



PUBLIC HEALTH 
COMMUNICATIONS
COLLABORATIVE

How to Build Cross-Sector Partnerships that Improve Public Health

Public health has a greater impact when our work is informed by diverse perspectives. To improve community health outcomes, public health professionals must collaborate with other community anchors, including schools, businesses, and government agencies. These partnerships can help build trust, increase audience reach, and unlock more sustained funding for public health.

In this guide, find best communication practices for developing cross-sector partnerships in your community, informed by [Public Health Reaching Across Sectors \(PHRASES\)](#), a partnership of [de Beaumont Foundation](#) and [The Aspen Institute](#).



Identifying the Right Partner

Before considering how you'll communicate with a new partner, you must identify who can effectively expand your message and impact to new audiences. A strong cross-sector partner:

- Provides guidance for reaching your intended audience
- Gives additional credibility to your message
- Offers alternative channels to reach your intended audience

For additional tips on identifying values-aligned partners, visit the Public Health Communications Collaborative's [Strategies for Developing Culturally Driven Public Health Communications](#).

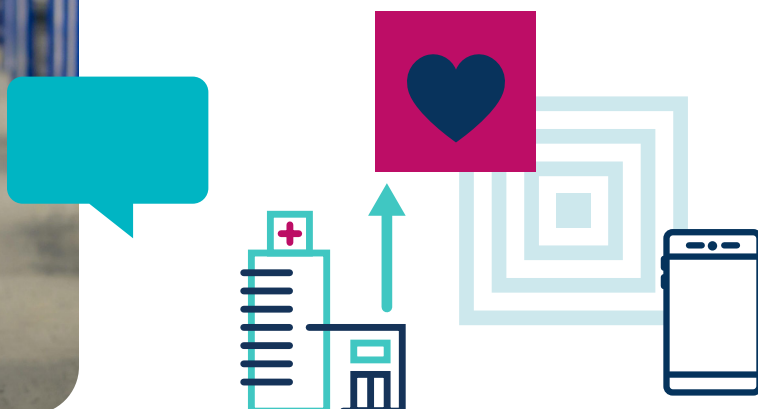
How Other Fields Perceive Public Health

Clear communication is key to building and sustaining community partnerships. However, people who work outside of our field often think differently about public health than we do. [Research from PHRASES and FrameWorks Institute](#) finds that leaders in other sectors think of health as the absence of illness, as opposed to a state of well-being across all aspects of life. Additionally, leaders across sectors view their work as unique, with its own goals and priorities, and not easily understood by leaders from other sectors.



Business leaders, in particular, are used to cross-collaboration that involves business transactions. They also tend to focus on the role of individual behavior in health outcomes rather than considering the social and environmental factors that can impact a person's well-being.

Changing perceptions about public health and the value of cross-sector partnerships comes down to how you frame the focus and impact of your work.





What is Framing?

According to PHRASES, frames are “sets of choices we make when we present information: what to emphasize, how to explain ourselves, and what to leave unsaid.”

Use these four framing techniques to share messages informed by your partner’s priorities, goals, and values.

1. Focus on the innovative nature of public health.

The public health field extends far beyond flu shot campaigns and health inspections. By framing your message around how the field is transforming to meet the current moment, you can help potential or current partners understand that public health is far-reaching and future-oriented.

EXAMPLE



This year, our goal is to ensure teachers have the training and tools they need to identify early signs of mental illness in their students.

Why this doesn’t work

It lacks context about the evolution of public health. If your audience doesn’t yet understand the expansive nature of the field, they might ask, “Why is public health focused on sectors outside of their control?”



Public health is deeply interconnected with other sectors that shape community life. For example, when students are experiencing mental health challenges, it is hard for them to learn effectively. That’s why the health department is partnering with education to ensure teachers have the training and tools they need to identify early signs of mental illness in their students.

Why this works

It provides a foundation for how we view public health today. This context clarifies why a public health professional might want to collaborate with a teacher or another cross-sector leader.



TIP Framing helps public health professionals create compelling messages to engage partners. **To reinforce your message, identify spokespeople with professional experience in both public health and your partner’s sector.**

Leaders with relevant cross-sector experience can speak to the intersection of your work in a nuanced, deeper way. Positioning these people as messengers can help prove to a partner that you understand their sector’s priorities, goals, and challenges.



2. Highlight cross-sector collaboration as a way to fuel your partner’s mission.

Ensure your partner knows that your proposed collaboration isn’t one-sided. Share how you’ll support their goals and overall impact, without suggesting that you’ll take any of their work on as your own.

EXAMPLE



[Speaking to leadership of a youth arts nonprofit]

Practicing an art form has clear emotional and mental health benefits. Coupled with our resources, we can help keep your students healthy outside of art class, too—improving health outcomes for all.

Why this doesn’t work

Your audience knows their students well and may feel they can better identify their students’ health needs outside of the art program. They may feel guarded about “handing over” this component of their work, which this message implies.



[Speaking to leadership of a youth arts nonprofit]

Your impact proves that practicing an art form has clear emotional and mental health benefits. Let’s work together to identify your students’ health needs outside of their art classes and improve health outcomes for all.

Why this works

This message focuses on collaboration and working together to improve the lives of students, which may make your audience more receptive to your proposal.



TIP Mapping out the contributions and benefits for those involved in the partnership can help you define the collaboration’s value. Simple tools like the Give-Get Grid can help you stay realistic about the amount of effort the partnership will require and the outcomes it can lead to.

GIVE

What you intend to contribute to the partnership

What your partner intends to contribute to the partnership

GET

How you aim to benefit from the partnership

How your partner aims to benefit from the partnership

Source: [Vanderbilt University Medical Center](#)



3. Use storytelling to prove the value of cross-sector collaboration.

Examples of your impact in action that draw on stories from real places and people make your proposal feel possible. Through stories, you can answer the “but, how will we do this?” question that your partner likely has and share the impact of your collaboration in a way that is meaningful and memorable to those outside the field.

EXAMPLE



When public transit systems make information about healthy living more accessible, cities thrive.

Why this doesn't work

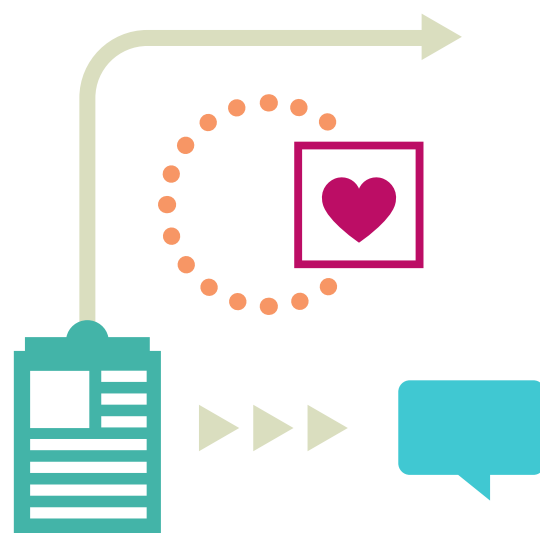
This is a unique idea, shared without any further explanation or examples. Your audience may think, “What does this mean, really? And how do we do it?”



Last year, we collaborated with public transit officials and found effective ways to share how passengers could access healthy spaces and places using the metro–grocery stores, parks, health clinics, and more. This collaboration contributed to a 2% improvement in community health outcomes last year.

Why this works

Using an example makes your idea real. Not only does it provide the details of the activation, but it shows how the collaboration contributed to better community health.





4. Position public health as a field of data-driven experts who can help other sectors meet their data analysis goals.

Public health professionals understand how to use data to make decisions, solve problems, and positively impact future health outcomes. Other sectors see this as a key benefit of working with public health, so showcase how this skill is not only valuable but also beneficial to your multisector partners.

EXAMPLE



The public health field encompasses professionals from across sectors, including education, business, government, and nonprofit.

Why this doesn't work

The message is too general and focuses on where public health professionals have worked, but not what skills they hold that could be beneficial in cross-sector collaborations.



Public health professionals are data experts. We use our data analysis skills to help our partners understand their impact and ultimately address the issues our communities face. Among other evaluations, we use data to:

- *Identify barriers to care*
- *Target populations for services*
- *Influence public policy*

Why this works

The needs mentioned in this frame exist across sectors. Audiences are more likely to be interested in your proposed collaboration if you can give examples of what gaps you can fill in their sector and how.

Communications Checklist: Preparing Your Cross-Sector Collaboration Proposal

When proposing a cross-sector collaboration opportunity to a potential partner, ensure your communications:

- Frame public health as an expansive, evolving field
- Show the collaboration as a benefit to both organizations
- Use storytelling to bring your points to life
- Position public health as a field of data-driven experts who can use their skills to benefit other sectors

For additional resources on framing the value of cross-sector partnerships, visit:

- [Collaboration Initiatives and Toolkits | PHRASES](#)
- [Map the Gaps Report | FrameWorks](#)
- [Plain Language for Public Health | Public Health Communications Collaborative](#)