

The Forge



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Power, Control, and Trust in Coalitions

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Like most organizers, I used to hate coalitions. They seemed to consist of a mixture of organizations that had something to contribute (a base, research, relationships with decision-makers) and organizations that wanted to tell the rest of us what to do. For membership-based organizations, our bonds with our members and our democratic decision-making structures were often threatened by individuals who wasted our time arguing about what our members should be doing.

In a city like Chicago, however, we despaired of ever being big enough to make change without allies. Thanks to some fine organizers who taught me about good coalitions, we learned how to make coalitions work by following these tips.

1. Set up transparent admission criteria.

The single best way to create a powerful coalition is to require that each member has the capacity to deliver a busload of constituents to coalition actions and events. I learned about the benefits of this criterion in a campaign against heat shutoffs, which was coordinated by Karen Nielsen of National Training and Information Center back in the '80s. We only had four member organizations in that coalition, but we delivered a minimum of 160 people to events and 500 to the rally where the governor announced that we had won.

For many years, Chicago ACORN made the mistake of joining coalitions with no admissions criteria, only to sit through long speeches about what we should be doing by individuals who brought nothing to the table. These seemed to be the same individuals who would bring the biggest banner to the march and position it in front of the rest of us with a message we had never agreed to. When we started joining and creating coalitions in which the decision-makers were organizers and leaders with a base, we were able to develop relationships of trust over time and spent much less time arguing or trying to tell each other what to do.

2. Let a thousand flowers bloom.

Once we trusted some of our coalition allies, we could relax our attempts at control and let each member do things their own way. The Grassroots Collaborative, a permanent community-labor table in Chicago, provides an example. In our 2006 campaign to set a minimum wage standard for big box stores, we faced an onslaught of negative media generated by WalMart and the Illinois Retail Merchants Association, along with Mayor Richard M. Daley. We won the first round of battle by calling an emergency meeting of the Collaborative and asking every member organization to develop an action or media event over a critical two-week period leading up the city council vote.

We trusted our allies to deliver, and they did, each coming to the meeting with an action that fit their own capacities and interests. One held a press conference at Costco, noting that it was already paying the \$10/hour (plus full family health insurance) that we were demanding, and another held a press conference with Black ministers expressing their support for the living wage. One planned a blessing of City Hall the night before the vote. Some others held marches in targeted wards. No one tried to tell anyone else what to do. We simply used all of the events to construct a narrative of increasing grassroots support for the proposal leading up to the council vote, which we won 34-15.

Daley vetoed our big box living wage in the only veto of his career. But to make amends with his voters in an election year, he joined our efforts at the state capitol to win an increase in the statewide minimum wage, which cost WalMart and the retail merchants hundreds of millions more than a limited city ordinance would have and delivered pay increases in the thousands of dollars to over a million state residents.

3. Wear your colors.

In 1995, in our very first Chicago Jobs and Living Wage Campaign, we planned a rally at the Teamsters Hall, which held more than 500 people. With a dozen members of the coalition, it should have been easy for us to pack the hall, but we worried about what it would look like if, for our first rally ever, each member organization left it to the others to do the turnout.

Here's what we came up with: members should wear their organizations' colors to the rally, and each organization should bring its own signs with its own logos on them. We then assigned speakers based on turnout goals and roped off the exact number of chairs for each group based on their goals. The result was a packed hall. None of us would risk looking small and weak in front of our own members and leaders; all of us wanted to be proud of our turnout and our organizations.

The rally was jammed and spirits were high. I remember walking up the aisle amidst the chanting and singing thinking that we just might win this one. We did. In the process, we created a model for how future coalitions, including the Grassroots Collaborative, would work.

4. Invite participants through one-on-ones.

Let's go back a moment, to the creation of any coalition. The good ones will begin with an organizer, usually the director, from an initiating organization paying a visit to the directors or presidents of all the organizations they want to invite to join. That visit will include a conversation in which the coalition creator explores the self-interest of the organization that is being invited.

When I did these visits for the first Chicago living wage coalition, I began with the unions, starting with the big ones because I needed them to attract the others. In that initial meeting, I got to know the invitee, got a better understanding of why they might want to participate in our coalition (and hopefully, so did they!), and acknowledged their role in their own organization as well as the role they might play in this one. Finally, I laid out the admission requirements for the coalition (\$1,000 and a busload to each event) and made the ask.

5. Make sure your coalition adds value.

Amisha Patel, who took the reins of the Grassroots Collaborative in 2007, taught me how significant it could be for a coalition to offer value-added items to each of its member groups. The first lesson came when member organizations offered Amisha the directorship of the Collaborative. “I’ll do it,” she said, with her signature serious look, “if each of you directors will go through a racial justice training that I lead.” We needed Amisha, and we sure needed that kind of training, so we agreed. Having a thoughtful and brilliant trainer carry us through multiple days of training was a huge value add for each of us.

Next, Amisha proposed popular economics trainings for our members and leaders. Not only did our members learn about flat vs. progressive taxation, but, for the first time, they built relationships with the members and leaders from ally organizations across the city, people who until that moment had only seen each other at big public actions. Amisha made the Collaborative indispensable with these two trainings. There would be many more to come.

6. Be clear about who has decision-making power.

When Kenwood-Oakland Community Organization (KOCO) invited us to participate in their coalition against the Chicago Olympics, in 2008, they insisted that the groups on the ground in the neighborhood where the Olympics was proposed to land (the Black south-side community of Bronzeville) would be the ultimate decision-makers. Such a stand caused something of an uproar from organizers, like me, whose organizations were not on that turf. I loved and respected Jay Travis, KOCO's director, and liked everything KOCO was doing, but it seemed unfair that KOCO was claiming the right to a final say. But KOCO's argument was ultimately compelling: the impacted people had to own the decisions on their own turf. If we wanted in, and we did indeed want in on that fight, we would have to abide by that rule. We joined with clarity about the different levels of power, and we loved working under KOCO's leadership. By being clear on the front end that the groups who were most directly impacted would lead, KOCO saved us all a great deal of conflict down the road.

7. Set up an agenda-setting committee.

Something else that I learned from KOCO was the idea of an "agenda-setting group." Jawanza Malone, a KOCO organizer who ran that coalition, laid out the concept at our first coalition meeting. Jawanza noted that some groups were more active in any coalition than others, and some groups wielded more power than others, sometimes by virtue of the amount of work they did. Jawanza proposed making that hidden process visible by creating an agenda-setting committee. The agenda-setting

committee decided what appeared on the agenda for each meeting and when to call an emergency meeting. To get a seat on the committee, a group's executive director had to attend most of the regular and agenda-setting meetings. Most of us did not feel the need to do all that work, so we stayed off the agenda-setting group, but we all knew how to get on if we wanted.

8. Talk about power disparities.

When we worked with the Grassroots Collaborative on the Big Box Living Wage, ACORN had some key roles that we did not delegate to the coalition. At that time, we had experience with political campaigns, large canvasses, and lots of door knocking. Once we understood that the huge majority of almost every Chicago ward supported our living wage proposal, we realized that a big door-to-door canvass, operating in all the swing wards, could force the bill out of committee and then win support from swing city council members at the key council vote. So ACORN approached the UFCW, the lead union in the campaign, for funding for a citywide canvass. At that time, the Collaborative did not have the staffing or the experience to run a major canvass, nor did any other ally. ACORN did. Because that was so clear to us, we moved on our own to create the canvass, fund it, and get it underway.

This is a very tricky issue because it brings up the thorny problem of size. For instance, what do we do about huge unions in coalition with smaller community groups? I think the jury is still out on that one. Smaller organizations will worry about being overwhelmed in a coalition with a huge union. Huge unions, on the other hand, may feel like they have more to lose or more to win. Can a big union that has to negotiate its contract with the mayor or governor every few years afford to enrage that

decision maker? They may pull out if the smaller groups don't agree with them, decimating the power and resources of the coalition. The best way to navigate these challenges is to acknowledge the power imbalance up front and hold early discussions about the value in maintaining relationships even when there are serious disagreements. But in the end, disparities of power, capacity, and member self-interest may result in the rending of coalition ties.

9. Make permanent friends.

Who on earth ever uttered that old slogan, “No permanent friends, no permanent enemies”? So wrong!

The underlying current in this article is trust. Ultimately, we need to build trust across all levels of organizations in the movement: directors, staff, leaders, members. If you are fighting for racial, economic, and social justice, there are permanent sides. Of course, we can establish a temporary alliance with an enemy for a pragmatic goal, and we can have a terminal falling out with an ally. But there are sides, and knowing who is on which side is critical to our success.

This level of trust is what made the Grassroots Collaborative, a permanent community-labor table, possible. During the first Chicago living wage campaign, the directors of some community organizations and a union sat down and talked about what we wanted from a potential permanent table. The answer we all agreed on: a transformation of power in Chicago, from the corporations to the largely Black and brown working class. I don't presume to speak for the Collaborative today, but that was our sense of what we were about back then. With our consensus on that goal, we made our alliance a permanent one.

There were groups that chose not to join the Collaborative, like KOCO and Logan Square Neighborhood Association (LSNA has since joined), that were nonetheless clearly on our side. Sometimes I had to chase KOCO down to work with them, but I kept trying because they were the most brilliant and principled community organization in town. In my mind, they were permanent friends, whether they liked it or not!

As we all work to find funding, get credit, and build power, we'd best stop treating our relationships with each other as disposable and stand firm in our commitment to each other as permanent movement allies. Good coalitions can be a way of learning how to do this. I urge you to give them a try.



About **Madeline Talbott**

Madeline is a retired community organizer who spent 37 years working with ACORN and Action Now, mostly in Chicago. In retirement, she is organizing her own neighbors on climate change, racial justice, and electoral politics, and enjoying her family and friends.