

# BLUEPRINT FOR A **MULTIRACIAL,** **CROSS-CLASS** CLIMATE MOVEMENT **THE REPORT ON COALITIONS**

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**CLIMATE  
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The Climate Advocacy Lab envisions a multiracial, cross-class climate movement that collectively builds and wields power to ensure all people live in thriving and equitable communities. In service of this vision, we equip the U.S. climate movement with the evidence-based insights, skills, and connections needed to build durable power and win equitable solutions. The Lab’s interdisciplinary team both synthesizes existing research and conducts original field research to provide actionable insights that help climate advocates make evidence-based decisions at every step of campaign planning and implementation. Our trainings help build climate advocates’ skills and capacity through a combination of cohort-based learning opportunities, in-person workshops, online webinars, and 1-on-1 coaching or consultation. Core to our work is a belief that the climate resilient future we build must be rooted in principles of both effectiveness and justice. For over 8 years, we have served as critical movement infrastructure, making a training program, research expertise, and an extensive online library of resources and tools free and accessible to nearly 4,000 climate community members from 1,500+ organizations in all 50 states; Washington, DC; Puerto Rico; and a number of Tribal nations. You can find us online at [www.climateadvocacylab.org](http://www.climateadvocacylab.org).

Author’s note from Lynsy Smithson-Stanley: After years away for school, this project provided an incredible re-entry into the climate movement. I cannot thank our interviewees enough for their willingness to share the good, bad, and ugly of coalition work in service of a stronger, more diverse and resilient climate movement. I see this report as a first step in the next phase of my career, where I hope to dig further into questions of power, strategic capacity, and organizational learning. It’s important to me that my future work be grounded in the questions and challenges most pressing to climate advocates in the field, so I would be grateful to connect to hear feedback on the report, your coalition experiences, or any ways that research could help move your work forward. Please don’t hesitate to reach out to continue this conversation: [lynsy.smithson.stanley@gmail.com](mailto:lynsy.smithson.stanley@gmail.com).

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**M**ultiracial, cross-class (MRXC) coalition-building is essential if the climate movement is serious about tackling the climate crisis at the scale it demands. However, a historical lack of collaboration, trust, or healthy mechanisms to deal with conflict often impair those efforts. This Blueprint report and accompanying workbook provide an analysis of the difficulties MRXC climate coalitions are likely to face and offer recommendations for a proposed path forward. Our intention is that these insights help advocates fighting for a livable climate and communities grounded in justice and shared prosperity.

We begin with a careful study of the social movement and organizing literatures, as well as analyses of five recent MRXC climate coalitions at the state and municipal levels: campaigns advocating for the Portland Clean Energy Fund, New York's Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act, Minnesota's fight against the Line 3 pipeline, Illinois' Climate and Equitable Jobs Act, and Washington state's I-1631 ballot measure.

***From scholarship and first-hand accounts of working in MRXC climate coalitions, we find that robust and healthy coalitions require foresight and intentionality around certain variables. In particular, we focus on the concepts of trust, clarity, resources, inclusion and voice, governance, anticipating and planning for conflict, ways of working, collectivizing identity and reflection, and learning. We argue that MRXC coalitions need to address each of these elements explicitly in order to maximize their collective power and minimize harm. Fortunately, we have some suggestions.***

## OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

### Building the coalition

- Clarify your shared goals, and revisit them frequently: Be explicit with the vision, goals, and desired benefits of your coalition, and refer back to them when assessing strategy and tactics
- You can collectively create group culture: Coalition members should take the time to discuss not only shared goals but also their collective values and principles
- Identify who's in and who's out: Clearly define boundaries internally and externally to clarify expectations and reduce confusion about coalition membership
- Be candid about existing resources and the need for up-front investment: Provide support for under-resourced member groups in order to address internal power differentials that threaten participation
- Take an audit of existing capabilities: Assess the skills and knowledge bases that coalition members bring into the collective so that you can match campaign needs to actual capacities
- Brainstorm the kinds of work and capabilities the coalition might need: Similarly, take stock of the skills and capabilities the coalition will likely need in order to succeed, as well as how to distribute tasks and responsibilities

### Ways to work together

- Map out how and by whom decisions — big and small — will be made: Determine the governing structure that works best for your particular coalition and make those processes explicit to all members
- Inclusion matters in decision-making, not just coalition composition: It's not enough to just be at the table — decisions need to include those who are closest to and most affected by the issue at hand
- To build trust going forward, recognize when it has been betrayed in the past: Potential partners do not enter into coalitions as blank slates, so leaders need to develop ways of expressing credible commitments that build (or rebuild) trust

- Set expectations about behavior and accountability mechanisms for addressing present and future conflict or violations: Conflict within coalitions is inevitable; consequently, coalitions need to develop principles and procedures to correct and potentially sanction bad behavior
- Where possible, discuss any out-of-bounds policies or thresholds ahead of time: Individual organizations all have their own values and red lines they will not cross. These should be shared explicitly and revisited when needed to limit potential misunderstandings and divisions



## Staying aligned

- When in doubt, over-communicate: Misunderstandings are the biggest threat to any relationship, so develop strong norms of explicit communication and information-sharing to keep everyone on the same track
- The more predictability and routines you can build into coalition work, the better: One way to build trust among coalition members is to develop and follow through on the expectations partners set for each other around the work itself and how they will relate to one another
- Remember that political work is emotional: Building a collective identity among coalition members can fortify the emotional resilience needed to overcome internal and external stressors
- Give members opportunities to get to know coalition partners: Recognizing and celebrating who advocates are as people — not just movement allies — bolsters mutual trust and credibility
- Plan for how you'll evaluate strategy: How will you know if you're winning? Determine and develop metrics (whether quantitative, qualitative, or both) that can accurately assess how your coalition is building power
- Learning is key to growth and success: Set aside dedicated time, both during and after the campaign, to reflect on how the coalition is functioning and respond to changes in context

## How to keep growing

- Plan for how you'll evaluate strategy: How will you know if you're winning? Determine and develop metrics (whether quantitative, qualitative, or both) that can accurately assess how your coalition is building power
- Learning is key to growth and success: Set aside dedicated time, both during and after the campaign, to reflect on how the coalition is functioning and respond to changes in context

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# WHY COALITIONS? WHY THIS REPORT?

At the Climate Advocacy Lab, we often get questions about coalitions. But why are coalitions so often identified as the most strategic approach to any political effort? Their allure endures because when coalitions function, they don't just aggregate resources but transform individual organizations' capabilities and constituencies into political power. While coalitional work may require individual groups to concede some of their autonomy, well-designed coalitions generate collective capabilities beyond what even a well-resourced, strategic organization has on its own — the cliched whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. Research confirms that for many major policy changes, it is the work of coalitions that explains whether or not change endures.<sup>1</sup>

Ask anyone who's spent any time in the climate advocacy space, though, and you'll hear a similar story. When someone suggests that organization X would be more powerful — that it would have a better chance of reaching its goals — if it worked in partnership with other organizations — the response might be an eye roll, resignation, or exhaustion just thinking about managing internal dynamics while coordinating across groups.

And we know that hesitancy or skepticism is warranted. Coalition work demands a level of patience, intentionality, and foresight that is often beyond any organization's individual capacity. Even under the best conditions, coalition-based advocacy multiplies the challenges that all of us face trying to build power: securing trust, growing strategic capacity, adjusting to ever-changing political conditions. At their worst, coalitions can solidify legacies of mistrust, replicate existing power imbalances, or burn out skilled advocates altogether.

Coalitions work best when they capture diversity along multiple dimensions — the constituencies represented, the kinds of organizations engaged, and the strategic tools each brings to the table.<sup>2</sup> The last 20 years of climate advocacy confirm that the mainstream green organizations — even working in lockstep — cannot go it alone. Looking back at the failure to pass federal climate legislation in 2009-2010 when political factors seemingly favored action, for instance, many attribute the loss to an absence of grassroots, outside-the-Beltway support.<sup>3</sup> Looking across the country for bright spots, we see that, often, wins can be traced back to coalitions where mainstream environmental organizations joined forces with social justice organizations and frontline communities.<sup>4</sup>

But as we all know, collective efforts that traverse lines of race, class, background, or issue are difficult even when the people or groups involved seem to share

political goals or values. The mainstream environmental movement's historical and systematic exclusion of people of color and dismissal of community-based needs only amplifies those challenges.<sup>5</sup>

Since 2016, the mainstream environmental movement has faced multiple reckonings. There is growing recognition, for instance, that the societal transition away from fossil fuels should be just, meaning that solutions must address the needs of the workers and communities most affected. The Green New Deal framework called for a shift from market-oriented solutions to a program of public climate investment on par with the original New Deal. Rather than focus solely on emissions reductions, many advocates now frame action as an opportunity to reconfigure the U.S. economy to be more equitable and to build resilience in the most vulnerable communities.

Especially after the Black Lives Matter uprising in the summer of 2020, many environmental advocates, leaders, and funders came to recognize their own inattention to power asymmetries among those fighting climate change. That is to say: the mainstream environmental movement is just now starting to contend with its own failures. Multiracial, cross-class (MRXC) coalitions represent one opportunity to examine whether privileged advocates can move beyond symbolic support and meaningfully shift power toward marginalized people, communities, and organizations.

The goal of this report is to shed light on both the promises and the perils of work in MRXC climate coalitions. Specifically, we want to identify the kinds of decisions that coalition participants face and to examine how those choices shape the coalition for good and for worse. We set out to tackle these broad questions: What can we learn from coalitions that achieved their desired goals and/or gained power to be leveraged for a future fight? What patterns do we see across coalitions that either fell short of their goals or failed to create healthy environments for participation? What best practices can we glean from evidence-based work outside the climate space?

In this report we lay out ideas, concepts, and challenges that consistently appeared across empirical research, practitioner recommendations, and coalition members' first-hand experiences. You will read a great deal about the importance of front-loading, or taking time to imagine the coalition's work in the future. This process can be used to create coalition structure, put in place decision-making mechanisms, and map out the roles, responsibilities, and capacities needed to move forward. Attention to trust and a radical commitment to

**At their worst, coalitions can solidify legacies of mistrust, replicate existing power imbalances, and burn out skilled advocates altogether. What can we learn from coalitions that achieved their desired goals and/or gained power to be leveraged for a future fight? What patterns do we see across coalitions that either fell short of their goals or failed to create healthy environments for participation? What best practices can we glean from evidence-based work outside the climate space?**

transparency, we learned, are as or more important to coalition efficacy as resources or skills.

We heard loud and clear that decisions about the mechanics of coalition work cannot be disentangled from those about how the group will interact, treat one another, and handle internal conflict. Mapping out how coalition members will work together — what some describe as a group’s relational culture — cannot be an afterthought. If coalitions want to make meaningful progress toward social, racial and environmental justice, they must prioritize process goals, or how you want to do the work and how you want those involved to feel.

Thankfully, our interviewees were open and

vulnerable about the pain points coalitions can expect to face. Many highlighted the difficulty of consistently implementing what they (and existing research) know to be best practices, such as consistent internal communication and holding dedicated space and time for learning and reflection, amid the frenzy of campaigns. Interviewees said that they all experienced moments when attention to power imbalances slipped, thus repeating the very historical harms they set out to course-correct. The bottom line: building multiracial, cross-class climate coalitions poses immense challenges and demands serious capacity, commitment, and mutuality.

The remainder of the report describes the key decision points MRXC climate coalitions are likely to face and provides examples for how different choices played out in actual climate campaigns. We close with recommendations that distill the core ideas and suggest some best practices. The accompanying workbook goes into yet more detail; coalition builders can walk through a series of questions and prompts designed to demonstrate how each concept could play out in the set-up and running of a campaign.

We intend for this report and workbook to provide current and prospective members of multiracial, cross-class climate coalitions a resource to catalog the complexities of coalition work and to gut-check their own internal culture, processes, and norms. It is not enough for climate advocates to rush into coalitions with eager partners, recreate the same toxic structures as in the past, and then lose morale when familiar problems arise. We see this project as a Blueprint to a better alternative. It lays out the ways that specific decisions and explicit discussions can lead to different pathways — toward more effective coalitions with healthier cultures that can withstand internal and external challenges. Following this Blueprint may not always be easy; the elements we identify require vulnerability, introspection, and cooperation. But from the conversations we’ve had and the insights we’ve gained during its creation, we’re convinced that many of us are up for the fight.

## Our process

We drew from two main sources to identify the variables that can nurture healthy, effective coalitions.<sup>6</sup> First, we scanned peer-reviewed literature in political science, sociology, psychology and other disciplines with the goal of identifying those factors that, across fields, research suggests play a role in a coalition’s capacity to function and ensure a safe space for participants. “[Designing Resilient Coalitions](#),” a report by the P3 Lab at the SNF Agora Center at Johns Hopkins

University, was a jumping off point for much of that research, and we’re indebted to them for synthesizing such a robust body of scholarship.<sup>7</sup>

We complemented that research with input from practitioners on the ground — we conducted 18 in-depth interviews with advocates from across the climate advocacy ecosystem to dig into their experiences, good and bad, as members of climate coalitions. What follows are the main takeaways from those analyses.



We recognize, of course, that no list or report can fully capture the dynamics of power, personality, and positionality that animate any coalition. Instead, we aimed to provide descriptions and examples of those principles and characteristics that consistently showed up in the empirical data and lived experiences we reviewed.

We've chosen to present the variables in what could resemble the trajectory of a climate coalition. That said, coalition work is by no means predictable, and we anticipate various coalitions skipping or toggling between many of these questions or challenges. Our goal was to lay out examples of the kinds of decisions and pivot points that we heard across the stories and experiences shared with us. Note that factors listed lower in the list are no less important than those at the top.

### **What kinds of decisions, challenges, or questions shape a coalition's capacity and functionality?**

**TRUST** Trust is the engine of a coalition's collective power. When the relationships that underpin MRXC coalitions are based in trust, working in coalition can amplify individual groups' capabilities and build resilience. When coalition participants have confidence that others will fulfill their responsibilities and behave in ways that align with agreed-upon expectations, a coalition can more smoothly execute its strategy and remain flexible to face any barriers that emerge. That may necessitate being upfront about the resources they can share or committing the time of senior staff to the coalition. For individual advocates, trusting relationships enrich the coalition experience while nurturing commitment and buy-in. Trust doesn't appear out of nowhere; it's dependent on past experiences and historical patterns. That means MRXC coalition members need to build or, often, restore trust that has been broken, especially across constituencies or focal issues.

**CLARITY** All of us bring assumptions to coalition work. Echoing existing research, interviewees stressed that coalitions are stronger when they can surface and collectively discuss those assumptions. Beyond making the implicit explicit, clarity also looks like a shared understanding of collective goals, the benefit of the coalition's work to respective constituents, and expectations about how participants will relate to one another. Interviewees said that maintaining transparency required significant investments in time and energy, especially in a coalition's early days. But working through any murkiness about the coalition's processes or protocols always paid off. When coalition participants are aware of the whos, hows and whys of the work, they become more dedicated and the coalition functions more smoothly.

**RESOURCES** As with any political effort, who needs, gets, and decides how to spend money matters immensely. Although additional funds can bolster a coalition or its member organizations' capacities, these decisions can hinder healthy dynamics if, for instance, they replicate existing power imbalances or undermine the collective commitment across organizations. The presence and role that funders play — some are entirely hands-off while others actively engage through the campaign process — also inform how coalition members interact.

**INCLUSION AND VOICE** Studies show that coalitions are more likely to succeed when they draw from — and that their base constituencies reflect — the people and organizations closest to, involved in or affected by a problem or issue. But “a seat at the table” is not sufficient if a coalition's norms or policies do not account for historical power asymmetries. We heard time and time again the important distinction between being in the room where it happens versus handing the strategic reins to historically marginalized individuals and groups. Rather than merely request an after-the-fact policy endorsement from BIPOC-led or serving organizations, the coalitions whose leaders came from frontline groups or marginalized communities were able to generate more power and more equitable climate solutions.

**GOVERNANCE** Governance refers to the policies, procedures, and norms related to decision-making. Research shows that distributing decision-making power and establishing clarity around those processes increases commitment and buy-in. When a coalition is knee-deep in legislative negotiations, however, it's not always possible to take a vote on every decision point. Political advocacy requires balancing the amount of input and distribution of authority with the need to act quickly and decisively. None of the parameters discussed below — the proportion of agreement needed, the ways votes are tallied, etc. — was more perfect than another. What is most important is that a process be in place and is implemented consistently with transparent ground rules.

**ANTICIPATING AND PLANNING FOR CONFLICT** Accountability requires that a coalition identify a process and norms around what happens when an individual or participating organization does not follow through on a commitment or causes harm to fellow members. Although these systems require time up-front to craft, evidence shows that having them in place tends to make coalition members more likely to stick to commitments, and for interpersonal disagreements to be resolved in a timely way. In any high-stakes context, strategic disputes and interpersonal hurts are inevitable; we



asked coalition partners to share what worked and what didn't when faced with the challenges inherent in MRXC coalition work: historical friction, structural inequities, interpersonal harm, and lack of strategic alignment.

**WAYS OF WORKING** After committing to a shared goal, coalitions have to create a structure to make real the essential work of advocacy: drafting policy, lobbying, communicating internally and externally, grassroots organizing, and more. Existing evidence suggests that getting clarity on “who does what” not only amplifies a coalition’s capacity but also engenders agency and buy-in among members. All of the more formal coalitions in our sample used task and/or constituency-based subcommittees anchored by a leadership committee responsible for major strategic adjustments.

**COLLECTIVIZING IDENTITY AND REFLECTION** Amid the tumult of any campaign, it’s easy to forget that what people feel is as critical to success as any policy detail or visibility strategy. Multiple disciplines point to

the importance of emotion and belonging as shaping people’s experiences in group settings. Collective identity refers to a sense of “we-ness” or belonging that generates a shared sense of purpose and strategic direction. For the distinct identities and perspectives that underpin MRXC collaboration to translate into power, the group needs to create space and build practices to foster collective ownership and commitment.

**LEARNING** Just as with individual organizations, we know coalitions benefit from systems and cultures of learning. That means that both the processes and norms around collecting, sharing and making sense of new information matter. Certainly, some of these data challenges involve choosing tools and establishing workflows. But it is clear that having robust technological tools for tracking and analytics do not automatically correspond to learning. Groups have to be intentional about making the time, space and dedicated capacity for collective learning to take place – what our contributors described as a central challenge.

## Case Selection and Background

Once we identified our key variables, we used them as the basis to analyze five recent climate campaigns that featured MRXC coalitions. When we considered which campaigns to explore in-depth, we tried to include variety in terms of location, the type of initiative, length, the formality of collaboration, its relative success, and the range of organizations involved. That said, we do not suggest that these five coalitions are representative of a field as expansive and dynamic as climate advocacy in the U.S.; we recognize every coalition grows out of a particular geographic, demographic, political, and cultural context.

To get a closer look at internal dynamics, we decided to focus on a single coalition from each campaign. However, that does not necessarily mean it was the only coalition. In the Illinois case, for example, there were labor and renewable energy coalitions *in addition* to the Illinois Clean Jobs Coalition (ICJC) that was the focus of our work. Similarly, we were not able to talk to someone at every organization within a coalition, so none of these accounts is complete.



### Members of the NY Renews Steering Committee at a strategy meeting in 2023

Last, this is not an endorsement or even deep analysis of any one policy solution or another. We were more concerned with the people dimension – the processes and policies that guide how individuals and groups pursue a shared goal. In addition to the sources listed in the bibliography, we’ve gathered additional background on [the Lab’s website](#).

## CASES



### **CAMPAIGN: PORTLAND CLEAN ENERGY FUND**

**COALITION:** PCEF is a municipal grant program that was established after 65 percent of voters approved the ballot measure in November 2018. As of 2020, the fund will have distributed between \$44-61 million dollars annually for renewable energy, energy efficiency, job training, and green infrastructure. Funds come from a 1 percent supplemental business license surcharge on large retail corporations such as Wells Fargo, Apple, and Banana Republic that generate over \$1 billion a year in national revenue and \$500,000 in Portland sales. As we explore below, this measure was created with the explicit focus of ensuring that the energy transition be just and benefit low-income, BIPOC, and frontline communities facing the joint pressures of climate change, racism, and displacement. Unless otherwise specified, interviewees for this case were part of organizations that participated in the PCEF Coalition, the umbrella organization for the multiracial, cross-class effort. For more, see info pages from the [advocacy coalition](#) that led the campaign and from the [City of Portland](#).



### **CAMPAIGN: NEW YORK CLIMATE LEADERSHIP AND COMMUNITY PROTECTION ACT (CLCPA)**

**COALITION:** NY Renews (NYR) was the main advocacy coalition behind New York's landmark climate justice law, the Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act (CLCPA). The CLCPA mandated the state to reach 100 percent renewable energy production by 2040 and to move 85 percent of New York's entire economy off of fossil fuels by 2050. The law addresses environmental justice by ensuring that no less than 35 percent of all climate and clean energy spending go to frontline communities. For more information see the [case study](#) laying out the campaign's story and the [state's info page](#).



### **CAMPAIGN: MINNESOTA LINE 3 FIGHT**

**COALITION:** In 2014, the Canada-based corporation Enbridge filed a proposal to replace and modify the path of more than 300 miles of pipeline that carry tar sands oil from Alberta to Superior, Wisconsin. They were met by fierce resistance from Indigenous groups, environmental organizations, and other activists. The reasons for protest were many. Any spill — the company had had more than 1,000 spills when the project was proposed — would endanger waterways that are spiritually and economically meaningful for the Indigenous people of northern Minnesota, including the Anishinaabe on whose treaty land the pipeline would traverse. The project doubled the amount of oil the tar sands could transport, doubling Minnesota's annual carbon output. Like many infrastructure projects, support or protest divided communities that, in many other ways, share characteristics or interests. Some Indigenous tribes came to support the project for its economic benefits, for instance, while private landowners were split about the costs and benefits of the pipeline. After years of protests, Line 3 came online in the fall of 2018. For more information, check out the [Stop Line 3 campaign website](#) and [MN350's information section](#).



### **CAMPAIGN: ILLINOIS CLIMATE AND EQUITABLE JOBS ACT (CEJA)**

**COALITION:** Illinois Clean Jobs Coalition (ICJC) was instrumental in passing CEJA in 2021, which put the state on a path to achieve 100 percent clean energy by 2045 by targeting power, transportation, and building sectors. In what supporters described as a major improvement from previous statewide climate legislation, the law "uniquely prioritizes clean energy investments and job creation in historically disinvested low-income and environmental justice communities" (Spengeman, 2021). For more information, check out the [coalition's web site](#) and the [state's info page](#).



### **CAMPAIGN: WASHINGTON BALLOT INITIATIVE 1631**

**COALITION:** The Alliance for Jobs and Clean Energy (AJCE) was a coalition of more than 200 organizations that started convening in 2014 to address climate change in a way that recognized the needs of frontline communities and workers. After a failed carbon tax ballot initiative in 2016 (I-732) — which many in the coalition opposed or restrained support because it did not invest any of the funds into the communities most affected — AJCE became the driving force behind a 2018 effort in which the fee monies would have been invested in community-level emissions reductions projects (I-1631). That initiative failed to secure a majority at the ballot. Over the course of 2020-2021, state legislators introduced several climate-related bills, including one that would establish a cap-and-trade program. Some groups opposed that particular mechanism because they were skeptical it would hold polluters accountable for reducing emissions while creating benefits for frontline communities. The coalition splintered around if and how to engage with that cap-and-trade bill, which later passed as the Climate Commitment Act.

# MAIN FINDINGS

We might describe coalitions that prioritize building trust and clarity as starting on solid footing. But from that foundation, participants face a range of decisions about what the coalition will look like and how it will function. We looked for and found many consistencies between what existing literature describes as key choices about coalition

structure and what our interviewees described as questions or challenges any healthy coalition must face. Political work is so contingent that we admit we likely missed some key pain points or strategic choices. We are confident, though, that all coalitions will have to answer questions about each of the topics below.

## Anchoring Principles – Trust and Clarity

Above all other variables, trust and clarity – what we call anchoring principles – seem to transcend any single decision point or set of practices. References to trust and the importance of transparent processes are so frequent in both the existing literature and our interviewees’ experiences that we thought it worth taking the time to break down each concept, connect it to coalition outcomes, and share some thoughts on how these take shape – or not – in the field.

### WHAT IS TRUST?

Looking across decades of scholarship, one review article summarized trust simply as the willingness of an entity to become vulnerable with another entity.<sup>8</sup> Many researchers add the dimension of expectations: person A trusts that person B will behave in a certain way. The fact that past experiences shape these expectations helps us understand why so much time and energy must be spent rebuilding trust that has eroded.

### TRUST AND COALITION OUTCOMES

There are few areas of social life disconnected from trust. Collective action, reciprocity, solidarity, equality – research ties each of these outcomes to a foundation of trust.<sup>9</sup> The power of trust to propel social change, however, is perhaps matched by the potential threats to its effectiveness: historical inequities, resource scarcity, and conflicting values, to name a few. If we’re serious about building durable power for just climate solutions, those challenges have to be met head on. While coalitions built on trusting relationships magnify the capabilities and power of individual organizations, a persistent atmosphere of mistrust leaves members atomized, uncoordinated, and ineffective. Data show that when coalition members trust one another, they improve not only the functioning of the group but also its capacity to resolve conflict, hold tensions, and respond to external stressors.<sup>10</sup>

Building trust makes the process of internal

negotiation and compromise easier – organizations are more likely to accept concessions to their individual preferences if they trust coalition partners are arguing in good faith. Trust also enhances coordination and cooperation among coalition members. Gina Peltier, an organizer with Honor the Earth during the Line 3 fight, said individual resistance camps were able to rely on one another to openly share building or food supplies during the many months of demonstrating: “That’s what really made me enjoy working in coalition. You know MN350, IEN (Indigenous Environmental Network), MNIPL (Minnesota Interfaith Power and Light), R.I.S.E. Coalition, if someone didn’t have something, the others would show up and provide.”

### CLIMATE ADVOCATES ON TRUST

**Trust demands a lot of us.** One of the most consistent comments across our cases was the significant investments of time and emotional energy required to build trust. The core group of organizations that jumpstarted Portland’s Clean Energy Fund (PECF), for instance, met to establish core values and review policy options for three years before their initiative appeared on the ballot. Making credible commitments to each other can also show up as committing the time and effort of senior staff; for instance, AJCE’s steering committee

*“There has to be a certain level of trust to actually move the work forward. And that comes with time and patience ... I’ve never experienced a formula that, within six months or within a year or two years, you have to have this level of trust. It doesn’t work that way. It comes and goes.”*

– Leslie Cagan, NY Renewables



ended up including dozens of executive director and director-level participants. We heard repeatedly that trust should dictate the speed of coalition work. At the same time, many said they recognized that the deliberative pace can seem inconsistent with speed and scope of the climate threat. Coalitions should strive for a balance that recognizes the necessity of timelines and deadlines but does not prioritize urgency in ways that threaten the relational dimension of coalition work. Relationships, be they one-to-one or across organizations, cannot be secondary to coalition strategy. In many ways, relationships are the strategy.

**Recognize legacies of mistrust.** The trust-building process does not start from a blank slate. Because trust rests on one person's behavior matching another's expectations, past behavior defines baseline trust — or lack thereof. Staff and organizers from BIPOC and/or frontline groups described being asked to join past coalitions only to provide a superficial policy endorsement or implement a strategy they had no hand in building. These and other hurts should not be papered over. Similarly, trust is not a static characteristic; a coalition does not achieve trust then move on to other challenges. If a coalition could track trust among and between members over time, the lines would likely be erratic and dotted with major up and down swings — and that's normal.

**Trust isn't just positive feelings — it's power.** As much as trust supports positive emotions and healthy relationships, we learned that trust across constituencies and organizational types can also translate into political power. For the final, closed-door CEJA negotiations, ICJC sent three representatives. Advocates from the coalition told us that those leads were empowered to make changes — to a point. John Delurey, Vote Solar's senior regional director for the Midwest, described the trust that the larger coalition had in the negotiators: "We empowered them. We tried to draw a line there of where they can toggle things because they need to be empowered to negotiate in or out, and where there are things that are of such high value to the coalition that they would have to say in the moment, 'Hey, we're gonna have to bring this back to our coalition and get their approval.' And they did that a lot. They did practice that, they strengthened that muscle by using it. And I think that also built our power."

## CLARITY AROUND WHAT?

From defining abstract ideals like equity to specific instructions for taking subcommittee notes, coalitions should consider how to foreground clarity. Clarity refers to making explicit the assumptions all of us bring to a shared space. Whether about the work itself ("Who's doing what? Why pursue X strategy over Y?") or the

*"[Aligning is] hard, but it needs to be done. To be specific about why you're in it together, because it helps to define the terms of engagement for people, whether they want to be there and in what way they want to be there."*

— Andy Pearson, Line 3

life experiences people carry into the coalition, our interviewees emphasized that there is no such thing as too much transparency or communication. When coalitions can be explicit about what they are striving for and how they'll get there together, they function more smoothly, generate more power, and avoid harmful miscommunications.

The most effective coalitions do not take any action until they can collectively answer two fundamental questions: "What goal or goals are we pursuing together?" and "How do we want to relate to one another as we fight for them?" Coalitions that neglect either question, our advocates insisted, sow distrust and division instead of solidarity. To answer the first, coalitions should come to an agreement on a precise outcome. That outcome functions as a kind of North Star: it clarifies the group's ultimate destination and works as a source of solidarity when internal challenges arise. Even if a goal evolves over the course of a campaign, the key is to empower coalition members to make those changes together, which ensures that the entire group stays apprised of any adjustments.

The second overarching question demands coalition members spell out precisely how the group commits to share space with one another. There is no one "right" way to go about determining the values that you'll prioritize or how you'll translate them into behavioral norms. Some coalitions coalesced around values after months of conversations but didn't see the need to put them to paper. Others formalized expectations in a lengthy document. The key takeaway was the same: those questions are paramount, and coalitions should be thoughtful about addressing them early in their formation and revisiting them regularly.

Process goals, relational culture, strategic culture — these are terms that speak to a similar approach to coalition work, one that centers relationships above all else. You can see seeds of that idea in various organizing traditions, conflict management tools, and social justice literature. The crux is this: how you will do the work is equally important as the coalition's strategy. The coalition members who used this approach emphasized that centering relationships does not mean zero tension. Rather, they said collective commitments

PRICE THE POLLUTION, FUND THE SOLUTIONS



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EQUITABLE TRANSITION FOR ALL

A graphic of Initiative 1631's benefits from an AJCE informational document

about mutual respect, vulnerability, and candor made it possible to navigate the conflicts that did arise.

Andy Pearson is the Midwest Tar Sands Coordinator at MN350. For nearly a decade, he has operated in spaces where groups came together both for long-term collaborative efforts and/or for discrete events. He said that, without fail, "If we allow the goals to descend into either an unmaintained laundry list of everything everybody wanted or we didn't set them at all — that event was probably not going to go very well."

### CLARITY AND COALITION OUTCOMES

Coalitions that are transparent about roles, goals, and workflows are more resilient.<sup>11</sup> When people understand how a decision was made, they are more likely to remain committed to and invested in the collective effort — even when they disagree with the choice itself.<sup>12</sup> Studies also demonstrate that merely having accountability processes in place increases the odds people will align with them.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps most importantly, clear roles foster an alignment of expectations and behavior that lays the foundation for trusting relationships.<sup>14</sup> Every coalition will face uncertainty in pursuit of its strategy. But coalitions need to be clear about what they are working toward, including the specific material benefits they want to earn for their respective constituencies. In the case of I-1631, leaders ensured not only that funds from the fee would be invested in frontline communities and job training — but also that those decisions would be made by groups operating with a participatory governance structure. According to our conversations and the existing data, internal cohesion and clarity bolster a coalition's capability and desire to work through what is a contingent, dynamic situation.

### CLIMATE ADVOCATES ON TRUST IN THE CONTEXT OF COALITION WORK

Trust demands a lot of us. Increasingly, advocates participating in intentionally multiracial, cross-class coalitions say that they seek to center equity and justice in both the policy solutions they pursue and how the coalition does its work. But what environmental or social justice looks like can differ from person to person or organization to organization. Concepts such as equity and fairness — coalitions have to discuss together what they mean, otherwise they are toothless ideals as opposed to organizing principles. Lili Scales, state director at the ICJC, said that what equity means and looks like in terms of policy compromises has to be constantly renegotiated over time and among groups: "Equity was so integral, and we talked about it for years. We're not going to sacrifice that." By the time that the final policy details of CEJA were being hammered out inside the Capitol, she said that the larger coalition trusted its two negotiators: "We could also trust that they understand the same definitions of what our values are and what equity means."

For some coalitions, that also meant drawing lines around specific policy compromises that were automatically off the table. Deric Gruen, current director of Front and Centered and former member of the AJCE steering committee, described that prior to the planning for what would become I-1631, there was pressure to consider a cap-and-trade model. "That was a red line for our coalition," he recalled. "Our coalition was not about the price on carbon, it was about funding the just transition." That was made explicit from the onset, he said, as were standards about how the investment money would be spent and the participatory governance structure that would determine distribution. Once those "must-haves" were in place, Deric said the group could negotiate on everything else.

## WITHOUT CLEAR PARAMETERS, YOU CAN DRIFT

Xaver Kandler, campaigns coordinator (and former organizing lead) at NY Renews, recognized that aligning on a single, shared priority demanded a huge investment of time in the early days of NY Renews. Yet being able to turn again and again to that specific goal was particularly important as the coalition grew over time. Because participating groups had agreed on exactly what NY Renews was — a statewide legislative coalition devoted to equitable climate solutions — they could debate any requests or changes through the lens of that identity.

When assumptions or preferences are not made explicit, coalitions risk falling back into old patterns or structures of the status quo. When the AJCE faced unprecedented pushback — the fossil fuel industry invested more than \$30 million to fight I-1631 — the coalition had to develop a response strategy relatively quickly. Deric said he was not sure the full coalition was bought in on the revised approach, which centered less on grassroots organizing and more on spending for polling and strategic communication.

## RADICAL TRANSPARENCY IS EXHAUSTING — BUT WORTH IT

Andy (Line 3) that he recognized that getting to clarity — naming the groups' shared interest, identifying a specific goal, making explicit the decision-making structure — can be agonizing. But when you get past that, "people feel like they've established the fundamentals together. And then they want to see it through. And they're invested in giving their own capacity to it, because they've connected it. They've connected the dots in their mind for how it's going to lead to them getting their needs met and their goals fulfilled." strategic communication.

Clarity during the height of campaign developments is no less arduous. In fact, some of the phrases used to describe how ICJC kept its coalition members up to speed were "redundant" and "overcommunicated." But it was imperative not just that folks know what was going on in the CEJA campaign, Lili argued, but that they understood it. "We're as powerful as our people," she said. So if members needed policy folks to re-explain something, they did — even if it meant that meetings went far into the night.

## Resources

It doesn't matter how much passion or collective expertise groups bring to a coalition space: setting up effective, healthy coalitions requires material resources. Our data show a clear pattern wherein early and consistent funding improved the coalition's internal dynamics and its overall capabilities. Our interviewees stressed the importance of strategizing about funding months — if not years — in advance of any particular policy push. For instance, Adriana Voss-Andreae, 350PDX executive director and PCEF executive committee member, said core coalition members sought out grants for brainstorming conversations, relationship building, and strategizing three years before the ballot initiative they would later craft and place on the ballot.

One scholar who studies coalitional efforts uses the term "overcoalitioned communities" to refer to the fact many organizations (especially those that are place-based) are invited to more coalitions than their baseline capacity covers.<sup>15</sup> If mainstream environmental, white-led, or other privileged organizations want to meaningfully engage frontline voices or center equity in the fight for climate solutions — which many if not all have said they do — raising or providing funds is one way to move beyond hat tips and toward inclusion and power-shifts.

For AJCE, NY Renews, and ICJC, material support during a coalition's earliest days (in some cases before

*"Organized money and organized people is power. And if we're running a coalition that doesn't have what we need to go against fossil fuel industries, we're never going to be able to compete. You need money in the system we are in."*

— Lili Scales, ICJC

any concrete efforts to coordinate across organizations) made it possible to gather community input on not only the content of the policies but also how previous organizing or policy efforts might have fallen short, especially around questions of equity. In the case of Illinois, the state had previously passed climate legislation in 2016. But advocates representing labor and environmental justice pointed out that the law neither addressed some important sources of emissions (transportation) nor included plans to ensure clean job opportunities would reach those historically excluded from the renewable energy economy.

When coalition members reconvened to assess lessons learned and plan a forward-looking strategy in 2018, representatives from environmental justice groups

urged for a more inclusive process devoted to more listening. The Illinois Environmental Council re-granted about a quarter of a million dollars in 2018 and 2019 to create capacity specifically for events dedicated to listening. All told, organizers led hundreds of listening sessions across all of the state's 59 legislative districts. Those conversations generated creative policies that had not been on the table for the Future Energy Jobs Act (FEJA), including a green bank to finance clean energy projects and a "contractor incubator" to assist lower-income people of color to start their own clean energy businesses.<sup>16</sup>

### **VARIED APPROACHES TO FUNDING**

How and from whom money was raised and distributed varied a lot across cases. NY Renew, the entity created to manage the NY-based climate coalition of focus for us, got most of its funding from foundations, which it then re-granted to participating organizations. According to Xaver, grants need to be substantial to make a difference. These grants should be large enough that people can really have staff members — whose 20% of their time, for example, or 50% of their time — is directed towards NY Renew so that groups really have the "capacity" to accomplish coalition goals.

Funds weren't distributed equally across organizations at the same level of involvement or similar roles. Xaver said the team tried to be conscientious that they are allocating funding to groups they perceive as in more need, such as funding smaller environmental justice groups instead of large, mainstream environmental organizations.

In addition to applying directly for large foundation grants, the Portland coalition leveraged their existing relationships at the individual and organizational levels. In some cases, that meant that organizations asked for donations from individuals in their member constituencies. Some of the volunteer-led local affiliates — the Oregon chapter of the Sierra Club, for instance — requested and received some support from national offices. According to Adriana, in-kind donations such as office space, organizational staff time, and campaign consultants were critical campaign resources.

### **RESOURCE DYNAMICS CAN AFFECT COALITION CULTURE AND STRATEGY**

Often, the material resources an organization brings to a coalition space reflect long-standing inequities in philanthropy. For decades, environmental funders largely ignored groups fighting for marginalized or frontline communities, instead filling the coffers of a few highly centralized, white-led groups. Despite funders' promises



### **A group of PCEF supporters on a canvassing action near Portland's Alberta Arts District**

in the last decade, the data still paint a grim picture. One study of the Midwest and Gulf South found that only about 1 percent of environmental grantmaking from 12 of the largest environmental funders went to environmental justice groups.<sup>17</sup> Another found that just 20 organizations get half of all funding for climate issues, and leadership across those organizations was 90% white and 80% male.<sup>18</sup> For smaller organizations or those representing marginalized communities, this has created a permanent sense of scarcity. In that sense, coalition spaces often look less like opportunities to build power and more like an arena to vie for a small pot of potential resources.

Whether intentional or not, well-resourced organizations often assume that their authority in the coalition should be commensurate with the resources they bring to the table. Longtime labor activist Jeff Johnson is a former President of the Washington State Labor Council, AFL-CIO who served on the Governing Board of the AJCE during the I-1631 campaign. He recalled when the coalition invited a large traditional conservation group to join.

Jeff and Deric both mentioned that at some moments in the I-1631 campaign, the strategy drifted toward the preferences and skills of the wealthier organizations. Jeff described the initial phases of AJCE work as focused on grassroots organizing and directing funds to frontline organizations and tribal communities for issue education. When the fossil fuel industry dumped more than \$30 million into anti-I-1631 messaging, the priority shifted to raising money for a



counter-offensive. Traditional green groups, Jeff shared, “went where the money was pulling them.” The result, he said, was a much more “conventional” campaign – TV ads and mailers but little organizing and education on the ground.

### THE ROLE OF FUNDERS

Several advocates wanted to agitate around funders’ assumptions regarding timelines and the tendency to fund episodic campaigns as opposed to sustained power building. Lili (ICJC) said that, in her experience, funders often want to see results immediately and thus overlook the importance of community building, which she described as a “substantial” concern for coalitions that purport to value equity. Lili said some funders are starting to recognize the need for a long-game, but that they aren’t moving fast enough.

Eóin Small is an organizer working with indigenous

tribes and environmental groups in Northern Minnesota to fight Line 3 and other extractive industry projects. Even if a particular piece of infrastructure was permitted and completed, as Line 3 was, Eóin said advocates and funders are mistaken if they believe the need for material support ends with any so-called “campaign loss: “I think one of the things that’s really difficult is that with a lot of these fights that become amplified and reach the mainstream, the second it’s built, the funding evaporates.” That loss of funding can impact future opportunities. The process of bringing Line 3 online, for example, revealed some substantial regulatory gaps that the coalition could exploit. But Eóin insisted that leveraging that knowledge would require resources: nonprofits and funders that supported the protests should follow-up with millions “to lobby the politicians to close up every regulatory gap that we experienced during this project – so it never happens again.”

## Inclusion and Voice

Given the current political climate, some advocates might hesitate to frame coalition work in potentially exclusive terms, such as defining people as “in” or “out.” But research says setting a boundary – emphasizing that all coalition members make up the “in” group – contributes to the clarity and trust that nurture more effective, healthy coalition spaces. By establishing who is “in” and in what capacity, a coalition affirms the constituencies it represents, to whom it is accountable, and who has authority for collective decision-making.<sup>19</sup>

When coalition leaders or founding members think about building out the coalition, it’s important that they keep an eye on different kinds of diversity, such as the amount of power an organization has, the capabilities it brings, its closeness to the problem at hand, individual members’ backgrounds, etc. Existing data show myriad ways that diversity (at the individual and group levels) strengthens groups. Integrating different types of knowledge and expertise generates better informed decisions, and studies suggest that groups generate more power when their strategic toolbox is as expansive as possible.<sup>20</sup>

### BE WARY OF EXCLUDING ANY POTENTIAL PARTNER

Future coalition builders should examine the assumptions they make about specific kinds of organizations or constituencies, especially presumptions about what a group will or will not support. A great deal of scholarship and advocates’ energy has focused on



what’s necessary for greens and labor – constituencies often pitted against each other – to build generative partnerships. But what might have once seemed like predictable patterns of conflict (that is, labor united against environmental groups whose policies they feared would destroy jobs) no longer hold.

Several interviewees cited examples when coalition members from one constituency perceived people from another (whether based on race, class, or a group’s focal issue) as part of a monolith. This sort of assumption belies important differences at the individual and group level. Not all Indigenous tribes opposed the updated Line 3 path, for instance. And within the tribes that pushed back against the project publicly, there was internal dissent around how to balance potential harm

to ancestral lands with the community's need for the kind of high-paying, long-term jobs that pipelines were promised to create.<sup>21</sup> Interviewees said that mainstream environmental organizations are often guilty of ignoring these and other complex internal dynamics and can, as a result, become quickly frustrated or write off would-be partners entirely.

Bree Halverson is the Midwest Field Director for the BlueGreen Alliance (BGA), a group that unites labor unions and environmental groups to advocate for a

***"We [labor unions] are as diverse as society is."***

**– Jeff Johnson, AJCE**

just transition and equitable economy. BGA supports state-level coalitions across the country, and Bree said she often observes that green groups' urgency around climate solutions — which she recognizes is warranted given the threat — clashes with the time and space that unions need to work through very real questions about their members' livelihoods. She said she thinks some greens still don't understand the quality of jobs related to fossil fuel infrastructure. In addition to making sure all replacement positions are equally high-paying and secure, unions also act as a watchdog against unfair contracts, wage theft, and worker safety. Working through those issues requires ongoing relationships with management, she said, and pushes up against this "very real ticking clock for climate."

Interviewees said that many in the climate space often don't realize just how big the labor tent is. Jeff, who is currently the chair of the board of the Labor Network for Sustainability, put it this way: "We [labor unions] are as diverse as society is." Consider the range of jobs affiliated with a single state-level AFL-CIO: retail, manufacturing, education, healthcare, public safety, service professionals, and more. That means when an AFL-CIO or Strategic Organizing Center (SOC, another umbrella organization) is asked to endorse a climate policy, it must juggle the preferences and concerns of members from wildly different sectors, many with conflicting incentives related to climate solutions. In unions where members' jobs are not tied to energy infrastructure, Bree said she hears members advocating internally, "what are we doing on climate?" That's entirely different from many of the building trades (those connected to construction, such as ironworkers, carpenters, and laborers), who often come to climate spaces skeptical that a transition can truly be just for them. If coalitions want to engage union members on climate action, she they should be aware of the breadth of (sometimes contradictory) viewpoints they will

encounter.

Interviewees also emphasized a key difference between labor unions and other constituencies in the climate space: unions' internal accountability mechanisms. "One thing that is really unseen a lot of times when it comes to labor unions is that the people who work for the union are elected by membership and are accountable to that membership on a monthly basis," Bree said. That changes the dynamics of how a union representative comes to a table or coalition space. As a result, representing a union on a climate coalition requires building awareness about the issue and its connection to its members' lives. But coalition members from unions have to navigate internal politics on top of the challenges of coalition work.

Representing multiple unions, which is how labor showed up for most coalitions we reviewed, only amplifies those challenges. Jeff might have been the sole labor voice on the AJCE's leadership committee, but as former president of the Washington Labor Federation and current board chair at the Labor Network for Sustainability, he had to negotiate across dozens of unions. In that context, he said that no single issue or policy can ever be untangled from the larger web of relationships and priorities. That includes vertical connections and complications, like when unions in building trades devoted time on their national convention agenda to criticize anything related to clean energy, or when public sector employees missed a critical I-1631 vote when they rushed to DC to protest a surprise Supreme Court decision.

Labor is never just fighting for or over one thing, labor organizers said. Building trades are working out jurisdiction on projects, coalitions are coordinating with government agencies on worker safety standards, and union reps are lobbying elected officials on multiple pieces of legislation. In such a dynamic, sometimes cluttered space, Jeff said 1-on-1 relationships and who holds leadership positions can shape how unions engage with an issue. In the years before I-1631, Jeff described his relationship with the previous head of the Washington building trades as "hand in glove." Together, the two chaired the Washington Blue Green Alliance, met with the governor and delivered joint presentations on energy retrofits. When that leadership changed, however, Jeff said he could no longer count on workers from the building trades to support climate action en masse. Jeff pointed to several reasons why the WA AFL-CIO ultimately decided not to endorse I-1631, but he said personalities and relationships had an outsized impact.

## MANAGING GROWTH

There is no perfect size for a climate coalition. The important thing to keep in mind is that there are trade-offs between keeping numbers (meaning organizations represented) small or expanding a coalition. On one

hand, adding organizations can increase a coalition's capabilities and/or bring additional resources to the table. On the other, it becomes harder to get on the same page and share timely updates as coalitions grow. When considering the pros and cons of growing the coalition, interviewees encouraged groups to return to their core principles.

Coalitions had various approaches and norms when it came to possibly inviting new coalition members over time. In the case of PCEF, the BIPOC groups leading the coalition had an intense process for joining. "It wasn't just that any group that wanted to could join the steering committee," recalled Adriana. BIPOC-led coalition leadership was explicit about what organizations were expected to commit as full-fledged members, including that they would make the campaign a priority internally. There was an interview process to establish whether the group in question was in fact committed to an intentionally and explicitly equity-focused approach.

Leslie Cagan is a lifelong organizer in the peace and justice movements with years of experience in climate organizing. She was part of the NY Renews steering committee from the initial formation of the coalition. She said she knows that there are organizations that want to be members of NY Renews as a way to publicly state their alignment with coalition goals or add their organization name to an official list of supporters, and she encouraged coalitions to embrace a spectrum of membership that welcomes this minimal level of participation. She said that when organizations want to commit more deeply, though, a structure needs to be in place that makes that possible. Important questions need to be addressed so everyone is clear, such as: "What does it mean to actually be a member group above and beyond just being listed on the website? How do you really integrate new groups – groups that range in size and scale and what they focus on, and have [different] types of working styles?"

### **BEING AT "THE TABLE" ISN'T THE SAME AS DRIVING STRATEGY**

Critics have bemoaned for decades the disproportionately white racial makeup and relative affluence of many of the groups that dominate political strategy and fundraising. The call for mainstream environmental organizations to more fully and concretely address racial and social justice has only intensified in recent years, especially since the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement. Of course, mainstream greens' response to this criticism varies widely, from superficial statements and attempts to cultivate DEI values internally, to fundamentally reconfiguring organizational values and theories of change. We heard from interviewees representing BIPOC-led coalitions or groups that, often, mainstream environmental leaders frequently invited marginalized groups to get involved in coalitions

only after policy details had been settled and a strategic plan finalized.

Many coalition participants described experiences when more established traditional groups struggled to share power or hand strategic reins to BIPOC groups. Adriana summed up what she heard across the 30-plus interviews she did for the PCEF case study: BIPOC groups experienced a long history of the local environmental movement either completely ignoring or tokenizing them rather than involving them in core decision-making from the start. Even when the mainstream organizations had given BIPOC coalition members money in the past, she recalled, power had not been redistributed in any real way, "because they [mainstream environmental groups] wanted to diversify, to have some representation, but not to share power on a deeper, more fundamental level."

In the case of Line 3, nationwide interest led Honor the Earth and other Minnesota-based organizations to create scaffolding to coordinate media outreach, volunteer engagement, and communication resources. Throughout the fight, that group managed a shared resource, StopLine3.org, at the same time that individual organizations maintained their own communication channels. Kevin Whelan, then-Executive Director of MN350 and now Deputy Director at Honor the Earth, explained that the size and shape of organizations involved varied over time depending on specific events, such as the Treaty People Gathering. He said there was a clear, consistent norm, though, that frontline groups drove the direction of the communication and that their content took priority. When it made sense for a message to come from multiple organizations, nothing could move forward without the explicit OK from someone from each of those groups.







Interviewees who had participated in many coalitions said they also faced questions about how much decision-making power to give to consultants or hired staff. Leslie said early in the life of NY Renews, there was an agreement that the representatives of the groups on the steering committee would create the strategy and drive policy decisions. Steering committee members recognized that they might need to hire staff at some point (and they did, as discussed more below) – but that any hired staff would be executing a strategy crafted by the steering committee. She said she’s been involved in coalitions where, over time, staff take on more and more authority, effectively displacing the agency and autonomy of coalition members. She said that NY Renews recognized that risk and tried intentionally to avoid it.

### **THE WHO OF INCLUSION SHAPES THE WHAT OF POLICY**

Being part of a coalition doesn’t necessarily mean a constituency’s needs or preferences automatically get translated into policy. In addition to governance procedures – which we discuss more below – meaningfully addressing a constituency’s needs starts with listening. According to many of our interviewees and coalition participants, that requires upending the typical top-down approach to policy development.

### **An organizer for ICJC conducting a “Listen. Lead. Share.” community input meeting as part of their statewide listening tour**

Delmar Gillis Jr., lead CEJA negotiator, described such a bottom-up approach as leveraging your community power. Most states’ lawmaking is oriented around maintaining the status quo – as opposed to addressing the needs of historically underserved groups. Delmar said ICJC worked from the other end: the coalition started with listening to community leaders, “and then taking the manifestation of the needs, of the barriers, of the struggles and finding ways of getting those in front of lawmakers and pushing them forward as legislation.”<sup>22</sup>

Importantly in the case of Illinois, the 2018-2019 listening tours – first suggested by environmental justice organizations in the coalition – gave ICJC a chance to course correct both the process and outcome of an earlier legislative success, the FEJA. While certainly substantial in terms of emissions reduction goals (25 percent renewable energy by 2025), FEJA exemplified the usual trajectory for climate solutions: industry insiders and policy experts draft a bill and the public receives little to no information about adjustments or

compromises made. Political scientist and clean energy advocate Sarah Spengeman interviewed ICJC members in 2022 and wrote that community feedback – meetings were often held at religious congregations, gyms and rec centers – revealed to ICJC it had missed opportunities to broaden the advocacy coalition and push for a more ambitious bill. By intentionally engaging communities statewide, a broader spectrum of Illinoisans generated ideas that would eventually become CEJA’s most innovative provisions, including a green bank and a contractor incubator program.<sup>23</sup>

When asked to reflect on PCEF for the case study, environmental attorney and campaign strategist Brent Foster said the policy “wasn’t drafted as a climate measure and then had social and racial justice tacked on. But rather both were co-equal goals from the start.” He said that coalition leadership, and primarily BIPOC-representing organizations, influenced specific components to ensure that equity was articulated in the allocation of the money: “[BIPOC leaders] were involved in all parts, from the spending side, such as deciding what the different pots of money would go for and how much was in each pot ... to the make-up of the grant committee, to what percentage of recipients have to include minority contractors.”<sup>24</sup>

Advocates across the cases emphasized that meaningful inclusion often meant convening sometimes difficult ad hoc conversations about how policy could best balance emissions reduction, economic opportunity and environmental health and justice. Setting a closure date for a high-emitting coal plant was particularly thorny, Lili (ICJC) remembered: “ ... [We] were talking about the folks in a just transition. So we can’t just

***“A wide body of research demonstrates that, absent robust coalition support, political changes are often fragile and short-lived. Without coalitions to hold leaders accountable during policy implementation, a policy can ‘drift’ over time, reverting backward in such a way that it reflects underlying power dynamics the coalition was trying to change.”***

**–Zack et al., *Designing Resilient Coalitions***

say ‘we want a closure date.’ We have to think about the workers, what’s happening to those families, to those communities. What are we doing in our policy to make sure that we have a pathway for these people’s livelihoods? That was a critical conversation.”

Other coalitions illustrated their commitment to inclusion and other core principles by identifying specific policies or potential compromises they would not consider. During the height of legislative negotiations in 2019, Xaver shared that NY Renews prepared a red lines document that it shared with negotiators working directly with lawmakers. “And then, of course, there was some back and forth,” he remembered. “... but really sticking to the red lines that we had all agreed upon. I will say that was definitely like a kind of make or break it moment for the coalition. And I think, by and large, we really stuck by the red lines.”

## Governance

**F**or MRXC coalitions that purportedly strive for equitable process and outcomes, decision-making is where the rubber hits the road. Like so much of the scaffolding for healthy coalitions, governance discussions require upfront thoughtfulness and candor about how the group will arrive at decisions, including who will be empowered and what kinds of agreement thresholds are needed. Research makes clear that coalitions inattentive to these questions risk internally replicating the power asymmetries that persist outside.<sup>25</sup> Distributing power within coalitions, on the other hand, generates multiple benefits. Studies show that for individuals, more democratic decision-making processes lead to higher rates of satisfaction, enthusiasm, and motivation. Balancing the range of stakeholders involved in decision-making at the coalition level can also

enhance its perceived legitimacy and authority.<sup>26</sup>

Ideally, the process of establishing decision-making guidelines would itself be inclusive. Citing studies across disciplines, one research synthesis states: “When coalition members feel that they are authentically involved in the decisions that directly impact them as individuals and as members of a group, they are more willing to commit to the coalition and one another.”<sup>27</sup> Lili said that unlike most coalitions in her experience, the ICJC governance process tried deliberately to limit “the gray.” Alignment and clarity around decision-making was and remains in everyone’s self-interest, she said: “These are the expectations – everyone here is [of] their own free will. And those principles and norms were established as a coalition. They weren’t created by one entity or organization and strong-armed. This was the making of a robust process that



included everyone to agree on norms ... I've seen where things are gray, and it gets messy and that's when it gets personal. And some coalitions start to fall apart because [some groups] were not actively engaged in the process they were a part of."

## FORMALITY OF STRUCTURES AND PROCESSES VARY

It is up to the organizations that commit to collaborate to make sure their rules and decision-making structures match their strategic vision, or whether to even create formal structures. For instance, for years (and continuing today), anti-Line 3 work drew support from local and national groups representing constituencies such as Indigenous tribes and nations, traditional environmental organizations, interfaith organizations, landowners, as well as committed individuals or informal groups. Such breadth meant that the protesters could leverage any number of strategies at any given time: lawsuits, legislative lobbying, civil disobedience, and more. Gina said that lack of structure could be "a little chaotic" and "stressful on organizers" at times, but that she valued the diversity of voices that a lower barrier to participation provided. "It made it easier for people to come in."

Andy Pearson (Line 3) said that he personally did not think of Line 3 or other infrastructure fights as being coalitions in the traditional sense because there was never a centralized decision-making structure. No expectations existed, for instance, that any one group would have to receive approval from any other group before moving forward with its strategy. He suggested that the more accurate term was movement, which he described as people and groups from various corners of climate and social justice spaces moving in the same general direction.

That said, he shared that there were and remain "plenty of spaces where groups have gotten together to talk so that everybody could best inform their individual decisions and we could identify collective priorities." But for the most part, advocates described Line 3 as a movement space where, more often than not, individual organizations maintained their autonomy around strategic and tactical decisions.

That flexibility meant that different groups could come together on an ad-hoc basis when collaboration made strategic sense. Andy explained that in the context of infrastructure or other physical fights, it's often helpful to have a great deal of in-person protest events. He said especially large events — he helped to organize some that included up to forty organizations — are impossible to pull off without some kind of decision-making structure. In that case, he said those involved would agree to ground rules (often Fist-to-Five, explained in more detail below) with the understanding that those organizations were committed to collective strategizing and implementation for that discrete event.

The decision-making apparatus for the ICJC, on the other hand, was spelled out in a seven-page "Norms and Guiding Principles" document that described the composition of the governing body, detailed expectations for different kinds of members, and explained protocols for instances of interpersonal harm (we discuss specific components of that document later in this and other sections). Even with that level of foresight and planning, the coalition still revisited and reassessed the make-



Activist Dawn Goodwin leads a procession of activists from Camp Firelight during the "Treaty People Walk for Water" event near Solway, Minnesota. Photo: Keri Pickett

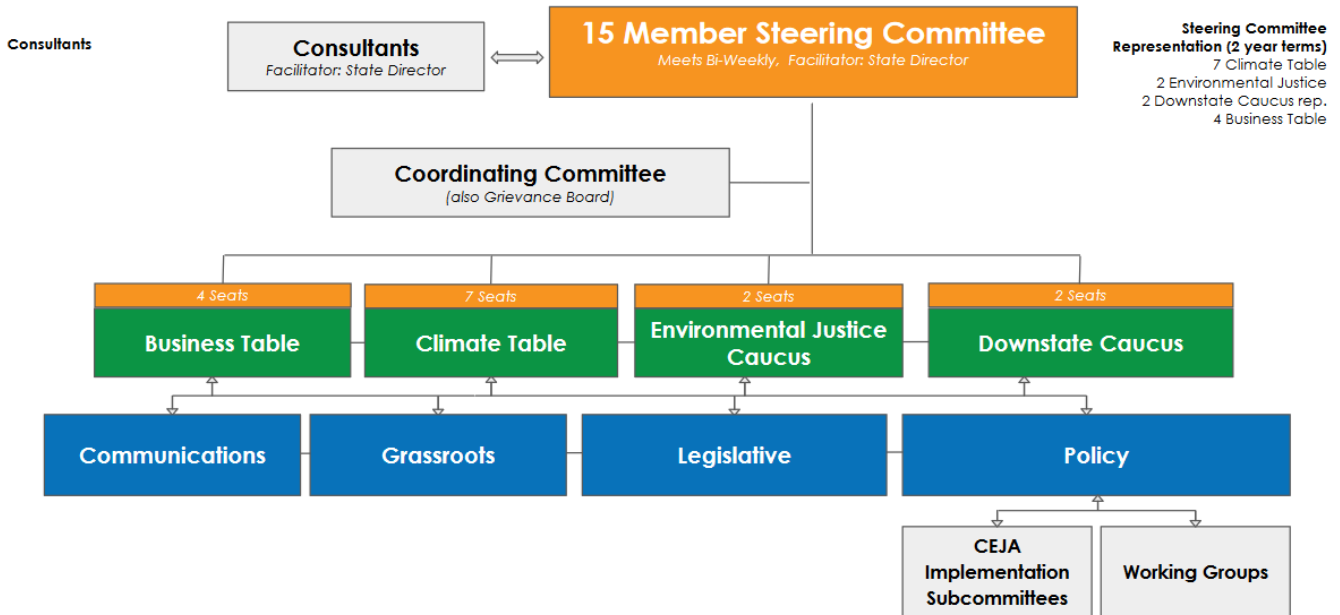


Diagram of Illinois Clean Jobs Coalition’s 2023 organizational structure

up of its leadership body. Kentaro Kumanomido, lead environmental justice organizer at United Congregations of Metro-East, recalled learning that, soon after the listening sessions, people in the coalition pointed out that leadership was very “Chicago-centric.” Because they built in some flexibility around structure, ICJC was able to respond to that imbalance; the “Downstate Caucus” currently holds two voting seats on the 15-member steering committee. Scholars of collaborative work describe this process – consistently evaluating whether those who make decisions represent the full breadth of those closest to the problem in question – as a best practice.<sup>28</sup>

### APPROACHES TO DECISION-MAKING

Practitioners who study and advise coalitions describe some spaces on the left as “allergic to rank,” meaning that they insist on a “flat” structure and eschew any semblance of hierarchy. But rather than democratizing power, that configuration often means that when rank emerges implicitly – and it always does – there is little accountability or transparency (A. Harris, personal communication, training presentation, June 2023). Andy (Line 3) noted that sometimes hesitancy to embrace structure just leads to repeating external power imbalances. “People actually like to know the rules,” he said. “And rules tend to drive towards equity rather than away from it when they’re well thought out. We all know this: a lack of a hierarchy is actually just a hierarchy of

who’s the most bullying or who’s the loudest.”

Several climate coalitions followed what evidence says is the healthier path: they intentionally created a leadership body that distributed power in a way that matched their values. Four of the coalitions of focus – AJCE, ICJC, NY Renews, and PCEF – were structured similarly, where a leadership body worked in tandem with a configuration of sub-groups. The purview and general set-up were so consistent across these leadership groups – a smaller group of organizations or constituent representatives who approved major shifts and oversaw grievance procedures – that we use the same term of “leadership committee” to describe that governance structure moving forward.

Who joins, the organizations represented, and distribution of “seats” on any leadership committee all present an opportunity for a coalition to make good on commitments to equity. That was an explicit value for the four more formal coalitions, but there was no single prescribed way they went about leadership selection. A few years into NY Renews, for example, people from most of the founding organizations still sit on its version of a leadership committee, but new organizations have to apply to join. That additional level of gatekeeping, Xaver said, is so the steering committee can maintain a balance of power where EJ groups can continue to exert influence.

Members from each of these coalitions recognized it was neither strategic nor realistic for a leadership



*“I’m not sure we always struck that balance. Sometimes there were moments where it felt it was a little too deferential to the steering committee. And there were other times where I felt like the steering committee was a little too far removed from the work. But I do think that having that structure made sense. I’m glad that we had a steering committee, I am grateful for how transparent the process was.”*

—John Delurey, ICJC

committee to need to approve every coalition action. Aiming to distribute power and be realistic about the demands of a sustained political effort, AJCE, NY Renews, ICJC, and PCEF executed their work through sub-units (often called working groups or subcommittees). We heard about subcommittees that were based on type of work (e.g., communications, policy, grassroots organizing) as well as constituency (e.g., frontline communities, businesses). Leadership committees in Illinois, Washington, and Portland also worked with consultants — some paid and others offering services pro bono — on questions around narrative development and messaging, political targeting, and media outreach. But in each instance, it was up to the leadership committee to decide on major decisions such as resource allocation or changes in strategy. The chart below illustrates that ICJC had both kinds of subcommittees and traces the relationship between those sub-units and the steering committee (its version of the leadership committee).

Lili laughed when she thought back to the first time she saw this graphic in all its formality and complexity: “I’m the person that would have gotten intimidated at the processes, because I come from community organizing. If we build enough trust, we don’t need this process.” But she said she has come to believe wholeheartedly that the clearly-defined structure strengthened ICJC when their values were tested and to demonstrate their growing power. The graphic provided a visualization of their culture and their growing influence. No one can look at that chart, she said, and think “this is some willy-nilly coalition ... it’s helpful and gives the coalition credence but also gives me an appreciation of how powerful the coalition has become.”

John (ICJC) shared that he thought it was important the coalition had accountability and some degree of executive decision-making at the steering committee level. He explained: “I think it was the delicate balance — as often the case — between ensuring that there was a structure in place to make really hard decisions,

and to perhaps negotiate disagreements or things like that, without putting too much power into the steering committee and accidentally disempowering other non-steering committee groups or members.”

“I’m not sure we always struck that balance,” John said. “Sometimes there were moments where it felt it was a little too deferential to the steering committee. And there were other times where I felt like the steering committee was a little too far removed from the work. But I do think that having that structure made sense. I’m glad that we had a steering committee, I am grateful for how transparent the process was.”

## HOWS OF DECISION-MAKING

It bears repeating: having a transparent decision-making process and using it consistently is more important than which specific process a group chooses. There are various challenges to reaching agreement on how many and what kinds of rules to use. One is that organizations come to collaborative spaces with their own culture and pre-existing norms around decision-making. The Western-style emphasis on majority rule, for instance, is in many ways incompatible with the primacy of consensus that undergirds decision-making processes in many Indigenous-led spaces. Some approaches demand more time than others, so coalitions must also consider trade-offs about decision-making in moments that require rapid response.

## LOOKING BEYOND EXPLICIT RULES

Many interviewees emphasized that even when the leadership bodies had well-established thresholds for decisions, there were still unwritten norms and patterns at play. Xaver (NY Renews), for instance, described that in a consensus model — where ostensibly everyone’s voice matters equally — power asymmetries can manifest in different ways. “Like in all coalition spaces, it’s a lot about who holds informal decision-making power,” he said. “And in our case, it really was the EJ groups that hold that power. And then some of the groups that have a lot of access to legislators. In particular, I think in regards to dictating terms of conversation, that leads to the kinds of the decisions that we end up making.”

The burden, participants stressed, should be on people coming from privileged personal backgrounds to be attentive that an individual or group does not fall

into routines that undo attempts to rebalance power. “You need to create some way to navigate decisions that feels fair and builds in buy-in from the people you need it from,” Andy (Line 3) said. “And that’s one key learning that has been just abundantly true in every example that I’ve worked with. But if you can do that, then conflict is not pleasant, but it’s not untenable, right? Because people have already bought in on how they’re going to work through it.”

## DECISION-MAKING APPROACHES

Here are some of the approaches that our interviewees shared or that we saw in analyses of other coalition spaces.

**CONSENSUS:** In this model, choices are not solidified until everyone in the decision-making body has had the chance to raise questions, share concerns, and voice preferences. This is an iterative decision-making approach that aligns more with logics from Indigenous cultures than Western-style understanding of “one person, one vote.” The benefit of such a system is that it increases the likelihood that everyone’s voice is heard — inclusion that we know pays dividends in terms of commitment. It can seem cumbersome when campaigns demand quick responses, though, and also makes it more likely that the group will uphold the status quo.<sup>29</sup>

**CONSENSUS MINUS ONE:** NY Renewables used this model, which means that it takes more than one dissenting

member to block a decision. Any more objectors, and the decision has to be re-examined. That said, there were moments in the coalition’s history where if the dissent came from an EJ group — even if they were the only one opposed — then they could initiate a pause on the decision. Only people representing those organizations could block alone; other kinds of groups had to work with other organizations to block a decision.

**CONSENT:** Someone has a proposal, and if no one objects, it moves forward.

**MAJORITY RULE:** Anything more than 50% of members can move a choice forward. This process makes change easier but can sideline groups with less representation in the leadership body.

**SUPERMAJORITY:** The ICJC said that, where possible, its leadership committee would strive for consensus. Where it was not possible, a two-thirds majority could move actions through.

### GRADIENTS OF AGREEMENT:

The Fist-To-Five approach uses people’s physical hands to consider levels of agreement within a group. The model empowers individuals to show levels of their support for some choice, but it also hands the reins of the final decision to a predetermined facilitator or decision-maker. In this case, both the “meaning” behind each vote and the acceptable range of tolerance are subjective. Eóin (Line 3) described himself as a fan of this process — but he has clear thresholds that he

personally requires to move forward. “As a facilitator, five is, ‘I am 100% on board. This is the best decision.’ And a fist being something more like ‘If this is the group decision, I’m out of here.’ And then a three being ‘Meh.’ And one being, ‘I’m actually really against this, but I’m willing to talk about it.’ ... I would never feel comfortable facilitating a space for when someone is at a fist and we’re just moving on.”

### MIX & MATCH:

Establish a preferred decision-making approach and identify a fall-back that only comes into play in specific circumstances.

# Anticipating and Planning for Conflict

When asked about conflict in coalitions, Andy (Line 3) offered this candid assessment: “We pretty much know there’s going to be conflict when you’re doing something big enough to count, right?” Regardless of the issue or type of advocacy work, disagreement and internal tension are part and parcel of political work. From interpersonal slights to differing ideologies to the replication of historical oppression or harm, the causes for conflict are innumerable.

We’ve all worked in spaces or teams where disputes threatened to escalate and splinter a group, ruin a relationship, or undermine a strategy. Perhaps those dangers, along with the emotional toll that conflict can take, lead many climate advocates to avoid shining a light on or encouraging conversations about it. But evading the subject ultimately weakens organizations.<sup>30</sup> When framed appropriately and approached in healthy ways, conflict can be generative: relationships can deepen, tensions can become opportunities for reflection, and temporary misalignments can lead to clarifying a shared vision.<sup>31</sup>

## BE PREPARED

Conflict is inevitable, but it doesn’t have to be destructive. If coalitions commit to collectively build the muscles to navigate conflict, they can actually come out the other side stronger and more resilient. That starts by weaving conflict management into the group’s process goals, or the shared agreements they make about how to relate to one another. As part of the front-loading work, coalitions can surface past experiences to get a sense of potential tripwires. Coalitions can then brainstorm or even role play how they might respond to different kinds of disagreements or causes of friction.<sup>33</sup>

In the case of the AJCE, steering committee members anticipated that non-coalition stakeholders, such as the fossil fuel industry or lawmakers, might eventually try to cleave the group with side deals. Jeff recalled that, as early coalition members drilled down on the group’s values, they recognized this threat and doubled down on making credible commitments to one another that they would not be peeled off from the collective. Rather than react to moments of conflict, some experts encourage groups to make discussing hard issues or difficult dynamics an agenda item for all meetings, 1-to-1s, subcommittee check-ins, etc.: “When the time and space for addressing conflict exists and is honored, it normalizes the fact that many humans working together will bring up hard or sticky dynamics that will otherwise feel safer under the surface.”<sup>34</sup>

Even coalitions that put equity front and center should expect to encounter problematic behavior or processes that might stem from or replicate systemic

harms. Interviewees shared a range of scenarios that prompted a coalition to take a step back and collectively work through various kinds of structural oppression (e.g., racism, patriarchy, colonialism, heteronormativity) that were showing up in the space, such as how a coalition spoke about race and class and who represented the coalition in public.

Several interviewees shared stories of what initially looked like personality conflicts were actually examples of systemic marginalization. In those cases, some conflict management facilitators coach groups to focus on the behavior as opposed to the person, and to connect the harm explicitly to structural issues. Citing philosophies such as restorative justice, interviewees shared the benefits of pausing to unpack not only the victim’s feelings but also to reground the entire group in their shared values. Creating norms around these and other healing practices won’t eliminate conflict, but they do make it more likely that coalitions can rebound afterward.

Gina (Line 3) said, although such a process may take a great deal of patience and understanding, “we can’t continue this colonized system of ‘you did something that hurt me and now I’m going to unleash this fury on you’ because someone accidentally said something wrong or did something wrong.” She recalled that when conflict arose in the camps opposing Line 3, organizers tried to reorient the clashing parties around their shared mission. She noted that discord was what Enbridge wanted. “They want us to be fighting each other and continuing this cycle of abuse and trauma,” she said. “So we need to say: ‘I understand we’re going through a lot of trauma, but let’s not be violent. You don’t want to live in a violent world. You want to live in a world where we

## NOTES ON THIS SECTION

Discussion around the causes and consequences of structural oppressions has multiplied in the last decade, as have the number of frameworks meant to combat them. Rather than try to synthesize that literature or evaluate any one tool, we focused on how conflict unfolds specifically in climate coalitions and asked advocates to share their reflections on how their group or coalition managed it.

The evidence, anecdotes, and recommendations in the section focus on conflict – not abuse, or a pattern of power and control over another through manipulation, coercion, and/or physical and sexual violence.<sup>32</sup> For resources that speak specifically to addressing abuse and violence, please see this [Creative Interventions toolkit on ending violence](#).

can work together. Let's talk it out."

## DECISIONS WON'T ALWAYS ALIGN WITH EVERY ORGANIZATION'S VALUES

Even when a coalition adheres to a jointly designed decision-making process that everyone understands, strategic or tactical choices can still cause friction. Ideally, the coalition space is founded on trusting relationships so that when an organization views a decision as inconsistent with its internal values, there can be a discussion about how to move forward in ways that do not undermine the collective power of the coalition.

In Illinois, for instance, advocates described intense debates about whether the coalition should publicly criticize the state's shortcomings implementing a solar development grant program, a pillar of CEJA's equity-focused policy interventions. Kentaro remembers the group evaluating the pros and cons of specific tactics. They discussed the risks and rewards of, for example, placing an op-ed that chastised the state office responsible for wasting millions in grant dollars set aside for frontline communities and businesses. The flip side was whether that criticism would burn bridges with state officials who would be critical partners in future implementation efforts.

One way that some ICJC subcommittees navigated these kinds of disagreements was by being careful about attribution. Kentaro gave the example that when a coalition subcommittee decides not to issue a press statement, a single member is given tacit permission to make a statement attributed solely to themselves if they feel strongly enough about it. Kentaro said that empowering someone to speak for their organization alone creates a buffer with the coalition's external relationships.

## TRY NOT TO AIR DIRTY LAUNDRY

In less formal coalitions, there is no expectation that groups have to agree to any one decision to move forward. That means that the strength of these loosely-held, decentralized coalitions — that is, the breadth of strategies available at any one time — can also be a pain point. This dynamic manifested in the Line 3 efforts in several ways. First, the centrality of the legal strategy meant there needed to be some distance between groups leading on lawsuits and those engaging in civil disobedience. It's actually a legal liability, Andy explained, for the groups working within the judicial system to coordinate or approve of lockdowns. But zero communication would not have been smart either, as it was important that any civil disobedience did not jeopardize the legal strategy in any way. "The intention is that you're probably not going to show up and do a lockdown at the Court of Appeals when the groups that are doing advocacy at the court of appeals are having their trial day," Andy said.

Even when organizations coordinate, there might still be times when one strategy undermines another.

## ST. PAUL PRINCIPLES

A set of commitments that encourage diversity of strategies across a shared issue space

- **OUR SOLIDARITY WILL BE BASED ON RESPECT FOR A DIVERSITY** of tactics and the plans of other groups.
- **THE ACTIONS AND TACTICS USED WILL BE ORGANIZED** to maintain a separation of time or space.
- **ANY DEBATES OR CRITICISMS WILL STAY INTERNAL TO THE MOVEMENT**, avoiding any public or media denunciations of fellow activists and events.
- **WE OPPOSE ANY STATE REPRESSION OF DISSENT**, including surveillance, infiltration, disruption, and violence. We agree not to assist law enforcement actions against activists

Source: Twin Cities Coalition for Justice 4 Jamar (TCC4J)

For example, funding for lawsuits against Enbridge came in part from private landowners — many of whom had not historically aligned with Indigenous struggles but shared a commitment to stopping Line 3. When some organizations chose to protest the pipeline by occupying private property, some landowners stopped contributing — choking the legal groups at key moments in the cases. To limit misalignment that could hamper the larger Line 3 efforts, Andy said that clusters of advocacy groups talked together and, where possible, foregrounded the St. Paul Principles, a set of commitments that encourage diversity of strategies across a shared issue space (see sidebar) and others.

Even if agreement was uneven across groups and over time, Andy said there were several movement-wide conversations that zeroed in on the core idea: no one throws other tactics or organizing approaches under the bus publicly. A few snide comments aside, Andy said he didn't see anything escalate into "all-out war," nor did any one group consistently criticize another's decisions. "I don't think infighting was the public story for the most part in what was a pretty raucous campaign," he said. "I think that was kind of cool." Gina agreed with that assessment, emphasizing that "it wasn't all peaches and cream." But when two camps or specific leaders would clash or hold bad blood, she said that other organizers were able to facilitate discussions where both could still move forward due to their mutual shared goal of stopping the pipeline. "That's how even today with the animosity between some of the groups, we're still continuing to work together."

## FISSURES HAPPEN EVEN IN HEALTHY COALITIONS

In any coalition, including ones that are a safe space with clear protocols and norms, groups at some point might decide that pursuing the shared goal isn't in the best interest of its constituents anymore. Any number of things could drive the decision to leave — shifting internal priorities, disagreement with the coalition's evolving principles, and lack of organizational capacity all came up in our conversations. When the Green New Deal framework came out in 2018, for instance, there were debates around the extent to which NY Renews should adopt its key features. Several groups who did not agree with some of the framing ended up leaving the coalition.

Deric (ICJC) explained that Front and Centered similarly had to take stock of its capacity to contribute to AJCE after the loss of I-1631. He said that for any major coalition effort, he tries to ask: "Is this a purpose-driven coalition, or are we just staying together?" The I-1631 campaign, he said, was very time-intensive — at a moment when Front and Centered itself was just getting off the ground. Although there were other dynamics at play across the larger climate space, Front and Centered ended up leaving the Alliance. Deric explained: "For us, it was kind of necessary to reinvest, to divert that time back to organizing communities of color as the priority."

Some departures are more fraught than others, of course. In 2019, solar and wind companies, along with their affiliated trade organizations, were part of ICJC. To the surprise of the steering committee, some of those groups bypassed established procedures and launched their own bill, which isolated the renewable portfolio standards from CEJA but left out all other provisions. Some interviewees described that moment as the first stress-test for the steering committee. Given that many people perceived the work-around as a betrayal of trust, the steering committee ultimately asked the industry representatives involved to leave. They ended up forming a separate coalition, Path to 100, which focused specifically on growing capacity and creating jobs through renewable energy.

## **BUILDING AND STICKING TO ACCOUNTABILITY MECHANISMS**

Just as organizations do not enter coalitions with a blank slate, neither do the individuals involved in the fight. One ICJC coalition leader described the context around CEJA as shaped by personal histories, old grudges, and perceived slights — the same baggage that humans carry into any collective enterprise. It's normal and expected, interviewees shared, for a coalition to include executive directors who have never gotten along, for instance, or for there to be someone who seems to always pick a fight with the same constituency.

That friction can eventually disrupt the work, in which cases interviewees said that it is common for conflicts to be managed directly between people who already have a trusted relationship. Deric said that



although there were certainly tensions (including about equity) throughout the I-1631 initiative, nothing escalated into anything that required serious intervention. "I think folks — because of the prior relationship-building — people had pathways to navigate through it." AJCE didn't initially have any formal grievance procedures, he said, but leaders from the three core constituencies (frontline communities, traditional greens, labor) "stepped up to resolve anything that got too tense."

Problems arise, however, when disputes are left to fester and ultimately disrupt the coalition's work. In many cases, that's because the tone of conversation becomes increasingly personal — about some individual instead of their actions. Having clear accountability mechanisms in place empowers coalitions to work through friction in a productive way.<sup>35</sup> Accountability mechanisms (also referred to as conflict resolution or sanctioning) lay out what happens when a coalition member breaks a commitment or behaves in ways inconsistent with group norms. What those mechanisms looked like and how formally they were imposed, however, varied a lot from case to case.

Many interviewees described direct conversations as an appropriate initial response. Lili said that when someone expressed conflict toward another person in ICJC, for instance, she would turn to her training in crucial conversations and years of community organizing, which encourages 1-on-1, direct conversations. Often, she said that when she nudged someone to explain their reasons, it would be something as simple as "oh, John didn't replace the printer ink, and I never confronted him about it." She shared that making space for a candid conversation helped people work through their residual frustration and return to the collective efforts. But while that recommendation — for an aggrieved person to first try to resolve an issue by reaching out directly to the other person or organization — was explicitly named in ICJC's steering committee principles, NY Renews process was more informal. Xaver described several instances when he reached out directly to a partner to share his disagreement with their behavior, but he wasn't following any existing protocol.

Coalitions have to navigate how public any sanctioning process is. Some studies find that addressing



poor behavior in the larger group makes it less likely for people to shirk their responsibility or violate norms moving forward.<sup>36</sup> That's how MN350 decided to address a conflict that played out on a rather large email list where two advocates were arguing for everyone else to see. One, an Indigenous organizer, spoke up about a particular message from the other, who was white and affiliated with MN350, that they described as harmful. Andy recalled the white person didn't acknowledge the harm but doubled down on what they were saying. After huddling to talk, the MN350 pipeline resistance team decided to send an email to the entire list on behalf of the organization. Andy said he would describe MN350's response as a mild public reprimand: "Hey, as the people who run this list, we've got to say that this is not an acceptable way to behave just around the politics of equity." Andy said his team decided that they needed to step in and take responsibility for the

harm, and to say that aloud.

Where Andy's team convened an ad hoc response, other coalitions had more formal procedures in place to guide the accountability process. Lili spoke of an instance where several people had a grievance with a particular ICJC partner. After discussing the situation, she and a small group decided that the person was undermining the CEJA effort to the point of being damaging. In that case, they followed the procedure and elevated the problem to a formal process of the coalition, which was housed in the Coordinating Committee: "So the CC came in, we took all the evidence, all the emails — we had a process. That person had to explain themselves to the membership base. And the membership base can say 'that was wrong.' And we had the option of expelling that member, but that member ended up leaving the coalition [on their own]."

## Ways of Working

With goals in-hand and principles established, a coalition must figure out how the work gets done. Research confirms that to foster trust and be efficient, coalitions should aim for members to understand not only their individual responsibilities but also what is expected of others. Setting up that workflow begins with anticipating what will need to be done at various stages of the coalition's work.

### DISTRIBUTING RESPONSIBILITY

For many of our interviewees, subcommittees — a way of breaking down the overall campaign into more manageable components — were the workhorses of the larger effort. That's especially important as a campaign grows in size or prominence. Kevin (Line 3) said that in addition to being spokespeople and driving strategy, many Indigenous frontline leaders were over-burdened with asks about directions or event minutia. The work functioned more smoothly, he said, once they decided to delegate those and other tasks to specific standing groups.

How many subcommittees existed, how specific their divisions were, and how many people worked on each depended on the coalition's size, scope and strategy. We found, though, that most coalitions include at least these broad divisions: policy, communications, grassroots, and legislative. In this setup, each subcommittee is responsible for decisions or options around a specific issue or workflow. Even with that specialization, though, there should still include a mix of skillsets and identities within each subcommittee.<sup>37</sup>

When considering the composition of any subgroups, interviewees said one effective approach was

to begin with an assessment of each organization's strengths: turning out volunteers, policy expertise, legislative relationships, planning events, etc. The goal was to try to match existing skills with what each subcommittee would need. In the case of NY Renew, for instance, it made sense that individuals representing Environmental Advocates NY — a white-led advocacy group based out of Albany — were in a good spot to lead legislator engagement. They had lots of pre-existing relationships and were trusted inside the capitol, Xaver said. It would not have made sense to put them in charge of turnout for events when both youth-led climate groups and environmental justice organizations had demonstrated strength around that capacity. Xaver said that it was not just having the breadth of expertise and distribution of skills — but putting them together in a complementary way that amplified the coalition's power.

As interviewees from Illinois shared, expertise should not be the end-all, be-all. Kentaro (ICJC) said that experts shouldn't drive all decisions. Or, at the least, there should be a range of input as opposed to deferring solely to so-called expertise. He said as someone from a grassroots EJ organization, his preference is that there be EJ voices in each of those subcommittees — even if they're not a policy or subject matter expert. In addition to often excelling in turnout or agitation, he said having an EJ person present ensures equity stays at the forefront.

### GETTING TO STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT

Even if subcommittees work on discrete areas or topics, few decisions are truly independent of the other workflows. Coordinating, Lili (ICJC) said, requires that

*“What I think is sometimes less understood is that, by definition, coalition means that you’re probably not going to agree on everything. If you agreed on everything already, then you probably would be an organization. You agree on goals, but you may not agree on tactics. You may agree on the timing of things, but you may not agree on who the targets are that you need to focus your energy.”*

— Leslie Cagan, NY Renewables

subcommittees understand why one is recommending path A over path B. Sometimes that means conflict — over timing, tactics, or scale. Lili recalled one particularly intense moment when the grassroots team wanted to hold an event at a state official’s office. Because the lobbying team monitored the dynamics inside the capitol, they made the case to the grassroots why that kind of tactic did not make sense for that target at that time. Understanding the why of some decisions requires near-constant communication and a willingness to explain context, background, and more to the other subcommittees. Lili recalled how that might look: “If there was a policy issue, for example, we’d talk about it in policy committee, provide context, explain it to grassroots, explain it to our member base so that people understood. As opposed to ‘no, we’re not doing that, period.’”

### AIM FOR CONTINUITY

Coalitions benefit from prioritizing continuity when it comes to coalition leadership. While turnover is inevitable, the more institutional knowledge available at any one time, the better. Knowing the ins and outs of coalition systems and processes makes work more efficient. Stable leadership also helps solidify relationships and demonstrate that commitments are credible. In the case of AJCE, coalition participants admitted that there was skepticism among the groups in the earliest days of the initiative. But the combination of long-term relationships — the labor representative had partnered with EJ groups for 30 years — and a willingness to talk openly about concerns helped build solidarity before the formal campaign kicked off. After the I-1631 loss in 2018, though, leadership changed at several of the core AJCE organizations. While AJCE was still working together on policy goals that would end up in the 2021 HEAL Act and a 2022 transportation package, Washington state legislators proposed competing carbon

tax and cap-and-trade bills, the latter of which was supported by fossil fuel interests and polarized some members of the coalition. With the leaders who had held those crucial relationships gone, the alliance was more vulnerable; groups divided on which direction to go, and the coalition dissolved in 2022.

### PREDICTABILITY AND REPETITION ARE YOUR FRIENDS

Coalitions should jointly choose a system for decision-making. Our interviewees echoed the research that, whatever model is chosen, it’s most important that all participants know and understand it. When we asked about how the work gets done, many interviewees said that they found it helpful to first come to an agreement about expectations in different coalition contexts. Should cameras always be on in digital meetings? Who writes subcommittee agendas? ICJC participants described the multiple benefits of speaking openly about these and other behavioral norms.

Spelling out what looked like a base level of respect wasn’t easy, but Lili said candor about expectations at the organizational and individual levels increased the odds that organizations hesitate in moments they are tempted to be selfish.

There are separate but nonetheless important questions about how coalitions document decisions and share information across the coalition. Establishing some standard processes serves two goals: they help the coalition run more smoothly, and they build trust when people’s behavior matches the expectations others have of them.

Advocates emphasized that even for seemingly benign questions such as the coalition calendar, consistency is key. Having a standing meeting time can be a source of stability in an otherwise hectic campaign schedule, Kentaro shared. The fact that the calendar laid out the full scope of the coalition’s work — it captured every leadership and subcommittee meeting — was helpful both for those new to the space and for someone who wanted to join a subcommittee’s conversation for the first time. ICJC also had routines around subcommittee notes: every meeting had a note-taker, and those notes were posted in the same place. Decisions and meeting topics were organized in a kind of rolling record that both documented the sub-group’s work at any given time and made it possible for anyone new to get up to speed quickly.

### KEEP THE UPDATES COMING

In addition to those detailed meeting-by-meeting notes, some coalitions produced digests to summarize key internal developments. These might synthesize the entire coalition’s work over a given time period (some coalition generated one a month) or function as a quick update on a specific subcommittee’s work. Sticking to



these intra-coalition routines is especially important as coalitions grow. ICJC developed a standard onboarding procedure.<sup>38</sup> Participants admitted it isn't perfect; Kentaro and John said given the complexity of CEJA implementation and the breadth of committees that now exist, confusion sometimes happens. But when individuals can see attempts to keep everyone in the loop and feel comfortable asking for clarity, it's possible to work through fuzziness or miscommunication.

Last, our contributors pointed out that in addition to cross-coalition communication, they also needed updates and FAQs to share with their constituents. Being in the loop encourages enthusiasm among advocates who aren't involved in the finer details of the campaign; their buy-in is particularly important when coalition efforts take up a great deal of organizational capacity.

A healthy back-and-forth can make it possible for organizations to leverage coalition work internally, solidifying members' commitment to the cause and to one another. That said, regular two-way communication adds yet another responsibility to coalition representatives. Kentaro (ICJC) said it can be overwhelming to receive and distill the firehose of information coming from the coalition into something helpful for UMC-E's grassroots. For one thing, CEJA is a huge, complex piece of legislation being implemented in real time. That means that there can be long stretches without any updates, Kentaro said, or information can be so technical as to seem disconnected from the community's needs. Keeping grassroots advocates engaged and aware of the larger CEJA effort is so critical, though, that the UMC-E team named this as a specific responsibility for a new, full-time staff member.

## Collectivizing identity and reflection

Advocacy is as much an emotional experience as it is a political one. Elation after a successful event, frustration coming out of a difficult meeting — research suggests that effective coalitions embrace rather than shy away from expressing feelings. Studies indicate that positive emotional experiences — which does not necessarily mean the absence of negative emotions — often leads people to stick with a group despite strategic loss or internal disagreement.<sup>39</sup> The aim should be to cultivate a collective identity, or a sense of “we-ness” that delineates who and what the coalition is as a group.

Fostering collective identity does not mean suppressing or ignoring differences, including individual demographics or organizational features such as theories of change. In fact, healthy coalitions actively identify, manage, and negotiate those and differences.<sup>40</sup> The idea is not to pretend that everyone's background, movement experience, and/or personal values are the same, but to cultivate a shared sense of “us” that complements individual identities. To have a common answer to “who are we?” is in and of itself work. Like trust, shared identities don't emerge and then remain fixed in place. Scholars who observe coalitions point out that, in healthy ones, collective identities are regularly developed and reconfigured. It is an ongoing, iterative process that reflects the relational nature of coalition work.

Scholars write that collective identities are “talked into existence.”<sup>41</sup> That might look like people openly discussing their experience after a joint coalition event, such as a lobby day or sit-in. Another practice is to regularly invite participants to share how working in coalition makes them feel: Empowered? Overwhelmed? Energized? Dialogue, storytelling, and open reflection

— these are the building blocks of collective identity. It might be the case that a coalition eventually uses that information to assess its process or strategic goals, but collective processing is not a tool for evaluation. Rather, it's about creating space where coalition participants can feel comfortable articulating their full range of emotions, and for individuals to connect their experience to shared efforts. Social science suggests that as difficult as it is to set aside time and space for this work, the shared understanding of the “we” can help coalitions manage both internal schisms and external stressors.<sup>42</sup>

### **BUILDING FAMILIARITY AND TRUST AWAY FROM THE OFFICIAL CAMPAIGN “WORK”**

The more people work together, the more familiar they become with one another. Familiarity deepens relationships and helps people feel more comfortable being explicit about their feelings — both of which contribute to collective identity. So too does spending time together not working. Reflecting on the annual NY Renewals retreats, Leslie described in-person, unstructured time as a building block for trust. Whether folks were sitting down for a meal, walking from one building to the next, or sitting at a campfire, she reported these “in-between moments” as the chance to learn about coalition partners as people. Particularly because NY Renewals was a statewide coalition whose work was dictated by the state legislature's calendar, Xaver added that the retreats were key to relationship-building across organizations that did not get to spend meaningful time together during a hectic legislative session. “I just really believe those are the two most valuable days of the year,” he said.



PCEF core groups also held an in-person retreat that participants described as strengthening the group’s collective commitment and fostering a greater appreciation of individual members’ experiences and values. Even when they were meeting regularly to plan the ballot initiative campaign, PCEF steering committee members carved out time on the agenda to sit down to a shared meal. Even better, the meal was at times culturally specific to the host organization and prepared by neighborhood vendors, strengthening place-based ties. In this sense, fun does double duty: casual interaction nurtures familiarity and provides a key outlet to step outside the frenzy of day-to-day campaign work.

### ASKING TOGETHER: WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

By the time Line 3 came online in 2021, some of those groups and individuals had been working together for years. Echoing existing research, Andy emphasized that long-term interaction led to the relationships and trust necessary for people to let their guards down in a shared setting. “That [familiarity] lets you do some group processing. When something’s bad, you can grump and cry about it. When something is good, you can be happy and giddy about it. And that’s great. That’s super healthy.”

Beyond emotional bonding, collective processing can also help groups pivot after major developments or maintain momentum for a new phase of the fight. For example, there was obviously profound sadness and disappointment after Line 3 was completed. Red Lake Treaty Camp, MN350, Honor the Earth, and other groups recognized the need to move through those emotions together, so they asked Indigenous leaders to bring in healers who specialized in grief processing to hold sweat and cedar ceremonies. Gina said these events were restorative: “We needed to recognize the fact that [the fight] was traumatizing. It’s traumatizing even being

### PCEF held a celebration for volunteers to recognize their help collecting over 61,000 signatures

vocally resistant about a pipeline, let alone physically putting yourself out there and risking your life and freedom. Cops were legit beating on your sisters and your family. Leaving that and going back to society, a lot of people were completely ignorant of the situation. Having someone recognize how traumatizing that is, let alone putting up an event that can promote healing from it, can start and promote the whole healing process.”

Andy said it took months to meaningfully engage with those negative feelings and to reflect on what some perceived as a significant setback: “[You can’t] just check a box and say ‘Oh, we’ve processed the grief and snap!’ I mean, we wish — that would be cool, but that’s not how people work. But you can get through the rawest of it, and you can do as much of it as feels productive to do together.” Addressing the grief head-on, he asserted, set the stage for the group to ask: “What’s next?” They moved from the emotional to the strategic: “You can stay wallowing in the emotions for years if you let yourself. I would propose that is actually not particularly productive for movement work.” The aim, he said, is not to suppress any emotions but to build on the emotional experience to “unlock” what comes after. It’s a tricky balance, he admitted, but one that pays off. “Most people don’t want to live in conflict and trauma ...You’ve got to be able to move forward through it to something that feels generative. Not instantly, but you can regain your lightness over time in your heart about it.”

# Learning

Of course, collective reflection does not need to be limited to only emotional processing. Learning was the variable that our interviewees spoke about the least, but no one questioned its importance. Scholars and practitioners alike identify learning as a key component of strategic capacity, or a group's ability "to think about how it manages its resources and capabilities in pursuit of its strategy."<sup>43</sup> But data from the field suggest that climate advocacy coalitions struggle with learning, or the ability to interpret and respond to observed changes in their environment.<sup>44</sup>

One way that organizational scholars break down learning is into three core capabilities: sensing, seizing, and reconfiguring.<sup>45</sup> Sensing refers to the ability to collect or generate new information, and to discern whether that information signals a relevant change in the external environment. In the context of climate coalitions, sensing might be monitoring lawmakers' public comments or counting the number of signatures gathered in a particular neighborhood. Seizing refers to an organization's ability to respond to what it senses, be that by seeking a new skill set or adjusting strategy. When dissenters start to publicly disparage a policy, can the coalition identify and train spokespeople?

Reconfiguring refers to whether or not an organization can recombine and revise its assets and organizational structures to match what the seized opportunities or threats demand. This final step speaks to the flexibility that is needed to function in the dynamic, contingent space of politics.<sup>46</sup> Consider a coalition that realizes none of its press releases are getting picked up. They investigate and find out that the statements are not going out in a timely way — stories are completed by the time reporters get them. How readily can it adjust its drafting and sign-off process? Is there someone from another team or a floater who could add capacity during times of need?

Many of the decisions we describe above, including prioritizing team diversity and distributing power, also support organizational learning. However, the literature suggests that one factor contributes to learning more than any other: an established culture of learning, or the ability to use reflection, testing, feedback, and knowledge as part of day-to-day operations.<sup>47</sup> Some practices that are common in advocacy spaces, including isolating evaluation or relying entirely on external consultants, do not support a culture of learning. Like other dimensions of coalition work, learning is most generative when it's pursued as a group. Learning, one scholar notes, is about collectively addressing questions such as: Why? What's it all about? What are we noticing? What's working (or not) in the current content? Is the context changing?<sup>48</sup> Learning is not an aggregation of individuals' insights but

a body's capacity to collectively transform itself.<sup>49</sup>

## EMBRACING INSTEAD OF FEARING FAILURE

One part of a learning culture that is relevant for MRXC coalitions is psychological safety. Advocacy spaces are psychologically safe when the people involved are confident that they will not be embarrassed, rejected, or punished for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns; taking risks; or making mistakes.<sup>51</sup> Rather than punishing or even ignoring missteps, one organizational scholar encourages group leaders to think of failure on a spectrum from blameworthy to praiseworthy.<sup>51</sup> Although there are some reasons for failure that warrant blame, including deviance or inattention, leaders can elevate mistakes that come out of an attempt to experiment or improve a process. Making those kinds of celebrations routine encourages psychological safety and can tee up group discussions to assess the reason for a project or idea's failure (note that the focus should be on the decision or approach, not the person). From there, members can evaluate a failure's implications for the coalition's processes and brainstorm potential solutions — all of which feed into a coalition's ability to learn.

Beyond how people feel in a space, coalitions must also identify the tools and data that will help them answer



the all-important question of “How do we know if we’re winning?” For a coalition to commit to learning, it should identify which indicators will help assess progress to its goals. From there, members have to make sure they can collect data that speak to those selected metrics or indicators. In the last decade, ever-more sophisticated tools have multiplied the kinds and amount of collectible data, for example, which emails a member opens, the Facebook ads with the most clicks, voting patterns in a given precinct. These data can empower organizations to target their actions and to track how their constituents engage over time, but may also confuse evaluation if selected blindly.

Yet when coalitions focus only on what is countable, they effectively limit “valuable” information to one specific kind and source of knowledge. Coalitions that ignore members’ observations in the data they collect can miss important opportunities and threats that emerge from relationships or from experiences outside the coalition bubble. For instance, when a previously supportive lawmaker drops her support for a bill, the response should be based on relationships and her trust with different coalition members; there isn’t a tool or tracker for that. Devaluing personal insights or feedback also signals to coalition members that there is ever only one “right” choice or approach. In many cases, coalitions define what counts as knowledge narrowly, often as only that information that comes out of a Western, reductionist, hierarchical epistemology.<sup>52</sup> Proponents of relational culture suggest instead that MRXC groups practice a “multiplicity of wisdoms,” or the recognition that there are multiple “ways of knowing” and that each brings value to a strategic discussion.<sup>53</sup>

## **EVERYTHING HAS TO COME BACK TO GOALS**

Even when coalitions take a holistic view of what counts as “input,” data and metrics are only useful when a coalition uses them to directly assess progress to its shared goals. Too often, conversations about metrics are siloed from the rest of campaign work. Evidence suggests that coalitions should integrate the people

responsible for data, tracking, or metrics into strategic discussions from the very beginning. People who study learning in organizations insist that learning cannot be episodic but has to be interwoven in the processes and protocols a group creates.<sup>54</sup> The idea is to make a habit of pausing and setting aside space explicitly for each part of learning — collecting data, processing collectively, making a change or response, and ensuring updates get codified into coalition work moving forward.

Interviewees shared examples where a subunit of a large coalition demonstrated some of the characteristics of a culture of learning. Xaver described his experience as part of the NY Renews organizing committee, for example: “When we have any sort of action, we have a debrief. We talk about what worked and what didn’t work. We write down things that we’re going to do differently next time.” He attributed the unevenness across the coalition to the fact that learning cultures develop in part based on leaders’ values. When committee leaders prioritize learning, he said, it happens more regularly.

Reflection can also come at the end of a coalition, whether because the campaign it was formed to oversee had run its course or because of internal fracturing. Steps can be taken to record which practices worked (and which didn’t) for a coalition to prevent that knowledge from fading into history. For example, as AJCE made the decision to formally dissolve in 2021 after some key members withdrew, the remaining participants completed a process of reflection and learning as part of the sunset. They hired an external, neutral facilitator to speak with coalition members individually and in small groups about the purpose of the coalition, the work done together, and their perspectives on the coalition’s health and needs. One critical question was what members would need or would need to see to recommit to working together in a future iteration of the coalition. However, not all members or former members ended up participating in this process, notably labor and some environmental justice organizations were absent.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

We recognize that to work in multiracial, cross-class coalitions is to navigate all kinds of tensions: the recognition of individual identities while also cultivating a “we-ness” that helps a group cohere around shared values; the capacity to respond to a dynamic political context while making sure urgency doesn’t undermine commitments to inclusiveness and reflection; distributing power in ways that encourage agency and make timely decisions possible.

Trust, transparency, accountability – building healthy spaces takes a great deal of self-reflection and collective thoughtfulness. When coalitions ignore those principles, they run the risk of reinforcing the very systems of oppression that they aim to dismantle, be they white supremacy, patriarchy, colonialism, or others. In addition to causing harm, overly hierarchical and emotionally unsafe coalitions often fail to generate the power necessary to secure equitable climate solutions. These recommendations (and the accompanying workbook)



push coalition members to make concrete the concepts captured in the report. We challenge current and prospective coalition members to be vulnerable and humble enough to ask whether and how these practices can be integrated into practice.

## Building the coalition

### Clarify the shared goals, and revisit them frequently



Getting crystal clear on what the coalition is trying to achieve came up more than any other recommendation. You cannot assume that a group showing interest in a coalition or even coming to the table means that all of the organizations share a desired outcome. Even when a would-be coalition tackles difficult questions about how to be in a space together, the groups involved still need to gut-check they are working collectively toward a shared goal or goals. And those goals should be said aloud and frequently throughout the coalition work, not just during periods of reflection or discussion among any single subgroup. That also means recognizing and respecting the material and political benefits that coalition partners are trying to win for their individual constituencies. It’s possible that a coalition’s goals may need to shift over time. In those cases, the strongest coalitions make those discussions as inclusive as possible and take time to make sure organizations and people understand and are bought into any changes.

### You can collectively create group culture



Many of us assume that team culture is incidental, that it emerges only after groups have established some familiarity and engaged in campaign-focused work. That view of culture means that discussions of shared values are often secondary to developing the coalition’s strategy. This report urges coalitions to ask questions and create a vision of how they want participants to feel in the space, and to make collective agreements about how they will relate to one another. That can mean setting expectations about how coalition members can show commitment to one another through the participation of empowered staff members, or by clearly articulating the occasional need for groups to compromise on their individual positions so the coalition can achieve a more collective win. Taking time to align on group values and principles at the outset of a coalition can be arduous, but advocates shared that such work is imperative if a coalition is serious about rebalancing power away from the historical inequities – in the climate movement and society in general.

## Identify who's in and who's out



Coalitions are strongest when they develop clear boundaries. That demarcation is practical: clarifying the organizations involved is necessary for clarifying roles and processes. In terms of the coalition experience, establishing an “us” helps groups cohere across various axes of differences. Clear boundaries also clarifies to whom the coalition is responsible. We heard that some coalitions had a kind of tiered system of commitment, as in some organizations only wanted to be listed on the website as “partner” while others engaged more deeply and regularly. That can work, but coalitions have to be diligent about clarifying expectations for the various levels of engagement or else blurred lines can create confusion and division among member groups.

## Be candid about existing resources and the need for up-front investment



If MRXC coalitions genuinely want to address historical inequities and give power to marginalized constituencies, they need to provide material support to under-resourced groups, sometimes before any formal coalition exists. Without capacity from the get-go, under-resourced organizations often get locked into a loop of exclusion and tokenization. In other words, staff and volunteers from smaller groups or those representing frontline communities are often spread too thin to engage regularly or deeply in the frontloading processes. Then, because they have been left out of creating strategy or setting values, those groups have little incentive to invest the time and capacity in what might be a tokenized position. When the people most affected are left out, any so-called solutions will rarely meet their needs or preferences.

## Take an audit of existing capabilities



Coalitions should not expect or require that each organization brings the same set of skills or level of expertise to the table. In fact, successful coalitions bolster their strategic arsenal when they develop complementary capabilities, which means working in ways that leverage an organization's or person's existing strengths. The kinds of critical capacities (Strategic, Organizing, Narrative, Disruptive, Electoral/Institutional) needed might vary from coalition to coalition, but it's unlikely that any can rely on a single one.<sup>55</sup> Take a holistic look at the skills and capacities available. Some groups might excel at visibility events while others have established relationships with lawmakers. Where one group already has a strong media relations team, another could have a small dedicated group of volunteers equipped to run a canvas. The idea is that groups have to be candid about where they excel (or not) and coalition leaders should be thoughtful about matching campaign needs with the best organizational fit.

## Brainstorm the kinds of work and capabilities the coalition might need



It would be impossible to predict every turn a campaign will take. Coalition leaders can, however, brainstorm the kinds of roles and capacities they need within the coalition. Project forward what the coalition's work might look like, including the kinds of information, expertise, and relationships that you might need to leverage. Be thoughtful about how to break up the work. Some roles might be permanent through the life of the campaign. In those cases, coalition leaders might consider having at least two people responsible for a subcommittee or specific sets of tasks. Counterintuitively, that redundancy can keep the coalition flexible as resources and people need to be reallocated along the way. In other areas, coalitions may need people ready on the sidelines who can step in to complete tasks, add capacity, or fill in holes. Creating a “floater” role of sorts is one way coalitions can more readily respond to surprises and to be flexible in what are highly contingent spaces.

# Ways to work together

## Map out how and by whom decisions – big and small – will be made



Coalitions must establish ground rules for how decisions are made. That applies to major strategic shifts (e.g., who is in the room to discuss potential pivots?) as well as how to move forward day-to-day coalition and campaign tasks (e.g., who writes and reviews press releases?). We've shared a range of ways to approach decision-making. The research is clear that the priority should be making sure that all coalition members have a clear sense of the hows and whos of decision-making. Anyone should be able to find out who made a certain decision and the process used to generate it.

## Inclusion matters in decision-making, not just coalition composition

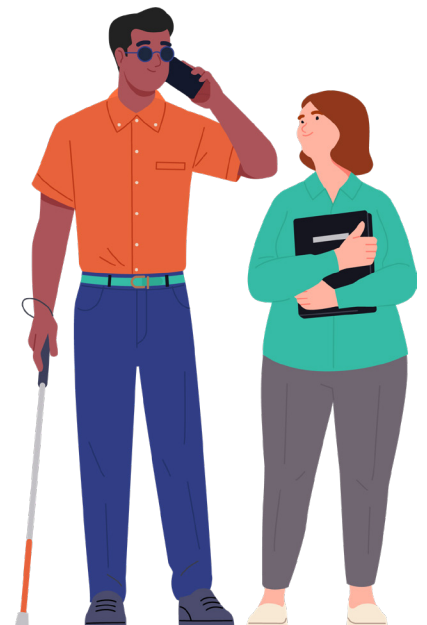


People feel most invested in the goals and processes that they help develop. When it's possible, try to make conversations around norms, processes, and strategy as inclusive as possible. Inclusion might look different depending on which concept or protocol the coalition is talking about; the baseline should be to include the people closest to the topic at hand. For coalition-wide protocols like how the leadership committee is chosen, it makes sense to seek input from as many coalition members and their constituencies as possible, perhaps through listening sessions. For designing a process related to interpersonal harm, on the other hand, inclusion might mean making sure that all marginalized identities have a representative so that they can speak for themselves. When people feel as if they had a say in making a rule or protocol, they are more likely to align their behavior with it – even if they disagree with a specific decision. That is to say: just having norms of inclusion in place raises the likelihood people will stick with any procedures the group creates.

## To build trust going forward, recognize when it has been betrayed in the past



It's likely that coalition partners have worked in the same issue or community space before – sometimes even in opposition to each other. Those experiences set a baseline presence (or absence) of trust going forward. Advocates said that the earlier a coalition can reckon with mistrust, the better. Acknowledging and working through breaches of trust takes time – to collectively process what happened and to demonstrate credible commitment to this shared effort. As opposed to an externally imposed timeline, coalitions will work at the speed of trust, whether they want to or not. Showing up consistently and being unafraid to unpack individuals or groups' suspicion, advocates said, signals to fellow coalition members that their grievances are being taken seriously and that people are committed to repairing any harm. When coalitions ignore or delegitimize perceived mistrust, they leave themselves open to internal division and repeating past harms.





## Set expectations about behavior and accountability mechanisms for addressing present and future conflict or violations



Collaborating with partners across advocacy sectors can be challenging because everyone comes in with different institutional logics when it comes to theories of change, risk management, and internal norms. Some amount of interpersonal conflict or harm is all but assured in diverse, dynamic, and stressful advocacy situations — even if everyone is operating with good intentions — so MRXC coalitions have to normalize addressing conflict directly and often collectively. Some interviewees said that they asked members to adhere to specific principles (several coalitions used the Jemez framework as a guide) about keeping interactions respectful and, in some cases, agreed to accountability measures if those principles were violated. If certain behaviors or kinds of harms trigger a formal process, everyone needs to know what it is and who oversees it as evidence shows that having a sanctioning process itself incentivizes compliance. Recognize that many harms come out of long-standing structures of oppression. In addition to creating a culture of reflection and vulnerability, coalitions might consider how to evaluate whether certain actions (or repetition of certain actions) warrant asking someone to leave the space.

## Where possible, discuss any out-of-bounds policies or thresholds ahead of time



A coalition's ability to set clear boundaries, or red lines, about specific policy components is in part a function of what the coalition is trying to do and in what context. A ballot initiative, for instance, requires that participating groups agree on “must haves” and “no gos” before any campaigning can begin. Editing legislation in the final moments before a floor vote, on the other hand, means that trade-offs might have to be negotiated on the fly. In order to navigate these decisions, coalitions should try to surface any off-limits compromises or policy positions as early as possible. When policy tweaks or last-minute proposals require that the coalition debate internally, there should be a process in place for what the sign-off process looks like, including who needs to be involved to move forward and any threshold of agreement required. Coalitions should plan ahead who will represent the coalition with other stakeholders, the kinds of decisions that person(s) is empowered to make, and the criteria for bringing something back to the larger group.

## Staying aligned

### Keep everyone in the loop



When coalitions grow and/or when smaller groups take over specific kinds of work, it can be difficult to keep everyone across the coalition in the loop. But getting people (and not just organizational leaders) up to speed in a timely way is worth the effort. First, seeing the entire landscape empowers coalitions to more readily identify and seize new threats or opportunities. Second, knowing what's happening encourages buy-in and commitment. Establish — then revisit — guidelines about the kinds of information that should be shared and at what intervals. Consider using templates or building norms around note-taking, email updates, or populating a calendar. And remember that in addition to intra-coalition communication, coalition members are accountable to their own constituencies. Coalitions might brainstorm ways to synthesize developments across the coalition, leaving organizational representatives room to add in the updates most relevant to their specific audiences.

## The more predictability and routines you can build into coalition work, the better



Coalitions function best when participants know “when X happens, we do Y.” That applies across the work on the campaign (e.g., “What happens when the coalition has decided on a visibility event?”) as well as interpersonal norms (e.g., “Where do I go if I experience or see harm?”). Research tells us that trust grows when people can predict others’ behavior. The earlier and more clearly that coalitions can outline processes for what to do when various developments occur, the more smoothly a coalition can run. Role play ways to handle conflict before it happens. Map out a week in the life of a campaign, and list all the tasks and decisions that come up; check that you have a process or know whom to ask for each.

## Remember that political work is emotional



Building a collective identity, or a sense of solidarity and shared commitment, can make coalitions more resilient to internal and external stressors. That does not mean suppressing individual identities or experiences. Members have to recognize those in their coalition partners and make space to process together people’s experiences and related emotions. That means making space to process people’s personal and shared emotions in addition to self-reflection, coalitions should try to cultivate psychological safety so that people can be vulnerable talking through their experiences and feelings. Leaders should not shy away from negative emotions that people experience within the coalition or in response to changes in the external environment. Belonging does not mean curtailing conversations to supposedly “positive” emotions; data show that inviting people to share their perspectives and to reflect collectively cements their commitment to the cause and coalition — not its success or failure. Time to collectively process or work through emotions should not be a “nice to have.” It is essential to building a sense of belonging that connects to solidarity and accountability.

## Give members opportunities to get to know coalition partners



We know that trust builds when people have chances to get familiar with one another, when individual advocates have opportunities to see their fellow coalition members not only as colleagues but as people with their own backgrounds, experiences, and motivations for joining the fight. Research shows us that the stronger the relationships that undergird a coalition, the greater buy-in and commitment will be. This ups the effectiveness of the coalition and makes it more resilient in the face of setbacks. Nurturing those relationships often means being intentional about time together that isn’t necessarily focused on work. Coalitions should make sure that participants have opportunities to spend time socializing with people outside their “home” organization. That might look like carving out time before meetings to share a meal, or building plenty of social time into events such as retreats or strategy sessions.

## How to keep growing

### Plan for how you’ll evaluate strategy



Very few strategies are spot on from the onset. When coalitions do not take the time to assess if their strategy is effective, they can grow rigid amid changing contexts or run on auto-pilot with an approach that isn’t working. Evaluating whether the initial plan is moving the coalition closer to its goals means that coalitions have to know how they will know if they are winning. Coalitions first need to develop metrics connected specifically to their goals, and then figure out the kinds of data needed to accurately monitor those metrics over time. Often, coalitions fall back on only data that is countable, such as cumulative campaign actions, lawmaker visits, or voters turned out. Research shows, though, that qualitative data from within and outside the coalitions can be equally helpful. That might look like asking coalition

members to share what they see as threats and opportunities, or to voice their opinions about the coalition's internal processes.

## Learning is key to growth and success



Data is only powerful when coalitions (and, to be fair, individual organizations) set aside space to regularly make sense of it. Again, the more inclusive and diverse the group involved in that reflection, the higher the caliber of the discussion. And the more disciplined a coalition can be about regularly setting aside time for collective reflection, the more responsive it can be. The goal should be to build opportunities for learning into coalition routines. Successful coalitions often commit to collective reflection at regular intervals. Scholars urge us to get beyond the “what’s working” and dig deeper into the wider context: “What’s changing? What opportunities exist now that didn’t before? What new ideas does the group have”? If the coalition is to be formally dissolved, form a plan for retiring it that captures the legacy of the collaboration for future work to learn from and build on.

# ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Patashnik, 2009

<sup>2</sup> Zack et al., 2023

<sup>3</sup> Skocpol, 2013

<sup>4</sup> Du and Kaplan, 2022; San Juan Citizens Alliance, 2019

<sup>5</sup> Faber, 1998

<sup>6</sup> We use the term variable because each of these concepts or practices can be present, absent, or somewhere in-between in the practice of coalitional work.

<sup>7</sup> Zack et al., 2023

<sup>8</sup> Shilke, Reimann and Cook, 2021

<sup>9</sup> Ostrom 1998; Hayashi et al., 1999; Molm et al., 2007; Smith, 2010

<sup>10</sup> Zack et al., 2023

<sup>11</sup> Ostrom, 2000; Wolff 2001

<sup>12</sup> Gray, 1998

<sup>13</sup> Ostrom 1990 and 2000a

<sup>14</sup> Zack et al., 2023, p. 17.

<sup>15</sup> Wolff, 2001

<sup>16</sup> Spengeman, 2022

<sup>17</sup> Baptista et al., 2020

<sup>18</sup> Solutions Project, 2019

<sup>19</sup> Zack et al., 2023; Ostrom 1990; Roberts and Bradley, 1991

<sup>20</sup> Booth-Tobin et al., 2021; Phinney, 2017

<sup>21</sup> Kraker, 2018; Pember, 2021

<sup>22</sup> Climate Advocacy Lab, 2022

<sup>23</sup> Spengeman, 2022

<sup>24</sup> Voss-Andreae, 2020, p. 39

<sup>25</sup> Zack et al., 2023

<sup>26</sup> Zack et al., 2023, p. 9

<sup>27</sup> Zack et al., 2023, p. 10

<sup>28</sup> Gray 1998

<sup>29</sup> Zack et al., p. 12

<sup>30</sup> Ross and Ghadbian, 2020

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Hemphill, 2020

<sup>33</sup> Race and Social Justice Initiative

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, p. 11

<sup>35</sup> Gray and Stites 2013; Dentoni, Bitzer and Schouten, 2018

<sup>36</sup> Ostrom 1990 and 2010

<sup>37</sup> Snowden and Rancati, 2021

<sup>38</sup> ICJC's onboarding started with a Google form that listed information that the signatory needed to review (e.g., Have you read the meeting norms document? Check), information about the individual and their organization (e.g., Are you representing a frontline organization? Check) and the opportunity to indicate which subcommittees you want to join. The new member was then added to that committee's email list and calendar invites.

<sup>39</sup> Ansell and Gash, 2008

<sup>40</sup> Rupp and Taylor, 1999

<sup>41</sup> Hunt and Bedford, 2007, p. 445

<sup>42</sup> Jasper, 2011

<sup>43</sup> Booth-Tobin et al., 2020 p. 6

<sup>44</sup> Hyman, 1997

<sup>45</sup> Teece, 1997

<sup>46</sup> Booth-Tobin et al., 2020

<sup>47</sup> Center for Nonprofit Excellence, 2016

<sup>48</sup> Nilsson, 2019

<sup>49</sup> Marsick and Watkins, 2003

<sup>50</sup> Edmondson, 1999

<sup>51</sup> Edmonson, 2011

<sup>52</sup> City of Seattle, 2021

<sup>53</sup> Our Bodhi Project, 2023

<sup>54</sup> Rayner and Bonnici, 2021

<sup>55</sup> Thomas, 2022



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**\*Indicates content that is available to Climate Advocacy Lab members. Not yet a member?**

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