

The Six R's of Participation

by Gillian Kaye



Coalition
Building
Tips

Overview

Good coalitions cannot rest on service providers and professionals alone; involvement of the grassroots community is essential. It's frustrating when grassroots leaders and residents don't respond to our invitations, or when, despite what we feel are our best efforts, we are characterized by grassroots members as being non-inclusive.

The fault may lie not in what we are doing, but in what we are not doing, and in our definition of the grassroots community. It is essential to understand the importance of community ownership and how to create it, and to examine our coalitions and the avenues we have (or have not) created for real grassroots participation. Upon examination, the strategies and "how to's" of involvement and effective outreach become clear.

By approaching the crucial topics of outreach, leader identification, and participation in this way, you can begin to build the organizational capacity you need to sustain grassroots membership. Here's an organizational diagnosis that will aid you in developing a unique "cure" for your coalition.

Involving and Mobilizing Grassroots Residents

By understanding why community members participate in a coalition, you take the first step toward developing strategies to ensure their inclusion. Like other prospective members, grassroots residents expect to have certain roles and kinds of power.

Why would someone want to be involved in your coalition? How does it benefit him or her? Here are some reasons people may participate in groups, organizations, or associations. Your neighborhood coalition can be successful when it meets the needs of your membership, as outlined in the following "six R's."

1. Recognition

People want to be recognized for their leadership. We all want to be known, initially by the members of our own group and then by others, for our contributions to a better quality of life.

Tip: You can recognize contributions through awards and dinners, and by praising your members at other public events.

Example: The Westside Health Authority, a community-based organization in Chicago, recognizes community members who share resources, gifts, and talents with each other in a variety of ways. It organizes neighborhood dinners and other community events and recognizes groups and individuals at monthly membership meetings. The local media also feature the group's "wellness initiatives" periodically. This recognition not only makes community members feel good about their contributions but also spreads word of them nationwide, evidenced by the frequent inquiries they receive from around the country.

2. Respect

Everyone wants respect. By joining in community activities we seek the respect of our peers. People often find that their values, culture, or traditions are not respected in the workplace or community, so they seek recognition and respect for themselves and their values by joining community organizations and coalitions.

Tips: Don't schedule all of your planning meetings during regular working hours. This may exclude many grassroots leaders who hold other jobs. Experiment with different meeting schedules until you strike a balance. Try meeting in the evenings and providing dinner and child care for members. Translate materials and meeting agendas into languages other than English if necessary, and provide translators at meetings.

3. Role

We all like to feel needed; we want to belong to a group in which our unique contribution is appreciated. Groups must find a role for everyone if they expect to maintain a membership.

Tip: Grassroots leaders and members may have experienced being "tokens" on coalitions. Create roles with real power and substance.

4. Relationship

Organizations are networks of relationships; often a personal invitation convinces someone to join. People may sign up for private reasons (say, to make new friends) and for public reasons as well (to broaden a base of support or influence, for example). People may also join to get connected to "power player" in your coalition. Organizations draw us into a wider context of community relationships that encourage accountability, mutual support, and responsibility.

Tip: Provide real opportunities for networking with other institutions and leaders.

5. Reward

Organizations and coalitions keep members and attract new ones when the rewards of membership outweigh the costs. Of course, not everyone is looking for the same kind of rewards. To sustain members' role in your coalition, try to identify their interests and find out what public and private rewards suit them.

Tip: Schedule social time and interaction into the agenda of the coalition so families can participate. Make sure there is an ongoing way to share resources and information, including funding opportunities and access to people in power.

6. Results

Nothing works like results! An organization that cannot deliver the goods will not continue to attract people and resources. If your coalition is formed in response to negative forces in the community (e.g., rising crime rates), safer streets will obviously be welcome and will enhance your coalition's credibility. Build in visible, short-term successes to your work.

Tip: To many grassroots leaders and residents, visible projects and activities that directly affect conditions and issues in their communities are the results they want in return for their participation.

Adapted from material by Ira Resnick

One in a series of coalition building tips.

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