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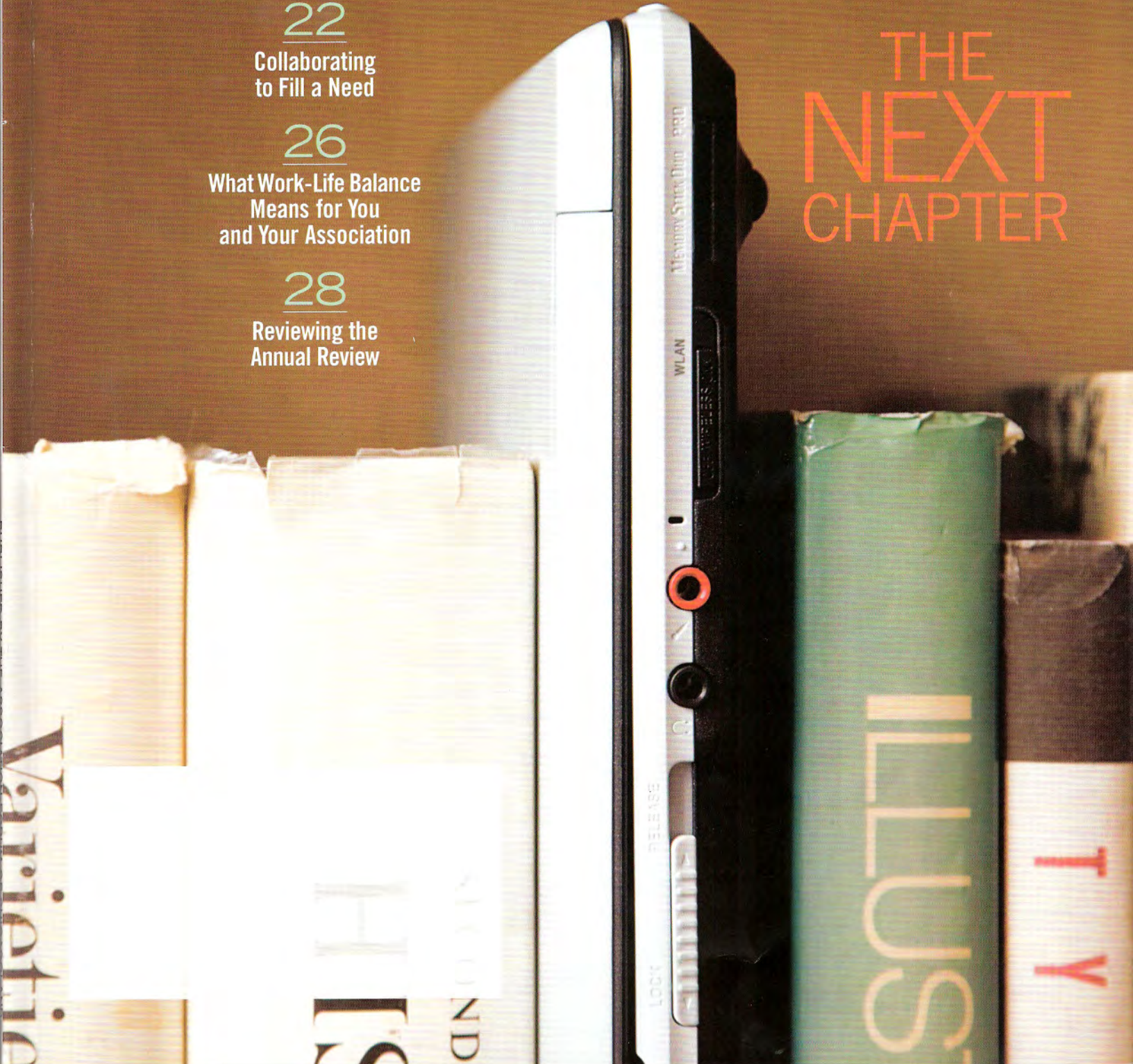
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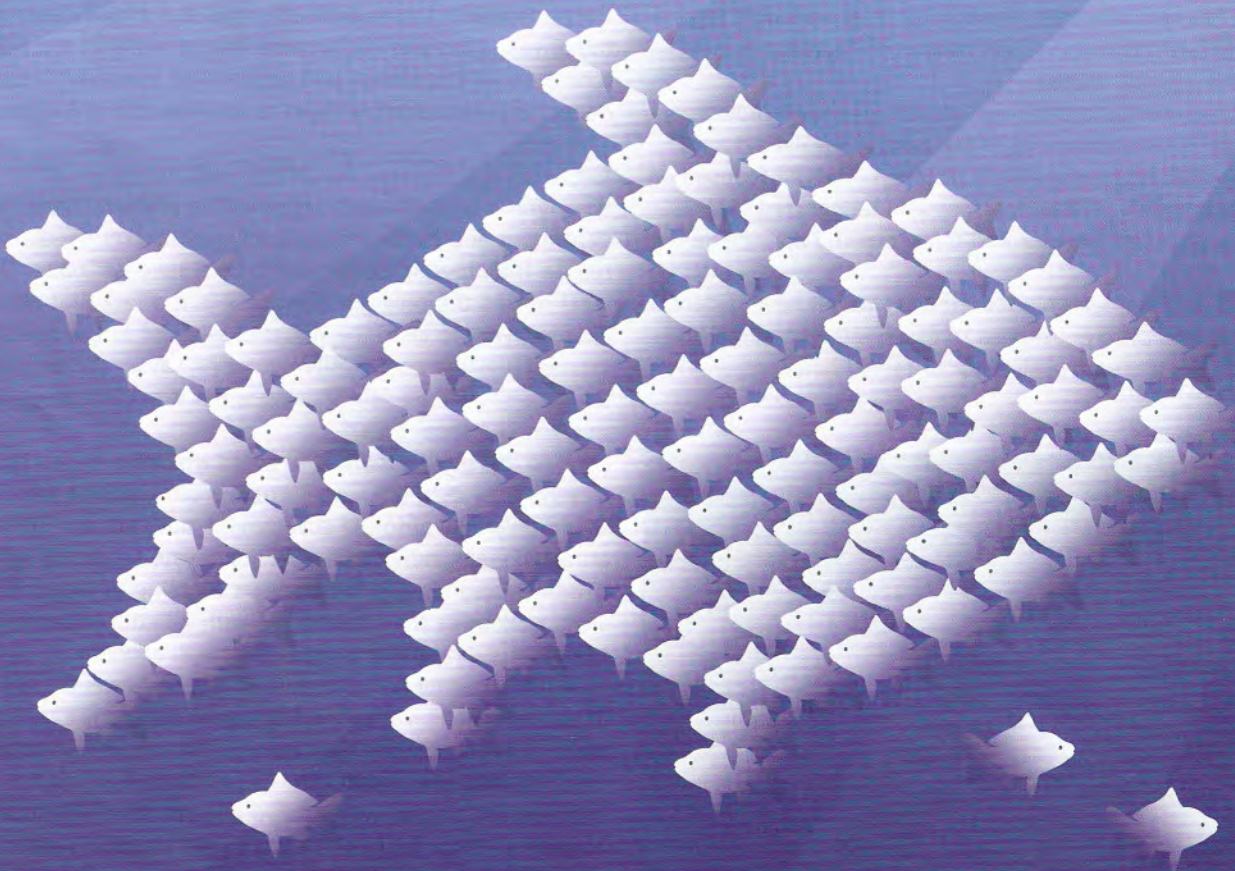
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# COALITION BUILDING TO STRENGTHEN YOUR LEGISLATIVE AGENDA

By Timothy Hennessey and Susan Clark



If you're looking for an analogy to describe the battles associations often find themselves in, David vs. Goliath is a pretty good one. Whether the "giant" they face is a well-funded opposition or an indifferent legislature, it's not uncommon for associations to believe that only divine intervention can save their cause. But there is a more pragmatic way to snatch victory from the clutches of defeat — enlist more Davids to join in the fight.

Coalitions can be a powerful force for achieving the shared goals of like-minded

associations and organizations. As evidence, one only needs to look to health care reform, an issue that in recent years has generated much rhetoric but little action.

A coalition led by Safeway Chairman and CEO Steve Burd is being credited with spurring the movement toward universal health care despite the fact that the coalition has yet to formally announce the companies that are participating. Although it's much too early to predict success, a 4,900-word article in the *New York Times Magazine* provides proof

that the coalition is definitely positioned to provide an influential voice.

Make no mistake: Building and maintaining an effective coalition can be hard work. It requires commitment, strong leadership, management, and, in most instances, some degree of capitulation on the part of member associations. Potential pitfalls lurk along the way that could derail any gains that have been made. But the benefits can far surpass the efforts required to build a successful coalition.

The most obvious benefit of a coalition is quite simple: There is power in num-



bers. No matter what the cause, the more names attached to an issue, the more influence those names can command. The synergy that is created by uniting the resources and expertise of individual organizations compounds that influence, creating a much greater force.

A coalition also gives the impression that a consensus is being formed on an issue, or at least that momentum is building toward the coalition's position. Legislators who might view the interests of a single association as parochial and inconsequential will be much more receptive when those interests are presented by a united front representing the views of a larger collective.

For the member associations that make up the coalition, the alliance affords the opportunity to be exposed to the inner workings of other organizations. This can be a valuable opportunity to identify and incorporate best practices. By working directly with other organizations, an organization may find better methods to communicate with its members or more effective ways to utilize its databases. It may discover a more suitable management structure or a leadership style worthy of emulating.

In addition to improving internal practices, the opportunity exists to become acquainted with more decision makers. Often, a coalition will operate beyond an individual organization's home district. While performing the coalition's work, members likely will meet legislators and their staffs for the first time, establishing contacts and credentials that will serve them when working in the capacity of their individual association.

Any time separate entities are brought together to perform as a cohesive whole, consensus building is a top priority. While member organizations obviously will share an interest in the issue that unites the coalition, there could be instances where they conflict or possibly even oppose each other on other issues. It's imperative in such cases that members focus on the coalition's goals as the greater good and, to the extent possible, agree to disagree on issues that fall outside of the coalition's scope.

While competing agendas can lead to difficulties in the formation and operation of a coalition, there can be some benefits to reaching across the aisle to ally on an issue. If two or more organizations are willing to set aside their differences in support of a common goal, a

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strong perception will be cast with both legislators and the public at large that their goal is of significant importance. Any issue that can unify opposing forces will almost always demand attention.

### COMMON GROUND

As an example, consider the case of hunters and environmentalists. Although not a formal coalition at this time, these two groups, which quite often find themselves on opposite sides of the political spectrum, have recently found common ground in opposing some of the current federal policies on public lands that favor oil and gas exploration over public access and conservation. It's clear that if this shared concern ever evolves into a structured campaign or coalition, it will wield considerable influence as legislators from both parties will take notice of their alliance.

No matter the level of compatibility among member associations, strong leadership is essential for the success of the coalition, especially in the initial formation and planning stages.

Enlisting associations to the cause can present a challenge at the onset. There's often a reluctance to join a coalition for the simple reason that there is a natural inclination to avoid committing to the unknown. But organizations should be aware that if they aren't willing to join in the effort, they won't have a say when it comes time to define the terms of victory. Or to put it in more carnivorous terms, which is often befitting when appropriations are involved, if you don't have a seat at the table — you're on the menu.

Simply joining a coalition, however, won't merit a seat at the table if an asso-

ciation isn't prepared to sing for its supper. Often, a coalition's initiative will be made up of components that align with each member association's priorities. Each association must take responsibility for its component and its members must commit, on a grassroots level, to push that part of the agenda.

### COMFORT ZONE

Consider that organizations vary in their style and methods of engagement. Often these are dictated, at least in part, by the accepted practices of the industry or environment in which they are operating. While some organizations choose an aggressive, if not confrontational, approach to presenting their agendas, others take a more moderate stance. Some, for various reasons, may even prefer to operate completely behind the scenes.

Because of this, careful consideration must be given to how the coalition will present itself, both in its direct contact with legislators and in its public relations and education efforts. It is crucial that none of the member organizations are uncomfortable with how the coalition's message is being delivered. Should organizations with conflicting styles find themselves allied, it is up to the leadership to determine which style is best suited for achieving the coalition's strategic objectives. It is then incumbent upon the leadership to acclimate everyone to this style.

No matter who is put in charge of a coalition, it is important that leaders realize not everyone will share the same high level of commitment. The ability to identify members who are best suited and willing to carrying out grassroots lobbying efforts is even more of a challenge in a coalition than it is within a single association because it can't be taken for granted that an individual's passion for an association will automatically carry over.

Building a new coalition that operates as efficiently as a long-standing association requires both finesse and toil. But it is also one of the best methods for maximizing support, especially when facing imposing opposition. And if in the end the giant falls, it won't be the result of divine intervention, but rather the combined efforts of people committed to their cause. ■

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