The conventional wisdom suggests that blue-green coalitions can be challenging and often dissolve into class tensions that appear to force unions to choose between job security and environmental health. This digest describes the strategies, such as bridge building and constructing a coalition frame based on the precautionary approach, used by coalition leaders to unite different stakeholders with different interests and priorities, in order to achieve their goal.

A Blue-Green Coalition

The Green Cleaners Project

The Green Cleaners Project (GCP) was initiated by a coalition of environmental organizations, a labor union and city education officials in Boston in 2003. The project was unique in its involvement of these different stakeholders, especially custodians, in the decision making process for improving the school environment. The project team began by screening 17 cleaning products used in Boston public schools. Nine were found to have potential hazardous health and environmental effects. They pressed the School Department purchasing agent to replace these potentially hazardous products with “green” alternatives. Environmental health advocates and the labor union lobbied city education officials to pilot test these green alternatives, and four schools were selected for the pilot program. In the summer of 2004, custodians working in these schools received training in the proper use of these chemicals. The project team monitored the pilot program to assess whether the new products were properly used and to gauge the performance of the new products and custodian satisfaction. In addition, the authors of a study that informs this digest (Senier et al., 2007) were invited to conduct an evaluation of the project based on interviews with members of the project team as well as custodians and principals of the pilot schools.

Background

The organizers of the GCP were able to build upon a long history of legislation and activism in the area of environmental health and school health in Massachusetts and Boston. The precautionary principle, which is reflected in these city and state initiatives, allowed the GCP coalition to build connections both with these larger initiatives as well as among coalition partners.

SUMMARY

Coalition building is a powerful tool for nonprofit and community organizations to gain power and influence. As organizations work together, rather than in isolation, competition or even conflict, they are in a stronger position to advocate for change. However, even when various organizations may jointly support a particular objective, the priorities and values of the different organizations seldom fully align. Therefore, coalition building is a difficult and complex process that requires strategy, communication and effort.

This digest examines a successful blue-green coalition, that is, a coalition between the environmental and labor movements, that worked to substitute cleaning products used in Boston public schools with safer alternatives.
THE PRECAUTIONARY PRINCIPLE

1. Taking preventive action, even in the face of uncertainty about the scope and extent of adverse events associated with exposures

2. Shifting the burden of proof to the proponents of an activity

3. Widening the range of alternatives assessed

4. Increasing public participation in decision making

The precautionary principle states that “When an activity raises threats of harm to the environment or human health, precautionary measures should be taken even if some cause and effect relationships are not fully established scientifically” (SEHN, 2011a) The precautionary principle calls for a proactive approach that includes:

- “exploring alternatives to possibly harmful actions, especially “clean” technologies that eliminate waste and toxic substances;
- placing the burden of proof on proponents of an activity rather than on victims or potential victims of the activity;
- setting and working toward goals that protect health and the environment; and
- bringing democracy and transparency to decisions affecting health and the environment” (SEHN, 2011b)

At the state level, Massachusetts has long been a leader in encouraging toxics reduction through statewide regulatory initiatives. The Toxics Use Reduction Institute (TURI), established in 1989 by the Toxics Use Reduction Act, has worked with state industries to replace toxic substances with less hazardous equivalents in a cost-effective and health-protective manner. In 1996, TURI established a grantmaking program to help community organizations and municipalities develop toxics reductions programs. The following year, the state of Massachusetts passed a rule requiring all state executive departments to follow an environmentally preferable products (EPP) program designed to eliminate potential environmental and health hazards in state office buildings.

These statewide initiatives therefore provide a combination of incentives, support and mandated shifts toward a precautionary approach.

These official policies came about in part through the advocacy and organizing efforts of the Alliance for a Healthy Tomorrow, a statewide coalition of community, environmental and labor organizations, seeking to promote the substitution of toxic substances with safer alternatives in multiple arenas, such as industrial production, cleaning products and consumer goods.

Two partners in the GCP coalition were also members of the Alliance and drew on this prior experience in several ways:

1. The GCP was motivated by a desire to reduce exposures to potentially hazardous substances, in keeping with the Alliance’s focus on the precautionary principle.
2. The GCP believed that forging a successful coalition between environmental organizations and labor unions would be possible if they focused on environmental issues concerning occupational health. The Alliance had initiated this tradition in Boston of emphasizing solidarity with labor unions by making the link between the workplace hazards and the environment clear.
3. When the GCP was initiated, the Alliance was lobbying for the passage of the Safer Cleaning Products Bill, designed to reduce asthma and other health threats from toxic chemicals in cleaning products by requiring managers of public buildings, including schools, to use greener alternatives. The GCP can be seen as a test case to demonstrate the feasibility of implementing such a bill in large bureaucracies like the Boston school system.

Environmental Health in Boston Schools

At the city level, parents, teachers, and community activists raised a sustained protest over environmental problems such as air quality in Boston public schools throughout the 1990s. In response, an environmental assessment was conducted in all Boston public schools. A report was released in 2004, stating that 90% of Boston schools had at least one major environmental problem, such as structural leaks, poor ventilation, dust and mold and pest incursions. A citywide task force, the Healthy Boston Schools Project, was formed to remediate the problems identified in the report. The task force included representatives of the...
Boston Urban Asthma Coalition (BUAC), the Massachusetts Coalition for Occupational Safety and Health (MassCOSH), the Boston Public Health Commission and the Boston Public School Department of Facilities Management.

In the fall of 2004, BUAC was awarded a grant from TURI to review cleaning chemical policy in Boston schools. The BUAC director decided to use the citywide task force as the base committee for this review, with the addition of representatives from the Boston school custodians’ union and the school department’s purchasing department. The Green Cleaners Project team thus represented various constituencies, each with a different perspective on, and different responsibilities for, school environmental quality.

The Coalition Partners

Boston Urban Asthma Coalition (BUAC) aims to “promote collaboration between organizations and residents concerned about the various factors that affect asthma, such as the environment, quality of health care, access to healthcare and education” (BUAC, 2006). Asthma is a significant problem in the health environment of Boston public schools with high rates of asthma among students and school employees. Asthma is the leading cause of hospitalization among children nationally. School health records in Massachusetts show that nearly one in ten of the children suffer from asthma, and that the burden is highest among schoolchildren in poor and minority neighborhoods (Bloom et al., 2003).

Massachusetts Coalition for Occupational Safety and Health (MassCOSH), like other COSHes nationwide, advocates for health and safety protection and social justice for workers. In this capacity, they often work closely with union leaders, but also engage directly with workers, community groups, and safety, health and environmental advocates. Nationally, COSHes were established in the early 1970s during a time of declining union strength, when many unions needed to shift their focus from health and safety concerns to protecting wages and job security (Berman, 1981). They readily maneuver among organizations such as unions, management and academia and thus encourage cooperation among partners who might not otherwise collaborate (Gottleib, 2005).

MassCOSH was also a member of the Alliance and the program director was able to draw in coalition partners she had met through the Alliance and unite them around the common logic of the precautionary principal.

Both BUAC and MassCOSH hoped that the GCP could be a stepping stone to a broader campaign for improving the environment in Boston schools. As members of the Alliance, both organizations recognize the potential of the precautionary approach as a strategy for achieving this goal.

The International Union of Painters and Allied Trades represents around 400 full- and part-time custodians who work in Boston public schools. The union was an essential partner in the GCP coalition, but their support could not be taken for granted. The union president initially expressed some concern about the precautionary framing of the GCP campaign. He was hesitant to foreground potential health risks associated with the cleaning products as the central issue in communicating the GCP’s project goals to the custodians and the public. Given that some union members have worked with conventional cleaning products for a long time, the union president was reluctant to trigger fears about past exposures.

Despite this hesitancy, the union had a vested interest in the success of the GCP for several reasons. First, BUAC and MassCOSH had successfully collaborated with the union previously to preserve custodial jobs in schools, because they were concerned that proposed staffing reductions would compromise school cleanliness and a healthy environment for students and employees. The union therefore had come to view the two organizations as valuable allies. Secondly, under the threat of severe job cuts, the union itself had limited resources to devote to advocacy on work environment issues. The combination of BUAC and MassCOSH’s organizational resources and experience in previous interactions with state environmental policies and city-level politics made them appealing as potential coalition partners to the custodians. Finally, the coalition’s emphasis on democratic participation and training was important to the union. Management typically resists requests for training among custodial workforces. By viewing custodial work as “unskilled labor,” management can justify harsh labor
practices and low pay. The coalition, especially MassCOSH and the union, made demands for worker training and worker input regarding chemical selection an integral part of the GCP campaign from the outset.

**City education officials** played an important role in the GCP coalition. However, unlike BUAC and MassCOSH, they were not members of the Alliance and the logic of the precautionary principle was unfamiliar to them. At the outset, they therefore expected proof of health benefits to justify the switch of cleaning products. Moreover, they have historically preferred a top-down decision-making approach and were reluctant to engage other stakeholders in the process.

While all partners of the GCP coalition were committed to the goal of replacing cleaners with green alternatives, the organizations had different interests and different reasons for joining the coalition, and sometimes held differing opinions about strategies for reaching and communicating their goal. Coalition leaders used the strategies of bridge building and framing to keep the partners together, as they not only work towards the goals of the GCP, but also build from the early success on this first project to future objectives on their long-term agenda.

**Maintaining a Coalition Frame**

The way we “frame” an issue or situation refers to how we interpret, understand, and act on it (Snow, et al., 1986). Organizations and coalitions can use framing strategies to align the interests of various members, often through communication that encourages a unified interpretation of issues that the coalition is addressing. Individuals who belong to an organization each have their own needs and concerns. In order to unite members in collective action, leaders construct organizational frames that represent overlapping or shared concerns of these individuals. Similarly, organizations in a coalition have different missions and interests. Coalitions use frame alignment to merge the concerns of organizations into a coalition frame. If successful, the coalition frame integrates the needs and concerns of actors at multiple levels: individuals, organizations, and the coalition itself.

The GCP coalition is a cross-movement coalition bringing together labor and environmental activists, as well as city education officials. Effective framing was especially crucial in this case for identifying common ground among these diverse groups. Leaders of the coalition took several strategic steps for frame alignment:

**Connecting environmental protection with occupational health.** Some regulatory policies advocated by environmental organizations may appear to threaten job security, which has historically caused tension between environmental organizations and labor unions. This blue-green coalition was successful in part because the selected issue of school cleaning products connected environmental protection and the priority of environmental groups with occupational health, which is a concern of labor unions. In addition, coalition leaders integrated the precautionary approach, which emphasizes public participation in decision making, as an aspect of the coalition frame. BUAC and MassCOSH joined the Union in demanding custodian training and custodian input in product selection. This aligned the coalition frame more closely with the interests of custodians and their union.

**Starting with the low-hanging fruit.** BUAC and MassCOSH identified green cleaners as a starting point for improving school health because it is a problem that would be easy to identify, easy to reach agreement on and easy to solve. The 2004 report on school environment showed that 90% of Boston schools had at least one major environmental problem, such as structural leaks, poor ventilation, dust and mold and pest incursions (Jan, 2004). Many of these contribute to illnesses such as asthma, but are difficult and expensive to fix because they are closely related to the age and construction of buildings. On the other hand, cleaning products which commonly contain asthmagenic ammonium compounds are much easier to replace. By strategically focusing on this “low-hanging fruit,” school health advocates hoped to build a foundation for tackling larger school health issues in the future.

**Adopting the precautionary approach.** The project leaders began their framing efforts by introducing potential stakeholders to the significance of asthma as a school health issue, suggesting that traditional cleaning products presented hazards to both school employees and students. However, data that link product substitution and improved health are sparse. Coalition leaders included the precautionary approach in their framing of the project. By
framing the project as a preventative measure, they attempted to sidestep controversies over lack of proof that substituting the cleaners led to a reduction of asthma in students of the pilot schools. Furthermore, the precautionary principle provided the coalition with a rationale, language and precedents for engaging a broader group of stakeholders in decisions about environmental health. This helped MassCOSH, BUAC and the Union to successfully involve custodians and their representatives in the decision making process of the GCP.

The construction and maintenance of a movement frame is a dynamic process. In cases that involve the construction of coalition frames, the process of aligning diverse identities and goals is particularly challenging and requires continuous attention. The GCP brings some of these challenges to light, because some, but not all, coalition partners embraced the precautionary approach. City education officials, for example, initially expected to see evidence of a reduction in the schools’ asthma rate to justify the change to new cleaners and initially resisted involving custodians in the decision making process.

While the Union valued the emphasis on democratic decision making promoted by the precautionary principle, it was not quick to embrace all aspects of the approach. The union president was initially hesitant to emphasize the link between regular cleaners and health risks, which may have influenced the message he conveyed to custodians during their training. When the custodians in the pilot schools were interviewed and asked why they thought the school system had shifted to these newer cleaning products, two recalled having been told that these products were safer or healthier for themselves and the students. These two custodians had the most favorable impressions of the new products. One of these custodians has asthma and appreciated the new products because, unlike previous products, they did not induce wheezing. The other two replied that they thought the shift had been made to save storage space or because they were cheaper, and they were more critical of the products’ performance. If custodians were confused or unclear about the importance of health in making the shift to green cleaners, it may have affected their opinion of the new green cleaning products, some of which require more work to use.

Custodians who suffered from asthma were more likely to connect the project with the larger goal of improving health, while custodians who perceived themselves to be unaffected by the traditional cleaning products viewed the pilot project as a simple administrative shift in the type of materials they were instructed to use. This suggests that personal experience may influence individuals’ acceptance of a coalition frame, indicating that organizers should be attuned to which parts of the frame or message need to be emphasized when communicating with different stakeholders.

While problems arose in the process of frame development, the efforts of project leaders to align the partner organizations in a shared coalition frame allowed the GCP to bring together diverse stakeholder groups and successfully advocate for the use of safer cleaning products in schools.

**Bridge Building**

“Bridge builders” are individuals who are able to communicate across movement divides by their unique position at an intersection between two movements or organizations (Robnett, 1981; Rose, 2000). In this case, MassCOSH, and particularly the MassCOSH program director, acted as bridge builders and negotiated a shared understanding between diverse stakeholder groups about the importance of eliminating toxic cleaning chemicals from the school environment. The MassCOSH program director is a founding member of BUAC and also heads the BUAC school health committee and chairs MassCOSH’s Healthy Schools Network. Through this experience, she has extensive knowledge of the environmental issues in Boston schools and strong personal contacts with key decision makers in the school administration as well as leaders of the school and custodial unions. These relationships helped establish the communication and trust necessary for bridge building between the environmental health organizations, administrators and the union. Her leadership in the Alliance and in the statewide Healthy Schools Network also gave her the means to link the GCP to wider initiatives at the city, state and national levels.

Both MassCOSH and BUAC supported the Union during its negotiations to preserve custodial jobs in schools, which was likely a key factor in the decision of the Union to
participate in the GCP. Public participation in decision making is an important tenet of the precautionary principle, one which MassCOSH and BUAC pushed for in the GCP. In the face of a top-down decision making structure common in the school system, MassCOSH and the Union emphasized the need for custodian training, custodian feedback about product performance and custodian input regarding product selection as part of the project. Without the advocacy of bridge builders in the GCP coalition, it is unlikely that a call for a review of cleaning products would have arisen from the workforce or been heeded by management. In some respects, then, the greatest success of the Green Cleaners Project team may have been the way they fought for a significant voice for employee input. This highlights the importance of MassCOSH as a bridge builder in this example, because their presence as a strong and well-established labor advocate on the project team brought a strong pro-labor voice to the table.

Conclusion

By building a coalition among a wide variety of stakeholders, all of whom have a stake in managing school environmental quality, the project leaders were able to bridge divisions that have traditionally crippled cooperative efforts between labor and environmental movement organizations. The participation of such a varied group of participants required leaders to build a comprehensive coalition frame. The precautionary principle ultimately filled this need by meeting the needs of the environmental health activists’ interest in product substitution, and also fulfilling the union’s wish that negotiations include specific attention to worker training and the right of workers to participate in decisions about the chemicals they will use on the job. This project also represents a creative approach to addressing school health issues in a concrete and systematic way that sets a precedent for future decision making based on the precautionary principle. In addition, the GCP shows the critical role of bridge-builders, such as MassCOSH, to mediate the needs of different partners. This alliance of environmental health and labor activists, workers and city education officials is a potential model other health advocates can follow to foster a healthy environment for students and staff. Attempts at coalition building should consider the importance of framing and bridge building in engaging a broad range of stakeholders.

Further Resources and Reading on Coalition Building

• The Wisconsin Clearinghouse for Prevention Resources provides information, tools and useful links for coalition building. [http://wch.uhs.wisc.edu/01-Prevention/01-Prev-Coalition.html](http://wch.uhs.wisc.edu/01-Prevention/01-Prev-Coalition.html)

• The Community Toolbox offers information, tools and presentations for building and maintaining coalitions as well as examples of successful coalitions. [http://ctb.ku.edu/en/tablecontents/section_1057.aspx](http://ctb.ku.edu/en/tablecontents/section_1057.aspx)

Further Resources and Reading on the Precautionary Principle

• The Science and Environmental Health Network is working to implement the precautionary principle as a basis for environmental and public health policy. [http://www.sehn.org/index.html](http://www.sehn.org/index.html)

• The Lowell Center for Sustainable Production maintains a database of city, state and regional efforts to implement the Precautionary Principle. The database allows users to search for policies that require green chemistry initiatives, chemical substitution and environmentally preferable purchasing programs. [http://www.chemicalspolicy.org/chemicalspolicy.us.state.database.php](http://www.chemicalspolicy.org/chemicalspolicy.us.state.database.php)

Works Cited


