

## GenEQ Action Tools: Coalition Building

Getting a lot of people involved in your cause will give you clout, provide you with more resources and allow you to put more direct pressure on decision makers. It's one of the most fundamental and rewarding aspects of a successful campaign. Working to secure equal rights for GLBT people appeals to all fair-minded Americans. It can be beneficial when our issues are not seen as simply "gay" issues, but civil rights issues important to people from all walks of life.

### **What is a coalition?**

A coalition is a group of individuals or organizations cooperating to develop effective strategies for accomplishing a mutual goal. Part of the purpose of a coalition is to share the work and of educating and mobilizing others. The role of a coalition is to actively develop and coordinate a strategy for building support.

As a member of the GLBT community on campus you are in the best position to evaluate potential supporters for your issue. No two situations are alike – there is no foolproof recipe for building working relationships with others. Don't overlook obvious help, but at the same time, think creatively when researching potential allies. Most issues have several different angles – pitch your issue in the light that makes the most sense for the organizations you are trying to work with.

Don't ignore organizations and individuals merely because you disagree on other issues. *A coalition is formed for one purpose.* All other agreements or disagreements can and should take a back seat.

### **Reaching Out**

The first step is to research your campus and to identify other groups that may be interested in joining your efforts. At first glance, the Student Government, a Religions Professor, the faculty association, an Amnesty International chapter, the Alumni Association, a National Organization for Women chapter, Campus Democrats and a NARAL chapter may appear to have little in common. In fact, these groups and individuals may all have a stake in ending workplace discrimination based on sexual orientation. Don't overlook campus chapters of national organizations or nearby High School Gay-Straight Alliances who may be interested in your cause.

One of your top priorities should be recruiting organizations or individuals with the greatest political influence. If they won't join, seek their help in the form of behind the scenes backing or individual endorsements (even if a club/organization's membership would not endorse your cause, its president might). Sometimes powerful people are willing to help but unwilling to do so in a public way.

Prepare your pitch before contacting any group. Research the size of the organization, its purpose, activities, officers, and organizational structure. It's important to get an engaged, interested and reliable contact person to serve as a liaison.

When asking for help, package your request so that your needs mesh with the organization's current program. For instance, if you are approaching a group that works with children, you may ask them to work on education programs related to your issue in local schools. Remember that if coalition members help on your issues, they will expect your help on their issues.

### **Be Specific**

Since every group will have different resources, providing a specific list of activities allows them to choose what they feel they can accomplish, rather than turning you down flat for fear of getting in over their heads.

Such a list could include: hosting phone banks, triggering their phone tree, organizing letter writing campaigns, printing and distributing leaflets, publishing stories in their magazine or newsletter, posting on website, sending emails to list serve, featuring on My Space or Facebook, getting names for petitions, sponsoring education programs, helping with a speaker's bureau, signing on to group letters, talking with or writing to influential administrators or the board of trustees, joining you at a news conference, signing an op-ed, turning out their members for a rally, or hosting a speaker from your organization at their meeting.

### **Communication**

One of the most important parts of a smoothly running coalition is communication. Be sure that everyone is communicating the work they are doing with an eye on how to best complement the efforts of others. Don't forget to thank members of the coalition for their contribution – whether it is time, money or influence.

Give-and-take is another integral part of coalition work since all individuals and organizations in the coalition have their own identity and agenda. It's important to remember that organizations working together in a coalition may have different purposes and assign different values to GLBT equality. Groups will differ on priorities, strategies, and tactics; those differences can produce internal conflicts. But they can also provide a fertile field of good ideas, different perspectives, and important resources.

A coalition generally operates on consensus, which often can be a challenge. However, solutions are more likely to be found if the coalition discusses the potential advantages and disadvantages of a particular course of action and comes to a democratic resolution. One of the main functions of a coalition is to gather and share information so that all participants gain a clearer understanding of where the issue is and where it is going.

Building a coalition – large or small – can be a crucial step in any successful campaign. It takes tact, hard work, and a little creativity, but is well worth the effort if you want to make things happen for the issues you care about.

### **Rules for a Coalition**

- Clearly define and state your goal.
- Agree on the appropriate steps needed to accomplish your goal.
- Clearly define and assign coalition tasks.
- Fundraising is essential to keep the mail and phone lines running but don't ignore cost-free ways (internet) of keeping information flowing and communications strong
- Recognize accomplishments and say thanks!
- Establish a procedure for getting clearance on public statements and maintaining communication among member organization.
- You don't have to agree on everything – just the issue at hand.