

BEYOND EASY ALIGNMENT

Cross-Boundary Coalitions Fail When Agreement Has No Price

Why influence in the federated organisation depends on negotiated sacrifice, not stakeholder goodwill



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“The coalition begins when each boundary can name what it will give up, what it will gain and who will make the difficult decision.”

1. The meeting where everyone agreed

At nine o'clock, twelve senior managers gathered around a long table to approve a common service model. By eleven, the discussion had produced unanimous support. The divisions wanted lower cost. The central functions wanted consistent controls. The programme wanted one design before the next systems release. The minutes recorded strong alignment.

Six weeks later, nothing essential had moved. One division had not released its process experts. A second insisted that its local approval route was outside scope. Finance would recognise the savings only after posts left the budget, while operations intended to use the released capacity for growing demand. The technology team had reserved no time for the required interface changes. Nobody had openly reversed the decision. Each boundary had simply protected itself.

This pattern recurs across shared services, enterprise systems, outsourcing transitions and merger programmes. We describe it as resistance, weak sponsorship or poor communication. More often, the diagnosis is simpler: the organisation secured agreement without negotiating the price of agreement.

Cross-boundary coalitions are not built by collecting supporters. They are built by making interdependence explicit and turning it into an exchange that the parties can honour.

2. The textbook promise and the organisational reality

The conventional account of influence is appealing. Identify the stakeholders. Assess their interest and power. Tailor the message. Build relationships. Find senior sponsorship. Communicate the case for change until people understand why the enterprise interest should prevail.

Every element has value. None is sufficient.

The difficulty is that organisational boundaries are not merely lines between people who need better information. They are arrangements of accountability. A division has a profit target. A function has a control obligation. A site manager has a service commitment. A supplier has a contract. Each boundary exists partly to protect something, and its leaders are judged for doing so.

When an enterprise initiative crosses those boundaries, costs and benefits rarely fall evenly. The centre may count a purchasing saving while the divisions fund data cleansing.

A shared service may promise efficiency while local managers absorb transition risk. A common system may reduce long-term maintenance while forcing one business unit to abandon a process that currently gives it speed.

The people involved may understand the corporate logic perfectly and still hesitate rationally. What looks like politics is often an unresolved allocation of burden.

Communication can clarify the case for change. It cannot settle who carries the cost when the benefits arrive somewhere else.

3. Influence begins where authority stops

In a direct reporting line, a leader can decide and then manage compliance. Across boundaries, the same action often produces only formal consent. The programme board approves; the boundary decides how much practical cooperation to supply.

That practical power is distributed in places the organisation chart does not reveal.

- The finance director controls whether a forecast benefit becomes a budget commitment.
- The operations manager controls whether experienced staff are released or only nominal representatives attend.
- The process owner controls whether a local exception is genuinely closed.
- The technical specialist controls whether a design is considered safe enough to adopt.
- The employee representative controls whether the proposed sequence becomes workable on the ground.
- The supplier controls effort that the contract may describe less precisely than the programme assumes.

A coalition becomes necessary precisely because no single person commands all these contributions. Yet organisations often respond by raising the sponsor's seniority. That can establish priority, but it cannot manufacture the missing operational bargain. A powerful sponsor can force a decision; repeated force across several boundaries usually drives objection into delay, qualification and minimal compliance.

The better question is not, "Who supports us?" It is, "Whose contribution is indispensable, what must they risk to provide it, and what legitimate interest must the coalition protect in return?"

4. The price that polite language conceals

Coalitions weaken when their language becomes too agreeable. Words such as alignment, engagement and buy-in allow different parties to appear united while imagining different obligations.

A serious coalition must make four things discussable.

- Sacrifice: What discretion, resource, timing or local advantage must each party surrender?
- Return: What benefit, protection, capacity or influence does each party receive?
- Authority: Which decisions may the coalition make, and which remain with the boundary?
- Consequence: What happens when a promised contribution is withheld?

Without sacrifice, support costs nothing. Without return, enterprise rhetoric becomes a demand that one boundary subsidise another. Without authority, the group can recommend but not govern. Without consequence, commitments remain courteous intentions.

The coalition begins when each boundary can name what it will give up, what it will gain and who will make the difficult decision.

This is not an argument for crude bargaining. Not every contribution requires compensation, and leadership sometimes requires accepting a local disadvantage for a larger purpose. But even then, the disadvantage should be named and authorised. Concealed sacrifice does not disappear; it returns later as slippage, exceptions or quiet non-adoption.

5. A composite pattern from enterprise consolidation

Consider a representative organisation in 2005: five operating divisions, 14 sites and a central programme to consolidate purchasing and accounts payable. The business case forecasts £3.6 million in annual savings from common contracts, fewer suppliers and reduced invoice handling.

The executive committee endorses the case. A steering group is formed with senior representatives from procurement, finance, operations and information systems. A stakeholder plan records each as supportive.

The first design requires every division to cleanse its supplier records, adopt common category codes and release two experienced staff for twelve weeks. The programme budget includes the central system work but not the divisional effort. Savings will be reported at group level. Local finance directors will still be judged on their divisional budgets during transition.

The programme interprets slow mobilisation as reluctance. It schedules more presentations, distributes the business case and asks the sponsor to restate the priority. Support is reconfirmed. Only seven of the ten requested specialists appear, and three are withdrawn during month-end. Supplier records arrive in incompatible formats. The schedule slips by eight weeks.

The turning point comes when the coalition stops discussing belief and starts discussing exchange.

The central programme funds temporary backfill worth £180,000. Divisions keep half of verified first-year contract savings in their own budgets. The rollout avoids two year-end periods. Operations retains an emergency local-purchase route for plant-critical items, subject to monthly review. In return, each division names a finance principal with authority to close local supplier accounts and commits specific staff by date.

Within ten weeks, 62,000 supplier records are reduced to 21,500 active and verified records. Three common categories move to contract. The first-year saving forecast falls from £3.6 million to £2.9 million because some local exceptions prove legitimate. Yet the lower figure is more credible, and delivery accelerates because the parties now know the bargain they are being asked to keep.

The mechanism is not improved morale. It is the movement from general assent to reciprocal, authorised commitments.

6. The serious objection: bargaining can fragment the enterprise

There is a strong objection to this view. If every boundary expects a negotiated return before supporting an enterprise decision, the organisation risks becoming a federation of vetoes. Leaders may defend parochial interests, inflate the price of cooperation and weaken the authority of the centre. Some decisions should simply be made and obeyed.

That objection is correct in two important respects.

First, coalition building must not become permission-seeking from everyone affected. Consultation is broad; the governing coalition should be limited to parties that control indispensable contributions. Interest alone does not confer a veto.

Second, leaders sometimes must impose an uneven burden. A control requirement, a merger decision or a necessary cost reduction cannot always be made locally attractive. Enterprise authority exists for a reason.

But formal authority works best when it is used with precision. A sponsor should decide the non-negotiable outcome and arbitrate bargains that cannot be resolved. The coalition should govern the contributions, sequencing and protections required to make that outcome real. If the centre dictates both the destination and every local means, it assumes knowledge it rarely possesses. If every boundary can reopen the destination, the initiative dissolves into negotiation.

The discipline is to separate three categories.

- Non-negotiable enterprise outcome: explicitly set by legitimate authority.
- Negotiable conditions of delivery: shaped by those who must supply the work and bear the risk.
- Protected local obligation: retained unless the competent authority formally changes it.

This separation prevents coalition building from becoming either command disguised as consultation or bargaining without end.

7. Why sponsorship is often misused

Senior sponsorship is frequently treated as a substitute for coalition work. When cooperation falters, the programme seeks a stronger announcement, a more senior chair or a sharper escalation.

Sponsorship matters, but its most valuable use is not repeated exhortation. It is resolving the structural conditions that participants cannot change themselves.

A sponsor adds value by:

- clarifying which outcome is genuinely fixed;
- changing measures that reward local obstruction;
- assigning budget for burdens that were omitted from the case;
- delegating real decision rights to the coalition;
- deciding when one party must accept an uneven but necessary contribution;
- enforcing consequences after an authorised commitment is broken.

A sponsor who merely tells everyone to collaborate leaves the original conflict intact. Worse, the instruction makes it harder to name the conflict because objection now appears disloyal.

The strongest sponsors create a place where disagreement can be explicit before commitment, and where commitment becomes binding after decision.

8. The evidence of a real coalition

Coalition health is often judged by attendance, tone and the absence of escalation. These are weak measures. A polite meeting may conceal complete operational withdrawal.

The better evidence is behavioural.

A coalition is real when principals send people they cannot easily spare, change a measure that protects their function, release information that exposes local weakness, close an exception they once defended, or accept a decision whose benefit arrives elsewhere. It remains real when one party can say, "This arrangement no longer works for us," and the group can repair the bargain without pretending the statement was never made.

Three tests reveal more than a stakeholder survey.

1. The resource test: Has every indispensable boundary committed a named resource, permission or change in behaviour?
2. The costly-decision test: Has the coalition survived a decision that creates a real local disadvantage?
3. The consequence test: When a commitment was missed, did anything change in the plan, bargain, authority or accountability?

If the answer to all three is no, the organisation has a discussion forum, not a coalition.

9. From support to obligation

The practitioner lesson is not that relationships are unimportant. Trust lowers the cost of negotiation. Good communication prevents imaginary conflicts. Personal credibility allows difficult truths to be heard. But these are enabling conditions, not the substance of coalition.

The substance is mutual obligation across divided authority.

We should therefore stop asking cross-boundary leaders to "get buy-in" as though the task were to persuade reluctant people to recognise an obvious truth. The real work is more

demanding: expose the unequal burdens, protect legitimate interests, allocate decisions, and make contributions consequential.

When that work is done, alignment no longer depends on everyone wanting the same thing. It depends on each party understanding the shared outcome, accepting the bargain and possessing the authority to keep it.

That is how coalition crosses an organisational boundary: not by dissolving the boundary, but by making the exchange across it explicit enough to govern.