Coalition Building 101

A coalition is a group of people united by their collective drive to make a difference in their school or community. Not all coalitions look the same, but they involve at least three people who share your goals and are just as passionate as you about changing the conversation about mental health. A coalition in your school could look like a group of students getting together to petition for more gender neutral bathrooms, or approaching your school administrators about having more classrooms or guidance counselors’ offices as designated safe spaces.

How to build a coalition

Ask yourself the following questions to help get started:

What are you trying to accomplish? Being prepared with an intentional goal will help in communicating exactly what kind of support you will need. Be specific so that people understand why this is an important thing to be part of. Are you trying to advocate for excused mental health days and more mental health resources, or do you want to host a mental health awareness event? Take a moment of exactly what you want before setting your intentions for your coalition meeting.

When engaging potential collaborators, you can ask such questions as:

- Who do you need in your coalition?
- Who are the right people to invite to join you? For example, student leaders, school counselors, parent-teacher association members, and community members.
- What have they accomplished that can be an asset to your coalition?
- How do they see mental health advocacy as a community issue, and do their goals align with yours?

List 3-4 of the above stakeholders you will contact about this project. Stakeholders refer to anyone who is invested in the success of the school. This could be students, teachers, parents, or administrators. Aim to reach representatives from each stakeholder group, i.e., at least one student leader, at least one teacher or administrator, etc. Below, write their names and how you plan to contact them.

1.
2.
3.
4.
Hosting your first coalition meeting

Now that you know your goal for starting your coalition and you have your list of key stakeholders to invite, it is time to host your first meeting.

- Consider the goals of the meeting. Are you presenting your thoughts and ideas to the group? Are you aiming to facilitate a discussion to learn more? What would you like the participants to think about and/or learn and/or plan as a result of this meeting?
- How will you invite people to your meeting? Email? Text? In-person invite? Flyers/posters?
- Consider the logistics of the meeting: exactly when will it take place (keeping in mind busy schedules)? Will it be in-person or virtual? Set the date, time, and location, and share that with your intended participants.
- Consider starting with a couple icebreakers. It may be that members of your coalition don’t know each other well, and designating some time to make everyone feel more comfortable could be beneficial in setting the tone of the meeting. Maybe you could discuss your favorite mental health advocate and why this person is a role model to you, or you could even discuss what the perfect day at school looks like to you. Whatever it is, it’s worth making everyone feel comfortable and heard!

Here are some tips for planning and hosting a successful meeting

Setting goals

Goals are specific actions that a coalition will take to work towards its vision, and mission and objectives are the exact steps that will be taken to accomplish the goals. The key to a successful coalition is identifying common goals and working together.

Step 1: Develop a list of priorities for your coalition

Step 2: Select one or two goals to get your coalition started

Step 3: Plan your work using the SMARTIE framework (Smart, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound, Inclusive, and Equitable). Use this worksheet to develop your SMARTIE goals.

Next Steps

In determining your next steps, it helps to revisit your initial goals and plan how to move forward. Looking at what you have accomplished so far is helpful when planning what still needs to be done and what collaborators can be engaged in your next steps. Consider the following questions.
Are there concrete action items you discussed in your coalition meeting? How can you plan to implement these as you move forward? What partners can you engage to help move these actions forward?

What of your initial goals did you accomplish? Would your coalition benefit from any follow-up check-ins or meetings? If yes, be sure to schedule that soon so you keep your coalition engaged.