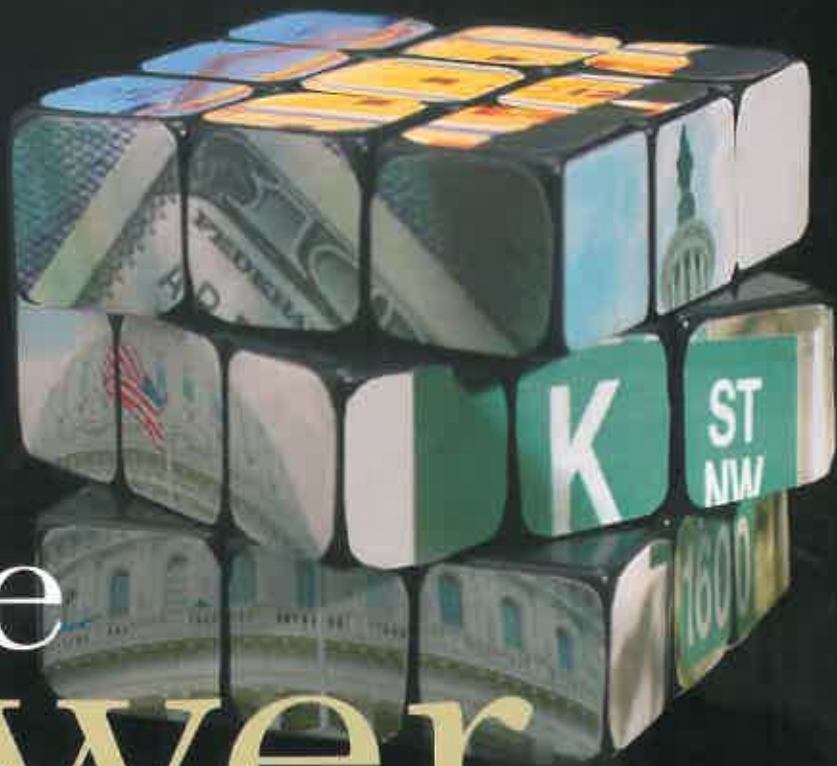


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Influence



The Power Puzzle

From picking the right lobbying firm to judging the final result, strategies to help you get more out of the complex advocacy game.

Marriages of Convenience: Making the Most Out of Coalitions

The 10 Contradictions of Lobbying Coalitions

If you can follow their logic, coalitions can be highly effective. BY PEGGY TIGHE AND MICHAEL T. HEANEY

The old adage that “politics makes strange bedfellows” is especially true of lobbying coalitions. The essential contradiction of coalitions is that they are expected to find unity where it is unexpected.

Coalitions are collective efforts undertaken by firms, trade associations, and public interest groups to coordinate their lobbying and advocacy on policy issues. They may facilitate the short-term efforts to block or support particular pieces of legislation or they may augment long-term projects to shape attitudes among lawmakers and the public on areas of policy concern.

A coalition may consist of two organizations collaborating on a narrow issue or 500 organizations allied behind a far-reaching legislative agenda. Whatever their form, coalitions have become a standard piece in the strategic tool kits of interest groups.

Those who work with coalitions know that they are difficult to form, nearly impossible to staff and fund, and often a nightmare to keep together.

Yet they can be incredibly effective advocacy tools. We have identified 10 contradictions of coalitions. If you can follow the logic of contradictions, you can work effectively in coalition.

FORMATION

1. Strategize with a select group first, without angering those you



exclude. Begin a coalition by strategizing with a small group of close allies, then open up your efforts to a larger group. Early strategizing helps to organize and clarify goals. However, failure to include the correct groups early enough could cause them to feel left out of the process and unlikely to participate later.

2. Large coalitions signal political strength, but are not always more effective than small ones. Given that coalitions usually operate on a consensus basis, an advantage of smaller coalitions is that they may reach consensus more quickly. When legislation is moving, it may be wise to trade off size against agility. Small coalitions may still signal broad support if

their members are well chosen.

PARTICIPATION

3. Become part of the group without losing your identity. The essence of working in coalition is preserving your organization's interests while simultaneously advancing the group's goals. Often, this means that specific goals must be advanced apart from the coalition while the coalition espouses a broader vision. Be candid with your coalition partners about the need to do this, lest you jeopardize their trust.

4. Coalition participation can enhance, but may also outstrip, your lobbying resources. Coalitions can make it possible for small organiza-

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tions to achieve more than they would accomplish by working alone. But even a large organization can become overburdened if it joins every relevant coalition. Consciously create a portfolio of coalitions that reflects your issue priorities, and keep in mind what other groups are doing. If your close allies are working on an issue, it may not be necessary to become deeply involved because they can keep you up-to-date. But if your allies are not active, it may be in your interest to be involved, even if the issue is not your highest priority.

5. Coalitions must have a core group of strong leaders, but members can make a contribution with almost any level of participation. Participating in conference calls, adding your company's name to the coalition letterhead, testifying, writing an opinion editorial, participating in editorial board meetings, serving on a coalition steering committee, or funding a coalition are all important facets of coalition participation. Because different groups will want to contribute to coalitions at varying levels, it is essential for each organization to be clear about what it is and is not willing to do. At the same time, your coalition partners are likely to expect that if you are note-taker in one coalition, then you will be a more substantial contributor to some other coalition in the future.

MANAGEMENT

6. Those with the most at stake have the greatest incentive to lead the coalition, but a noninterested party is often the best coalition coordinator. If possible, consider hiring an executive director who is

accountable to the entire coalition. Bringing someone in with experience in the issues may be in the best interest of the entire coalition membership. Executive directors who are too closely allied with one interest may begin to espouse those views, often unaware that they are doing so.

7. Creating committees within coalitions is one way to formalize and regulate participation, but it can also limit and reduce participation. Creating a steering committee or subcommittee for a coalition is one way of defining a stake in the coalition for certain key groups, but groups that are not included in these committees may feel excluded from the "real" decision making of the coalition. Representation on key committees and strong leadership of each committee is vital. Without both, coalition partners will become disinterested and reduce their activity.

8. National representatives who work in state coalitions often add valuable expertise to state efforts, but can sometimes alienate in-state partners. State allies are often not interested in "outsiders" telling them what to do, particularly Washingtonians. National representatives must recognize the expertise of in-state allies and that every state is unique. Those who espouse "cookie-cutter" methods are routinely shunned on the state level. National groups should take the time to understand how a state operates and then apply appropriate state-specific tools.

THE BIG PICTURE

9. Coalition work is of enormous value, but is not necessarily expen-

sive to undertake. Successful coalitions have the right players advance the right message at the right time. This requires constant communication, compromise, sensitivity, and diplomacy. Much of the expense can be covered through in-kind contributions and donations of lobbyists' time. Alternatively, all the money in the world will not produce common ground in the absence of mutual trust.

10. You get back much more than you give. Sharing as much information as possible strengthens the giver as much, and often more, than the recipient. If you share information, others begin to see you as an information resource of professional value. Once others feel they are plugged in to an information-sharing network, they will feel empowered to add even more to the effort.

Coalitions afford unique opportunities for advocates to work together informally across traditional boundaries. Take this as an opening to adapt your work to the specific challenges of an issue. Coalitions should be run in a way that is flexible to the needs of the members and responsive to the realities of the issue. By recognizing and embracing the contradictions of coalitions, your organization can work together more effectively with its allies (and sometimes adversaries) in coalition.

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