The Six Elements of Effective Coalitions
This resource is the first installment in a series, Key Elements of Effective Coalitions, which has been developed for prevention practitioners and community coalition members by the Prevention Technology Transfer Center (PTTC) Network (https://pttcnetwork.org/). The goal of this series is to provide information on key elements that research suggests are critical for coalitions to operate effectively and increase their impact on substance misuse and its consequences for individuals and communities.

This resource is not meant to be exhaustive, but instead serve as a starting place for prevention practitioners and community coalition members who are in the building and maintenance phase of a healthy coalition. Based on a large and growing body of rigorous research, there are six elements that are characteristic of effective coalitions. Future installments in this series will provide tools to help practitioners assess, monitor, and implement these elements to enhance their coalition work.

Acknowledgments

SAMSHA’s Prevention Technology Transfer Center Network Community Coalitions and Collaborations Workgroup created this document. Contributing Network Workgroup members represented the Northwest, Central East, Southeast, Northeast and Caribbean, New England and the National American Indian & Alaska Native Prevention Technology Transfer Centers.
As shown in the figure below, the six elements that support an effective coalition are:

- **Goal-Directedness**
- **Efficiency**
- **Opportunities for Participation**
- **Cohesion**
- **Diverse Stakeholders**
- **New Skills**

These six elements work together to support a coalition’s capacity to achieve desired outcomes in a community, including changes in community members’ attitudes, knowledge, and skills; community policies and practices; allocation of resources; inter-organizational relationships; community norms and values. Collectively, these outcomes may be characterized as **systems transformation**.
Goal-Directedness

**What it is:** Coalitions are not formed just for the sake of bringing people together. They are intended as vehicles for members and stakeholders to achieve a common goal or shared vision. Remaining focused on achieving this goal, or maintaining goal-directedness, will help the coalition deliver high-quality program implementation. To work towards the coalition’s overall goal there may be short-term goals that need to be met along the way. Coalition members should have their goals realistic and action-oriented.

**Why it’s important:** Goal-directedness is important because it is easy to be side-tracked by smaller issues or pet projects that surround the coalition’s central goals, thus making task-focus a critical element in achieving goals.

The Science behind Goal Directedness


Efficiency

**What it is:** Coalition efficiency refers to the work ethic and task focus of the coalition, and the coalition’s ability to utilize its resources to deliver services in an well-organized and effective manner.

**Why it’s important:** People and organizations join or form coalitions to accomplish together what they cannot alone. Often coalitions are working with limited resources and require nimbleness to respond to a quick and changing timeline.

The Science behind Efficiency


Opportunities for Participation

**What it is:** Opportunities for participation include encouraging members to take on a variety of formal positions or roles within the coalition that are tied to their expertise, abilities and interests.

**Why it’s important:**
- A coalition may be very successful at attracting membership, but if opportunities are not provided for members to contribute meaningfully, retention could become an issue.
• Opportunities for members to take on significant roles has been shown to create an empowering environment as well as increase the program’s success.5–8

• Providing members with a variety of roles, not only supports the coalitions goal but also helps to build the skills and competencies of individual members.5

The Science behind Opportunities for Participation

• Center for Community Health and Development. Chapter 5. Choosing Strategies to Promote Community Health and Development | Section 5. Coalition Building I: Starting a Coalition | Main Section | Community Tool Box.

Cohesion

What it is: Coalition cohesion can be seen at both the member-level and the organizational-level. Feelings of unity, group spirit, trust, and belonging are a few common features of a cohesive coalition.1,9 Some also refer to cohesion as synergistic collaboration.1,4 Cohesion among coalition members can be seen as strong interpersonal relationships, effective collaboration strategies, and increased commitment.1

Why it’s important:
• Organizational cohesion leads to member satisfaction, commitment, and retention; implementation effectiveness; and the long term viability of the project.2
• A cohesive coalition has a positive work environment, where members have developed trust with each other and the ability to resolve conflicts.2

Resources to learn more about Cohesion

Diverse Stakeholders

What it is: Coalitions that engage a diverse set of sectors in a prevention effort represent a broader group of stakeholders in the community.10–13

Why it’s important:
• Involving stakeholders who represent targeted sectors is associated with more impactful planning and implementation of prevention strategies.
• Inclusion of diverse sectors promotes collaboration, builds stronger bridges to the target populations, pools resources and builds strategic influence.

Resources to learn more about Diverse Sectors

• Shapiro VB, Oesterle S, Hawkins JD. Relating Coalition Capacity to the Adoption of Science-Based Prevention in Communities: Evidence from a Randomized Trial of Communities That Care. Am J Community Psychol. 2014;55(1-2). doi:10.1007/s10464-014-9684-9

New Skills

What it is: Having a variety of opportunities for trainings and technical assistance can help build upon and refresh staff and coalition members’ skills.

Why it’s important:
• As a coalition builds and enhances its functioning, acquisition and fostering of new knowledge and skills among its members can increase the effectiveness of the coalition in achieving outcomes.14
• Opportunities for skills building and technical assistance not only improves the coalition’s impact but can also promote member retention and self-efficacy.15
• Greater coalition accountability can come from providing appropriate trainings and lead to solid implementation of prevention strategies.16

Resources to learn more about New Skills

References


