

Tip Sheet 8

How can we build alliances between community, clinicians and public health?

Alliances are important. Having a coalition shows strength and wider support. It also shows that you can work together and won't easily be deterred if one partner has a crisis. But alliances need to be carefully managed if they are to grow, especially if the organisations involved are also rivals for funding or have other areas of disagreement.

What's this alliance about?

What is the issue that you want to ally with people about?

- Establish your issue - Is it a broad one (improve testing rates in our country) or a narrow one (improve testing rates for people who inject drugs in our city)?
- Articulate clearly what the issue is and have some ideas about possible solutions before you start to seek allies
- Have some initial conversations with individual people you think will agree but who can constructively criticise the idea; make people from different sectors or professions all feel that they have a stake in the alliance
- There's a balance to be made – too wide and you may argue about the goal, too narrow and you may not find anyone else to work with.

What isn't the issue?

- Successful alliances avoid disagreements until they know they are strong enough to manage them.
- Don't start out by discussing something you know will be a problem, or where you don't know whether people can agree.
- If you do have a side issue that could be a barrier to working together, give yourselves the confidence of some successful work together and then ask whether people want to discuss it or leave it be. Agree in advance to limited discussion with a neutral moderator and 'agree to disagree' if necessary.
- Don't start with a long list of things you'd like to work on, or you may all head off in different directions. Do one thing well first and work from there.

Mission creep:

- Don't get distracted by side issues, or bigger issues. Everyone has their own concerns, but you need to use the group's energy for the purpose that you've all agreed on.
- It's easy to become a talking shop, exchanging information and complaints rather than actions. Watch that agendas don't slide into this and always ensure you have a good, firm moderator or Chair in meetings.

Who's in this alliance?

Who has a common interest with you?

- Who else is (or should be) working on this issue? Make a list identifying them all
- Talk first to people you get on with, who share your concerns; they will act as a bridge to others who you might not be able to ask to the table yourself
- Establish the principles of what you all care about e.g. making life better for people with HIV, doing a better job, not wasting scarce resources

Who needs to be round the table/on the conference call?

- Is this a sectoral alliance (PLHIV, key communities, NGOs, clinicians, public health specialists) or a wider alliance (other conditions, rights groups, wider public health and health workers, policy experts)?
- Are there any gaps? (representation, balance, skills, knowledge, influence) You don't have to be perfectly balanced to start out, but you need an idea of who else you want to attract, to grow to be widely representative and authoritative
- You may need to start as a small group and do a couple of useful things, to make others want to join in; busy people need to see proof that something will be a good use of their time. You may start with one student doctor, but if you clearly do good you might end up with their clinical association

How do we keep everyone together?

- Start with a relatively simple task; a leaflet, a consultative meeting, something you feel the partners can achieve that will help you clarify where you all stand
- Have easy goals for an early victory as well as harder ones for the long haul
- Don't have more meetings than you need to, or for longer than you need to, and have a skilled Chair or Moderator to keep you moving and minimise tensions
- Have clear agendas, meeting notes, share actions out, make it clear who has what responsibilities and what the structure is of your coalition
- Avoid controversial topics until you all know each other well and have done good work together
- Check in with partners in between to make sure they're involved, especially if they miss meetings
- If you can afford it, meet somewhere comfortable with some food or good coffee; it always improves people's mood

Logical Logistics

- If you discuss things on an email tree or listserv, establish rules of conduct or have a moderator who will gently discourage long strings of nested emails, private conversations or off-topic mails
- Don't try to write anything by mass committee! Delegate it to a small writing group or one organisation and then let people make comments which will be considered by the writers. Nothing good ever got written by a large committee
- Try and have a central point of contact, preferably someone who can delegate tasks back out.
- Pick the best people for important meetings, but also share out the glory; do you have time or contacts to be able to offer key skills training to alliance members?

How to Cite:

Power, L. (2017). *OptTEST Tip sheet 8 – How can we build alliances between community, clinicians and public health*. Retrieved from: www.opttest.eu