

How to Structure Your CoR

Informality

Every year in January the leaders of the national organizations in our movement get together for the annual “Heads” meeting, during which they spend a day updating one another on what their organizations have been doing as well as talking shop together, listening to informative or instructional presentations on subjects of practical value to all, and engaging in joint planning. The Reason Rally was one of the outcomes of such joint planning.

These Heads meetings originated in 2005 with the holding of an initial summit meeting in Washington DC. And that summit meeting concept best describes what goes on. We aren’t dealing with a coalition or other type of organization here but, rather, an annual shared activity that makes other things possible.

On the local level, these sorts of Heads meetings have been sprouting up all over the country in the form of coalitions of reason (CoRs). That is, leaders or other representatives of the various types of local groups in our movement have been getting together to establish informal coalitions under the United Coalition of Reason (UnitedCoR) umbrella and then meeting periodically to update one another, talk shop, and engage in joint project planning. An *informal* structure, on the model of a summit meeting, is usually what’s involved here, not a formalized coalition. But one important addition is a common local website that lists all of the participating groups, with links to each. The site also describes the various joint activities of the CoR as well as the activities of each participating group separately (usually on a common calendar). This gives a little more form to the arrangement.

The advantages of such an informal structure are as follows:

1. No need to incorporate, form a partnership, or take out a business license.
2. No need to file for non-profit tax-exempt status.
3. No need to write bylaws or prepare other organizational documents.
4. No need to deal with banking resolutions or handle money directly.
5. No need to hold regular elections or engage in other bureaucratic activities.

A Light Structure

Yet, despite this informality, it is still possible to get a lot done. The secret is what one might call “structure lite,” a sort of minimalist level of organization. Here are its elements.

1. The CoR has a name based on its geographic location.
2. This CoR name is used for publicity purposes and to identify joint events.
3. The CoR has a website in its name (as noted above).
4. The CoR has a simple mission statement that it places on its website.
5. Guiding the CoR’s activities is an individual volunteer called a coordinator.
6. Managing the website is a volunteer CoR site administrator.

As desired, other individuals may be added for other purposes, such as media representatives who are good at talking to the press or event organizers for specific activities.

Key CoR Volunteers

UnitedCoR recommends the following best practices for CoRs to follow in regard to the key CoR volunteers.

1. The coordinator needs to be chosen democratically by the representatives of the participating groups. The coordinator can be changed whenever a resignation occurs or a majority of the representatives decide to make a change.
2. This coordinator is ideally someone experienced in group leadership but who isn't presently a group leader. This brings knowledge and experience into play without creating conflicts of interest or generating overwork that can lead to burnout.
3. The website administrator can also be chosen democratically, but generally the appropriately-qualified person simply volunteers. This individual would ideally be someone not already running one of the group websites—again to avoid conflicts of interest and overwork. It is also ideal that this individual not be the same person as the coordinator, both to avoid overwork and burnout as well as to prevent all key information from being in but one person's hands.
4. Either the CoR coordinator or the group representatives can select other volunteers, as needed or desired, such as media representatives or event organizers. Often the task is simply that of identifying the appropriate, interested individuals.

Duties of the Coordinator

The CoR coordinator is the primary contact for communications from and to UnitedCoR. Thus this person becomes the means by which UnitedCoR has dealings with the local CoR and, in turn, is the conduit through which the representatives of the various groups in the local CoR may communicate with UnitedCoR if they need to. When communications from UnitedCoR need to be shared with the local group representatives, it is the coordinator who handles that as well.

The coordinator also communicates with the group representatives, usually by e-mail, engaging in joint planning with them and, when necessary, arranging face-to-face meetings to talk shop, plan joint events, and handle any issues that may come up. Thus this person arranges for, calls, and chairs occasional or regular meetings of the group reps. However, it may prove sufficient that most interactions be handled electronically. When joint activities or CoR-identified events are to occur, the coordinator is usually the one to initiate and take the lead in such efforts. But that can mean that this person either personally handles or delegate to other volunteers the arrangements for such events. Planning, however, is best done with the participation, or at least the consent, of the group reps.

In connection with this role, the coordinator also provides material for posting on the CoR website, CoR Facebook page, and other appropriate media. The coordinator may also draft press releases or delegate the task to another volunteer.

Duties of the Administrator

UnitedCoR provides its local coalitions with free Web hosting and a standard website that is easy to use. UnitedCoR's webmaster, Joseph Stewart, will give over-the-phone training to the new website administrator. Also, if his help is needed, he can provide tech support, place content on the local CoR website, or fix problems. Anyone reasonably conversant with computers and the Internet, however, can learn how to manage the local CoR website.

After that, the site admin has the job of keeping the local site updated and adding new content. This content may be created by the site admin her or himself or by the coordinator. But generally the site admin should take direction from the coordinator when it comes to site content.

Duties of the Media Representative

Often the CoR coordinator is the media representative, but doesn't have to be. Or additional media reps may be added. The job of a media rep is to talk to the media (to print reporters, radio announcers, and TV reporters) and appear on interview shows. As one would expect, this requires a presentable appearance, a personable manner, and a good radio voice. Some people are better at television while others are better at radio. It's quite appropriate, therefore, to divide the labor accordingly, supervised by the coordinator. An entirely different volunteer may be called upon to draft press releases, but if the primary media rep or coordinator has this ability, then that's the person who can do it.

Creative Opportunities

In all of the above roles, those who serve are free to determine how far they wish to go. That is, they can simply maintain the coalition at a modest level of functioning or they can see this as a creative and activist opportunity and thereby expand upon the above job descriptions. By viewing the websites of various local coalitions in the UnitedCoR network, one can see the range of activities and activity levels that different coalition leaders have maintained. One may find them by going to www.UnitedCoR.org and using the Map Page or the pulldown menu of the "Find your local coalition" feature. Currently, three particularly active coalitions of interest are in San Diego and Orange County, California; Tulsa, Oklahoma; and Morgantown, West Virginia.

Conduct of Business

The people who serve in the roles of coordinator, media rep, and admin do so at the pleasure of the reps of the participating groups in the coalition. In other words, a local coalition is locally controlled and democratically run by the groups that make it up.

In the absence of bylaws, it is sufficient to follow the sort of ordinary democratic procedures used by small groups. The CoR coordinator chairs face-to-face meetings and initiates electronic

communications. Votes can be taken on anything that is or may be controversial. But if there is no dispute, then an absence of objection is sufficient to allow an effort to move forward. A group rep may raise an issue with the coordinator, asking that it be presented to the other reps, and may inform the coordinator and the other reps that there is an objection to some action.

No activity should be done in the name of the local CoR if any of the participating groups have a serious objection. This is because, if one (or more) of the groups feels forced to bow to the majority regarding some major public effort, that could endanger the continued cohesiveness of the CoR. Better to simply have the interested groups engage in the activity together under their own names and avoid use of the CoR identity in that instance.

The more regular the communications between the coordinator and the group reps the more likely the CoR will stay active after its initial launch. So it's important to share information and ideas. UnitedCoR offers the following recommendations for local CoR events throughout the year:

- Darwin Day (February 12)
- Earth Day (April 22)
- National Day of Reason (First Thursday in May)
- CoR Picnic (Summer)
- Banned Books Week (Last week of September)
- National Secular Service Day (First Sunday in October)
- Winter Solstice/HumanLight/Festivus (around December 21)

If the CoR needs to gather financial contributions in order to fund some joint activity, the way to do it is have one of the incorporated, tax-exempt groups in the CoR act as banker and hold those contributions, earmarked for the CoR expenditure, in its bank account and keep track of the money in its books.

Higher Levels of Formality

UnitedCoR recommends a light structure, as described above, to keep the work load and red tape to a minimum and keep the focus on the local groups. So this is how the vast majority of CoRs in the network operate. But such a minimal approach is by no means required. There are a few CoRs that have chosen to incorporate, have bylaws, elect officers, secure IRS tax-exempt status, have a bank account, raise funds, and in other ways establish a strong institutional structure and a complex array of programs. It all depends on what the groups involved prefer to do and what level of organization will be necessary to foster their chosen range of activities. Moreover, CoRs can start out informal and become more formalized over time as their goals and interests change.

Beyond the level of structure, UnitedCoR recommends that CoRs be formed geographically along the lines of media markets. Any sizeable urban area, for example, tends to constitute its own market. Thus many CoRs are named for these: Chicago CoR, San Diego CoR, and Tampa Bay CoR are just three examples. At other times media markets include two or more smaller cities. Hence we have Triangle CoR, Triad CoR, and Northeast Florida CoR. All of this makes promotional efforts easier, not to mention face-to-face meetings among the reps. But in a few

instances CoRs have been named and formed along the lines of states. Rhode Island CoR, for example, covers a state so small that the whole place is one media market. And New Jersey CoR covers the whole state because its groups aren't clustered in easily identifiable ways.

In this regard, the Secular Coalition for America, a national organization that focuses on church-state lobbying in Washington DC on behalf of the freethought community, has branched out to form state chapters that focus on lobbying in the various state capitals. This expansion has led one of UnitedCoR's state coalitions, Arizona CoR, to organize the Secular Coalition for Arizona. This latter is a coalition with a legal charter from the Secular Coalition for America, a high level of organization, and a clear political mission. UnitedCoR is supportive of such efforts wherever the local activists have that interest.

In sum, local CoRs are at their option as to the level of organization they want. But UnitedCoR seeks to make at least the start-up process as easy and as efficient as possible.

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