



## Building Coalitions

*Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.*

-- Margaret Mead, *The Wagon and the Star*<sup>1</sup>

A coalition unites people for a single purpose. Whether you are trying to convince your boss or your colleagues, your customers or your suppliers, you will often need to bring together people whose interests vary greatly. Forming them into an ethical alliance, defined as the opposite of a manipulative conspiracy,<sup>2</sup> can be one of the most effective methods of finding and maintaining a support network for your agenda.

Recruiting the members of your coalition, however, can be an intricate process. You must begin by defining your objective. This is the single most important step in building a coalition. In order to assemble an effective and powerful coalition, you must make sure that the uniting force is unambiguous and recognizable. Your direction must be well-defined, and you must be able to communicate it clearly.

This clarity of purpose will enable you to target your most valuable allies and most dangerous adversaries. As Peter Block explains,

Those whom we need to influence become our adversaries and allies on the basis of two dimensions: agreement and trust. We either agree or disagree about where we are headed, and we either trust or distrust each other about the way we operate in pursuit of that future. Agreement or conflict can take place over the rather abstract statement of our vision or, more frequently, over project purpose, goals, and requirements. Trust is almost universally built or destroyed on the basis of issues of justice and integrity.<sup>3</sup>

Your allies are people who share your agenda and your intentions. Conversely, adversaries are both untrustworthy and oppose your agenda. Block defines three other groups to complete his portrayal of your political landscape: opponents, bedfellows, and fence sitters (See **Exhibit One**).

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Joel M. DeLuca, *Political Savvy: Systematic Approaches to Leadership behind-the-Scenes*. Horsham: LRP Publications, 1992. Page 83.

<sup>2</sup> DeLuca, Page 85.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Block, *The Empowered Manager: Positive Political Skills at Work*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1987. Page 138.

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Research Associate Jennifer M. Suesse prepared this note under the supervision of Professor Herminia Ibarra as the basis for class discussion.

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Block's matrix provides you with a helpful framework for understanding your own political landscape. By identifying agreement and trust as the critical variables, he allows you to isolate the nature of your relationships with others from their position relative to your objective. For instance, his definition of opponents (individuals with whom you share high trust, but low agreement) allows you to distinguish friends who disagree with you on a single issue from true adversaries (individuals who have proven themselves both untrustworthy and antagonistic). While discussions with opponents can often lead to valuable insights, conversations with your adversaries are rarely productive. Thus, learning to identify allies, opponents, bedfellows, fence-sitters, and adversaries will enable you to exercise your influence both efficiently and effectively.

Your application of Block's matrix begins when you start identifying the positions of your colleagues. You must work to obtain highly accurate information about your colleagues' positions, since the efficacy of your coalition will relate directly to the accuracy of your diagnosis. If your diagnosis is sound, you will spend your time talking with people who will be receptive to your ideas and will hopefully offer you constructive feedback. If you base your observations on hearsay, however, you risk missing vital constituents or alienating your opponents. To build and manage an effective coalition you must spend time and energy watching and listening to your colleagues in order to assess their positions in terms of agreement and trust. Forming an accurate diagnosis of the political landscape is the first step in building your coalition. For Block, political diagnosis goes hand in hand with a clear affirmation of your own political orientation, since open communication lies at the foundation of his ideal organization.

Block defines his vision for interaction within an organization in terms of empowerment, which he sees as "an alternative to negative politics and bureaucracy."<sup>4</sup> He argues that "autocratic culture and personal ambition conspire to support behavior that is strategic, cautious, and indirect – in other words, manipulative."<sup>5</sup> For Block, this manipulative attitude creates an organization whose members are more concerned about moving up, than doing good work. He suggests an alternative organizational objective: "to have all members believe and act like this is their organization and to take personal responsibility for how it operates."<sup>6</sup> He maintains that in order to achieve this objective, each person must strive to "be direct and authentic in our management style...For most of us that means sharing as much information as possible, sharing control, and taking reasonable risks."<sup>7</sup>

Block's open approach stands in stark contrast that of Niccolò Machiavelli who advocates caution in two respects. First, Machiavelli suggests that you limit the disclosure of any privileged information that you may possess, since sharing information sparingly allows you to conserve the advantage created by its scarcity. Second, he argues against identifying your agenda and position too openly, because such candor limits your maneuverability. Maintaining a noncommittal stance, according to Machiavelli, preserves your ability to change your mind while you become more aware of the limitations imposed by the political landscape. Hence, your own strategic orientation will clearly shape your tactical decisions. The remainder of this note is based on Block's recommendations.

## Beyond Diagnosis: A Tactical Approach

**Your Allies** Once you have defined your objective and begun your political diagnosis, you must first identify your allies. You will know your allies. They are the people with whom you feel

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<sup>4</sup> Block, page *xiii*.

<sup>5</sup> Block, page 22.

<sup>6</sup> Block, page 24.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

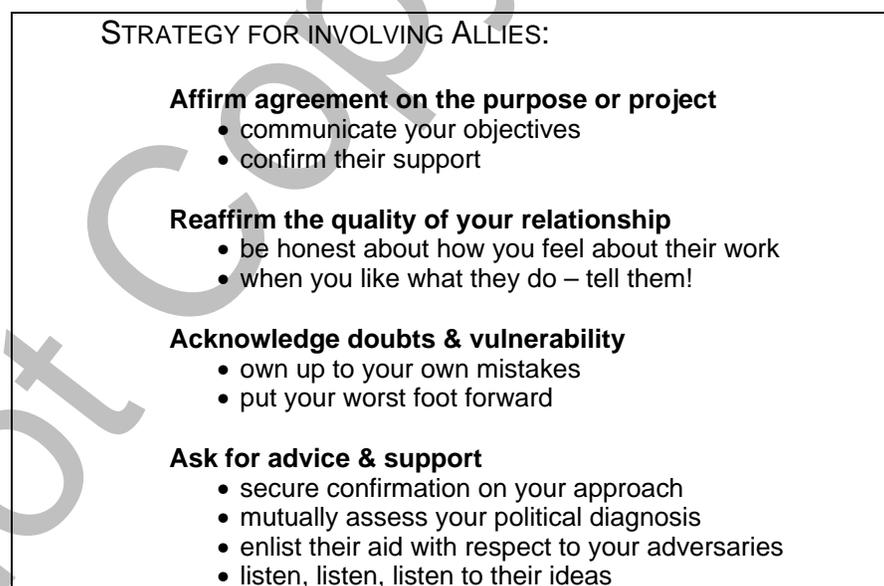
comfortable expressing your ideas and thoughts. In Block's terms, you share high agreement and high trust, and therefore, your relationship tends to be reciprocal. They call on you, and you call on them. As mutual allies your strategy Block writes:

...is to treat them as if they are part of our organization, as friends, and to let them know exactly what our plans and hopes are for our function. We also need to bring allies into a discussion of our own vulnerability and doubts about what we are doing. In many ways, the way we approach allies is to put our worst foot forward. Allies can do for us many of the things that we are unable to do for ourselves. Oftentimes we have adversaries with whom communication is very difficult. We ask allies to deal directly with our adversaries in hopes of a more positive response than we ourselves are able to elicit.<sup>8</sup>

Your allies, therefore, offer you an alternative source of information. They can also help you to diagnose the political landscape by offering insights and perspectives you might not notice otherwise. Finally, your allies can help you to develop and implement a successful game plan.

In conversation with your allies, therefore, you want to maintain your strong relationship, and work towards your vision for the future (See **Figure One**). Thus, you may begin by affirming your agreement, and the quality of your relationship. Then, you can acknowledge your doubts and vulnerability, since your allies will most likely be eager to help. Finally, ask for their advice and support. These discussions with allies will hopefully be the easiest and most rewarding.

**Figure One**



**Your Opponents** Like your allies, your opponents are often friends. You have a comfortable relationship with them, although due to your respective positions, you often disagree. In Block's terms, you share high trust, but low agreement. Your relationship with your opponents, therefore, might be the most important for revealing the integrity of your coalition. Block explains, "The task of our opponent is to bring out the best in us. The better our opposition, the higher our performance. We all have the experience of playing our best against our best opponents."<sup>9</sup> Thus, your opponents give you the rare opportunity to challenge the strength of your vision in a trustworthy atmosphere. They force you to acknowledge realities that you may wish to ignore, and identify critical weaknesses

<sup>8</sup> Block, page 140.

<sup>9</sup> Block, page 144.

in your vision. Hopefully, by engaging in a problem-solving conversation with your opponents, you will reach a compromise where you are both happy with the results.

All meetings with your opponents are crucially important because you want to maintain your good relationship, while confronting your difference of opinion (See **Figure Two**). When talking with your opponents, be careful not to jump to conclusions. Based on your trustworthy relationship, they may be more willing to support your position than your initial diagnosis suggested. Therefore, you should agree by affirming your foundation of trust, and stating your position. Then, try to state, in your own words, your understanding of their position in a positive way. Finally, engage them in a problem-solving dialogue. This kind of meeting with your opponents meets two objectives: it provides you with trustworthy feedback from another perspective while also giving you an opportunity to test out your most convincing arguments in a friendly, but incongruous atmosphere.

**Figure Two**



**Bedfellows** Relationships with bedfellows lack the foundation of trust that supports your interaction with opponents and allies. Block explains that bedfellows are “people who are aligned with our...objectives but, when we have contact with them, don’t give us the whole story.”<sup>10</sup> In building your coalition, the support of bedfellows is important because of your high agreement. Most importantly, you want to avert the potential for your untrustworthy bedfellows to take action rivaling your own. If you ignore your bedfellows by allowing them to proceed independently, you risk producing, albeit inadvertently, a damaging split among those who support your position. Avoiding such duplication, however, can be unnerving since by definition you do not trust bedfellows. Block argues that this lack of trust is dangerous and suggests the following strategy.

The key to approaching our bedfellows is to be true to our vision in the way that we deal with them. There is a tendency to become clever or manipulative or to go around people we don’t trust. At such moments, we may be serving our ultimate purpose in terms of moving our unit ahead, but what we are doing is undermining our vision of how we want people to deal with each other inside the organization.<sup>11</sup>

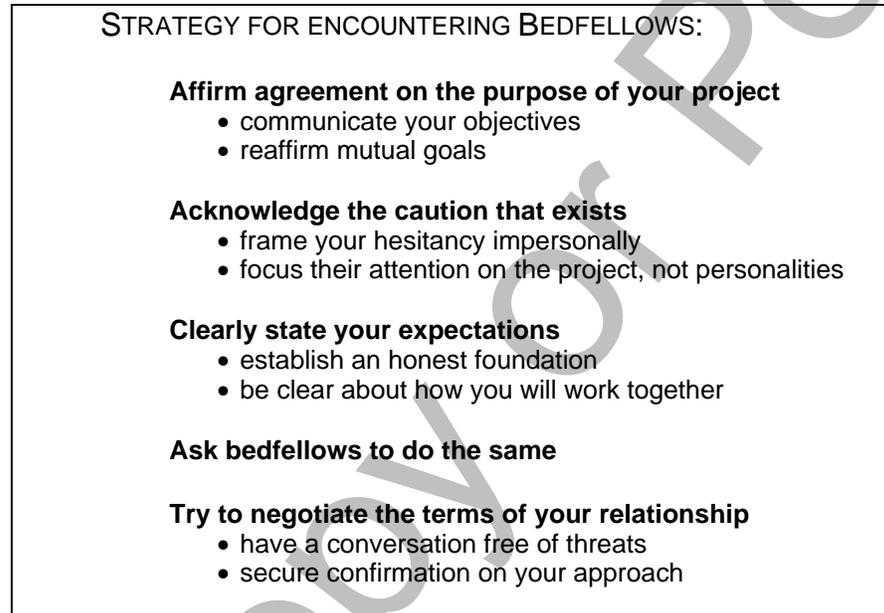
In conversations with bedfellows, therefore, you must be very careful to clearly lay out the boundaries of your relationship (See **Figure Three**). Remember that bedfellows are people who share your position on a particular issue, but with whom you have a rocky history. Thus, you should begin

<sup>10</sup> Block, page 147.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. Here Block refers to his ideal vision for interaction within an organization.

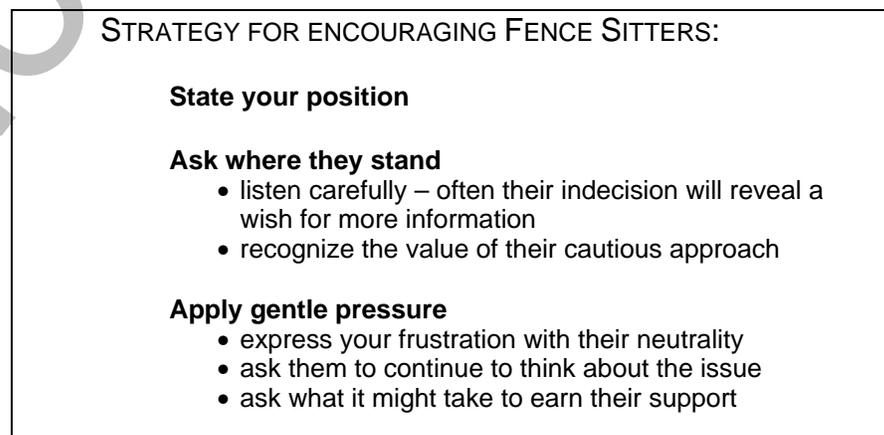
by affirming your shared objective, but acknowledge that caution exists. Attempt to communicate your reservations regarding the quality of your previous interactions, and, if possible, take responsibility for your contribution to the former difficulties between you. Then, clearly state the goals of the coalition, and your expectations for their cooperation. Ask bedfellows to do the same and try to negotiate the terms of your relationship. Listen carefully to their answers.

Figure Three



**Fence sitters** Fence sitters often consume a disproportionate amount of your influence time and energy. Unlike any of the other four groups in Block's matrix, even after a careful diagnosis, you know very little about the attitudes of fence sitters. These are the folks who simply refuse to take a stand. They are friendly and tend to be good listeners. Often, in conversations, they will frame issues so that major conflicts seem to disappear. As Block writes: "At the heart of the fence sitter is doubt. The risks and uncertainty dominate the discussion. Fence-sitting is basically an editorial function. It is a triumph of form over substance."<sup>12</sup> Fence sitters love to gather information, and usually come to their own, very informed decisions. Thus, because these fence sitters probably won't help or hurt you, **they do not merit too much of your energies** (See Figure Four). Encourage them to take a position, but don't force the issue.

Figure Four



<sup>12</sup> Block, 150.

**Adversaries** Finally, Block gives advice on how to deal with your adversaries, which he defines very carefully. He argues that, “People are bedfellows or opponents until we’ve tried unsuccessfully either to negotiate the relationship or negotiate a plan of action. *People become adversaries only when our attempts at negotiation agreement and negotiating trust have failed.*”<sup>13</sup> As individuals who make you uncomfortable or angry, your adversaries consume an enormous percentage of your emotional energy and time. Unfortunately, this investment of time and energy is often futile. Block has clear advice.

The fact that our adversaries, by definition, are people we have no trust in means that we, of all people, are in the absolute worst position to exert influence on them. The solution is to let go of our adversaries. For our sake and for their sake. To let go of adversaries means to stop trying to persuade them and to stop doing anything to undermine or destroy them. Our goal is to reduce the tension and threat that exist in the relationship.<sup>14</sup>

Letting go of your adversaries will save you time and preserve the integrity of your coalition (See **Figure Five**). Meeting with adversaries will be the greatest challenge you will face. However, if you remember that you are not trying to convince them, but rather to simply allay their fears and reduce the existing tensions, hopefully your task will be easier. As with all of your colleagues, communicate your vision clearly, and attempt to state the position of your adversary in a reasonable way. Recognize that your relationship is not good, and identify your end of the problem. Finally, and this is the toughest part, end the meeting with your plans, but no demands. If the situation becomes ugly or hostile, eliminate all voluntary contact with your adversaries. If possible, let your allies who may have better relationships, play the intermediary.

**Figure Five**

**LETTING ADVERSARIES GO:**

**State your position**

- communicate honestly and clearly
- give it your best shot

**Try to state their position**

- attempt to communicate your understanding of their position in a reasonable way
- acknowledge that alternative views exist
- your goal is NOT conversion, simply understanding

**Identify your contribution to the problem**

- try to diffuse existing hostility
- take responsibility for your actions
- allow third parties to support you
- preserve your integrity

**End meeting with your plans, but no demands**

- expect nothing but an exchange of information
- this meeting need not deter you from pursuing your objective

<sup>13</sup> Block, page 152.

<sup>14</sup> Block, page 155.

**Summary** Learning how to build effective coalitions is a critical skill for getting things done within organizations. It need not be seen as a conspiratorial activity; on the contrary, building coalitions unites people so that you may work together towards a common goal. When you begin to build any coalition, remember to consider the following questions:

- *What is your agenda?* Is it clearly defined? Will you be willing to change your mind as you uncover new information?
- *Whose support do you need?* How will you decide which players are the most important?
- *On whom will you focus your energy?* Whom will you go to first? How will you sequence subsequent efforts?
- *How can you get key players on board?* How will you build a coalition may involve competing factions? Will you use direct or indirect methods of persuasion? How will you manage competing agendas?

Answering these questions will help you to sequence your actions and allocate your time and energy efficiently, as you work to build a productive coalition. Bringing your colleagues together in support of your agenda increases the number of people who identify with your project and take responsibility for its success. By joining others' voices with your own, you will augment the weight and legitimacy of your objective, thus greatly increasing the chances of reaching your goal.

## Exhibit One Block's Trust/Agreement Matrix: A Summary

High

**BEDFELLOWS**

high agreement/low trust  
share your vision, but don't always tell the whole story

relationship can be tenuous

*can help you:*  
build support for your common vision

**ALLIES**

high agreement/high trust  
share both your vision and your intention

relationship tends to be reciprocal  
i.e. usually mutual allies

*can help you:*  
access alternative sources of information  
diagnose the political landscape  
develop & implement a successful game plan

Agreement

**FENCE SITTERS**

won't help you or hurt you  
usually amiable, good listeners  
simply refuse to take a stand  
usually come to their own decisions

**ADVERSARIES**

low agreement/low trust  
have resisted your negotiation attempts

make you uncomfortable or angry

*your goal:*  
STOP trying to persuade them  
STOP trying to undermine or destroy them  
let them go – they are not worth the amount of energy you  
invest in trying to change their minds

**OPPONENTS**

low agreement/high trust  
provide valuable relationships and conflicting visions

relationship reveals your integrity  
i.e. the better the opposition, the better your performance

*can help you:*  
challenge your own strategies and tactics  
confront information you might wish to ignore  
identify critical weaknesses in your vision

Low

Low

Trust

High