



## American Water Works Association

The Authoritative Resource on Safe Water<sup>SM</sup>

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## How to Join or Form a Coalition

According to Webster's New World Dictionary, a coalition is "a combination or union, especially a temporary one." Although this definition captures the essential meaning of the word, it doesn't express the word's political implications. A coalition has come to be viewed as a super-organizational structure created to effect some political or social change. In other words, it is a group of organizations or individuals that coalesce around an issue or set of issues to pool their power and resources toward a desired outcome.

Coalitions can be made up of almost any collection of groups and/or individuals with some common interest. Many AWWA sections already coordinate some activities with other organizations and, thus, have formed coalitions. For example, some sections co-host conferences with Water Environment Federation (WEF) member associations, National Rural Water Association (NRWA) chapters, or the local operators' association.

### Coalitions Offer Great Opportunities

Today, financial and personnel resources are becoming scarce. More responsibility is being transferred from the federal and state governments to the local level and to the private sector, and the complexity of the issues faced by the water industry is growing. Those organizations that recognize these changes and that understand the power in building consensus and working collaboratively will survive and prosper.

This How-to-Guide provides information about participating in or developing a coalition.

### How Coalitions Work

Coalitions can be very effective in building the critical political mass required to accomplish an objective. Organizations consider creating or joining a coalition in order to reach a level of power or influence on a particular issue that a single organization alone could not muster. Besides political power, many coalitions serve to present a united and consistent position to decision-makers. Finding a

group with broad representation that has come to an agreement on a complicated issue gives that decision maker relief from competing interests and may offer a thoughtful solution.

The common interest among coalition members is usually fairly well defined, for example, getting more funding for state revolving loan funds. This can be contrasted with a broader interest, such as improving water quality. The first example is well defined and agreement can be reached among all parties about the kind of funding needed and the mechanisms to be used to distribute it. The second example is so broad that it is difficult to envision agreement on definitions and purposes that are specific enough for a coalition to form and operate effectively. Moreover, a participating organization might have to compromise more than it is comfortable with if, to keep the coalition together, it must uphold such a broad mission.

Coalitions tend to be temporary structures created to respond to a problem or to build support for an initiative. This is due in part to the diversity coalition partners bring to the decision-making process. It is often difficult for a coalition to function as a unit outside a very narrow range of issues. Thus, as time passes and the initial goals are reached, its reason for existence fades and the coalition disbands. Additionally, those coalitions that deal with a wide range of issues survive over time and graduate to a more permanent form of organization, such as an association.

### Case Studies

#### Coalition for Literacy Trust Fund

A state-funded literacy program in the western United States wanted to increase funding available for family literacy, and it went to the business community for help. As a result, a coalition of businesses supporting the literacy program was created. The objective of the coalition was to create a literacy trust fund to provide a consistent and

predictable source of funding for family literacy programs in the state.

As part of the plan, businesses were to contribute to a fund that would be used to leverage additional funds from the state government in the form of a grant. The money collected would create a trust fund from which the interest earnings would be used to fund literacy programs. The coalition worked first in the private sector to raise money for the fund but encouraged the state to contribute. Next, the coalition worked for the passage of funding through the state. Once that was secured, the coalition proudly and deservedly boasted about its success and dissolved. Individual members of the coalition maintained their relationship with the literacy program because of a previous affiliation and because they were independently involved in literacy programs.

This coalition worked because the purpose was well defined and because the appropriate people and organizations were involved. The literacy program offered expertise in literacy, a vision of what was needed, and legitimacy in terms of the ability of the group to deal with this issue. Businesses offered expertise in fundraising, establishing a trust fund, and the making connections needed to raise the money. Also, members of the business community were well connected with state officials and legislators. Finally, as the coalition gathered steam, members of the legislature were convinced to join, which development added critical expertise and access to the mix of skills and resources available to the coalition.

### **SDWA Coalition**

Another example of a successful coalition involved AWWA's efforts to get the Safe Drinking Water Act reauthorized. The SDWA Coalition was composed of the following organizations:

- AWWA
- National Governor's Association
- National Conference of State Legislatures
- U.S. Conference of Mayors
- National League of Cities
- National Association of Counties
- Association of State Drinking Water Administrators
- National Association of Regulatory Utility Commissioners
- Association of Metropolitan Water Agencies
- National Association of Water Companies
- National Rural Water Association
- National Water Resources Association

At first glance, some of these organizations may seem out of place among water-related associations, so let's take a closer look at the purpose of this coalition. This coalition worked for the passage of a bill that reauthorized the SDWA, and in the process, promoted reforms in the legislation. Because these reforms impacted state, city, and county programs, organizations representing these groups were included in the coalition. This added to the coalition the considerable political power of groups such as the National Governor's Association and the U.S. Conference of Mayors. It also made them part of the team rather than potential adversaries in the reform effort. Any differences in positions were worked out within the coalition and not in front of Congress. By its very existence, this impressive collection of organizations suggested substantial agreement about what the problems were in the SDWA and what reforms were needed.

### **Coalition Structure**

Coalitions vary in a number of ways: level of organization, purpose, and diversity of membership. Coalitions can be very formal organizations in the sense that they may be corporations with boards of directors, formal membership and well-developed funding streams. These coalitions are developed when their purpose requires them to comply with laws or regulations in order to execute the plan they have developed to achieve their goals. For example, if a private foundation is funding some part of the activities of a coalition, but requires its grantees to be nonprofit corporations, the coalition will have to incorporate and get nonprofit status. Public corporations are required to have boards of directors. Therefore, in this example, this coalition is a nonprofit corporation with a board of directors.

Of course, most coalitions don't formalize their organization to this extent. There is nothing that requires a coalition to do anything in terms of formal organization beyond agreeing to work together. If you are not going to have employees, accept donations, lobby, etc., you will not need to meet the appropriate legal requirements.

Many coalitions will have staff, which is often donated by member organizations. When organizational arrangements such as funding, sharing staff, developing coalition positions, contracts, or other arrangements are made that could impact coalition partners, some formal agreement should be established to avoid disagreement and division.

## ***Joining an Existing or Newly Forming Coalition***

When requested to join a coalition, consider the following three questions:

1. Does the coalition represent your association's view closely enough for participation in the coalition to make sense?
2. Will joining the coalition aid in the promotion of your association's positions?
3. Are the issues the coalition is dealing with important enough to justify the investment of resources that joining will require?

To answer these basic questions, you need to look at the section's position on the issue with which the coalition is dealing. If you have no existing position, you should develop one. In most cases, your section will have an existing committee that deals with the kind of issue in question. However, if no existing structure is available, the creation of an ad hoc committee is a way to develop a position. If it is a fairly simple issue, the board may be able to develop the section's position.

### ***Assessing the Coalition***

Once your position is defined, the next step is to assess the coalition you are being invited to join. It is necessary to evaluate the purpose and organization of the coalition and your ability and willingness to participate in the ways requested.

### ***Purpose and Organization***

Answering the following questions will clarify the issues regarding the purpose and the organization of the coalition

- What are the coalition's purposes and goals?
- Has the coalition considered antitrust issues?
- Is the coalition designed to share information on common interests and beliefs, or is it designed to influence public opinion or advocate for some policy or program?
- Who belongs to the coalition?
- Who is supporting or underwriting the coalition?
- What will my association get from the coalition?
- What strategies will be used to reach the goals of the coalition?

When considering joining a coalition, watch for a hidden agenda. Recently, a water-related environmental group sent letters to utilities asking them to sign on to a set of water quality principles. The principles were sound, but there was evidence

that these principles and their signatories were going to be used to oppose legislation that AWWA and most utilities favored.

Consider who is driving the positions of the coalition. Is the decision-making process one that you will be able to influence? Is one organization contributing more resources to the coalition and if so, what does it expect in return? If one organization or group contributes most of the financial or operating support, that group may control the action or position of the coalition.

As mentioned earlier, determine whether or not the coalition actually represents the positions of your association and its members. Look out for an agenda that supports the interests of most segments of your membership, but would injure no one. Perhaps a position may support utilities but hurt some manufacturers. This does not mean that you can never participate in a coalition unless every member is helped. It does mean that caution should be used. You may be able to influence the position of the coalition to better consider the interest of a group, such as manufacturers or small systems.

### ***Ability to Participate***

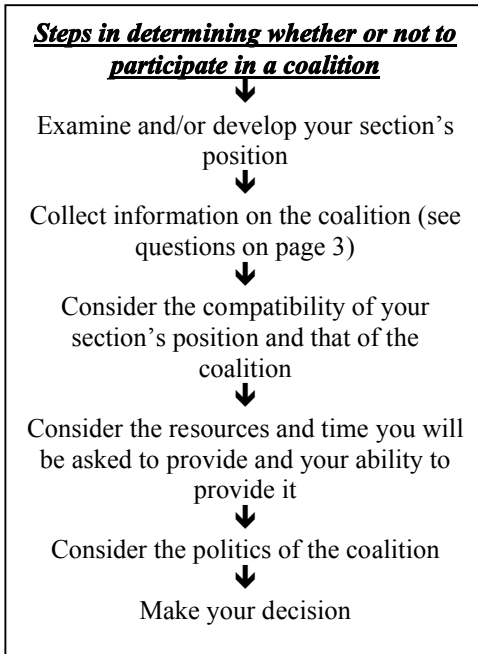
Participating in a coalition can demand the commitment of a considerable amount of time and resources. At the outset, you should clarify what it is you will be responsible for providing and be sure you really can provide it. Also understand that you are in effect joining another organization, which entails compromise, information sharing, and trust. You may have to accommodate some interests that you would not ordinarily in order to find a position all the members of the coalition can support. It may also be necessary to share information that may be sensitive to your section. This will put you in the position of placing the goals and objectives of the coalition before your section. This will require trust in the coalition and the confidence that the outcome will be better for all involved.

Answer the following questions to determine your ability to participate:

- Are you, other volunteers, or staff able to handle the additional workload?
- Are you willing to candidly share information?
- Are you willing to attend the meetings or send a volunteer or staff person that has the authority to make commitments and agreements representing your association?

- Are you joining because of public or member pressure or do you believe in the coalition's purpose and goals?

The flowchart below shows the basic steps you should follow when examining whether or not to join a coalition.



### ***Forming a Coalition***

As mentioned earlier, all coalitions should form in response to a problem or a proposed solution to a problem. If you are forming a group to research possible solutions to a problem, it is more accurately called an interorganizational committee or ad hoc committee. The distinction here is that the group is not being formed for the purpose of specific action or advocacy. This group may develop into a coalition once a method of addressing the problem is identified and agreed upon by the participant organizations.

### ***Articulating the Purpose and Strategies***

Having established the value and purpose of developing a coalition, it is necessary to articulate its purpose and strategies for reaching its goals and terms. This can be done by developing answers to the questions you would ask if invited to join (see page 3). If you expect your coalition partners to be contributing members, a substantial part of the refinement of the purpose and strategies must be left to the whole group. You will guide the process with your ideas about the nature of the problem and

possible solutions, but the group will have to amend and support the final product. Your role at this point is to provide a framework that has enough substance so that you can begin the job of enlisting organizations and selling the idea of the coalition.

### ***Enlisting Organizations in the Coalition***

#### **The Message**

When working to enlist organizations in a coalition, you must clearly and convincingly state your case for the coalition and for their participation in it. This means that the purpose, need, and message must be clear in your mind and you must find ways to effectively articulate it. You must also consider how to make the message appealing to the other party. Before contacting them, think about why they would want to join and what issues might present barriers to their participation. Anticipate the information needs and concerns of the other party so that you can persuade them that their participation is a good idea. You can use your knowledge of the questions you would ask if you were in their position as tools in trying to predict their reaction.

#### **The Method**

Typically, the organizations that are critical to the success of a coalition are limited in number. Without these organizations, the credibility of the coalition may not be established, the financial stability will not be secured, or strong opposition may result. A personal meeting or at least a personal call to such groups, gives the message that these organizations are important. It also gives you a lot more time to sell your idea. Think of what you can communicate in a one-hour meeting that you cannot in a one-page letter. For all the other relevant groups, which are not as critical to the success of the coalition, send a letter and invite them to a meeting to discuss the establishment of the coalition.

#### **Who to Enlist**

Think broadly. Don't underestimate the interest and power of those who are not directly involved in the water field. It may be appropriate to invite politicians, government officials, business leaders, bankers, environmentalists, interested private citizens, and any others who could influence the success of the coalition.

Remember three things:

1. In most cases numbers help. The more groups and individuals you have involved, the more influence you will have.

2. The broader the coalition's membership, the more it can be said to be mainstream, a reflection of the community and its values.
3. You never know who is going to be the most help. A private citizen, whose only interest was the water system his homeowners' association, was hooked into may have gone to high school with the legislator who is resisting the legislation your coalition needs. In most cases, the more people and groups you have involved, the greater your resources will be.

There are also drawbacks to large groups. They are more difficult to manage and reaching consensus in a large group can be a challenge. You will need to look at size as it relates to effectiveness, not as a benefit in and of itself.

### ***The First Meeting***

Eventually, you will need to have a meeting of all the players to work out the details of the coalition -- i.e., funding, staffing, management, purpose, strategies, etc. As the organizer of the meeting, you should develop the agenda and run the meeting. After this first meeting, your role may change based on the decisions reached on these issues at this meeting. However, at this point the group has only you as a leader.

At this meeting, the group should try to come to agreement on the following issues:

1. The goal of the coalition.
2. Strategies for its attainment.
3. The decision-making process the group will use.
4. Meeting management (i.e. agenda development, meeting facilitation, minutes, etc.).
5. The resources the coalition will need and who will provide them.

If the group decides there will be some sharing of resources —particularly money— a formal agreement delineating what will be contributed and by whom should be developed and signed. This can take the form of a memorandum of agreement between the parties. Clarifying responsibilities like these at the onset will prevent disagreement later. At this point, the process you establish in the first meeting will take over and you will be on your way.

Coalitions are much like any organization. Use your own knowledge of organizations and your experience working with others to deal with specific issues not addressed here. We also suggest that you speak with others in your sections who have worked with

coalitions. There is no substitute for experience. Finally, we have provided a short list of resources at AWWA you can consult as you work with a coalition.

### ***Other Resources***

- For assistance with forming or participating in a coalition meant to affect legislation, call the AWWA Washington Office at (202) 628-8303.
- For help with a coalition that will be working to change public opinion, contact the AWWA Public Affairs Department (303) 347-3410.
- For general assistance with an issue relating to the formation and operation of a coalition, you can contact your Section Services Representative in the AWWA Convention, Education and Section Services Department at (303) 347-6202.