

GRASSROOTS CAMPAIGNS & ADVOCACY

a toolkit to help you make change happen



Acknowledgements

Senior Editor: Jeff Miller

Contributing Editors: Ellen Buchman, Peter Montgomery

Contributors: Edwin Fichter, Eduardo Garcia, Cedric Lawson, Patrick McNeil, Scott Simpson, Jheanelle Wilkins, Tara Yarlagadda

Layout & Design: Laura Drachsler

The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights is a coalition charged by its diverse membership of more than 200 national organizations to promote and protect the rights of all persons in the United States. The Leadership Conference works toward an America as good as its ideals.

The Leadership Conference Education Fund is a 501(c)(3) organization that builds public will for federal policies that promote and protect the civil and human rights of all persons in the United States.

Access this material online at http://www.civilrights.org/action_center/toolkit.

Dear Friend:

This toolkit was created with you in mind. Its purpose is to educate, equip, encourage, and empower you to make change.

Our goal is to provide you with the basic structure and strategies needed to plan and carry out an effective grassroots public education or advocacy campaign. It's possible to write an entire book on each of the areas covered in this toolkit – in fact, many have been written. But you don't have to read half a dozen books to put together a strong campaign.

What you need to do is establish your goals, create a strategy, make a step-by-step plan, and mobilize the people, partners, and resources to make it all achievable. This toolkit is meant to be a concise guide to accomplishing that. And we include plenty of suggested resources if you want more in-depth information.

The Leadership Conference and The Education Fund provide leadership and coordination to coalition efforts and support the work of national and local partners by providing strategic and technical assistance, preparing materials, offering training, and identifying resources to support coalition efforts. Information on training for grassroots advocacy is provided by The Leadership Conference; information relating to education and coalition building is provided by The Education Fund.

We believe in the power of coalitions to bring people together for a common purpose. History shows that change can be made when diverse voices unite around a shared goal. We hope you will consider us your partners in making needed change happen. You can learn more about our work at www.civilrights.org. You can also reach The Leadership Conference field staff at 202-466-3315 or at grassroots@civilrights.org.

Onward!



Ellen Buchman, Vice President, Field Operations
The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights
The Leadership Conference Education Fund

BUILDING AND SUSTAINING COALITIONS

A coalition is a group of organizations that agree to work together toward shared goals. It may be a more permanent and structured coalition, like The Leadership Conference, or a less formal collaborative working group that comes together for a specific campaign. Many coalitions will not have their own staff, but function as a team of people representing the coalition's members. For example, the [Transportation Equity Caucus](#) includes national organizations that work together to monitor legislation and promote policies to prevent taxpayer funded discrimination. It doesn't have its own staff or budget, but functions based on what each group is able to bring to the table.

Working in coalition is essential for bringing about change that would be impossible for a single organization to achieve on its own. Coalitions require their own investment of thought, energy, good will, and open communication.

Identify and Recruit Potential Coalition Partners

A diverse coalition can draw interest and resources from across a community. For example, the coalition that pushed for passage of federal hate crimes legislation included not only traditional civil rights organizations and groups that advocate for particular communities (including the rights of women, people with disabilities, and LGBT people), but also law enforcement groups.

While diversity can bring strength, it should not come at the expense of shared purpose. It is essential to any successful coalition to have clear goals to which all partners are committed.

Building with Purpose

Start by making a list of groups whose missions are clearly aligned with the goals of your campaign. Expand it to include others that generally share your values.

The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights is the nation's oldest and largest civil and human rights coalition, with more than 200 national organizations. The Leadership Conference and The Leadership Conference Education Fund believe in the power of coalitions, because every day we see how the diverse expertise and abilities of organizations working together strategically can create a whole that is more effective than the sum of its parts.

For example, if the goal is to create a new ethics commission, start with groups that focus on ethics and accountability in government, such as Common Cause and the League of Women Voters. Next, consider organizations that are likely to share the values that the campaign will promote: honesty and accountability. That might include ministerial associations, interfaith coalitions, and local community groups. Then approach other potential allies: community service organizations, state or local bar associations, public employee unions, state and local chambers of commerce, and other public interest advocates who may see favoritism and corruption harming their ability to do their work or damaging the community's reputation.

Unexpected allies can help get messages to new audiences. For example, in 2015, The Leadership Conference Education Fund was among the founders of The Coalition for Public Safety, which will work to make the criminal justice system more just, fair, and effective. The coalition brought together an ideologically diverse set of groups who often find themselves on opposing sides of other policy debates, a fact that helped generate national news coverage of the coalition's launch.

Start with people you know personally. When you've enlisted their support, ask them to suggest other participants. If they have personal or professional relationships

SAMPLE COALITION



with some of your potential partners, ask if they'll make the first contact or introduce you.

Have a short written description of the coalition's goals and objectives ready to send as a follow-up to your conversation. Give people different ways to be involved; if they can't serve on the steering committee, perhaps they can name a staff liaison to the campaign. If they can't commit to long-term participation, maybe they can co-sponsor a single public event.

Some organizations may have to follow a formal process before signing on. These are opportunities to make new allies and sharpen your ability to make a compelling case for your campaign. Collect business cards and follow up with each person you meet. Maintain a database of contacts—like an Excel spreadsheet—to keep track of who you have met, what level of information you shared, and what kind of response you received.

Coalition Structure

Every coalition will have different needs and dynamics. If the coalition is more than a few representatives, it may need a steering committee or executive working group that will serve as a functional board. There is an inherent tension between the need for a relatively small group that can make decisions nimbly and the importance of having partner groups feel that they have a voice in decision-making. Minimize potential conflict by having an agreed-upon and clearly understood procedure for coalition decision-making.

It may also be useful to create task forces that take responsibility for different aspects of a coalition's work or a specific campaign. Here is one way to envision the structure for a campaign being run by a coalition.

Keeping the Coalition Together

Sustaining agreement on a coalition's purpose, strategy, and activities can be challenging. Even when you share a common goal, it's easy for disagreements to arise among people with different perspectives, levels of expertise, personal histories, and organizational interests. Here are some general tips for trying to keep a coalition running smoothly.

Clarity is your friend. Having clear goals, plans, procedures, and assigned responsibilities is one of the best ways to minimize potential conflict. Be sure everyone

TIP:

Public attention may bring more allies to you. But that's more likely if you have made an effort from the start to be broadly inclusive. Some groups may resent being asked to add their names to what feels like a finished product without opportunity for input. Others will be grateful to have had someone else do the planning and will be content to lend their support as long as the demands on their time will be minimal. Keep in mind that it's only human to want to feel included—and respected.

TIP:

Be careful not to take a polite expression of interest as a commitment. Never put anyone's name on a list of coalition members or a public sign-on letter without written confirmation.

Communicate frequently in a way that everyone agrees will be efficient. Monthly or weekly meetings may work to track your progress and make necessary adjustments to your plan. If you have a larger coalition or campaign team, you may need separate meetings for the executive committee and task forces organized around specific projects. Be sure that different parts of the coalition communicate decisions and progress to each other.

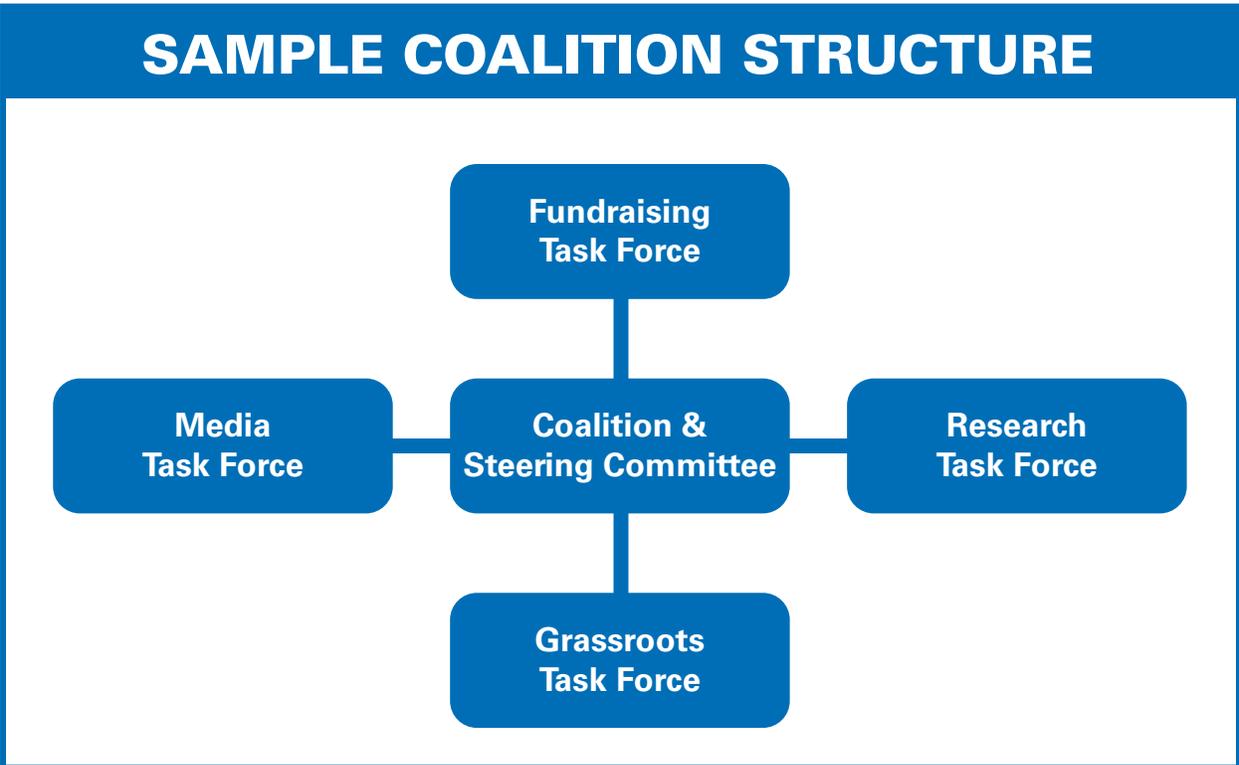
understands and accepts how decisions will be made. After each meeting, recap what has been decided, who has taken responsibility for which tasks, and when they have agreed to complete them. Putting things in writing helps avoid misunderstandings.

Disagreements are to be expected and resolving them is part of the process of managing a successful campaign. If serious disagreements arise that threaten the group's ability to work together or disrupt progress toward the goal, deal with them honestly and directly. Here are some tips:

Be aware of power dynamics. If one or two organizations dominate a coalition, others' commitment might diminish over time. Remember that each organization has its own priorities and needs for visibility, membership engagement, and fundraising. Find ways to share the coalition's voice. One way to work around potential problems is to design campaign messages and online presence that use institution-neutral branding. A coalition of organizations working on immigration reform chose "Keeping Families Together" as an umbrella that appealed to a shared value and under which coalition members could share more specific messages of interest to their constituencies. But the website is focused on telling immigrants' stories, not promoting the organization's member organizations.

- Recognize the problem directly and respectfully.
- Seek clarity on the nature of the problem: Is it a disagreement about strategy? A struggle over turf or visibility? A personality conflict between members of the group?
- Try to identify a coalition member or community leader who might be able to mediate the differences or propose a resolution.

If sincere efforts fall short of resolving disputes, try to determine whether they can be worked around (for example, by placing people with difficulty working



together on different task forces) or whether there's an acceptable compromise on strategy or tactics that all sides can live with.

TIP:

When you can't meet in person

People may find it easier and less disruptive to their schedules to hold some meetings by conference calls. Larger organizations may have their own conference call systems. If you don't have an organization with that capability, you can arrange conference lines through services such as www.freeconferencecall.com.

One of the best ways to communicate quickly with a large number of people is to set up a group email list. It's virtually free and instantaneous and will probably be your primary means of getting information to everyone in the coalition. If there's anyone in your coalition who doesn't yet have an email address, you can help them get one through a free service such as Google's Gmail (www.gmail.com). Both Google Groups (<http://groups.google.com>) and Yahoo Groups (<http://groups.yahoo.com>) allow you to set up email lists for free.