



# 5 Blind Spots that Prevent Coalitions from Producing Systemic Change

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SEPTEMBER 26, 2021

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A coalition is formed when individuals and/or organizations seeking common change come together to tackle a difficult, wide-ranging issue. Typically, the change that coalitions strive to accomplish does not fall within a single entity's sphere of influence or control. By working together and developing consensus on a shared purpose, individual organizations can expand their perspective on the issue and broaden their sphere of influence. Thus, the collective impact of a coalition can typically produce change more effectively than any single organization alone.

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Note, however, that ‘*can*’ is the operative word here. Coalitions *can* produce positive outcomes more effectively and efficiently than any single individual or organization when they marshal the collective skill, wisdom, patience, and experience of participating members.

## Enthusiastic Beginnings

Hopeful optimism generally accompanies coalitions at the beginning of their journeys. Coalition members are motivated to positively impact an inequity or problematic condition, and they share a collective enthusiasm for making a long-term difference in their community. Even individuals on the sidelines may hold hope that with the coalition, change is coming.

Unfortunately, this type of support can quickly fade as obstacles become apparent. Prior failed attempts at producing systemic change in complex environments, or perceived lack of interest within the community can quash enthusiasm and stymie cooperation, leading to widespread pessimism and distrust. Other stark realities include limited financial resources, little to no experience building effective coalitions, and most detrimental, limited vision for the root cause of the problem. These and a multitude of other issues can prevent coalitions from achieving their goals, and the obstacles often germinate before anyone notices.

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In this white paper, we will address five common blind spots that prevent coalitions from producing systemic change. We'll examine each blind spot to explain what it is, why it happens, and recommend concrete actions that can help avoid or remedy the situation if it already exists.

## **Blind Spot #1: Underdeveloped Shared Identity & Culture**

The most important task every coalition must undertake at the outset is to identify the greater purpose. This requires developing a shared value system that all members agree upon, which can be more difficult than one might imagine.

Coalitions are almost always established with the goal of achieving something noble – something that has never been done before, at least not in their community. Noble achievements, therefore, get their name because they are intrinsically complex and difficult to attain. The difficulty stems from the fact that achieving a noble change requires a multitude of stakeholders – including members of the coalition themselves – to view challenges from multiple angles, to adjust assumptions, and to move away from the usual way of doing things in favor of attitudes and actions that support the coalition's overall identity and culture.

It may be tempting to theorize that coalition members who have signed on to work together toward a common goal will likely share the same values and beliefs. Therefore, decision-making among the coalition members should be a fairly straightforward exercise. Yet, this theory rarely holds true. In reality, coalition members bring to the table positions and opinions built upon their own personal identities, values, and experiences, as well as the values and cultures of their own organizations. On top of this, organizations measure success in relation to their own objectives, which may be at odds with other coalition members' measures of success.

As an example, consider a coalition whose mission is to reverse the growing trend of substance use addiction within their community. Coalition members represent the local hospital system, rehabilitation facilities, city parks and recreation, local police and juvenile justice, the school district, government officials, a neighborhood association, the faith-based community, and two philanthropic foundations. All coalition member organizations seek to reduce substance use addiction in their community. However, you might imagine that their values and priorities concerning health, safety, criminality, recreation, and social support will vary greatly.

While the partnership diversity represents an extraordinary strength of a coalition, the ability of members to see beyond the objectives of one's own organization and to support the greater good is integral to coalition success. This explains why it is critical to set aside time for the coalition to identify and benchmark group values through open and honest communication. Coalitions that make space

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for identity, culture, and value discussions will find ways to work through conflict and evolve together rather than splitting apart.

### ***Finding the Likeness of Minds***

Identifying common ground between coalition members helps form the group's shared values. To illustrate, let's revisit the coalition to reduce substance use disorders. Undoubtedly, coalition members will come to the group with predetermined mindsets, ranging from "substance addiction is a mental illness" to "substance addiction is a learned behavior" to "substance addiction is criminal activity" and everything in between. Imagine the struggle to agree on coalition priorities among members who hold such distinctly different opinions. It's simply not going to happen until those individuals recognize the common ground that *does* exist between them.

Finding common ground begins with identifying universal agreements among members, e.g., "We agree that addiction is detrimental to the overall health of our community." With agreement, respectful conversations can drill down, little by little, to find the "break" in viewpoints. Identifying the breaking points is infinitely important because the coalition can then focus its time and energy on building consensus. Tedious work, indeed, but experienced professionals know how to make the process both efficient and effective, producing headway rather than headaches for the group.

**Whether or not you have the guidance of a trained professional, a few basic ground rules will help determine your values and culture:**

**Set Aside Self Interests.** Each member organization has a unique reason for participating in the coalition – a self-interest, if you will. Only when members set aside their organization's self-interest and focus on the broad scope of what is best for their community can the coalition develop a shared purpose and vision.

**Create a Culture of Trust.** Coalitions live and die on trust. Trust is built by being honest, consistent, and following through on promises.

**Listen Empathically.** Include empathic listening as a coalition practice. Hold each other accountable to listening with two ears but speaking with one mouth.

**Commit to Commitment.** Participation in coalitions is time consuming but it shouldn't be draining if every member agrees to pull his or her weight.

**Lighten Up!** Remember that no matter how serious your goal is, a measure of humor helps bring levity to every coalition.

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## **Blind Spot #2: Exclusion, Intended or Not**

A second common blind spot that far too many coalitions are prone to experience is a lack of appropriate representation and inclusion. This can manifest itself in a variety of ways.

### ***Engaging the right partners***

Sometimes the makeup of a coalition unwittingly lacks representatives from key constituencies. Let's take another look at the coalition with aims to reverse the growing trend of substance use addiction. There are a myriad of laws and protections for both employers and employees in work situations affected by substance use. There are also numerous employer-sponsored healthcare and wellness options as well as workers compensation insurance impacts related to substance use and addiction at work. However, no one on the coalition is representing employers or employees' perspectives. Inclusion of a local employers' group such as the chamber of commerce, a workers' representative, and an attorney who specializes in employment benefits may be excellent additions to the coalition.

### ***Engaging people with lived expertise***

Oftentimes the very people a coalition sets out to impact most are completely overlooked and left out of the coalition. People with lived experience, or lived expertise, often add important dimension and perspective to the work of a coalition. Their inclusion should not be underestimated, not only because collaboration is a pointless exercise if it excludes the target population, but because people with lived expertise can offer coalitions impactful, credible leadership. Their personal experience, innovative solutions, and adaptive skill sets uniquely add to their authority. Likewise, people with lived expertise often save coalitions from years of barking up the wrong tree. They can provide insider information that other coalition members may not be exposed to or understand. For example, a coalition member in recovery from addiction might passionately lead an advocacy effort to destigmatize addiction. Or they may share their beliefs on types of services that need funding prioritization. Or they might speak anecdotally about the local rehabilitation clinic hours being too limited, or about the clinic location lacking mass transit access. Keep in mind, though, that people with lived expertise should not be expected to represent entire populations or serve as "informants" only. Rather, they can share skills, innovative ideas, commitment, and perspectives to improve the coalition's effectiveness, as is expected from coalition members overall.

### ***Balancing power***

Oftentimes, power imbalances will arise due to the sheer influence of member organizations or their individual representatives. Keep in mind that some coalition member organizations will be better staffed and better funded than others. Some may be well-established pillars of the community, while others may be up-and-coming social enterprises new to the scene. It is important when building a

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coalition to find consensus on power-sharing. For example, is the hospital system entitled to support three people to serve on the coalition while the school district has just one? Does everyone have an equal vote or are votes limited to one per organization? Is the opinion provided by a foundation that is funding the coalition more valuable than that of the person with lived expertise? These power-sharing issues should be considered and decided early on to avoid infighting and member disenfranchisement.

Having all the right participants on board *and ensuring their voices are heard clearly and equally* is vital to maintaining a well-balanced coalition; one that stays upright in turbulent waters and quickly charts a path to smoother seas. That's easier said than done, of course. Thoughtful speech is an incredible asset to coalitions, and it's important that everyone's voice is heard and considered before making collective decisions.

### **Blind Spot #3: Ineffective Group Decision Making**

Decisions, decisions. Some are easy and others ... not so much. The only certainty that comes with making decisions is that everyone wants them to be *right*.

In the case of coalitions, making *timely and wise* decisions is requisite for achieving the noble aim. But for every coalition member there is an opinion, and the abundance of viewpoints can grind decision making to a halt. This is where coalition members can seek to *listen to understand rather than listen to respond*.

#### ***Listen to Understand***

Coalitions are largely made up of knowledgeable individuals in their chosen fields; people who have often spent years researching an issue, working with an issue, and/or living within the midst of an issue. At some time throughout the life of a coalition, each member will experience a moment of being the "smartest" person in the room; that moment when he or she has more knowledge of the subject matter at hand than anyone else present. But remember, knowledge doesn't always beget wisdom. Listening to what others have to say can produce enlightenment to the point of changing someone's mind. Yes, even the so-called "expert" in the room can be convinced to change their stance after viewing the issue from a perspective they had not previously considered.

#### ***Putting Empathic Listening into Practice***

To make empathic listening a customary practice within a coalition, include it as one of the ground rules previously mentioned. Attempt to build listening skills among members of the coalition through group training and individualized practice. The help of a trained facilitator can work wonders with your coalition to improve communication and power sharing skills, yielding remarkable results.

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While you're at it, be sure to establish a rule whereby acronyms and "insider talk" are avoided. Using plain language that all members of the coalition understand puts everyone on equal footing and helps ensure what's being communicated doesn't fly over anyone's head. We've all "nodded" to feign understanding of an acronym or a name we've never heard before because it feels embarrassing to expose our perceived ignorance. This produces gaps in understanding and can add to poor decision making.

Once coalition members fully understand the context of the decision at hand in relation to their shared values and culture, including the emotional and logical viewpoints of other members and stakeholders, they are more apt to make decisions that support their overall shared purpose. They are also better equipped to course correct along the way.

### **Blind Spot #4: Routine Activity and Small Wins Replace Big Ideas**

Producing community-wide systems change requires copious amounts of wit, wisdom, perseverance, courage, and humility. The process can be exhausting. But there are rewards along the way.

As programmatic solutions are implemented, big and small changes occur. It's important that coalitions don't allow themselves to relish in the comforts of the small wins. This can be likened to *reaching for the low hanging fruit*. It's easy for groups to find satisfaction in the collective accomplishment of solving the smaller – albeit important – matters. In fact, this is often where coalition members are most comfortable, for these require the familiar tasks of their day-to-day jobs or other conventional activities.

Ironically, the ease of harvesting only the low-hanging fruit winds up choking the life out of the proverbial tree itself. This includes the highest hanging fruit – the community-wide systemic change that the coalition originally set out to achieve.



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To illustrate how this happens, imagine that you serve on our coalition to reduce substance use addiction in your community. Your coalition has a goal to engage employers in your cause. Your coalition determines that only a few area employers offer wellness programs on substance use

cessation. Your coalition decides to hold an informational event for employers on the prevalence of substance addiction, the workplace impact, and the resources offered by the community. Your first event is attended by 25 employers, with five employers embarking on new wellness plans. Your coalition is thrilled by this big win and decides to hold the informational event year after year, growing its size and scope. Over time, other coalition goals are sidelined as all financial resources and efforts become dominated by administering this program. The coalition is no longer working on reducing substance use addiction overall – but instead is focused on addressing just one of its goals.

While smaller wins help boost morale and a sense of accomplishment, don't lose focus on the big picture! Secure the counsel of an experienced facilitator – someone who is not a coalition member – to remind everyone that the incremental programs they are working to achieve are but stepping-stones to achieving overall change. The consultant can help the coalition leverage quick wins to substantiate and leapfrog toward wider-ranging wins, thus advancing closer to that high hanging fruit.

## Blind Spot #5: Turnover

### ***Coalition Member Turnover***

Coalition members leave or are replaced for a variety of reasons. They change jobs, move, experience burnout, have other priorities take precedence in their lives... in short, member turnover happens because *life happens*. Since change is constant, it is wise to prepare in advance for coalition member turnover through succession planning. Coalition members can identify potential replacements in to become familiar with the coalition's work, stepping in or out as needed.

### ***Onboarding***

Sometimes, organizational changes can result in entire partner entities withdrawing from or being added to a coalition. Anytime members of a coalition change, a two-way onboarding process should



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occur. The new member needs to understand the coalition's mission and vision and what's expected of them. A formal period of orientation should take place that includes meeting with the group to learn when and why the coalition began, its shared purpose and vision, a historical timeline of what's transpired, and the roles and responsibilities expected of everyone. It may even be beneficial for the group to share what the new members' predecessor brought to the table and how they interacted with coalition members.

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By the same token, the body of the coalition must undergo an onboarding process. The orientation should serve as a time for fellow members to listen; to understand why the new individual was selected for membership; to find out if they have a personal passion or just a passing interest in the cause; and to get a feel for their personality. This will help members know how to adapt the group dynamics to best incorporate the new member's strengths and participation.

### ***Organizational Buy-in***

Sometimes, the departure of a dynamic, engaged coalition member can leave a significant void in the group; one that is hard to replace with a new representative. Relying on personalities can leave coalitions vulnerable, causing the ship to steer off course, or at least take the wind out of the sails. To prevent this from happening, it's important for coalitions to keep their member *organizations* engaged – not just the individual representatives. When the larger organization behind each coalition member is kept informed and supportive of the coalition's mission, it is far more likely they will choose a replacement who is motivated to engage as fully as their predecessor. Organizational buy-in helps to ensure continued dialogue and support will flow from the participating organization.

If the coalition is unable to regularly engage with a member organization over time, they should set out to reacquaint the coalition members with the organization: what it does, its culture and values, its reason for being in the coalition, etc. If coalition members determine that the organization's values have changed or that its purpose for participating in the coalition no longer complements the overall mission and vision, it may be best to part ways amicably, leaving the door open for reengagement should conditions change.

### ***Turnover in Funding Sources***

Coalitions tend to rely on one or more sources of funding to support their work. Typically, funding sources are heavily invested in producing outcomes in order to justify continued funding. Coalitions that engage funders as valuable members tend to sustain a longer and healthier funding relationship. Look for ways to keep your funding sources informed and involved in the coalition's work. Solicit their input on important decisions. Think about their need to report a return on their investment and provide them with opportunities to see firsthand the difference their investment makes in the community.

Sometimes turnover in funding sources are beyond the control of the coalition or the funding partner itself. Having a back-up funding plan to sustain the work of the coalition is always a smart idea. Coalition members should remain on the lookout for additional funders that care about your noble aim and have the potential to contribute financially.

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## Why are Blind Spots so Prevalent?

Blind spots are as common as coalitions themselves, but why? If coalitions are made up of smart people, why can't they recognize problems before they happen and avoid them all together? The answer is that not all problems are avoidable.

Although blind spots may never be completely eliminated, they can be greatly diminished with proper preparation. Working with trained consultants who understand group dynamics and who know how to anticipate and prevent blind spots from throwing the coalition off course is the surest way to achieving results.

### ***Produce Action Through Engagement***

The goal of every coalition should be to work its way out of a job. The most effective ones will do this with efficiency by bringing in outside consultants to facilitate a process, keeping individual members engaged, producing clarity and consensus for the goal, and generating enthusiasm and action.

If you believe your coalition could benefit from the guidance of trained facilitators or consultants, contact Noble Aim Consulting for a free consultation.

You're just an email away from producing the systemic change your community so richly deserves.



*Laura Bogardus & Mike Teachey, Noble Aim Consulting, LLC*

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**Noble Aim Consulting, LLC** was born of a desire to help coalitions overcome wicked problems. After years of analyzing the essence of collaborative partnerships and the common issues they face, Laura Bogardus and Mike Teachey combined talents to develop a powerful methodology that helps coalitions push beyond obstacles, stay focused on the big picture, and produce the lasting change their communities seek.

Contact us at [NobleAimConsulting.com](https://www.NobleAimConsulting.com) or 864.651.0744.

