

Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION Review

Informing and inspiring leaders of social change

Collaboration

10 Things You Need to Build Clever Coalitions

How to make collaboration work in a world of complex systems and exponential change.

By [Gemma Mortensen](#) | Apr. 25, 2017

Humanity is beginning to come to terms with the fact that the era in which we live is characterized by the exponential. The increasing pace of technological development, climate change, and globalization has created what author Thomas Friedman calls “a [supernova](#).” We are seeing a rate, depth, and scale of change that we recognize but do not truly comprehend.

As complex systems unfold—and mankind’s impact on them and theirs on us is revealed—we are left searching for the most effective ways to understand and respond to the changing world around us.

I have spent my professional life looking at how to bring very different types of people and organizations together to solve social problems. In recent years, our understanding of collaborative, adaptive approaches to social change has increased as research on systems leadership has blossomed. This is welcome. Yet I would argue that we lag far behind where we need to be, and that the ability to build, curate, and steward these kinds of models needs to become a prerequisite for anyone with leadership aspirations today.

An important part of this kind of leadership is the ability to cultivate collective intelligence and put it at the service of collaborative initiatives. We need to build communities that organically build collective bodies of knowledge and organize accordingly. As Devin Fidler,

research director at the Institute for the Future noted in “**Realigning Human Organization**”:

We are moving from a world of hierarchical social structures toward one in which resources, including human resources, can be digitally activated, deactivated, and reconfigured to come together when and where needed ...The process of activating shifting clusters of people and things within a global network is strikingly similar to our own thought processes. Already, many have speculated that we are seeing the emergence of a collective “hive mind” with its own logic.

The Hive Mind

Let us say the vehicle for collective intelligence—our hive mind—is a coalition. A coalition is an alliance for combined action. It can involve any kind of actors, in any kind of formation, for any length of time, so long as there is a shared purpose and objective. A *clever coalition*, however, is a temporary alliance for combined action that exhibits collective, adaptive intelligence.

The strength of clever coalitions lies in repeatedly crowdsourcing information or intelligence around a specific social problem, and adapting both composition and strategy accordingly. They are dynamic and flexible, taking different forms and adopting different approaches as the situation demands. They can adopt centralized organizing techniques, as well as connect with more dispersed, self-organized movements orientated toward the same goals.

We need them because:

- Understanding and changing complex systems requires many different players.
- Traditional institutions have difficulty overcoming vested interests or inertia without an external constituency or crisis to galvanize action.
- Traditional decision-making structures do not allow for sufficient levels of innovation or experimentation.
- Legitimacy requires a broader base of participation than traditional structures are equipped to handle.

10 Principles of Clever Coalitions

There are many ingredients that make up clever coalitions, and it is only in rare, heady moments that they all coexist perfectly together. The process requires stamina and patience on behalf of all involved. In my work at **Crisis Action**, an organization that builds coalitions to secure the protection of civilians in armed conflict, I learned the value and power of this approach, and the principles that underpin successful efforts.

1. Build culture around servant leadership.

The leadership behind clever coalitions requires both ambition and humility. Leaders must commit to honesty and transparency of conduct, place a constant emphasis on learning, and celebrate collective rather than individual success.

Crisis Action does this by helping partners secure top-tier media coverage but never being the spokesperson itself. It also convenes meetings with Ministers and CEOs for others, and sets up learning systems so that the network benefits from insights into all activities, not just those they participate in directly.

2. Define a clear theory of change.

A theory of change stipulates a hypothesis about the sequence of actions required to bring about a desired change or outcome: $x + y = z$. It should be clear why a collaborative approach is necessary for this causal sequence. The coalition is then the vehicle for that collaboration and serves a practical strategic purpose. The reference point must always be the desired outcome, not maintenance of the coalition itself.

Crisis Action recently worked on the Central African Republic, where civilians were being deliberately targeted, and a risk of genocide arose. Activated by some of its core partners, it agreed to try and get the situation on the agenda of the UN Security Council for discussion. An important part of the strategy was to assemble the evidence to prove that the situation was serious enough to demand top-level attention. A simplified theory of change would be: evidence + media attention = on the agenda. In this case, a coalition of human rights

organizations working to support faith leaders from Central Africa Republic was necessary to pool analysis and submit a collective body of evidence.

3. Invest in and empower a strategic coordinator.

Leadership of a clever coalition is akin to that of an orchestra conductor. The role is to spot, coordinate, and deploy talent and resources. Those who lead them must strike a fine balance between deference to the expertise of others, and clear decision-making and direction.

Crisis Action calls this a “listen and lead” approach. It uses a stakeholder map to rapidly consult relevant partners, analyze input, identify the optimal course of action, and then provide clear direction, bringing people in according to their specific expertise and interests. It also seizes regular opportunities to feed new information into the system and pivot where needed.

4. Prioritize opt-in coalitions over consensus-based models.

Traditional coalitions and network models work on the basis of consensus. In an opt-in model, the coordinating body is independent and reserves the right of ultimate decision-making. The coordinator proactively and continuously seeks advice and input to diagnose the problem, identify the preferred solution, and craft a blueprint for collective action to achieve it. Partners elect to join or stay outside the coalition based on that blueprint.

An opt-in model prevents dilution of goals and strategy, enables coalitions to expand or shrink around specific activities as the situation evolves, and provides collaborators with a variety of opportunities to engage without jeopardizing membership of the club itself. It also allows for coordinated pursuit of a very specific objective, increasing the likelihood of achieving it.

5, Build a core of partnerships from which coalitions can be built.

Relationships of trust are paramount and must exist beyond the transactional nature of interactions around individual pieces of work. A subsidiary network is needed; a club of sorts, into which different players come together in pursuit of a common overall goal.

Relationships must be strong enough to weather periods in which collaboration is not possible in light of inevitable and legitimate differences of opinion. The provision of valuable information is one way to build trust.

Crisis Action has a standing group of **core partners** who make a nominal financial contribution and can opt-in or opt-out of specific coalitions. There is also a large **global network** of a much more diverse set of organizations that are invited to join forces as and when it makes strategic sense for them to do so.

6. Collect and share information and continue to adapt to it.

A clever coalition is a bit like a meteorological forecaster; it collects data from myriad data points across the coalition, and synthesizes them into rapid reports and forecasts that influence behavior. The collective intelligence is constantly morphing, and the role of leadership in this context is to ensure that strategy and composition of the coalition also changes as a result.

At one point during the terrible conflict in Syria, the UN Security Council passed a resolution to ensure that humanitarian aid reached all civilians in need, including those in rebel-held areas. However, UN humanitarian agencies were not delivering the aid across Syria's borders, saying they did not have the legal grounds to do so without the Syrian government's permission. Previously, the strategy had demanded a strong coalition of humanitarian NGOs and agencies to show what humanitarian relief was needed and where. When it became clear that one of the major obstacles was legal, the strategy shifted to forming a new coalition of leading international lawyers who argued that the UN could indeed deliver humanitarian assistance across Syria's borders without government permission. There was no overlap whatsoever between these coalitions in terms of membership. But Crisis Action coordinated both of these toward the same objective, each informed by and helping to inform the same set of information.

7. Find roles that play to strengths.

The skill in mobilizing coalitions and networks is not simply enabling people to play together, but doing so in a way that plays to their individual and organizational strengths. A clever coalition can deploy different members for different tasks—strategic thinking, design, research, communications—and enjoy a huge diversity of talent.

Returning to the example of the Central African Republic, where the situation was deteriorating extremely fast—Crisis Action amassed a list of jobs: pooling information on what was happening, working out the most effective response and prevention measures, writing up a succinct brief for the UN Security Council, creating a media release, and lining up spokespeople in different time zones to get the message out. A central coordinator working on the basis of collective intelligence can pick the best person for the job no matter where they are or who they work for. The result is much swifter action, and a more responsive and dynamic team.

8. Reduce the transaction costs of collaboration.

Collaborating with purpose, discipline, and focus is a demanding business. It is necessary to lower the transaction costs of collaboration and reduce the pain threshold for entry. This boils down to making sure that every interaction is a good use of people's time in terms of productivity, efficiency, and ideally even enjoyment.

It's not glamorous, but excellent agendas, timely and exact notes of meetings, and extremely responsive communication protocols are all part of building a slick machine of collaboration. The small stuff really matters.

9. Get the right people on your team.

It takes a very particular person to possess first-class strategic sense and the ambition and willingness to work behind the scenes at the service of others. They are few and far between. The skills required to do this well are often seen as “soft” and don't necessarily accompany a level of seniority and experience. The longer I've seen coalitions at play, the more I am convinced that the skill set is specific, and requires a rare combination of attitude, aptitude, and ideally some specialized training.

Crisis Action recruits people who have a “special sauce,” the key ingredient of which is personal motivation to help bring about positive impact rather than attain personal glory.

10. Sustain morale.

Building and deploying clever coalitions is time-consuming and painstaking, and it does not always make you popular. There is never a moment at which you can, or should, please everyone all the time. So it is necessary to take people away from the front line so that they have time to replenish.

Crisis Action runs a learning lab for team members, where they can cycle out of convening coalitions on a specific conflict, and focus on distilling lessons and insights that the organization can use across all of its work.

Conclusion

Today’s world demands that we get good, quickly, at sustained collaboration. We cannot afford to rely on any one group of organizations or coalition of interests to bring about the right decisions and outcomes. We have to be both pragmatic and radical; working with what is there, as well as supporting, encouraging, and reinforcing new modes of organizing that are growing in importance and impact.

This requires that we remain open to working with new groups and in different ways. It requires that we communicate across cultures, beliefs, and approaches. It requires that we function in and understand highly centralized structures of power, as well as the torrents and tides of movements and social swarms.

As with the hive, there are myriad patterns and signals that optimize collective behavior. A clever coalition is one of the nearest substitutes we have at present for the kind of hive mind we need—one that can solve deeply ingrained social problems and realize opportunities of extraordinary scale.



Gemma Mortensen is a former executive director of **Crisis Action**, which won a Skoll Award for Social Entrepreneurship for its innovative model of collaboration. For more information on Crisis Action's model, see their recently published **Handbook for Change**.

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