

# THE ART OF BUILDING COALITION

*By Suzi Pomerantz, MT., MCC.*

There are numerous situations we face at work, whether as an entrepreneur, an employer, a manager, a leader, an employee or a member of a project team where we need to build coalition with others. The results we can produce depend on relationships that are effective and sufficient to the goals of the organization or project. These others with whom we need to build coalition may be colleagues, the board, co-workers, vendors, customers, peers, teammates or subordinates. Sometimes we need to build coalition to navigate a political minefield in our organization, sometimes it is to move a particular idea forward, sometimes it is to most effectively lead, manage, or motivate others. Below is a time-tested method for building coalition, creating a partnering relationship for whatever your purpose, so that you can increase your visibility, clean up a messy interpersonal scenario, create development opportunities for yourself or others, or simply expedite the results of any project or team you are working on. It is a roadmap for creating sustainable, strategic relationships of influence.

Before you delve into the instructions below, make a list for each situation in which you need to build coalition or create influence. For each example clarify your intended result, then ask yourself, “What conversations do I need to have with whom to accomplish X result?” List the person and the conversational purpose, then prioritize the list by importance and impact. In other words, which conversation is most critical either by strategic importance or time factors? Then use the guidelines below to think through and prepare for the first conversation on your list.

Avoiding conversations causes the productivity equivalent of a multi-car pileup on the highway...engagement, effectiveness, morale, action, results, and energy become blocked. Generating partnering conversations, even if executed less than perfectly, opens up the roadblocks and gets traffic flowing again.

## **Forming A Partnering Relationship: Guidelines For A Possible Dialogue**

The guidelines below set up the actions you might consider taking to step-by-step build coalition. Know your reasons before you start. With whom do you want to have this conversation and why? What is your goal in creating coalition with this

person, specifically? The answers to those questions may not necessarily be communicated to the other person, but are useful for you in determining the importance of the conversation, the timing or urgency of the conversation, and how you will measure your results. Think through ahead of time your conditions of satisfaction; how will you know if the conversation was effective?

#### THE SET-UP -- Creating a safe environment

- Clearly establish for yourself the purpose for partnering with the other person. What do you think matters most to them? What do you have to offer them? How would you like them to support/help you?
- Check in with yourself to determine your readiness and willingness to be open, honest, vulnerable. Let your guard down; be prepared to tell your truth and speak your mind, particularly if there has been any conflict in the past with this person. Keep in mind you always have the right to say what you want. The other person is not required to grant what you want, but you always have the right to express it.
- Depending on the person or the situation...
  1. Take that person out of the office to a neutral location such as a restaurant or a park or take a walk. If appropriate, a local pub is a casual setting conducive to dialogue.
  2. Take him or her on a coffee break in or out of the building.
  3. Ask him or her to join you for lunch in the cafeteria.
  4. Go to that person's office or work area if it is private (not a cubicle).
  5. If it can't be done face-to-face, if you are in a virtual organization with far-flung global colleagues, this can be managed by phone, but will require setting up a special time to talk without other distractions. You'll need to request that the other person not multitask so that they can be present to the conversation. This may actually require asking that they specifically shut down their e-mail, IM, and Blackberry.
- Set up enough time to have a conversation about partnership, usually a minimum of an hour. (By "partnership" I mean a mutually beneficial working relationship.)

- Get that person's permission to have the conversation after you brief them on what it will be about. Tell them you want to discuss the possibility of forming a committed alliance or a partnering relationship with them and ask if they will talk with you about it.
- Schedule a specific date and time to have that conversation. Make any agendas you may have explicit and transparent to the other person so they know what to expect and can be prepared to discuss and share their thoughts. If you will be requesting advocacy or a referral, let them know up front. If you will be asking for their input or advice or for answers to complex questions, determine how to best honor his or her personality style. For instance, if she's an introvert, she may require some time to think through her answers ahead of the conversation, so you might send her a head's up note prior to meeting.

#### PART ONE -- Expressing commitment

- Share with the person what you are committed to accomplishing. What is your goal and intention in creating this coalition? What does that have to do with him or her?
- Find out from the other person what matters to him or her. What's important to him or her? What are they committed to accomplishing both in general and in this conversation or partnership?
- Join forces to support each other in reaching those goals and realizing those commitments. Possible questions to ask each other in the dialogue:
  1. What do you most care about right now in your job?
  2. What is most important to you regarding your goals and vision?
  3. What are you committed to in the short term and in the long term?
  4. What can I do to help you clarify your commitment and/or your vision if you are not yet clear about it? Are you willing to have a conversation with me to discover what you want your focus to be?

5. Are we aligned on our visions and goals? Can you get committed to my commitments/ objectives and vice versa?
  6. Do you have questions of me about my vision/goals/commitments? I have some questions of you....
  7. What's necessary to create alignment and sustain it over time?
  8. Is there a specific time-frame for this alliance?
- Declare to each other that you are willing to get behind what the other intends to accomplish, and that you will work together to figure out how you can best support each other. Then determine what both parties need to seal the deal.
  - Set up structures for accountability for yourself and work with your partner to help them set realistic structures for themselves. Make sure you are both in agreement about the role you want each other to play in supporting you both to realize your goals.

## PART TWO -- Cleaning up the past, clearing away unresolved or unspoken history

This may need to happen on a recurring basis throughout your partnership, or perhaps in advance of PART ONE above. The trick is to take responsibility when it is yours to take, to acknowledge what's true for you, and to give yourself and your partner the space to be human. Why clear up these past upsets? Because often, those upsets (past judgements/opinions/conclusions/miscommunications or betrayals) are the very thing that will be in the way of your working in successful partnership with the other person.

- First, state your commitment to the person, whatever is authentic and genuine for you. What do you value and appreciate about him or her?
- Let them know your agenda for the conversation you're about to have (i.e., My intention is to clear away any debris in the way of our relationship so we can be in partnership toward our aligned goals).

- Restate or reaffirm the understood goals, any shared goals, or alignment points as a foundation or grounding for the conversation.
- Listen in a way that allows you to fully understand and appreciate the other person's version of reality.
- Unhook yourself from blame, mistrust, being right about things, being defensive. Listen for their emotions and their experience as they see it.
- Listen for what they are committed to. Listen for when their expectations might have been thwarted.
- Share your version of what happened in the past between the two of you, but express it from a place of responsibility, from your commitment or intention, and from awareness of your emotions. Accept that your point of view is *your* truth, not THE truth. You are entitled to your experience, *and* they are not required to agree.
- Allow both people's perceptions of the incidents in the past to exist, even if they are in conflict. Give both versions of reality equal air-time and make sure each person gets to say all there is for them to say. Do not attempt to prove your case, to persuade the other person, or to seek their agreement or alignment with your point of view.
- Be prepared for several rounds of conversation that may or may not take place in the same day. It is okay if the issues don't all surface right away and it is okay if the issues are not all resolved in the first conversation... let it unfold.
- Be sure to express gratitude and acknowledge everyone's willingness to engage in this type of conversation, and celebrate the ground that was covered even if there are more conversations to have before it is entirely resolved.

### PART THREE --The wrap up

- Let that person know that it does not need to be completely handled today.
- Thank that person for being willing to engage with you in the conversation.

- At the end of the conversation, acknowledge something positive about how they were being with you (i.e., did they listen so that you felt heard? Were they open-minded? Did they contribute openly and honestly to the conversation?)
- Acknowledge that person fully. Recognize and praise any personal risks they might have taken to engage in this dialogue with you. Reaffirm your commitment to each other's success.
- If another round of conversation is needed, schedule it now.
- If you feel the conversation did not go well, or yield the intended outcome, you can try again...do not be afraid to have multiple attempts, as each one adds value and clears blockages.

## READY TO INFLUENCE

With that groundwork in place, you have set the stage well for sustainable relationships of influence. You will want to nurture those relationships over time and recognize that your ability to influence is directly linked to how well you understand what matters to the other person in any given situation or timeframe and how effectively you can link your influence points to motivational hooks that matter to the other individual.

The mindset that will make all of this work is one of SERVICE. Put yourself in the frame of mind that you are continuously looking for ways to be helpful and useful to the other person. You want to find ways to help them succeed, to support them in identifying and removing the barriers to their success, and to realize that by helping others you will reap the benefits in multiples. The very first step, of course, is to identify the key players that it would make sense to approach for the purpose of coalition building. Then, by applying the above process, you will easily build partnering relationships in all the domains that will advance your objectives.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Suzi Pomerantz, MT., MCC. is an award-winning master executive coach, facilitator, and author with over 19 years of experience working with leaders and teams in over 155 organizations internationally, including seven companies on the Fortune 100 list. Suzi authored 25 publications about coaching, ethics, and business development, and four books, including *Seal the Deal: The Essential Mindsets for Growing Your Professional Services Business*. [www.sealthedealbook.com](http://www.sealthedealbook.com).

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