Don’t Get Stuck in the Muck! Six Common Pitfalls of Emerging Alliances

Common Pitfalls – And How to Avoid Them

1. “Who decides on who’s deciding?” You may be stuck in the chicken or egg dilemma during the birth of an alliance. At this very early stage, it can be unclear who has the decision-making authority to actually move the work and make decisions. Who elects the steering committee? Wait, who gets to decide on the steering committee election process?

Avoid this common pitfall by establishing an interim process with a clear task and ending point. Someone has to step up and get the ball rolling. And, pay special attention to getting input, navigating relationships, and communicating to the larger group in this period.

2. “Let’s be everything to everybody!” When an alliance emerges, there is excitement around common vision but the specific purpose or role of the alliance is often fuzzy and broad. In this period, people project their own desires onto the alliance which leads to misconceptions and competing priorities. However, we often hesitate to sharpen the purpose and role for fear of losing membership or engagement. Rather, groups try to fit in all the desired purposes — but then end up with serious disagreements when charting out specific goals and work plans. In the end, the alliance moves in a way that feels like one step forward, two steps back – constantly having to deal with fundamentally differing ideas of what the alliance is set up to do.

Avoid this common pitfall by helping everyone understand that as the purpose and strategy of the alliance are sharpened, those initially at the table will become re-arranged in the alliance’s
universe. For example, start with the idea that the “final” strategy and form of the alliance might not resonate equally with all at the initial table: create an intentional opt-in opportunity when the purpose and strategy are sufficiently finalized. Some who started off very engaged may see that the purpose or strategy of alliance does not need to be as strongly aligned with their organizational mission as they first thought. They may opt to become supporters rather than core members. Some who were not at the initial table may emerge as natural leaders of the new effort. This re-arranging is not a “falling out” – it is a natural process of organizations positioning themselves in relationship to the alliance’s strategy and their respective organizational interests and strengths.

3. “What did we say we were doing again?” Sometimes each meeting feels like re-inventing the wheel. In an emerging alliance, the work between meetings to solidify ideas generated or follow through on plans of action may not happen. People come to the next meeting no further along than the last one, so they get stuck re-hashing the same topics until people begin to disengage.

Avoid this common pitfall by exploring why the work is not happening between meetings. Is it?

- **Lack of staff time and capacity?** Then plan for how a minimum level of capacity can be generated in the short term to ensure follow through; prioritize the most critical elements to move the process along.

- **Lack of clarity – or different interpretations of – what has been decided on?** Then clarify decision making process and summarize outcomes at the end of each meeting.

- **People hesitating to move forward because there is some fundamental difference that has not been addressed or resolved?** Then use your intuition to figure out what will be effective: Do you need to set aside time to address issues up
front? Or do people need to start working together in some concrete, pragmatic process – and then come back to ideological questions? There are myriad other reasons; uncover and address them.

4. “Let's set up an advisory board, 17 work groups, and bi-weekly calls!” We often have the impulse to build an entire vehicle right after people have decided that there is work to do together. This leads to an over-emphasis on process and structure which takes away from energy spent on clarifying purpose and strategy. It can also get people attached to structures that may need to be changed once the strategy is fully developed. Not every initiative should be an alliance. And, for those that end up being alliances, we can’t really know the form needed until the purpose and strategy are developed.

To avoid this pitfall, refrain from making “final” or more complex decisions on structure until the alliance strategy is fully fleshed out. Rather, lay in as much structure is needed (an interim form or skeletal form) until the strategy is fleshed out enough to reveal what kinds of structures are needed.

5. “We need to have everyone at the table!” Some efforts peter out in the process of trying to get everyone represented before starting to move. Remember: it’s actually pretty rare that all the right people are present at the founding of an alliance. On top of that add demographic, geographic, and other kinds of considerations and you could spend years trying to get the perfect mix.

Avoid this pitfall by being explicit and agreeing at the outset on the principle of readiness. Whoever is ready at the moment to move together should do so, with appropriate due diligence in engaging key players. By freeing those who are ready to move, they create momentum that can carry and draw others in. It really is a service to the whole, as long as the initial group follows up with real efforts at engaging people who were not or could not be engaged in the beginning. It’s time to start breaking our bad movement habit that we
need to be the originator of something in order to be invested. We all have limited energy and capacity – if we only engage in things that we start, we will be severely handicapped!

6. “Who was supposed to do that? Why didn’t you finish the project?” When alliances are getting started there are usually lots of ideas suggested and put onto “to-do” lists – with no one is assigned to do the work. Or everyone assumes that the one and only alliance staff person will magically catch all the tasks and finish them by the next meeting. Or even worse – the task gets assigned to someone who isn’t there! As more and more unfinished tasks pile on, frustration and disappointment set in. Tempers may flare as people who do many tasks begin to resent those who don’t. Motivation can take a nose dive.

**Avoid this pitfall by making sure there is a real agreement and decisions made around next steps.** At the end of each meeting, list out all the decisions and make sure to assign each task to someone who is present for the meeting, and give them a deadline to complete the task. All meeting notes should have a summary of decisions and next steps. At the following meeting, the same list can be used for a report back. It is important to hold each other accountable and also to be clear what you are expecting of each other.