were meeting. Sometimes I didn't know who to contact, so I just showed up hoping the meeting was happening. Most potential attendees will not go to that much trouble. If

they don't get a meeting invitation for the next meeting, they won't attend.

- 4. One of the best ways to keep new attendees is get them involved.** There is a formula that says:

$$\textit{Recruitment} + \textit{Engagement} = \textit{Retention}$$

In other words, if you can get people to come to your coalition **and** you can get them engaged in some project for which they have passion, then you will keep them.

To get people engaged, however, requires several things. First, you need to know their interests, what they might be willing to contribute to. And what's the best way to know their interests? You got it. You must get to know them. Have conversations with them, find out about them.

Second, you must ask people to be involved. Many people will volunteer for a project, particularly if they already have passion for the topic. But many more will wait to be asked. Coalitions often rely too heavily on the same people to do things. The best way to share responsibility is to ask others. One caution about asking, however. Don't put people on the spot. Asking someone to do something in the middle of a meeting without some forewarning can actually drive people away. They may feel embarrassed, especially if they have to say no.

- 5. Recognize success.** This is important not only for new members of your coalition but for everyone. If you want to keep the members you have, let them know they are appreciated. Figuratively, pat them on the back when they have done something, no matter how small, to make a difference. Send them a private email occasionally to let them know how much they are appreciated.

This is also another way to draw new people in. I know of one coalition that has produced their own thank you cards with the coalition logo. They send these to community individuals and partners after a successful project to thank them for involvement. Many of these partners have not yet joined the coalition but occasionally participate in coalition endeavors. A thank you note creates a significant positive impression in the mind of the receiver. The more goodwill you can create, the more likely individuals are to attend and participate in your coalition.

Summary

There you have it. Five easy (okay, not so easy) steps to grow your coalition. Growing a coalition takes time. It takes effort. It takes the purposeful commitment of the entire group. But it can be done.

I encourage you to take the time to work through these steps with your coalition. Identify the places where you are doing things well. Celebrate those. Then, focus on those things that you need to work on. Make a plan and begin to work it. As always, the consultants of the Evolution Foundation are available to review this guide with you and help you make that plan. Let us know if we can help.

We have more guides for you and your coalition.

Check out our other

[Newbie Manuals](#)