

# THE TENSION OF TURF:

## Making It Work for the Coalition

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Initial funding for this report was provided by  
The David and Lucile Packard Foundation.

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### INTRODUCTION

Coalitions are in vogue right now—more and more, funders are requiring that groups work together to solve a problem. “Coalitions are useful for accomplishing a broad range of goals that reach beyond the capacity of any individual member organization.”<sup>1</sup> However, the nature of coalition work as well as other alliances between organizations contains inherent challenges, including the issue of turf. The term turf refers quite literally to how the ‘property’ is divided up, who gets the recognition, and the resources—be they financial or political. And turf struggles affect not only those who ‘win’ or ‘lose’ but every participant and the very well-being of the coalition itself.

This paper builds upon the article *Developing Effective Coalitions: An Eight Step Guide*<sup>2</sup> and responds to a concern repeatedly encountered in training on this approach, a concern generally described as among the hardest issues faced in collaborating: turf struggle.

Turf struggles are a common threat to coalition vitality. In fact, for some people, turf is seen as the largest barrier to coalition success. Coalition leaders are often fearful of dealing with turf issues and some coalition members sit frustrated, on the sidelines, as others compete or argue. In response to this, coalition leaders often ask participants to leave their individual

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‘bias’—their programmatic responsibilities and objectives—at the door, in hopes of avoiding turf issues altogether. However, such a sacrifice drains the coalition of its purpose and energy. This paper offers a different, and ultimately more realistic perspective on dealing with issues of turf. Concerns about turf are natural and common within coalitions and should be acknowledged rather than ignored. Solutions to turf issues should aim to blend the pursuit of individual interests with the greater goals of the coalition.

Especially in the non-profit arena, groups have a deep belief in what they do, and connect that with their core identity. While that passion may introduce turf into the coalition, it is also the reason the group is willing to work with other organizations towards a larger goal. Suggesting that members leave that passion behind, that the coalition is treated as *hallowed ground*, serving a higher purpose than the assumed narrow focus of the member groups, is generally both unrealistic and unsuccessful. Further, it can be somewhat condescending: implying that the work coalition members do in their own communities or agencies is somehow less important than the ‘real work’ of the coalition. Needless to say, this will alienate some people. A successful coalition instead should be based on recognizing that people have conflicting agendas at times, and then creating an environment where coalition members feel comfortable acknowledging and discussing these issues, and also emphasizing the vision and outcome of the coalition as a whole.

## WHAT IS TURF AND WHY IS IT NATURAL?

Peck & Hague have defined ‘Turf-ism’ as the non-cooperation or conflict between organizations with seemingly common goals or interests.<sup>3</sup> Turf is a term borrowed from street gang terminology, and refers to a physical area or ‘turf’ that is defended against other gangs.<sup>4</sup> This etymology carries with it the assumption that issues of turf are best understood through a ‘battle’ metaphor—two sides vying for control and ownership, where only one can be victorious. Solutions to turf struggles, then, are typically couched in terms of conflict resolution. However, in the coalition context, turf becomes a more complex issue than two sides fighting for their own personal gain. Coalitions require members to balance their personal agendas and their organization’s sense of mission or financial welfare with the coalition’s shared goals. Each organization assesses the impact of participation: Will my organization gain access to increased resources? What is the ratio of cost to benefit for my organization? Do the coalition’s proposed activities fall in line with my organization’s mission? It is this need to wear many hats that can lead to turf conflict.

Turf battles can, in some ways, be a sign of a strong coalition, because turf struggle implies the existence of valuable turf. They demonstrate that the locus of issues the coalition encompasses, the specific approaches it undertakes, and the decisions it makes, are all ‘worth fighting over.’ In truth, the best coalitions are made up of passionate members, who bring their goals and perspectives with them. These people care about their own work and, by virtue of that, the larger work of the coalition. While this personal investment introduces turf into the coalition equation, and at times difficult problems will arise, irreconcilable problems are generally, though not always, avoidable. The worst thing a coalition leader can do in this situation is to diminish the importance of the coalition’s mandate. Thus, turf issues are natural and rather than suppressing con-

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cerns about turf, coalition leaders must find ways to incorporate that passion into the overall coalition effort.

To understand why turf struggle arises, it is important to uncover members’ motivations for joining and how their own goals interplay with those of the coalition. Coalitions are often formed in order to accomplish goals that are less likely to be accomplished by a single organization. By their very nature, coalitions attract organizations with similar missions. Members tend to be interested in the same policies, problems, and players—in short, the same turf. There are many reasons for joining a coalition, not all of which will be completely explicit. Coalition members might join because they believe in the cause around which the coalition has formed. Another reason for joining a coalition is when an individual group sees its work as part of something bigger, and wants to help create the broader vision.

Sometimes, a group may join a coalition because it experiences a threat to its sovereignty. It fears the coalition or its members might reframe the public debate around a key issue and thereby undermine the group’s own viewpoint or its credibility and importance. The coalition, or its members might win funding that could have otherwise gone to the group. When groups join a coalition primarily to protect their own turf the risk of a struggle is heightened.

Other possible reasons for joining a coalition include a desire to remain up to date on what others in the same field are doing regarding a particular issue; to participate in an initiative to address issues that friends and colleagues believe is important; to respond positively to an invitation by these same colleagues to join a new, cooperative effort; and to remain a part of the movement that the coalition represents. Another, not uncommon, reason is that groups are often mandated to join a coalition by their funders.

## WHY DOES TURF HAPPEN?

Turf struggles usually arise because members are dedicated to their work. This dedication is the lifeblood of the coalition. The challenge, then, for coalition leadership, is not to work out how to successfully stifle turf issues, but rather to figure out how to acknowledge, accept, and build upon them. As members watch their peers fight rather than contribute to the greater good, they feel frustrated and demoralized. They want to ensure that members are sharing a common agenda as a coalition and envision and buy into the larger vision the coalition is promoting. While the organizations represented in a coalition may be working on different projects, the coalition as a whole should have a single, collective focus. Left unresolved, these tensions impact a coalition's ability to work together, and can be the reason why a group dissolves. However, addressing these potential pitfalls makes it possible for coalition work to benefit all members.

Sometimes, what appear to be turf struggles occur because people use the coalition as a ground to play out larger non-coalition related issues. For example, there may be a history of bad relations between two of the groups represented within the coalition. This history might have nothing to do with the present coalition, however, similarly to holding a grudge, the representatives from these groups may bring the previously established negative method of interaction into the coalition. And sometimes individuals can be argumentative or obstructionist, and cause the coalition work to be even more difficult.

It is also critical to recognize, however, that tension within a coalition may not always be generated by turf. In all settings there are some individuals who create struggles and conflicts. These struggles may be an issue of character or personality; some people are naturally argumentative. In instances where turf is not the issue, strategies for resolving turf issues simply won't work.

## HOW DO TURF BATTLES PLAY OUT?

### TYPES OF TURF: THE BATTLE FOR WHAT?

Coalitions can often access more funding than an individual organization working on its own. While this can be helpful for the coalition as a whole, individual organizations may feel justifiably threatened. The most commonly noted turf struggle is over financial resources, but conflicts are also rooted in struggles over recognition and publicity, control of coalition identity and ideology, and strategy decisions in terms of specific approaches and target locations for action. Whereas struggles over money can be a simple matter of practicality and self-preservation, the other types of conflicts are grounded more in members' passion for their cause, vision for the future, and, at times, ego. Addressing turf requires acknowledging that it is there and then determining what is at stake.

Often, though, some members of the coalition are not interested in fighting for turf, and these members are best suited to resolve the turf issues of fellow coalition participants. For example, certain members (e.g., community members, youth, survivors, and individuals from the faith community) will tend to naturally have higher credibility because of their perceived neutrality alongside their dedication to the cause. These individuals are committed to the coalition's vision; however, they usually don't have side agendas. Their interests typically represent the overarching vision of the coalition. It is for

this reason that these members are valuable in helping to resolve turf issues within the coalition. Just as bystanders can help prevent domestic violence or bullying, they can bring the coalition back to its original vision, and remind members why they joined together in the first place.

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## KINDS OF TURF: WHO COMPETES WITH WHOM?

Most people assume turf within a coalition is between two coalition members, but there are three different categories of turf struggle, each with its own dynamics. These three categories are:

**COALITION MEMBER VS. COALITION MEMBER:** Battles for resources and recognition are often not simply related to the work of the coalition. Typically, there are historical roots related to this type of conflict, based, in many cases, on their intersecting funding streams. For example, one California violence prevention coalition includes two members who are executive directors from service providing organizations that have a history of tension between them.

**COALITION MEMBERS VS. COALITION:** As the coalition's visibility increases, there are increased funding opportunities for the coalition. Competition for the same pool of resources between individual coalition members and the coalition as a whole is the most difficult turf struggle for coalitions. For example, a California violence prevention coalition established five years ago is now eligible for grants that its individual members applied for before its inception, and due to its broad base of members, automatically becomes a formidable competitor. This competition for resources sometimes causes tension between the coalition itself and individual members.

**MEMBERS VS. LEAD AGENCY:** As the coalition's visibility increases, the lead agency may acquire resources instead of individual members. In many cases, the lead organization is equated with the larger coalition, until they are seen as one and the same. In such cases, the lead group can benefit much more than the others, potentially breeding resentment among members. For example, a lead agency of a California violence prevention coalition has been receiving accolades for the coalition's accomplishments. It applied for funding, stating the accomplishments of the coalition as largely its own, despite the contribution of other member agencies to the accomplishments of the coalition.

*Turf battles can either be overt or covert. Covert struggles can only be resolved after the elements of the conflict are brought out in the open.*

## CHARACTERISTICS OF TURF: HOW DOES IT PLAY OUT?

Coalition members commonly dedicate themselves to resolving turf battles, however, the bigger problem can sometimes be recognizing that a battle is even taking place. For example, personality conflicts between two individual coalition members may not be openly stated, but can greatly color coalition proceedings. In other words, turf battles can either be *overt* or *covert*. Covert struggles can only be resolved after the elements of the conflict are brought out in the open. Overt battles tend to be more straightforward: a battle over financial resources is often just a matter of money. However, as we have already alluded to in the 'member vs. member' category, even seemingly overt turf struggles can have hidden elements, such as a historical conflict between members, or a significant difference in values.

Turf struggles, then, vary depending on what's at stake, on the individuals competing, and on how explicit the battle is. The extent to which a coalition is mired in conflict often relates to how the coalition came together in the first place. If the members were forced together, perhaps as part of some policy decision that they weren't involved in, the coalition is, not

surprisingly, much less likely to succeed than one which formed through its members' own initiative.

Although turf is a hard issue for coalitions to resolve precisely because untangling turf issues places organizations in the difficult position of balancing important external commitments against their

own sense of mission or financial welfare, some preliminary guidance can go a long way. Coalition leadership can sometimes anticipate turf battles and make preemptive moves to avoid them. Coalition leadership can use the following suggestions to illuminate turf struggles by bringing attention to some of the problems with the coalition and to limit the negative impact of turf.

## EFFECTIVE TURF MANAGEMENT: TOOLS & TIPS

Too often we expect self-sacrifice from individuals and organizations as they move toward coalition solutions. Instead of instructing members to ‘leave turf at the door,’ a more realistic approach acknowledges that turf issues will challenge the group, and blends the pursuit of individual interests with the greater good.

There is no one-shot formula for coalitions to avoid turf struggle. Working collectively takes hard work, and requires a combination of strong relationships, planning for sustainability and focusing on the big picture.

### 1. Acknowledge potential turf issues.

Before forming a coalition, it is important to have honest conversations with participants about the history of relationships between potential members and their organizations. Based on this information, the lead agency can determine which people are best suited to join the coalition.

**TRY THIS** Choose coalition representatives whose job descriptions and personalities make them less influenced by the past. For example, city and county officials often have a history of competing over funding and the distribution of resources. The past history of individual members of the same coalition may stand in the way of the overall coalition’s progress. In this case, look for people with practical problem solving personalities, not those who hold grudges. And look for those with jobs where working together would be beneficial.

### 2. Talk details.

After membership is determined, coalition members should be encouraged to openly discuss their reasons for being at the table and share information about their respective organizations. Develop a collaborative document that includes the goals, roles, and investment of each partner, and include a budget and timeline. Circulate this document to the board and staff of each coalition member.<sup>5,6</sup>

#### TRY THIS

At an initial coalition meeting, allow time for a roundtable discussion of the questions below. (As new members join, encourage them to describe their organizations to the coalition, and provide them with other members’ organizational information.)

- What is the core mission of your organization?
- What are your funding sources?
- What activities might threaten this funding base and what would enhance it?
- Who are your key constituencies?
- What is the preferred strategy each member employs for achieving its efforts?

### 3. Shape collective identity.

Members must be invested in the coalition’s success and see how the work of their individual organizations fits into the larger vision of the coalition. While members must express individual needs and limits, building a common focus and commitment is essential.

#### TRY THIS

Share the limelight! Allow *all* members to represent the coalition at meetings, in the media, and at political gatherings. Write the words and goals of coalition members into the coalition’s mission statement. Give coalition members leadership roles in subgroups. Rotate the hosting of coalition meetings between the various member organizations. Hosting the meetings at members’ organizations allows each member to highlight their organization and feel that they are contributing in a positive way to the coalition. These opportunities will fulfill needs for recognition and foster a sense of collectivity.

### 4. Make fair decisions.

It is critical that the decision-making process is consistently applied and is based upon majority support. The group should be able to discuss the impact of a proposed action on the mission and finances of each organization. This assures that the adopted decision has genuine support from the membership. It is also important that partners remove as much ego from the process as possible. As one leader put it:

“When I bring my agendas to the meeting, then I become the center, instead of the issue becoming the center. When I really just put faith in the group

to make the best decision possible, I think that's when our meetings are the most productive."<sup>7</sup>

**TRY THIS** Create a clearly stated decision-making policy in conjunction with coalition members. The decision-making process should include time for all coalition members to discuss the impact of the potential decision on their individual organizations before the decision is made. Sometimes consensus is vital to ensure that no groups feel left out by the coalition's approach. The 'consensus' should be defined as what the majority supports and everyone can live with. Sometimes even this consensus cannot be achieved, and then the group has to explicitly decide how to best move on.

## 5. Seek funding for coalition coordination.

All members must contribute to the sustainability of the coalition. However, time and resources spent on the coalition can be a drain on member resources. Securing outside funding from foundations and other sources can help to alleviate the internal pressure for resources and when there is enough funding to go beyond a 'lead agency' it can provide an incentive for cooperation. For example, the leadership of a violence prevention coalition in Los Angeles (LAVPC) will seek funding for coordination but, at the same time, it has established a blanket rule that for certain direct service grants, neither the leadership nor the coalition itself will compete with its members for resources.

**TRY THIS** Because ideology and funding are intricately tied to each other, it is important to consider a plan for how resource needs will be shared and how to acquire and distribute new resources. In most groups it is unrealistic to expect all members to want or be able to contribute equal or any financial support. Explore the continuum of support: allow members to participate at different levels. Some will offer active financial support, while other members will make their contribution in the form of offering insight, staff time, or bringing informative research to the table.

## 6. Reward members and celebrate successes.

Because most coalitions rely on volunteer labor from members who have other professional responsibilities, the ability of coalitions to provide benefits (e.g., solidarity, appreciation, evidence of impact) that exceed

the costs (e.g., time, frustrations) is particularly important in reducing turnover and maintaining momentum.<sup>8</sup> Recognize that if you bring people together, you should give them something in return so they feel like it's worthwhile for them. Take time to acknowledge successes along the way. This will help members see that they are achieving some of the coalition goals and help them see how day-to-day activities are fitting into the broader vision of the coalition.

**TRY THIS** Hold acknowledgement sessions when applicable, during which coalition accomplishments are recognized. Take time to stop, and enjoy each other's successes. If coalition work is featured in the newspaper, email or bring in the article to illustrate to coalition members how effective their work is and to share the excitement and the credit.

## 7. Build bridges.

It is sometimes easy to forget that coalition members are people, not just members of organizations. Trust, respect and amicability must be a high priority. When coalition members like each other, work flows more smoothly; pay attention to the atmosphere you create.

**TRY THIS** Maintain a friendly, respectful tone. Have refreshments for breaks, and encourage members to take time after the meeting to socialize and enjoy one another. Encourage small groups to form within the coalition, as people tend to work more effectively in smaller groups and get more personal satisfaction from their efforts.

## 8. Remind participants of the big picture.

When turf issues arise, certain members, based on their role or professional identity, can be effective in re-unifying the group and reminding it of its common goals:

- Survivors (e.g., a mother whose son was killed) can remind the group why they came together in the first place.
- Youth often have stories that, when shared, can bring the coalition back to the overarching reason the coalition was founded. (For example, youth shared their experiences with violence during a violence prevention coalition meeting in Richmond, California. Hearing these poignant stories reminded coalition members of their overarching purpose).



- Faith leaders are often seen as having higher standing, and less investment in materialistic life

**TRY THIS** → If the coalition chair senses that turf issues are beginning to arise, make space in a meeting where a coalition member removed from the turf issue, but dedicated to the coalition's fundamental cause can re-motivate the members of the coalition, and help them to reconnect to the big picture of why the coalition was established. Coalition leaders should make clear to these members the importance of their role to the coalition.

## 9. Make struggles overt.

Turf battles can only be addressed if members admit they are there. Allowing problems to fester or engaging in passive aggressive behavior will quickly drain the vitality out of a coalition and make collaboration nearly impossible.

**TRY THIS** → Acknowledge that conflict exists and discuss the potential causes of the conflict. Lead agencies must be particularly alert to turf struggles that are between a member and the coalition as whole and/or the lead agency and must approach those issues in as non-defensive a way as possible. In addition, the chair or a neutral member should meet with members individually if she/he feels that turf issues are arising and aren't being handled well.

## 10. Encourage flexibility.

The more rigid people are, the harder coalition cooperation will be.

**TRY THIS** → Creating an open environment where members feel comfortable with diverse perspectives and with conflict is critical. Humor is valuable, as are ground rules that ask people to describe disagreements without personal criticism. A charismatic leader can keep the morale of coalition members high by getting them to feel the coalition and believe in its potential to succeed. Being honest, focused, decisive, flexible, and inclusive, are just a few qualities of a strong leader. A coalition leader who is knowledgeable in group dynamics, and has an understanding of group process may be more able to create this type of environment.

## CONCLUSION: TURF IS NOT A FOUR LETTER WORD

Even when people work collaboratively, there will be turf. Although turf may not currently be a problem, that does not mean it will not be a problem in the future. Sometimes turf emerges when a coalition's mission becomes the cause of the day, and political figures take control from the original grassroots membership. Other times, change is less dramatic; part of a coalition's natural evolution. As membership changes over time, power dynamics of the group may change as well. A change in leadership can leave a vacuum in a coalition, and to prevent this from happening, it is important to mentor future leaders. A successful coalition chair not only recognizes conflict, but also attempts to resolve it in a way that balances the needs of individual members with those of the coalition as a whole. Addressing turf struggles requires effective coalition leadership, which deliberately creates an environment of trust and openness, where members feel comfortable acknowledging and discussing turf issues.

Having a better understanding of the roots of turf struggle is an important first step, but there is not a magical cure all for this problem. Progress is not always easy, and the best successes may need to grow out of struggle. The preceding tips will hopefully make the process of addressing turf more manageable. Perhaps the most important tip, however, is to maintain a positive outlook and never underestimate the value of comradeship and creative thinking. Most often, individuals join a coalition because they believe in the reason the coalition was formed. The value of bringing different perspectives together to work on a common issue should not be underestimated—this is what prevents stagnant thinking, and facilitates comprehensive solutions.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Cohen, Baer, & Satterwhite. *Developing Effective Coalitions: An Eight Step Guide* (2002). A version of this paper was published in Mary Ellen Wurzbach's *Community Health Education and Promotion: A Guide to Program Design and Evaluation* (2nd ed. Gaithersburg, Md: Aspen Publishers; 2002:144-161).
- 2 "Developing Effective Coalitions: An Eight Step Guide" leads advocates and practitioners through the process of coalition building, from deciding whether or not a coalition is appropriate to selecting the best membership and conducting ongoing evaluation. It is available at no cost at [www.preventioninstitute.org](http://www.preventioninstitute.org)
- 3 Gregory P. Peck and Carla E. Hague, "Turf Issues" Fact Sheet. The Ohio State University Extension, <http://www.ag.ohio-state.edu/~ohioline/bc-fact/0012.html>.
- 4 *Violence Prevention News*. Illinois Center for Violence Prevention Vol9, No. 1 Winter 2002
- 5 "Collaboration Math" is a tool to help chart the interests of diverse coalition members, and can be found at <http://www.preventioninstitute.org/tools.html>
- 6 Wolff, Tom and Berkowitz, Bill. *The Spirit of the Coalition* (2000). Washington D. C.: American Public Health Association, p. 99.
- 7 (Chinman, Anderson, & Imm, 1996) Chinman. 1996. The Plan Quality Index. In. Fetterman et al., (Eds). *Empowerment Evaluation: Knowledge and Tools for Self-Assessment & Accountability*. Thousands Oaks: Sage.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Prevention Institute would like to thank the following people for their review and assistance.

Barbara Baker

Elizabeth Berger

Sana Chehimi

Sid Gardner

Barbara Hanna

Deb Marois

Donna Middleton

Amy Pendergast

Jennie Pry

Juliet Stein

Sharon Walker

Some elements of this paper came from earlier drafts written in part by Milton Morris and Jeremy Taylor.

### PRODUCTION

Document production by lockwood design, Oakland, CA.

### SUGGESTED CITATION

Cohen L, & Gould, J. *The Tensions of Turf: Making it work for the coalition*. Oakland, Calif: Prevention Institute; 2003.