

■ Building Bridges

ONE OF THE MOST REWARDING ASPECTS of coalition work is learning about the traditions, cultures and concerns of others. It provides opportunities for deep and lasting relations with individuals from many diverse backgrounds and confronts the isolation in which ethnic groups often find themselves. Many of these groups have a history of courage and dignity in the face of persecution that can inspire and strengthen coalition builders when a situation appears discouraging.

Inadequate understanding of ethnic, religious and class differences hampers multicultural coalition work. To avoid clashes, it is important to remember that members belong not only to different organizations but also to different cultural groups whose values and mores are reflected in their behavior. Blacks, Jews, Hispanics, Irish or others bring to a coalition their distinctive patterns of interaction, some of them self-defeating and counterproductive to coalition work, others valuable for inspiration and for illuminating problems. Groups will make a unique contribution when their strengths are taken seriously and their weaknesses are corrected.

The Best Way to View Cultural Differences

Much of American history has either minimized or denied cultural differences. The old melting pot theory hypothesized that ethnic, religious, racial, class and geographic differences could be subsumed under the inclusive, specific identity, "American." Although that theory has proven untenable, its assumptions continue to exercise influence, and many of the best training manuals on community organizing say next to nothing about cultural differences and their importance.

Building Unity Across Ethnic, **Religious** and Class Divisions *support* its agenda. Some differences among groups have been used to justify a group's inhumane treatment and persecution of others. Those who have inherited such a history naturally approach another group's organizations and coalitions with suspicion, sometimes *even* fear. Believing that negative stereotypes about them persist, they often cannot realize that some groups are willing to support them in the present. They should be helped to correct existing misperceptions, express their needs and actively seek out allies.

Some *groups* suffer internal *fragmentation* and *friction*. Many coalition workers tend to think that groups compete only with one another to advance their respective self-interests, but that *is only half* the story. Groups may also be fragmented internally: a history of persecution may cause members to vent their resentment on each other. Coalition organizers should learn not only to reconcile diverse groups, but also to understand the special differences and struggles within groups.

Some groups find an excuse to repeat their isolation even in the coalition. Because isolation is familiar and therefore seems "safe," some groups join a coalition that offers the hope of ending it only to find a small point of difference to justify their splitting into subgroups or even their withdrawing *from* the coalition.

Groups *may unintentionally frustrate their best allies*. Even after trying very hard to ally themselves with another group, a group or individual occasionally becomes a target of the other's resentment for past years of disappointment and mistreatment. Under such circumstances, many coalition builders need to be reminded that they are given a hard time precisely because they are, in fact, effective allies and safe targets for the rehearsal of past resentments!

Fostering Intergroup Sharing

Coalition leaders should arrange forums where each group can talk about its history, customs, music and rituals, as well as struggles and present concerns. By exposing groups to each other, these forums are effective in blunting intergroup rivalries. Another device for reducing tension is to present special programs drawing on each ethnic group's history. A coalition working on immigration reform, for example, may want to organize a session featuring skits that illustrate the experience of various groups in adapting to this country.

Some members will resent these forums, feeling they dull the group's political edge, but cultural sharing is an important coalition building tool. There is no way to bring together isolated groups with conflicting interests without weaving at least some of their most vital, life-sustaining customs into the fabric of the coalition.

Ultimately, ethnic groups participate in a multiethnic coalition only to the extent that they can be encouraged to be proud of their history and ethnic groups. Group tensions *and* stereotypes have been around for a long time; knee-jerk reactions to disruptive, prejudicial remarks may satisfy an emotional need; but they will not effectively change attitudes. Ethnic, racial, gender-related or other slurs are best handled by calmly challenging the misinformation on which they are based, while communicating respect for the person making the remarks.

By refraining from inducing guilt. Many people who belong to "oppressor" groups really want to be allies; they may just need to know more about the history and needs of victimized groups. Stimulating guilt in groups that at one time mistreated others tends to make them defensive or apt to withdraw. It is better to help such a group reclaim positive aspects of its own identity and to seek out areas where it has been cooperative.

By seeking symbols, precepts and traditions from different ethnic and religious communities. Many potential coalition members have deep roots in synagogue and church life, and can be reached best by understanding; respecting and communicating with the symbols and languages they understand.

By encouraging caucusing. Coalitions trying to resolve a difficult issue generally spend a great deal of time at full group meetings; these are particularly unproductive when there is a history of intergroup rivalries. An alternative worth considering is to let the constituent groups caucus, or meet only with their own members at first, to reach agreement on their position. Most groups need a private, undisturbed environment to vent their disappointments and air their negative stereotypes, even their prejudices, about other groups, without hurting anyone else. After having blown off steam, groups will be more flexible about adapting their agendas to that of the coalition. They can then join the others and report their concerns.