

## LESSONS LEARNED COALITION BUILDING IN APPALACHIA

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1. Integrity is the currency of building partnerships – In Appalachia, if your mistake is seen as dishonesty, you have lost your audience forever. You have got to be willing to share hard truths to your audience. The people you are talking to live with the results of poverty, drug addiction, and hardships every day. If you attempt to sugarcoat your message or present a magic bullet solution, you are going to lose your potential partner.
2. You have got to know your community – Rural communities are built on life-long relationships that can either help or hinder your efforts. If you do not know that Nettie May married Bobbi Sue's ex-husband you can sabotage a meeting by putting them in the same room.
3. Closely related to number 2, you have got to know what is important to your community. Supporting the local beauty pageant might seem like it is outside the scope of your project, but the people you are trying to reach might see this event as the most important social function of the year.
4. There is an adage in coalition work that says, "it's got to be a win-win." It goes further than that. You must appear to be of more value to your audience than they are to your cause. Go in with the mindset that you are there to relieve their burdens, not introduce new burdens.
5. There was a plaque that sat on the desk of Ronald Reagan during his Presidency. "There is no limit to what a man can achieve or how far he can go if he doesn't mind who gets the credit." This advice has been invaluable to our organization. I would be willing to say that most of the success we have garnered is related to that mindset.
6. Always have a clearly defined, easily relatable goal in mind before engaging members of your community. Engaging rural communities in projects that have no purpose or end-goal is akin to running in place. It gets your blood pumping, but ultimately you finish where you started. There must be a goal in sight and progress towards that goal must be measurable. Boredom sets in quickly if there is no sense of accomplishment.
7. We often seek out the smartest, most intellectually gifted people we can find. This is certainly beneficial, but the thing that has moved more people to action than any other attribute is passion. Find the passionate people that can touch hearts and move the masses.
8. Real world experience trumps theory every day of the week. You must use the successes and accomplishments of your local community members to make a greater impact on your messaging. Make it personal, because everything is personal.
9. The small populations, inherent in rural communities, are often seen as a weakness. This is untrue and is, in fact, a strength.
  - a. In rural communities, there is a strong sense of family or other relationship connections. The smaller catchment areas adhere to generational connections that are strong and binding. In many rural areas, this is due to close proximity's in where they reside, go to worship, shop, socialize, and attend school.
  - b. It is not unusual to have the same peer group from kindergarten through High School graduation and beyond.
  - c. Many of the problems rural areas face are universal for their area. Identifying and addressing problems and focused solutions can reach multiple sectors making dual implementations possible.

- d. Collection of data is available faster with fewer capacity partners. This makes it easier to form partnerships with key institutions that will be vital in any community engagement effort, i.e. schools, law-enforcement agencies, local judicial system.
10. Rural communities, by and large, adhere to the tenet of, "If it ain't broke, don't try to fix it." This is closely related to number 4 above, but this is a more universally applicable principle. It is imperative that any new processes or activities be well and fully researched before attempting to engage in partner building. Treating rural communities like a science lab may not be a successful endeavor without a solid reason for implementation. If you do manage to introduce new processes in these communities and they don't perform as advertised, it will be difficult to achieve further engagement. Memories are long.