

Developmental Stages and Work Capacities of Community Coalitions: How Extension Educators Address and Evaluate Changing Coalition Needs

Abstract

Extension educators provide resources to community coalitions. The study reported here adds to what is known about community coalitions and applies an assessment framework to a state-level coalition-based Extension program on healthy relationships and marriages. The study combines the Internal Coalition Outcome Hierarchy (ICOH) framework with four coalition capacity categories: general, internal, external, and prevention. The findings from two focus groups, one with formation coalition leaders and one with midlevel coalition leaders, are presented. Recommendations are made for designing educational, service, and evaluation interventions to meet the needs of community coalitions at specific developmental stages.

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Introduction

With shrinking resources, community agencies assisting families and children are entering into community coalitions (Valente, Chow, & Pentz, 2008). Community coalitions are voluntary collaborative relationships between community members and public and private organizations that

share and mobilize leadership and resources to solve problems, often too large to be solved by one group (Powell, Rossing, & Geran, 1998; National Network for Collaboration, 1995; Valente et al., 2008; Cramer, Atwood, & Stoner, 2006). Extension has a long history of working with community coalitions (Burgus & Schwab, 2012; Lodi & Stevens, 2002; Conone & Smith, 1997; Berry, Bowman, Hernandez, & Pratt, 2006; Radhakrishna & Snider, 1995).

For 6 years, the West Virginia University Extension Service (WVU ES) conducted a program to address the economic and social costs of unhealthy relationships. The Healthy Families/Healthy Children initiative (HF/HC) was launched in 2005 with funds from the Healthy Marriage Initiative of the US Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). The program, which was conducted at the community level by WVU ES through coalitions, reached 23 of 55 counties before funding ceased due to budget constraints in 2012. WVU ES and community groups have continued to offer classes and events in relationship, parenting, and financial education with university funding. The project's focus includes: (1) building and sustaining coalitions and (2) building the capacity of coalition members to become effective trainers or facilitators.

In the study reported here, two focus groups composed of participants from the HF/HC coalitions were conducted. The results provide insights into the educational and service needs of community coalitions and the evaluation of community coalitions. The following research questions were addressed.

1. How do formation coalitions (newly formed – 2 years) differ from midlevel coalitions (3 – 6 years) in terms of their educational and service needs?
2. How can community coalitions develop an ongoing evaluation strategy?

Review of the Literature

The development of community coalitions has been described in terms of three stages: formation, midlevel, and long-term. Coalitions would benefit from developing internal capacities and external supports (Cox, Finkelstein, Perez, & Rosenbach, 2010) as they move through developmental phases (Cramer et al., 2006; Francisco, Paine, & Fawcett, 1993; Lantz, Viruell-Fuentes, Israel, Softely, & Guzman, 2001; Mitchell & Shortell, 2000). One conceptual model for measuring the internal effectiveness of coalitions is the Internal Coalition Hierarchy (ICOH) (Cramer et al. 2006). The ICOH includes seven sequential constructs for success, including: (1) social vision, (2) efficient practices, (3) knowledge and training, (4) relationships, (5) participation, (6) activities, and (7) resources.

The work of coalitions can also be divided into categories that reflect the purpose and impact of work capacity. These capacities include general (creating processes, principles, or policies); internal (problem solving); external (interaction with other organizations); and prevention (preventing a problem or addressing an issue (Cox et al., 2010; Livet, Crouser, & Wandersman, 2008).

Research Methods

Selection of Research Methodology

Focus groups were selected as the research method because the format allows participants to react to the comments of others (Krueger, 1994; Albrecht, 1993). The research protocol was submitted to the Institutional Review Board of West Virginia University and approved as exempt.

One formation coalition focus group (1 - 2 years) and one midlevel coalition focus group (3 - 6 years) were conducted. No coalition was considered long-term because none had been in existence longer than 6 years and none had addressed prevention issues. Eighteen of 19 project counties were represented, with nine different counties in each focus group. In order to give participants an opportunity to verify the key points (Krueger, 1994, p.128), both groups were later led in a discussion. All group discussions were audiotaped and later transcribed verbatim.

Analysis of Data

The team used axial coding to fracture the data in the transcripts and to reassemble it into categories found in the Internal Coalition Hierarchy (Krueger, 1994, p. 128; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, pp. 61-74, 96-115). Members of the research team worked independently, reading the text line by line, and then worked together for 3 days, verifying each other's findings (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, pp. 238-240). As they came across an idea or phenomenon, they labeled it general, internal, external, or prevention capacity. The labels were then sorted according to whether they were mentioned by newly formed or midlevel coalitions and then further sorted into general, internal, external, and prevention capacity categories.

Limitations of the Study

One limitation was that some participants were familiar with each other. Familiarity tends to inhibit disclosure (Krueger, 1994, p. 18). Second, only two focus groups were conducted because of the limited number of coalitions. Typically, focus groups are conducted until no new information arises. Third, due to prior commitments and responsibilities, the moderator and the assistant moderator were not included in the analysis. Krueger (1994, 153) recommends that they participate.

Major Findings

The findings have been organized into Table 1 below.

Table 1.

A Community Coalition Framework Based on Developmental Stages and Coalition Capacity Constructs

| Level | Constructs | General | Internal | External | Prevention |
|-------|------------|--|-------------------------------------|---|---|
| | | Building infrastructure, process, principle, or policy | Building problem-solving capability | Supporting organizations that provide funding, training, and assistance | Developing the ability to prevent a problem or address an issue |

| | | | | | |
|-------------------------|---|--|---|--|---|
| Formation Groups | 1. Resources 2. Activities 3. Participation | Developing a collaborative style/structure Developing roles and responsibilities Recruiting members Using resources Communicating with administrators | Determining leadership Prioritizing/ selecting activities Placing value on professional development | Connecting with community activities Recruiting program participants Expanding community awareness Working toward sustainability | Not addressed yet |
| Mid-Level Groups | 4. Relationships 5. Knowledge and training | Connecting needs of coalitions with individual interests Finding the right people to do the work Recognizing formal and informal contributions Making group decisions | Building leadership capacity Learning as a group Determining project impact Assigning responsibility if effort fails | Infiltrating program content into other community groups Keeping audiences coming back and finding untapped audiences Questioning sustainability | Not yet receiving recognition for the value/impact of the product by other established groups who are working on the same issue |
| Long-term Groups | 6. Shared vision | Not applicable at this time | Not applicable at this time | Not applicable at this time | Not applicable at this time |

Explanations and example quotations are discussed below.

Formation Groups

General Capacity

Formation coalitions are dealing with structure, activities, and resources. They must determine the

time, venue, and composition of meetings and develop roles and responsibilities. One member said: "There are different involvements in the coalitions -- some people have more interest in certain activities than others, and that person who has the interest usually volunteers to take on that role." Resources brought to the coalition have to be shared. A member explained, "So many times we just do it on absolutely nothing. Having those resources available allowed for brainstorming and you didn't have to say 'how do we get the funds?'"

Internal Capacity

Formation coalitions are determining who should be their leaders. "Leadership is evolving very slowly," noted one coalition member. Formation coalitions are also assessing and expanding activities. As one member said, "We weren't sure what we were doing and we tried to put it down on paper, saying this is what we are here for -- financial education, parenting education and relationship education -- and that's it." Determining the right balance between working in the community and retooling members was a topic of debate. "We can't impact our community when we're at a conference and we're paying for that conference."

External Capacity

Formation coalitions are connecting coalition activities with community activities. "I've been trying for months to get in to speak with the superintendent so we can have PICK at all the schools." Supported by grant funding, they are aware that their funds could run out. "My hope is that some of the churches in the area would pick up the programming and sustain it."

Midlevel Groups

General Capacity

Midlevel coalitions must build and retain members while taking advantage of each person's contribution. One member said, "We have a couple who don't do a lot of training, but they certainly take the lead. They organize our events, they go out and man our tables at fairs, and then they bring back information." Midlevel coalitions members are also learning to make decisions as a group. For example, one coalition member said, "Sometimes we vote via email. I'll send notes out and ask do you agree?"

Internal Capacity

Midlevel coalitions are building leadership through professional development. "Each year, we send people to the Smart Marriage Conference and they come back with certifications, resources and they are pumped up, ready to do these things." Coalitions are also reaching out to new audiences. "We try to train youth because it is more effective if it comes from youth themselves." Coalitions are involved in group learning. "I worked for two years to get into our college, but only two people showed up. So we had to go back as a group and say, OK, how could we have done this differently?" They worry about who gets credit or blame. "Definitely your reputation in the community is as a

coalition member, but it is the organization that provides the trainings."

External Capacity

Midlevel coalitions are infiltrating other well-established organizations. "We would like to get a more solid relationship with the Board of Education." Midlevel coalitions are concerned about moving too quickly into areas previously dominated by other groups. "We are careful not to tread on anyone's territory. I'm trying to find a creative way to build a relationship with the provider." Midlevel coalition members are working on sustainability. "You would like the programming to remain viable. If you start going in the back door of the churches, schools, you are not going to make the program sustainable."

All Coalitions: Prevention

Neither the formation nor the midlevel coalitions had addressed prevention capacity. All coalitions are aware of the project's preventative goals, but they were still establishing themselves, planning activities, and working on relationships.

Discussion and Recommendations

Educational and Service Needs of Community Coalitions

The community coalition framework can be used to make decisions on content and delivery of training for members and volunteers. Instead of viewing all coalitions in the same way, needs of coalition groups should be assessed based on their level of maturity. For example, formation coalitions would benefit from education/guidance on bringing the right people to the coalition, working regionally, identifying partnerships, and determining program needs. Training sessions might be conducted for only formation coalitions, for members of one coalition at a time, or for formation coalition leads. Midlevel coalition leaders and members might also provide peer guidance to formation level coalition members by sharing what they have learned.

The focus of educational interventions for midlevel coalitions should be on finding multiple leaders and other volunteers to work on projects, motivating volunteers with clear expectations, building leadership, and keeping audiences coming back. These coalitions are focused on long-term sustainability and making a lasting impression in their communities. Midlevel coalitions would benefit from guidance on how to sustain work in the community, how to partner with other programs, how to seek funding, and how to document the impact of their work.

Evaluation Implications

The authors recommend the following evaluation process for evaluating formation and midlevel coalitions. These evaluations could be conducted by program coordinators themselves or by hiring external evaluators. A number of sources for doing collaborative evaluation are available (Borden, 1999).

Each year, program coordinators should conduct interviews with coalition leaders. Questions should include: (1) Does the coalition's collaborative style move the group forward? (2) Do coalition members know their responsibilities, and how do leaders promote success? (3) Does the coalition have enough resources, and what else is needed? (4) Do program coordinators provide enough guidance, and what else is needed? (5) How do activities help reach coalition goals? (6) What kind of professional development is needed? (7) How is the community made aware of the coalition's efforts? (8) How is the coalition working toward sustainability? (9) What strategies/practices have not worked and why?

Midlevel community coalitions are ready for an outcome evaluation. In addition, community members and organizations not associated with the coalition might be surveyed to measure community awareness and satisfaction. Midlevel coalitions need to know whether audiences are learning new knowledge and skills, changing behaviors, and experiencing improvements.

Midlevel community coalitions should prepare for a future impact evaluation. Are there changes to the community overall and over time? In addition, an evaluation protocol comparing target audiences where coalitions do not exist with audiences in communities where coalitions do exist should be pursued.

Conclusion

Educators with Extension provide resources by working with community coalitions. The study reported here conducted two focus groups with leaders of coalitions at different stages of group development: one with formation coalition leaders and one with midlevel coalition leaders. The findings reveal the importance of providing developmentally targeted training resources to community coalitions as well as choosing criteria and methodology to evaluate the effectiveness of evolving coalitions. A framework showing developmental stages and evolving group capacities was developed. It is hoped that this framework will be useful as a guidepost for educational, service, and evaluation interventions designed to meet the needs of community coalitions.

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