

GRASSROOTS COALITION BUILDING: LESSONS FROM THE FIELD

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In an era of major health care reform, nursing professionals will best impact both the politics surrounding reform as well as related health policy through well-established and effective collaborative groups. Whether the work is taking place at the local, state, or national levels, successful and powerful coalitions are the result of skill and finesse—not luck—and therefore must be built upon connecting with the right people, communicating effectively, understanding political challenges, and navigating them skillfully. The authors offer 10 success strategies for building successful coalitions based on lessons learned over a decade of involvement in grassroots nursing workforce initiatives. (Index words: Healthcare reform; Policy; Coalition-building) *J Prof Nurs* 25:352–357, 2009. © 2009 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

FREQUENT MEDIA REFERENCES to the “nursing shortage” and “health care reform” highlight just one aspect of the complex issue we are facing as a nation in providing health services for all Americans. Nurse leaders are educationally and experientially prepared to assume a prominent role in formulating delivery models and workforce solutions for the future but do not always synergistically collaborate to optimally influence change. Successful coalition building can result in public policy initiatives that can better energize nurse leaders as they prepare the profession to partner in the reform journey.

Too often, nursing education and practice work alongside one another but not in tandem on major crossover issues of concern. In 1996, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation awarded 20 states Colleagues in Caring (CIC) grants to focus on grassroots coalition building around current and projected nursing workforce issues. Over the ensuing 13 years, those original 20 states/programs have grown into a much larger force, with almost every state having a nursing workforce office or initiative. Twenty-nine states currently comprise the membership of the Forum of State Nursing Workforce Centers, with 4 more states considering membership. (<http://www.nursingworkforcecenters.org>)

[WorkForceCenters.aspx](#)). The CIC work introduced to the world a cadre of new nurse leaders who have become some of the foremost experts on nursing workforce in the profession. In addition, the CIC initiative helped nurse leaders learn coalition building skills that, when applied across issues, states, and regions, bring key stakeholders together around critical issues (Clifford, Bleich, Hewlett, Irving, & Persily, 2005).

In this article, 10 success strategies are presented to assist nurses in building grassroots coalitions strong enough to meet any emerging political and/or policy challenges. The lessons learned are based on the authors' experiences in building two state nursing coalitions: the Mississippi Office of Nursing Workforce and the South Carolina-based One Voice One Plan consortium.

Success Strategy 1: Rally Around a Common Issue/Cause That Impacts the Public's Health

The first step in building a credible and powerful political coalition is to identify strategic or organizational leaders who share a common interest around a key issue. These leaders should possess the capacity to use their knowledge and influence to advance relationships with policy makers. The ideal coalition meets regularly over time to discuss key issues and build trusting relationships. Relationships grow to be authentic through both social and professional interaction. Relationship building is easier to achieve when stakes are not high. When a rich variety of organizations and well-connected members are represented, the coalition has timely and relevant information to inform its agenda.

The key to collaboration is to work around a compelling issue that crosses the borders between all

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aspects of nursing practice and impacts the health of the public. Remember, in true collaboration, the stakeholders all have an equal place at the table and everyone must bring something of value—usually money or other equal resources (Kinnaman & Bleich, 2004). Negotiation skills require all parties agreeing to concede and come to consensus based on the desired end point. These factors define the difference between collaboration and cooperation. Ideally, the group's work together has begun prior to a high stakes crisis, but if not, then there is no better time to convene stakeholders who have much at risk if the problem goes unaddressed.

Imperative to the collaborative process is that the agenda is clear to all parties, for example, the top one, two, or three issues that can or do impact all stakeholders. Every member is privy to all conversations regarding the work of the group, and all have equal input into any decisions made. An external consultant/facilitator is helpful in the early development of a coalition and can assist in identifying core mission, goals, and initiatives. Once the agenda is set, we advise no deviation to the right or the left without the express involvement and agreement of everyone in the collaborative. This is a critical element in maturing collaboratives where emerging events may have created some trust fragility. Later, as the group engages in complex public policy initiatives, stakeholders can authorize key individuals to make decisions within agreed upon parameters.

Although the collaborative's agenda evolves and new partners are added and others bow out, everyone involved in the work of the group should be equally articulate in discussing issues around the agenda in any venue. All parties should be working within an environment of trust that allows for direct conversations and clarification of issues.

To summarize this success strategy:

- Collaborative members work together to establish the agenda around the issue(s) at hand, for example, the current faculty shortage.
- Once established, all stakeholders work within the parameters agreed upon—there are no hidden agendas.
- As the issues evolve so will the agenda and the work of the group, but the agreement to work together in the political and policy arenas remains a key element of collaboration.

Success Strategy 2: Establish and Maintain Key Relationships

The coalition should be inclusionary not exclusionary, continuously building strength through membership diversity. Proactively consider stakeholders, inside and outside of nursing, who are needed and are not present. To be sustained long term, the coalition must be nonpartisan. Politicians from both parties are essential to the success of nursing initiatives and must be judged on their commitments and actions, not by party affiliation.

As the issues develop, the group needs to ask the question “Who is missing from the table?” The

complexity of nursing workforce issues alongside the national move toward health reform requires that nurse leaders seek partnerships from among academic, service, and business settings. There can be no sink-or-swim mentality between the partners, rather a “we're in this together” motto must prevail. Evidence of this collaborative spirit is noted nationally as clinical care facilities work to help find public and private funding for nursing faculty members. Hospital leaders have realized that unless the faculty shortage is immediately addressed, the bottleneck in the supply of new nurses for their facilities is unlikely to be resolved.

To summarize this success strategy:

- Although a new coalition needs to convene a group of stakeholders that makes sense for the issue at hand, the best grassroots efforts continually assess the need for new membership.
- Stakeholders need to be invited from a broad continuum of interests, with each bringing unique and necessary resources to the negotiating table.
- Relationship building is the bedrock of successful collaborative efforts.

Success Strategy 3: Create a Central Entity and Brand Identity

Whether the group decides to work from a virtual or real entity, establishing a clear identity becomes an important part of the collaborative process. Although many successful groups begin with volunteer “staff” and a virtual location, an organization with an official name and physical location is recommended as the coalition matures. A steering committee or board serves to guide the work and negotiate the issues, and office space provides the group a place to gather and for staff to work.

If moving toward a physical location, there are several sensitive issues the coalition needs to consider. First would be the “where?” Would a neutral location better serve the group than within one of the stakeholder's domains or is there a stakeholder organization well positioned to host and house the collaborative's staff and its work? There are pros and cons to any location, and this one issue can consume a great deal of the group's time and energy. Therefore, it is more important to focus on the clarity of the mission because this is where the trust factor will begin to test the collaborative's strength.

A second decision for the coalition is to establish a name for itself. This branding is important because stakeholders use it in reference to issues that emanate. Although this may sound simple, naming can create interesting conversations and conflicts. One word of caution—once named, the work of this collaborative will forever be linked to it. So choose a brand carefully and wisely with an eye on the long view.

Making decisions on organizational structure, staff, and financing are likely next steps in establishing a move forward. Coalition members often get distracted by such issues as bylaws versus organizing guidelines. Our advice is to make this as structured as necessary to assure

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