Coalition Building II: Maintaining a Coalition
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Why is maintaining the coalition important?
What needs to be maintained?
How do you maintain a coalition?
What are alternatives to maintenance?

Suppose that you have started a coalition, following the guidelines in the last Tool Box section (Chapter 5, Section 5: Coalition Building I: Starting a Coalition). And suppose your coalition is working well, just as you envisioned. It's got lots of members, a stable structure, support from the community, and -- most important -- a growing list of community achievements.

Congratulations, and take a bow.

But don't bask too long in the applause, for your work isn't over. The coalition's work needs to be maintained.

In this section we will cover the importance of maintenance, what needs to be maintained, and how to maintain your work successfully. We'll also explore some alternatives to simple maintenance -- coalition growth, for example, or changing direction, and even ending. But the key point about maintenance is that it won't happen all by itself. It takes effort -- conscious, planned, and ongoing. To elaborate a little:

Why is maintaining the coalition important?

Let's admit that starting a coalition, or any group, can be challenging. It takes skill, sensitivity, timing, persistence, perhaps also faith; it brings out the best in you. Yet challenging though it sometimes may be, start-up is only half the battle. Truthfully, it's probably less than half. For now that the coalition is standing on its own two feet, it needs to start striding toward its community goals. Those accomplishments lie in the future. To ensure a successful future, the coalition needs to stay alive and healthy. To stay alive and healthy, it needs to be maintained.

Certainly in the physical world maintenance is necessary, for animate and inanimate objects alike. Most machines need to be lubricated once in a while. Houses need to be painted. Cars need to be tuned. Even computer files must sometimes be deleted. And of course, our human bodies need to be maintained as well, which is why we have physical check-ups, or do self-exams, or head for the gym. Can you think of any objects or organisms that will have long and productive lifetimes with no maintenance at all?

Physical-world maintenance is taken very seriously. In business and industry, for example, or in local government, physical property is maintained regularly. Managers devise schedules for doing so, put key staff in charge, and make repairs as necessary. In some cases (such as elevators, or restaurants) such maintenance, in the form of inspections, is required by law. These are examples of what's called preventive maintenance. We do it before things get into trouble, and to prevent trouble from occurring in the first place.
Maintenance, and preventive maintenance, also apply to the social world -- to partnerships, marriages, relationships of all kinds. But for coalitions, even more so. The coalition is more likely to veer off the track than other human interactions because the tracks are poorly laid down in the first place. Few guidelines tell the coalition where -- or how -- to go. And on the coalition train, passengers can vote on their own destination. Simply put, the complexity of the coalition means it is more in need of oversight and maintenance.

It is true that as technology advances, some physical machines may need less routine maintenance. Some auto manufacturers say that their cars need tune-ups only after 100,000 miles. But no coalition will ever go 100,000 miles without a tune-up. In human relationships, and certainly for coalitions, social technology has not arrived to the point where maintenance is unnecessary; it probably never will.

To put it in a nutshell: The environment - the outer and the inner environment - is always changing. Effective adaptations to those changes are necessary for organizational health. Renewal - conscious and deliberate renewal - is a basic need of organizational life. Once you take the coalition (or most any community group) for granted, then things will start falling apart. This is why it's important for coalitions and community groups to pay attention to maintenance and to work out procedures for maintaining their optimal functioning on a regular basis.

What needs to be maintained?

What needs to be maintained are the key structures, functions, and relationships of the coalition that helped get it started in the first place.

To make the analogy to the human body: If you had a physical check-up, your caregiver would examine your different body systems and how they worked. More than that, you might be encouraged to maintain fitness through physical and mental exercise, to avoid extreme behaviors, and to live moderately. For a coalition, the key ingredients are social rather than physical, but they are no less real or important. They include:

- The coalition's reason for being - its vision, mission and objectives
- The basic governance and operating rules of the coalition
- The coalition leadership
- The coalition membership
- The division of labor, within and among the leaders and members
- The coalition's strategic and action plans, both short- and longer-term
- The coalition's actions and results, so that it is accomplishing something (what it means to) in the world
- The coalition's funding, so that those accomplishments can be continued
- The coalition's visibility in the larger community
- The coalition's public support
- And finally, what we might call the spirit of the coalition, the good feelings and relationships among all involved, which are a fundamental precondition for the coalition's continued existence. This point is addressed at greater length further on in this section.

Each of these categories can be subdivided and elaborated upon. One such elaboration, in the form of a maintenance checklist, is given at the end of this section as Tool #1. But now, having identified what
needs to be maintained, how do you go about the actual maintenance?

- Before proceeding, though, here’s a reality check. Most coalitions -- and most community groups (and even most relationships) -- do not engage in regular planned maintenance. They may not be fully conscious of the need, or it may not be high enough on their list of priorities. They may be too busy, or perceive themselves as so, or other more pressing tasks may intervene. They may feel that they don’t know how to do maintenance work, or that it’s not particularly fun.

Many reasons may apply, singly or in combination. The bottom line, though, is that planned maintenance, carried out in practice, is relatively rare.

It’s not that a coalition cannot survive without maintenance. It can. Things may keep running on their own, and running reasonably well, for quite a while. Think, as in physics, of the inertia of motion. Many systems, living and nonliving, are also partially self-regulating. In biology, just for example, homeostasis provides built-in corrective feedback. These principles may extend to coalitions, too.

Our point, though, is that a coalition or group that does engage in regular and planned maintenance is in the long run going to be significantly better off. It will accomplish more; and it will keep on sustaining its accomplishments longer.

**How do you maintain a coalition?**

The first steps in maintaining a coalition, or any group, take place inside the mind of the coalition group member. They are internal. And to state them as specific guidelines:

1. **Develop the awareness that maintenance is necessary.**
2. **Make a decision to engage in it.**

These internal steps are in some ways the hardest part of the entire process. But once you --as individual members and then as a group-- have taken them, and made the decision to create and implement a maintenance plan, you are well on your way.

3. **Design a maintenance plan.**
4. **Carry out your maintenance plan.**

Suppose you have the awareness and have made the decision. Let’s think about the next question: How do you put a maintenance plan together? (Note the assumption here again: A maintenance plan will help you, rather than doing maintenance by the seat of the pants.) In designing your plan, you have a number of choices to make at the very beginning. We’ll list them, then give a little more detail after each item below.

**Design a maintenance plan**

A. **Who should design the plan?**

Among your options: The plan can be designed by the coalition’s leaders; or a subgroup of the leaders; or a subgroup of members chosen by the leaders; or by the larger membership itself.

In most cases, the leaders should take responsibility for setting the wheels in motion; but that doesn’t necessarily mean they have to drive the work themselves. They can delegate it, and often the best way to go is to select a few key experienced members who are interested in maintenance and have the time
to plan it. Usually, a small group will work best. The plan can be presented to the leadership, then to the larger membership for review and comment, and then for revision as might be needed.

The plan’s details will depend on what kind of coalition or group you are. If you have five or six regular active members (and even a coalition that small can be effective), chances are one or two people are going to take the lead. But when 5 or 6 become 50 or 60, you have the luxury of forming a larger committee to plan what is needed and perhaps carry it out.

**B. How comprehensive should the plan be?**

Should the plan, and therefore the actual maintenance, include all aspects of the way the coalition runs, or just several?

There are multiple items you can look at (see Tool #1). Your choice will again depend on the resources and the particulars of your group. But when you start, a good general guideline may be to take a middle path. That is, maintenance for you may not mean attention to the refreshments served at meetings, but it may in fact mean close attention to the format and content of the meetings themselves.

In other words, make the work feasible for you, something you feel comfortable taking on. It's good to challenge yourself a little, but don't overwhelm yourself at the beginning.

**C. How formal should the plan be?**

You can have loose-leaf notebooks full of maintenance procedures and schedules (as maintenance teams for machines like elevators would), or you can write things down on a scratch pad. You can keep detailed records, or no records at all. You can do maintenance simply through oral discussion, or with hardly any discussion whatsoever. A mental note might do the job, but so might computerized systems.

Once again, the possibilities vary, and your choices will depend on the size and nature of your group. And once again, a middle path may make the most sense for most groups, at least at the start. Informality can lead to sloppiness, but excess formality to rigidity. As a rule, the level of formality of the work should be in harmony with the level of formality of your coalition or group. If it's a step or two more formal, that might not be a bad idea.

**D. Who should carry out the plan?**

Briefly, your options here are similar to those listed under maintenance plan design: the coalition leaders themselves; a subgroup of the leaders; a subgroup of members chosen by the leaders, with variations throughout.

Three additional guidelines may help:

First, the people carrying out the plan may be the same as those designing it, but not necessarily; the implementers should generally have a strong voice in plan design, but the planners and the implementers need not always be the same people.

Second, implementation of the plan usually works best when the work responsibilities are divided up according to function - that is, not very surprisingly, the membership chair will typically have the lead role in recruiting and keeping new members; the publicity chair will take the lead in maintaining publicity efforts, and so on down the line.

Third, implementation will always be more successful if there are clear lines of accountability, no matter who is doing the actual implementation work. Not to pick on him or her, but who is that membership chair accountable to? We know that chair is a wonderfully creative and responsible person -- but even so, we would like to establish accountability to someone other than one’s self. It's just that organizations work better that way.
E. How frequently should maintenance take place?

The theoretical choices range from daily to never, with all stops in between. A guideline: Not so often that you spend too much time in this effort relative to other coalition tasks, and not so often that there is unlikely to be any change since the last review; but not so infrequently so that previously-undetected problems may have arisen.

What does this mean in practice? A yearly review--give or take--will work well for many groups. Anything less may be too little. More frequent reviews can be given to past problem areas calling for special attention. In general, the maintenance schedule need not be the same for all aspects of the coalition's work--some aspects may be reviewed more frequently and others less.

The answers to these questions above may imply that there are many ways to design and carry out a maintenance plan, and that there is no one way to do maintenance that is head and shoulders above the rest. This is true. The best way to do maintenance will depend upon the nature, history, composition, and goals of your particular group, as well as its plans, and its commitment to do maintenance work. Consider also these criteria: Whatever your maintenance choice, it has to be something that is workable for you, that you can implement in daily practice, and that you and your coalition can feel good about.

I once belonged to a well-established coalition that took maintenance seriously and practiced what it preached. At the end of the week, there would be weekly review meetings in the office - often light-hearted (we all knew it was Friday afternoon) but serious and systematic too, a sort of checking in on the week gone by and agenda setting for the week ahead. This probably could just as well have been on Monday, but Fridays worked fine in our case. It seemed to strike the right balance in tone.

Then once a year, when the weather warmed up, we'd get together outside and have an all-day meeting away from the office, out in the country - usually at the home of one of our coalition leaders, who in her never-to-be-forgotten kindness also laid out a great lunch. Once again, we reviewed and planned, but this time at greater length and with a longer vision. Most of us looked forward to these meetings. We may not have followed up on everything we said we'd do. But they did help in our coalition's maintenance, and bound us more closely as coalition members. The meetings weren't perfect, but they helped do the job; no one would have wanted to give them up.

Suppose, though that you have now made your choices. How do you go about carrying them out? How should you actually conduct maintenance in practice? This leads to Step #4:

**Carry out your maintenance plan.** Once again, you have options for doing so. They include:

A. **External Reviews**

These are reviews by outside reviewers or consultants. Sometimes they may be mandated by your funding source. Such external reviews can vary among themselves:

- The reviewers can be paid professionals from outside the community, or a single local volunteer.
- The reviewers can review your policies, practices, and accomplishments across the board. Or they can survey smaller and more limited practices.
- The reviews can last several hours, or several days.
- The external reviews can be combined with internal reviews, as noted below.
In any case, the criteria used to conduct the review should be clear to everyone. Ideally, they should be worked out in advance, together with the reviewers. There should be no surprises.

External or outside reviews are relatively rare for coalitions, though less rare for other types of groups. Not surprisingly, they have their own advantages and disadvantages. They can be expensive. The reviewers may not have good understanding of your organization, and may be using different criteria from yours. The value of the review will only be as good as the expertise, sensitivity, and communication skills of the reviewer.

On the other hand, such a review can provide a helpful outside perspective, by seeing your operations with a fresh pair of eyes, and by giving you insights you might not otherwise have had. That review can also lend objectivity and sometimes specific expertise. And sometimes it can also be free, especially if it is mandated from the outside. As one coalition leader told us:

> "Our coalition used to get periodic visits from our representative in the state office. They gave us some funding. So she was there to check up on us, we knew that. And this reviewer, who was actually a nice person, knew that we knew it. She also knew that we knew that she was just doing her job. So while nobody was actually eager for her to visit, we accepted her, and in fact she did have some good ideas for us. She was tactful enough to express them in a way that didn't alienate us. Looking back at it, she helped us more than we would admit."

All the other maintenance procedures noted below are internal, conducted by the people in the coalition itself.

**B. Internal Reviews (which subdivide into:)**

1. **Formal reviews.** What makes them "formal"? They have their own policies and procedures; they take place on a regular basis; they are institutionalized in the culture of the coalition; they are likely to produce a written report.

Formal reviews can also vary:

- They can take the form of an annual program review, with its own predetermined methods. A meeting of the executive committee or other governing group can be set aside for it.
- Or instead of a self-review conducted by the whole group, a subcommittee or designated group may be charged with conducting the review, and reporting out. This report would then get discussed by the larger governing group.
- The review can also be done at a membership meeting of the full group. Or a report prepared by others can be made to the full membership at that meeting for discussion.
- Sometimes the review is not of the entire operations of the coalition, but of some of its specific practices -- publicity, budget, etc. This more limited type of review can also be done by the full group, or a subgroup, with reporting out as noted above.
- It’s also possible to rotate a series of smaller reviews, so that one aspect of the coalition’s work gets reviewed (and maintained) every year or every few months. In this way, maintenance proceeds on a staggered schedule: this month, funding; next fall, membership review, and so on.

Your coalition or group can decide to carry out any of these types of reviews. Once that decision is made, then it’s a matter of setting up procedures to make sure the review is implemented, completed, and utilized.
2. **Informal reviews.** Maintenance does not always have to be a formal procedure, with structured agendas, clipboards, checklists, and written reports. A coalition can decide upon and carry out less structured ways of collecting the information it needs to see how things are going. For example:

**Feedback at scheduled meetings.** A natural opportunity for informal review and maintenance is at the end of scheduled meetings. So, for example, a short portion of each general meeting can be devoted to feedback. ("Any comments on this meeting?" "Are we going about things in the right way?" "How did you feel about the way things went?" Were you happy with what we accomplished today?) The same can apply to other types of meetings, such as executive committee or subcommittee meetings.

There are many variations of this concept. To cite a few specific practices:

- One meeting facilitator we know always used a "plus-delta" format at the end of each meeting. She would ask the group what it liked about the meeting (the "pluses"), and what could have been better (the "deltas," or things needing change). All pluses and deltas got written on newsprint, as written reminders for how things might proceed next time.

- At other meetings, the end of the meeting was devoted to "good and welfare" -- meaning that if someone had something to say for the good and welfare of the group, he or she was invited and encouraged to say it. In this writer's experience, that practice dates back to summer camp! But it can apply in many other settings too.

- At one large organization (a mental health center) the Superintendent used to held monthly general staff meetings. Everyone was invited, and many staff attended, from psychiatrists to night shift attendants, and from business managers to groundskeepers. The Superintendent would make a few general announcements, but then the floor was open. Anyone was invited to comment freely on any aspect of the Center's operation, and given that trust had been established through this process, many did just that. These meetings were excellent both for reviewing operations, for stimulating needed change, and for building morale.

**Feedback by mail, e-mail, or telephone.** From time to time, a postcard can be sent to coalition members asking them for feedback on certain aspects of coalition performance and asking for suggestions for improvement. This process can be accomplished by e-mail as well, or sometimes over the telephone.

**Retreats.** These are usually extended meetings for the full coalition staff held away from the coalition's usual place of business (sometimes at a special retreat center), and sometimes led by an outside facilitator. Their purpose is often to review, maintain, and refresh the group's work, though retreats can also be held to design new plans, or to consider a specific topic or challenge. Their potential advantage is the freshness of the setting, the freedom from daily distractions, the expectation of new accomplishment, and the mental preparation that occurs before the event. For more details on running a retreat, see Chapter 12, Section 7: Organizing a Retreat and Chapter. 16, Section 1: Conducting Effective Meetings.

**Daily communication.** The process of maintaining your coalition can also be part of daily communication, although one might not call it "maintenance" or a "review" as such. In this sense, maintenance is a part of almost everything you do. Voicing an opinion without fear of personal criticism, keeping members posted about what is going on, giving personal support if someone is having a bad day -- each of these little acts maintains the coalition, even though one might not give them a "maintenance" label. These small transactions, multiplied over months and years, sustain the energy and spirit of the coalition's work. For more on this topic, see Chapter 15, Section 4: Promoting Internal Communication.
Keep in mind that any of these methods can be combined with any other. Feedback at meetings can be combined with feedback by mail. Regular strong internal communication can be combined with occasional retreats. Maintenance of a coalition can (and should) occur in many different ways.

- Keeping the Flame Alive

  We've spoken about maintenance so far almost as if it's mostly step-by-step, almost by-the-numbers. In some ways it is, and in some ways it should be. But there's another part of maintenance that is much harder to reduce to action steps—namely keeping the spirit of the coalition alive.

  That is, people join groups to get things done, but also to have a pleasant time in so doing. Getting work done is essential; yet if belonging to the coalition is all work and no play, then it can become drudgery. The member thinks: Life is full of options; why should I give energy to something that is routine and cheerless, and that doesn't really make me feel good? Sooner or later, quite possibly sooner, such members [whether paid or volunteer?] will leave.

  The wise coalition leader, then, will make the coalition a happy place to be. He or she will build in some fun—some times to relax, push all work to one side, and simply enjoy one another's company. Going out to eat, throwing a surprise birthday party, having a cookout, taking some group time off for no particular reason, finding regular reasons to celebrate—these are examples of events that keep members connected to the coalition. Members stay involved not just because of the work, but because they feel affirmed as full human beings, because their human spirit is nourished.

  All this is part of coalition maintenance, just as much as any itemized review process.

  Leaders, take note.

What are alternatives to maintenance? Some other coalition directions

Maintaining the coalition is important; maintaining the coalition may be crucial, which is why we've spent so much time discussing it. But we haven't yet mentioned one essential point: Maintaining the coalition, in the sense of doing what you've done before, may not be what you want to do.

For people change, and so do groups. Community situations change; so do community needs. Coalitions are not immune from change, and your coalition may want to change with the times. Simple maintenance, holding on to the status quo, is not your only option.

What are the other options? You can grow; or spin off something new; or change your focus; or cut back; or simply end. Your coalition has choices. You can pursue any one of these options, or several of them at different times. But which option should you choose, and how should you go about choosing it? We'll consider these options in turn, along with some of the conditions that might be favorable for each one.

(Much of what follows is adapted from The Spirit of the Coalition, by Bill Berkowitz and Tom Wolff; see Resources section following.)
Growing.

You can grow. This is a natural tendency of groups and organizations, especially if they are doing well.

And suppose you are doing well. Suppose too that the previously-suggested maintenance checks have been completed to most people's satisfaction. Then why not do more of what you're doing, or branch out or up? You have taken on some tasks successfully; how about some more? Or how about a new challenge, in a different area?

Coalition growth may be the right way for you to go:

- When the coalition has a track record of stability
- When it has a track record of success
- When the community need is present
- When the resources (people, money, and time) to sustain you will be present as well
- When your members want to grow, and
- When the community wants that, too.

But when you start thinking about growing, look before you leap, or even step. It's helpful for your coalition to know some of the dangers that may come with expansion:

1. If you grow bigger, you will need more resources to sustain you. In plainer language, you'll have more mouths to feed.

2. Growth also puts more pressure on the coalition leadership. The leadership and membership have limits, and can only do so much --even though growth can also mean new opportunities for the coalition that are difficult to pass up.

So you may feel called upon to make trade-offs. As one coalition leader mentioned:

- "We're very cautious about taking on new projects. But over the last two or three years our coalitions have gotten additional money to do special projects in neighborhood development -- it absorbs a lot of our focus and time. At this point, we see it as a priority to be developing these grassroots community mobilization kinds of efforts. So it's a trade-off we're willing to make. But it's a risky trade-off."

3. As the coalition gets bigger, more visible, and more accepted in the community, there can be pressure to become administrators of community services, to actually run them. This can take you away from your planning, coordinating, and catalytic roles. You may not necessarily want to be a direct services provider.

4. Finally, if you grow, you can get spread too thin. And then you start feeling the strain of overload. Even if you can manage the strain, the quality of what you do begins to deteriorate. In this sense, there is danger in success, for it can steer you toward failure.

Resolving the issue of growth. While all these issues surrounding growth should make you stop and think, they are resolvable. The resolution begins by realizing that growth is not all or nothing. It’s not simply grow or stay stagnant, or grow or die. Your growth can instead be targeted and controlled. You can choose the degree to which you want to grow, when you want to do it, in what respects, and how. You can engage in a form of coalition career planning.

When you do, it always helps if you build from a stable base. One coalition leader put it this way:
"We need to be strong with what we already have, and be certain that growth is in a healthy and productive direction, before we start tinkering in new areas. Each time we grow, we're starting all over again. For us to start a whole new area, it's probably going to take some time for us to learn to do it right, and I'd like to make our current work more solid before we start approaching anything else."

So in a nutshell: If you choose to grow, you want to be in control of the process, and not let the process be in control of you. With thought, you can do this; and with experience and practice, your decisions about growth can become both easier and more productive.

"Spinning off."

Growth -- planned and controlled -- may be a goal for your coalition, and a sensible and wise one. But choosing growth is not the only possibility. Whatever new initiatives the coalition takes on need not be permanent; they can be temporary. That is, you can take on something new, get it started, and then let it go.

This is what we mean by "spinning off". It is similar to incubating a program until it is strong enough to survive on its own. Or (a different metaphor) it's like being a mother bird, until the fledgling gets its wings and is ready to fly.

Spinning a program off may be desirable:

- When a particular community need continues to exist
- When your coalition has addressed that need, but doesn't want to do so any more
- When another group is wanting to (or willing to), and also able to perform that task

Coalitions cannot handle all community needs, and so it often makes sense to hand the glory, and the headaches, over to someone else. Yet when you spin something off, there can be problems. One key concern is "parental responsibility." How far does your responsibility extend? How long do you keep your attachment? You don't want to hang on too long, because that's an energy drain on you. Yet you certainly don't want to let go too soon either.

A different but equally relevant concern: It's also true that if you send the new venture out on its own, you take your chances. Your child might turn out to be ungrateful. The project could come back to haunt you.

Spinning off new programs --and seeking to develop new programs precisely so that they can be spun off -- is often an excellent choice. True, success is not guaranteed. But to increase your chances of success, when you spin something off, what you can do is to set up conditions and make the rules of future engagement clear. You can agree to provide technical assistance and consultation. You can stipulate as best you can what you will and will not do.

Still, the reality is that when you spin a program off, it's largely out of your control -- which is often part of the reason you wanted to spin it off in the first place. It's helpful to accept that reality. More often than not, you can't have it both ways.

Changing focus.

An effective coalition does not have to grow, and it does not have to spin off new programs. It can simply change its focus. This may be a good idea when the original objectives of the coalition have been met, and when the coalition membership and leadership are motivated to take on other tasks. If you originally came together to improve public transportation, for example, and new bus lines are now running, you might choose to tackle job training (because people can now more easily get to good jobs).
Or you could focus on youth employment, or affordable health care, or virtually anything else that is needed.

- One coalition we know came together around medical interpreting, and put interpretation programs in place. That done, they were ready to move on:

  "The translation gap had been narrowed, so we just thought there was no need at that point to continue, and that we could place our energy onto other issues. For example, we've been talking right now about youth... and what's interesting is people who are already working with youth are coming to us. That's the difference. Before, we were knocking on their door; now they're knocking on our door."

So this coalition, in a natural sequence of events, looks toward a new issue. Their track record of success both attracts new members and increases the prospects for more success in the future. This is one common evolutionary path of the coalition, and a fully justifiable one.

**Cutting back.**

In a different scenario, suppose a coalition hits tough times, external or internal, economic or psychological. Or suppose another group in the community emerges that seems to be providing the same functions, and providing them well. If either of these situations comes along, and if they are severe or prolonged, you can downsize. You can simply cut back. (You can also share resources-see Chapter 46, Section 6: Sharing Positions and Other Resources -- or even merge with that other group, a topic not covered in detail here.)

There may be good reasons to do so. You may need to consolidate a little after some healthy growth. You may have grown too fast, and need to make some readjustments. A large grant may be coming to an end. Some other group may now be willing to take over an activity that's been an albatross around your neck. Perhaps the group is a "fledgling" that is finally ready to leave the nest by itself. Under these circumstances, cutting back could be a reasonable idea, at least for the moment. It weeds out inefficiencies, brings you back to basics, and prompts you to think more carefully about priorities.

- Some coalition members considered these options:

  "If we have to shrink back to the core, that's not a defeat. It's an awareness that we don't want to lose the most important things we do, which are the meetings and the newsletter...."

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"Our funding cycle is on the downward trend. We're in the fourth year of a major grant, so the amount of time for the coordinator is going to be cut in half, and so the steering committee needs to think about what they want this coalition to be involved with. Do they want to go back to the more subdued state it was in prior to these last few years, or what? And if they want it to be staffed at the same level, then what are they going to do about the funding sources?"

These types of events, like others in the paragraphs above, are all normal events in a coalition's development. And, as a reminder, neither growth nor downsizing has to be forever. If you cut back now, that doesn't mean you'll never grow again. The evolutionary path of coalitions, and of social systems, is usually not a straight line.
Ending.
You can also decide to end, and simply stop operating. This is often a sad event, but it doesn't have to be.

Coalitions are not immortal, nor are they expected to be. A coalition can simply outlive its own usefulness and decide to disband. The once-burning need may now be an ember. The leaders and members may have taken on new assignments, or changed their life priorities, or gotten sick, or moved away. And if the initial impetus or funding for starting the coalition came from the outside (perhaps from grant money) the impetus and the funding may now have shifted.

If the goal or mission has by now been accomplished, we can say congratulations for a job well done. Even if some goals have not been reached, and even if things must end semi-voluntarily or not voluntarily at all, the coalition's effort may nevertheless have made a difference. What's more, should the need flare up again, the coalition could spring back to life. In any case, new coalitions may arise later on, sometimes with some of the same members, and be better off because of your efforts before.

Staying the way you are.
One more option: You can simply keep going the way you are. If you've been doing something well, why not continue it in just the same way? Your coalition may want to do so when it has built a track record of success, when the original need still exists, when community support is stable, when things are going well, when both leaders and members (and community members) are satisfied with the status quo, and when both leaders and members choose to maintain it.

Staying the same sounds easy; it seems reasonable; but it is among the hardest options to carry out. The outer world, and your inner world, changes. There are ongoing, constant pressures to move in one direction or the other: to grow, or do something different, or fold your tent. To make a conscious choice to stay the same, and to maintain that choice regardless of those pressures, and stay steady as she goes - that isn't easy to do.

It can be a laudable thing to do, and preferable as well. But it's not necessarily the best thing to do, either. The danger is you can grow stale, or smug, or increasingly less relevant, or wither on the vine. Change often brings energy, a rekindling of the spirit. If you stay the way you are, you need to ensure that the underlying spirit of the coalition will be sustained.

To restate a major theme: Will your coalition be better off changing in some way? It might, or might not; there's no single answer. Your answer should depend on assessment of your coalition's and your community's present needs, desires, resources, support, and accomplishments, weighed against the costs and benefits of other options available to you. Let's clarify this point in the next part of our discussion.

To sum it up: The maintenance of coalitions in practice
We have treated these different coalition directions as independent options, but that has been partly for purposes of exposition. In practice, the options swirl closer together, with the predominant pattern changing, like weather systems passing overhead.

The reality of coalition maintenance and evolution lies closer to this: You keep going, because you're doing some good. You have some core functions. Perhaps you take on something new from time to time, wisely or not. Maybe that something dies on its own. Maybe somebody else kills it; but maybe it works, and you keep it. Or maybe you spin it off, so that it can stand on its own. New opportunities like that keep coming along every so often. You can choose among them.
How can those choices best be made? To answer that question, it will help to reflect on and review the key elements that ultimately maintain and sustain both coalitions and any social organization:

**Accomplishment.** First, of course, is accomplishment. If the coalition, if any organization, is doing good work and that work is recognized, the community is much more likely to support it. New members, and new funding, are easier to come by. Success is reinforcing. So if the coalition (and its leadership) can find a way to keep generating positive events, other things will tend to fall into place. And this applies regardless of whether the coalition chooses to grow or contract or move in a different direction.

**Institutional consciousness.** A second key element is an institutional consciousness. This means that the coalition and its members believe and act as if they are an integral part of community life, a prominent and constant feature on the local landscape. The larger community feels the same way. The coalition has a sense of permanence. It's here to stay; everyone knows it. It's become institutionalized.

To develop an institutional consciousness takes strong and committed coalition leadership. (Accomplishment helps, too). But it also takes effective coalition structures. Members need to know that attendance at each monthly meeting is expected, that they are expected to serve on at least one task force, that elections will be held on the last Wednesday in September, and that the first post-election business will be a coalition action plan. These or equivalent structures, reliably and repeatedly utilized, strengthen allegiance. Over time, they deepen the coalition's roots. Institutionalization, that five-dollar word, basically means rootedness -- even though the coalition's roots, like the roots of a tree, lie below the surface.

**Positive spirit.** Good works and good structure are two essential elements in the maintaining any coalition. But finally, what you also want to maintain are good feelings - the positive spirit that brought people together and kept them coming together in the first place. The personal closeness, the cohesion, the camaraderie are hard to overestimate. We spend our personal time where we feel comfortable, accepted, and valued for who we are. Why should we think that our own coalition members would feel, or act, any differently?

After the coalition is established, it may choose among many different maintenance options. The key point here, and a key point about coalition maintenance is that there are genuine choices; it's best to choose consciously. You can maintain the momentum of your coalition, speed it up, or slow it down. You can determine the direction of your coalition and keep or change it in the way that you and your coalition members see fit, rather than be at the mercy of outside factors.

The choices you make will depend upon your particular coalition's history, personality, assets, community needs, environmental factors, and available time. Many choices are justifiable, and many different choices may be made over a coalition's life span. And your maintenance choices here are ongoing, meaning that your best choice today might not be your best choice tomorrow -which is part of what makes community work exhilarating, challenging, and fun. But maintaining or changing the coalition, like most other areas of community practice, is up to you.

If your coalition is doing good work, it will probably choose to sustain it, in one form or another. Continued accomplishment, institutionalized structures, and vibrant spirit will help you maintain your efforts, and your successes. These coalition needs are interrelated, and they are continuous; they never go away. A wise coalition leader, like the one quoted below, will come into alignment with these principles of coalition life, and will steer one's craft carefully, flexibly, and with lightness of being on its extended voyage through waters yet unknown.

"Coalition building is a very lengthy process, and it's one that doesn't always go smoothly or according to anybody's pre-established time line. People in coalitions need to remember that, and to accept that, and not be disappointed that things don't go as quickly as they want to. As each new member comes in, it
changes the whole dynamic and the whole focus, and that’s part of it. It’s constantly evolving. The coalition never has an end in sight, not unless you want to disband it. It just doesn’t have an end. It constantly changes. You just have to keep going and plugging away. That’s just the nature of it.

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