Coalition Ground Rules Discussion Guide
A badly illustrated guide to setting good coalition ground rules

2015
About RE-AMP

RE-AMP is an active network of nearly 160 nonprofits and foundations across eight Midwestern states working on climate change and energy policy with the goal of reducing global warming pollution economy-wide 80 percent by 2050.

RE-AMP brings environmental, labor, faith, youth, energy, conservation and other groups together to develop common priorities to achieve our goals in the areas of clean energy, coal, energy efficiency, global warming solutions, and transportation. With a wide array of member organizations, RE-AMP provides many opportunities for various constituencies throughout the Midwest.

To help meet RE-AMP's goal of reducing global warming pollution 80 percent by 2050, the RE-AMP Steering Committee created the RE-AMP Organizing Hub. The Organizing Hub brings together targeted policy campaigns and movement building, to build power for long-term success. The Organizing Hub focuses on campaign planning, strategy coaching and campaign skills-building for RE-AMP members.

Effective campaigns build an organization’s power, and powerful organizations are able to run increasingly effective campaigns. This guide, with its emphasis on successful coalitions, seeks to help build power within the RE-AMP network so that members can run more effective campaigns in the short term and build a movement to fight climate change in the long term. For more information about RE-AMP or the Organizing Hub, please visit www.reamp.org. For more information of this guide contact Melissa Gavin at Melissa@reamp.org.
Melissa Gavin, Organizing Hub co-director, works to build the capacity of RE-AMP members and its partner constituencies to create more environmental policy wins. She assists in program development, developing leadership, gathering and sharing campaign best practices and promoting long-term movement building within RE-AMP and its partner constituencies. Prior to joining Clean Wisconsin, Gavin served as the Executive Director of the State Environmental Leadership Program, an organization dedicated to protecting and restoring America’s environment by strengthening and networking smart, powerful and well-run environmental advocacy organizations. Gavin holds a Masters of Public Affairs degree from the Robert M. La Follette School of Public Affairs at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She completed her undergraduate degree in Environmental Studies at Florida International University, in Miami, FL. When not at RE-AMP, she can be found in a garden, whether in her plot in the community garden she helps coordinate, working with students at Sandburg Elementary where she serves as the school garden coordinator, or daydreaming about her own next garden adventure.
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Introduction

Organizations often form coalitions upon realizing that they don’t have sufficient power (e.g., information, relationships or money) to affect change on their own.

Done well, coalitions can build your power and bring about the desired change. Done poorly, they can diminish your power, burn bridges and drain organizational capacity. Considering that so many efforts underway in RE-AMP are coalition efforts, it’s vital that they’re done well, so that we’re well poised to hit our network-wide goal of 80 percent carbon pollution reductions by 2030.

A surprising amount of groups come together to accomplish a collective policy goal and skip over a crucial first step: setting ground rules. We get it. When your to-do list and inbox are threatening to avalanche, it seems natural that you want to “cut to the chase.”
Case Study 1

During a recent meeting with Organizing Hub staff and Campaign X, Campaign Leader A expressed frustration with working in a coalition and the inherent challenges of keeping everyone on the same page. One of their campaign activists constantly proposed new ideas and regularly diverged from the campaign plan. In meetings, the activist would question their previously agreed upon targets and tactics and often required the time of other coalition leaders to explain the logic of previously made decisions. Coalition leaders were unsure how to handle the well-intentioned, but somewhat renegade, activist, because she was a valued member of one of the coalition groups. They valued her commitment but regretted the time they had to spend going over established decisions.
What went wrong?
The coalition had not had a formal discussion about how decisions were made, who made them, and what the accepted process was. This resulted in the activist misunderstanding her role, as well as how she could most effectively suggest changes to the campaign. In the absence of agreed upon ground rules, the activist interpreted their efforts as an open-ended discussion rather than an agreed upon set of goals and strategies. Ground rules would have helped tremendously in this scenario. Agreeing on how decisions are made and who gets to make them would have likely prevented this well-intentioned renegade activist from diverging from the group’s plans as well as saved coalition members time and frustration.

Case Study 2

A large well-funded collaborative campaign had all the makings of a smart and effective collaboration. They co-created a strong campaign plan, had a governance structure to ensure maximum transparency and even had good interpersonal dynamics. Veterans of this work, they had set clear ground rules from the very beginning. But those ground rules didn’t include a thorny question: who gets to speak for the coalition? Absent a clear directive, everyone did. This had the effect of the “blind men describing an elephant” in which differing representations of the coalition were given to others outside of the campaign. The situation became serious when a funder of the campaign sought more
information and got several different responses, which led to confusion and a delayed (though badly needed) grant.

*What went wrong?*
Even seasoned advocates miss things. Clarifying in your ground rules who represents the coalition to funders, the media and decision-makers is vital. If this is not discussed and agreed upon, everyone will speak for the coalition. Put these into written ground rules to avoid confusion or the potential of misrepresentation.

**Case Study 3**

Years into a working with a coalition, members of coalition campaign X had still not had an open discussion about organizations’ and individuals’ self-interests and why they were at the table. It raised questions for coalition members when one particular member insisted on maintaining a positive relationship with the target above all else. After a pointed one-on-one meeting, an individual coalition member admitted that the main reason he participated in the coalition was because he wanted a job with the utility the campaign was targeting.

*What went wrong?*
It is difficult to develop foolproof protections against unscrupulous behavior, but had there been an intentional discussion about self-interest early on, the coalition may have chosen to take another path and potentially reached success sooner.

I can see where that would be a problem....

Not me. I’d never work for a utility!
Coalition Best Practices

Here are some best practices when engaging with coalitions:

- **Set the partnership parameters.** Clearly establish the parameters of the coalition at the start: Who makes decisions? How are decisions made? Who speaks for the coalition? How will joint funding be handled? Craft a Memorandum of Understanding or agreed-upon operating principles and put them into writing.

- **Develop a written campaign plan together.** This builds in accountability and reduces lone wolf behavior and side negotiations.

- **Determine the bottom line for negotiations on your demand.** Get very clear about what constitutes the bottom line position for the coalition that will not be negotiated away.

- **Acknowledge and be transparent about self-interest.** Organizations need to believe they are benefiting from coalitions. When each organization puts its self-interest on the table, all the partners can take those needs into account and talk about whether and how they can be met.

- **Speak up, but agree to disagree.** When a partner does something your organization disagrees with, communicate quickly, clearly and professionally. Honest, non-defensive communication is key. However, recognize that not all coalition members will agree on all issues. Focus on your shared goals and avoid issues on which you do not agree.

- **Maintain regular contact with your partners.** Do this with regular in-person meetings and conference calls in-between meetings. During these meetings, review your campaign plan and make adjustments.

- **Coalitions live and die on trust.** You build trust by being honest, consistent and following through on your promises.

- **Plan for the time it takes to participate in coalitions.** Factor in the time it takes to participate in coalition work into campaign plans and work plans.

Also, consider the three things that most commonly blow up a coalition, as noted by Teresa Erickson, staff director of Northern Plains Resource Council, in Billings, Montana:

- **Money.** The fight over resources is a major source of tension and a very real issue for coalition members. Mitigate this with MOUs (or cooperative agreements or a simple set of written ground rules that everyone agrees to abide by), open and
honest communication, and a clear campaign plan, constructed jointly. Crafting a campaign plan, which should include a budget, gets everyone on the same page about objectives, strategies and tactics, which makes it easier to see how resources need to be allocated.

- **Credit.** An organization’s ability to survive and thrive often depends on the amount of public credit it receives. Ignoring that fact creates a huge fault line in the coalition and will likely result in trouble.
- **Deadwood.** Have an open and honest discussion about what each organization brings to the table and what the coalition needs to succeed.
Discussion Questions for Setting Ground Rules in a Coalition

Use the following questions as a discussion guide to help create a written set of ground rules for how your coalition operates. Make the ground rules only as complicated as necessary. Not every question may apply to your work, so feel free to skip them if they seem extraneous. However, there are some questions that nearly all collaborative efforts will need to answer. These questions are in bold. The goal is to create a set of operational ground rules that helps everyone understand how the coalition will function. The answers to these questions will allow you to create a written set of ground rules, which can be shaped into a simple cooperative agreement or a more formal memorandum of understanding.

A note about answering these questions: these are designed to be discussed as a group and agreed upon, rather than one group or individual answering the questions and submitting them for approval to the larger group, which would only reinforce a power dynamic you are trying to avoid in setting fair and clear ground rules. Alternatively, groups can answer each of these questions on their own and discuss their responses in the larger group. The point is, however, to have an open discussion about the rules so that everyone understands and is on board.

Purpose
1. What is the goal of our coalition?

Authority and decision-making
1. Who can make decisions regarding the campaign?
2. How are decisions made (e.g., unanimity, unanimity minus one, 2/3 majority, simple majority)?
3. How many votes does each group get (each individual gets a vote? One vote per organization? Etc.)
5. What decisions will require formal votes?
6. What notice will be given for upcoming decisions?
7. What input does a person have if they are unable to attend a meeting?
8. How will disagreements be handled?
9. Do groups with different levels of funding have different levels of decision-making authority?
10. Who can negotiate for the coalition? (e.g. in a policy discussion with decision-makers)

Membership
1. Who are the members of this coalition?
2. What is the process for adding new members?
3. How do members leave the coalition?
4. Is there a way to remove members?
5. What are the rights included in membership?
6. What are the responsibilities of membership?
7. What are the benefits of membership?

Accountability
1. How will the group ensure accountability?
2. What are the ramifications if a participating group fails to complete a task?
3. How often will these ground rules be revisited?

Communications
External
1. Who can speak to members of the media on behalf of the coalition?
2. Who will speak to funders on behalf of the coalition?
3. How will credit be shared?
4. Who will be responsible for various forms of communication? (e.g., website, social media, press, activist emails)

Internal
5. How and when can group’s names and logos be used for coalition communications?
6. How often will the coalition meet?
7. How is the agenda set for coalition meetings? Who sets it?
8. How and how often will coalition leaders communicate with members about decisions?

Plan and strategy
1. What’s our bottom line? (i.e., the point at which the coalition will not negotiate beyond)
2. What is the process for changing the campaign plan?
3. How will the workplan be created?

Resources
1. Will there be a fiscal sponsor for this effort?
2. Who controls and spends funds for the work of the coalition?
3. How and to whom are resources allocated?
4. Are there expectations of members for fundraising?

Duration and Dissolution
1. How long will this coalition exist? Is there a set date to end the joint work?
2. How does the coalition dissolve?

We did it! Thanks to setting good coalition ground rules, our coalition stayed strong and effective and we passed our really great policy! How about a group hug?

Ah... no.
Maybe next time, man.
Sample Cooperative Agreement*

Cooperative Agreement for the ______________

This agreement is voluntarily entered into by all of the undersigned groups wishing to create a new alliance focused on ______________________________.

While non-enforceable, the undersigned organizations nonetheless represent that they wish to adhere to the tenets of this agreement in order to better achieve their collective goals.

In this document, use of the word “Alliance” or “Alliance Groups” refers to the undersigned organizations individually and collectively.

1. Alliance governance will be handled by an Executive Committee (EC). Each of the undersigned organizations will provide a representative to the EC along with a named alternate. Each EC group will be allowed one vote per organization.

2. The EC will have final approval over, among other things, joint grant proposals, joint fundraising strategies, allocation of funds, approaching funders, how to spend funds, etc.

3. The EC will be responsible for collective coordination of legislative approaches, appeals, litigation and other actions.

4. The Alliance Groups agree that no one organization speaks on behalf of the rest of the groups without each organization’s informed consent.

5. The Alliance Groups agree to coordinate a media strategy in connection with these matters. All press releases or written public statements concerning ______________ will be circulated (via email) to all Alliance Groups at least twenty-four (24) hours prior to issuance or as soon as practical. Alliance Groups also agree that in talking with the media, they will speak only for their own organization and not purport to advance any position on behalf of another group or the Alliance Group as a whole, unless consent is given. While the goal is to achieve a unified public message, the Alliance groups agree that media strategies will be based on coordination, not consensus.

6. In order to share and protect potentially privileged information, the undersigned also believe that it is in their best interest to separately sign a common interest agreement.

The persons signing this Cooperative Agreement warrant to each of the other signatories that he or she is authorized to do so and that he or she has secured all approvals necessary to carry out his or her obligations as set forth above.

* Developed by and used with permission from the Western Organization of Resource Councils
It is contemplated that this Agreement may be executed in counterparts with a separate signature page for each party. All such counterparts and signature pages, together, shall be deemed one document. All parties further agree that, for the convenience of all parties, faxed signatures will suffice for the purpose of binding all parties to this agreement.

By signing this Cooperative Agreement, each of the undersigned acknowledges that he or she has read the Agreement and agrees to all of the terms contained herein.

________________________________________  _________________________
Organization #1  Date

________________________________________  _________________________
Organization #2  Date

________________________________________  _________________________
Organization #3  Date

________________________________________  _________________________
Organization #4  Date
Definitions

**Coalition** - an organization of (ideally) diverse interest groups that combines resources to affect a specific change the members are unable to bring about independently. They are usually temporary and disband once the stated goals have been accomplished.

**Consensus** - literally, “to think and feel together,” consensus is a participatory process by which group members come to a decision. It differs from unanimity in that groups can have consensus and still have members that do not wholeheartedly agree or even support the decision.

**Memorandum of Understanding** - a document which describes an agreement between two entities but does not constitute a substantive contract. These are more formal than cooperative agreements and written sets of ground rules, however, and are given some weight in a court of law.