

# Coalition Organisations

Catherine Berney

The advent of a coalition government in the UK has led some people to consider that the spirit of coalition could be applied outside government to business organisations, with everyone working together for the common good. Are workable coalitions possible and desirable? If so, how to go about creating one?

## **Possible and desirable?**

Not only is such an organisation possible, it could be argued that it is now also inevitable for many organisations in the current economic climate. In the public sector, cuts will mean mergers of departments and regrouping. Outside government, other organisations are following suit as boards try to work out ways in which to survive the economic downturn and address threats to their businesses. Take for example, the recent partnership deal between BSkyB and Virgin Media, previously regarded not only as competitors but rivals. If there is sufficient common ground between the parties and there is an attractive marriage then such an organisation is definitely desirable. Not least because there will be less time invested in fighting the enemy rival.

But such a coalition organisation is far from easy to achieve. Part of the success of any strong coalition will be in mastering the tension that inevitably exists when differing parties come together. In the short term for each separate organisation, there will be some loss or compromise involved and new changing patterns of behaviour will have to emerge if the partnership is to succeed.

One of the critical potential advantages of a coalition organisation is the diversity which can be realised with people coming together who have different histories and ways of doing and seeing things. Amongst other benefits this guards against the dangers of groupthink and improves decision making. In the longer term the coalition organisation could also be stronger than its predecessors: it will have learnt to work with internal differences and across the organisation so that communications become more transparent and decision making enhanced. In this way, it could also be in a better position to read and respond to the external environment.

## **Problems to overcome**

There are certainly substantial obstacles and barriers that must be tackled if a coalition is to succeed, with two separate organisations coming together based on different histories, approaches and ideologies. In these early days of the coalition government, we have seen muted grass root hostilities communicated by some Conservatives and Liberal Democrats.

The sheer complexity of introducing new processes in the teeth of politics and maybe even hostilities needs handling on top of the day job. Otherwise there is always a risk that the very differences that brought the separate organisations together will tear them apart and the coalition undoubtedly fail: I have worked with

many organisations helping them to pay sufficient attention to that very complexity and getting the 'marriage' right, while, at the same time, not allowing other important performance measures to fall by the wayside.

Leadership is critical, since successful marriage cannot be forced upon people. Leadership that clarifies the way forward and helps people see the reasons for coming together, that inspires others to be passionate about the partnership, that is patient in allowing time for the process to evolve and that works with everyone to plan and cascade ideas for the future. All these are essential aspects of building a strong coalition.

Managers and employees must be willing to be shaped and transformed by the process of dealing with diversity and this must occur at every level of the organisation, from the board right down, including cross department teams that operate at the vital grass roots level of the business.

### **How to make it happen**

Initially, experience suggests that sufficient time must be spent working out the common ground between the two organisations and the reasons for the coalition. An internal group or teams will generally take responsibility for managing details of the complexity and helping with the integration.

From experience, where an external consultant can often add invaluable support is in helping those involved to work with and embrace their differences and to work positively with the diversity afforded to them. External assistance can support people at all levels of the organisation in how best to get on with the day job and also skilfully drawing out and facilitating the best of the coalition.

### **What makes the difference?**

At the end of it all, what makes the difference between a really successful coalition and a low level transactional organisation is internalisation of the spirit of coalition by all of its people. A really successful coalition gets the best of both worlds and those that either fail, or only partially succeed fall short by not harnessing the opportunities that diversity can bring if managed in a skilful way.