

Coalition Building for Resolution of Natural Resource Issues

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Thank you for inviting me to visit with you about an important subject, i.e., getting others to see your point of view and convincing them to support you. That is a blunt, pragmatic, political way of stating the technical jargon, "Coalition Building."

When you begin the hunt for coalition partners, you become an advocate, perhaps an analyst, but you can no longer pretend that you are objective or neutral. Your targets are the stakeholders affected by the issue(s) on which you are working. In an effort to save time, energy and money, concentrate on those people who express an undecided or loosely-held opinion on the subject. Do not spend very much time with those who are dead-set against you; do not spend much time with those who already support you. The resources that you might devote to trying to convert those who are against you or to confirm those who are already convinced are wasted; a greater payoff will occur if your effort is spent on those who are undecided.

Your objective in coalition building is to gain sufficient support to carry the vote, to convince a consensus group that you are right, or to gain control of whatever way the group has chosen to make decisions. Coalition building is an issue-driven task which in itself defines your audience, i.e., all those affected by the issue resolution decision. Your job is applied problem-solving, that is, figuring out numbers of positions affected by the issue, numbers of people supporting each position, and those who are the most likely candidates, to try to convince of the merits of your point of view.

This puts you in a selling mode which means that you have to listen very hard, and, indeed, build on what you hear. Your objective is to synthesize and establish a common goal to which your audience can relate, can support, and will buy into. By listening to your audience, and building on what they tell you, your common goal will, indeed, also be theirs. By feeling ownership in the process and by feeling that through supporting you they will gain what they want, your task is made much easier.

Your need for creativity is profound at this point. How can you create win-win situations for the points of view which you wish to attract? You have to be inventive in a credible manner. You cannot afford to do shoddy work, use questionable data, or rely on rumored perceptions. You have to be believable and expose your ideas for discussion. This means that people can disagree with you. Thus, your presentation will need to tell your story and why you think it fits the goals of your audience(s), it has to be credible, and it has to be defensible with identified credible resources to back up the points that you make.

You can draw on emotion to win your points, yet if your words are not fully backed by research and credible experience that people believe to be accurate, your presentation may backfire with disastrous long-term results. Knee-jerk reactions will come back to haunt you. For example, hindsight is showing that the Alar scare presented on TV a few years ago caused severe economic harm to many small apple growers throughout the nation and abroad who are supporters of sustainable agriculture and the environmental movement. These growers were moving as quickly as possible to adopt management techniques of sustainability; at the same time, they had assumed the risk and expense of transition from a conventional, chemically-dependent agriculture to an integrated, nature farming system. Public reaction hurt them immensely, and also brought disrespect to some who promote environmental causes.

Another example is the Kesterson selenium trap in the San Joaquin Valley. Asking for, and receiving, a huge public dollar expenditure for the removal of those few acres from further environmental impact has still not resolved the basic problem; i.e., selenium in this case does not originate from agricultural, industrial, or waste disposal activities. Rather, it is the result of a naturally-occurring geochemical source in the soils and parent materials of hills to the east which comprises the watersheds that drain into the Kesterson reservoir. The expenditures have certainly not produced any lasting solutions. On the contrary, the action has caused tremendous acrimony and ill feeling among many who could have been allies in resolving the issue and who did not have to

be alienated.

Perhaps your own strongest ally for coalition building will be your ability to show sincere respect for the way people think and feel. I am always impressed with the way those who disagree with me find very good ways of expressing their disagreement. I have learned that the only way I can argue persuasively for them to join me, rather than to oppose me, is to respect their arguments.

This opens up the need to find intelligent questions to ask rather than to offer pedantic or prescriptive answers. If people provide their own reasons as to why they should join with you, your case becomes much more powerful than if you batter them with unwanted information and logic. Nothing is clear or logical or rational until you (they) see it and agree with its reason for being. It is your job in coalition building to ask the right questions that will bring forth the desired response.

Another way to look at coalition building is that the creative job of gaining support for your position, issue by issue, is based on the common concerns that you can draw from a group of diverse perspectives and understandings. This is leadership development at its best and it will call on all your talents.

Still another way to think about your task is that it involves creating a more informed dialogue and improved communication. In that process, you are the key in gaining knowledge about others' viewpoints. You are listening, and your questions provide the focus for the discussion. Your tools are your own mind, your own grasp of the subject matter, your sincere desire to respectfully gain their support, and your creative ability to show them that by supporting you they will have put themselves into a win-win situation.

On the other hand, I am beginning to believe that every coalition or group contains the seeds (or virus) for its own dismemberment and disruption. As a result, group maintenance will become another task as soon as the coalition is formed. Never take the group for granted. Always look to the needs of the group members and their expressions of concern, and cultivate these ideas in the same ways by which you originally obtained their support. Later, some of the maintenance functions can be delegated as long as the coalition leadership remains visible and credible.

Implementation of the coalition's plans and attainment of its goals require careful thinking, analysis and consensus. A simple rule is: never put anything forward or ask for a vote until you know that you have enough votes and support in hand. If there is any question about whether or not you have enough support to win, delay asking for action until you are positive that your point of view will prevail. Then you will win, your coalition will be successful, and you can go on to bigger and better things.

Coalition building for doing what you believe in is a continuing and often heart-rending task. It exposes your values and your tactics in complex ways. The challenge is great, yet when you have created or helped create a supportive group, based on expressed needs and concerns, mutual respect, credible information and discussion, you will know lasting re-wards of a very deep nature. Thank you again for this opportunity.