

PH WINS Learning Collaborative Change Package

Improving Organizational Communication

Introduction

The Public Health Workforce Interests and Needs Survey

([PH WINS](#)) is the first nationally representative survey of individual state health agency workers. More than 10,000 public health workers from 37 states and 14 cities participated in the 2014 survey. This document is part of a series of change packages, a collection of great ideas and practices aimed at promoting lasting change, that discusses findings from the 2016-2017 PH WINS Learning Collaborative (LC), supported by the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials ([ASTHO](#)) and the [de Beaumont Foundation](#). Health department staff who participated in the LC completed PH WINS in 2014 and used the survey findings to develop and address a workforce development opportunity within their agencies through the LC. Participating health departments included the Boston Public Health Commission, Houston Health Department, Maryland Department of Health, Minnesota Department of Health, Nebraska Division of Public Health, and South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control.

These change packages aim to help public health agencies hire and retain a well-prepared workforce that finds a career in public health fulfilling and impactful. This specific change package provides a menu of potential actions that public health agencies can use to improve organizational communication. This document is organized into several sections:

- A **table** listing a goal that an agency might wish to accomplish to improve organizational communication. This is followed by several key changes that could support that goal, a potential list (“menu”) of different ideas that agency staff can try to affect the change, and associated resources that may assist with implementing the idea.
- General **resources** that could be helpful overall and address more than one idea.
- **Stories** (successes, lessons learned, and resources) from public health colleagues in the LC who have experience related to enhancing cultural awareness in the workforce.

Please note that this document is not intended to be all-inclusive: it is meant to help agencies start thinking about change and present bold and creative ideas for impacting change. If you have ideas or suggestions for additions to this resource, please contact the PH WINS team at phwins@debeaumont.org.

Preparing for Change

The following best practices may be useful for agencies that are preparing for, or in the early stages of, change that affects the workforce:

- **Conduct an organizational assessment** to determine what your agency is already doing to improve organizational communication. (This assessment may include some of the actions listed in this section.) The assessment may help agency leadership select priority actions, determine readiness for action, and identify initial steps. See “General Resources for Improving Organizational Communication” later in this document for links to existing organizational assessment guides. Agencies may also find it helpful to review the PH WINS change package focused on change management.
- **Explore your organization’s resources.** Specifically, consider which existing policies, practices, workforce development plans, organized labor benefits, and structures could help support efforts related to improving organizational communication or connect you to key formal or informal agency leaders. Additionally, consider your agency’s history and current climate relative to the change you seek. Some agencies will benefit from selecting basic actions to start, while other agencies with already-established initiatives may benefit from tackling more advanced ideas.
- **Engage agency staff and stakeholders** in planning and implementing interventions. Engaging diverse perspectives and knowledge will encourage buy-in and build a cohort of individuals who can champion improving organizational communication. Internal agency representatives may include human resources, information technology systems, communications/public relations, management, and front-line staff. External resources may include academic institutions, professional associations, training providers, subject matter experts, or consultants. You may also choose to hold roundtable discussions or focus groups, form an advisory committee, conduct key informant interviews, or engage the broader workforce in a variety of other ways around improving organizational communication.
- **Clearly define what you are trying to accomplish.** The clearer you are, the more directly you will be able to develop strategies to address the issue. Consider applying quality improvement methods to tackle the problem: Plan, Do, Study, Act cycles could provide structure to solving bigger organizational workforce issues.
- Changes and ideas presented in this document require different levels of organizational and individual commitment. Therefore, consider **aligning your actions with your strategic plan** and other guiding documents and **explore any potential financial implications** before taking any action.

PH WINS Measures

This change package focuses on the following PH WINS measure:

- **Communication between senior leadership and employees is good in my organization.**

The table below identifies a goal that an agency may want to achieve related to organizational communication. It is meant to serve as a guide for achieving or addressing the above PH WINS measure. Please note that the “Other Ideas to Try” do not list specific resources, but may still be important to consider.

This change package is one of five that ASTHO and the de Beaumont Foundation developed to assist agencies with their workforce development initiatives. The other change packages discuss **enhancing cultural awareness in the workforce, change management, retention and succession planning, and creating a culture of learning.** They include resources that may also be helpful for addressing organizational communication.



PH WINS Learning Collaborative Change Package

Improving Organizational Communication*

Change package: a curated collection of ideas and practices to create lasting change in your organization.

*Note: Inclusion in this list does not imply endorsement of any particular process or product. Organizations using this change package should always vet resources independently and make the determination for applicability to their unique agencies and workforces.

Goal

What you are trying to accomplish?

Communication internally between leaders, supervisors, and employees is timely, consistent, clear, and effective.

Key Change

Institutional practice or condition, or individual change or behavior you will see.

Ideas to Try

Curated list of potential actions that may impact the change you wish to see; could be evidence-based or “testable” ideas.

1. Employees are engaged in setting communication strategies for the organization.

A. Implement a communications advisory committee.

RESOURCES AND TOOLS

- Center for Creative Leadership white paper: [Developing Network Perspective: Understanding the Basics of Social Networks and their Role in Leadership](#)

B. Develop and implement a communication plan or strategy.

RESOURCES AND TOOLS

- [Boston Public Health Commission: Communication Plan](#)
- [Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services: Communication Plan](#)
- Society for Human Resource Management guide: [Managing Organizational Communication](#)

Key Change

Ideas to Try

2. Non-traditional messengers or modes deliver communication about programs and services.

A. Produce a blog series.

RESOURCES AND TOOLS

- [ASTHO State Public Health blog](#)
- [Baltimore City Health Department blog](#)

B. Support staff training in various facilitation and communication methods.

RESOURCES AND TOOLS

- Training: [Art of Hosting](#)
- Training: [Technology of Participation](#)
- Center for Community Health and Development at the University of Kansas toolkit: [The Community Toolbox: Developing Facilitation Skills](#)

Key Change

Ideas to Try

2. Non-traditional messengers or modes deliver communication about programs and services.

C. Use digital signage to distribute all staff messages.

RESOURCES AND TOOLS

- [Boston Public Health Commission: Screensaver](#)
- [Rise Vision: The Ultimate Guide To Digital Signage](#)
- [HB Communications and Brown University: Tips for Designing and Managing Digital Signage Systems](#)

Other Ideas to Try

- Implement a staff ambassador program
- Produce short videos featuring a “day in the life” of agency employees.
- Use internal social media avenues with option for staff to post.
- Implement “peer group updates” at unit meetings.
- Hold an annual celebration with games and include agency updates.
- Post announcements in common areas such as kitchens and restroom stalls.

Key Change

Ideas to Try

3. Employees and leaders are routinely engaged in two-way communication.

A. Host town hall meetings.

RESOURCES AND TOOLS

- Society for Human Resource Management article: [Doing Town Hall Meetings Better](#)
- Center for Community Health and Development at the University of Kansas toolkit: [The Community Toolbox: Techniques for Leading Group Discussions](#)

B. Implement an online suggestion box.

RESOURCES AND TOOLS

- [Suggestion Box](#)
- [Typeform](#)
- [Online Suggestion Box Software for Small Businesses](#)

C. Open management meetings to line staff.

RESOURCES AND TOOLS

- [Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services: Program 2 Program Overview](#)

Key Change

Ideas to Try

3. Employees and leaders are routinely engaged in two-way communication.

D. Implement weekly e-mail messaging or a newsletter.

RESOURCES AND TOOLS

- [Boston Public Health Commission: Monday Message Executive Director Share](#)

Key Change

Ideas to Try

4. Use of technology is maximized for delivery of agency communications.

A. Establish an agency LinkedIn page.

RESOURCES AND TOOLS

- [5 Steps To Starting Your Federal Agency Page On LinkedIn](#)

B. Use a performance dashboard to tell stories and share successes.

RESOURCES AND TOOLS

Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services:

- [How Are We Doing? Measuring Progress on a Performance Dashboard](#)
- [South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control: Internal Dashboard](#)

C. Share infographics to tell a story.

RESOURCES AND TOOLS

- [Infographic Overview](#)

Key Change

Ideas to Try

4. Use of technology is maximized for delivery of agency communications.

D. Use file sharing services for disseminating ideas and information.

RESOURCES AND TOOLS

- [Comparison of file sharing platforms](#)

Other Ideas to Try

- Hold weekly 15-minute standing meetings within individual units or teams.
- Install electronic message monitors in lobby areas to easily share important information with staff.

Resources

General Resources for Increasing Organizational Communication

[Institute for Public Relations](#)

Organization website with articles and reports on internal communication tips, strategies, and current research, including:

- [“Employee/Organizational Communications”](#)
Useful article on improving communications between employees and leadership.
- [“Best in Class Practices in Employee Communication”](#)
Presentation and white paper containing tips and methods for assuring communication throughout all levels of organizations.

[MindTools Communication Skills](#)

Website with section devoted to communication tools that addresses a variety of communication and facilitation methods.

University of Kansas Center for Community Health and Development’s The Community Toolbox

- [“Chapter 15, Section 4—Promoting Internal Communication”](#)
Section from a larger online resource with information and tools for communicating internally.
- [“Chapter 6, Section 1—Developing a Plan for Communication”](#)
Section from a larger online resource with general communication planning guidance.



Stories from the Field

Boston Public Health Commission

<http://www.bphc.org>

With over 1,100 employees working various shifts and located on multiple campuses in a variety of roles (including providing direct services to clients or working offsite from a campus), Boston Public Health Commission had complex needs for internal communications.

To improve communication between staff and senior leadership, the Boston LC team introduced an online suggestion box on its intranet for employees to anonymously voice suggestions and concerns to the executive office. A summary of questions and answers from the suggestion box is updated regularly and posted on the intranet for all employees to read, and an internal survey showed that more than 40 percent of supervisors and nonsupervisory staff agreed that the suggestion box has had a positive impact on communications.

The Boston LC team also assessed the effectiveness of email communications to all staff and identified ways to improve them. While studying the agency's email communications, the team learned that a significant number of staff were not receiving emails intended for all staff. The team worked with agency IT and HR to ensure the accuracy of email lists, streamlining the "add on" process. The Boston LC team learned that email is the most effective and preferred communication method for staff, complemented by other methods such as flyers, the intranet, and calendar invitations.



CLICK HERE
to view all the PH WINS Learning
Collaborative Change Packages

Stories from the Field

Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services' Division of Public Health

<http://dhhs.ne.gov/PUBLICHEALTH>

The Nebraska LC team demonstrated exceptional communication practices throughout the LC project by assessing and establishing effective practices among the team and across the agency.

By prioritizing effective communication, Nebraska's team was able to promote a shift in organizational perceptions about workforce and expand its workforce development plan beyond competencies to spur the creation of a policy about succession planning. The Nebraska team remained adaptable, persistent, and committed to quality and communicated those values and qualities to the agency.



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Reflections & Acknowledgements

Reflections from the PH WINS Team

ASTHO discovered how each of the teams identified and established effective communication mechanisms, both within their teams as well as with the rest of their organizations. Each team modified its approach for its agency, the resources available, and how communications had historically been approached. ASTHO found that the teams were most successful when they had a systematic approach for communicating with leadership.



ASTHO

The Association of State and Territorial Health Officials (ASTHO) is the national nonprofit organization representing public health agencies in the United States, the U.S. Territories, and the District of Columbia, and over 100,000 public health professionals these agencies employ. ASTHO members, the chief health officials of these jurisdictions, formulate and influence sound public health policy and ensure excellence in state-based public health practice. ASTHO's primary function is to track, evaluate, and advise members on the impact and formation of public or private health policy which may affect them and to provide them with guidance and technical assistance on improving the nation's health. ASTHO's vision is "state and territorial health agencies advancing health equity and optimal health for all," and its mission is "to support, equip, and advocate for state and territorial health officials in their work of advancing the public's health and well-being."



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de Beaumont Foundation

The de Beaumont Foundation's mission is to strengthen and transform public health in the United States by improving the effectiveness and capacity of local and state health departments. We believe that a strong public health system is essential and work to improve the practice of public health through thought leadership and strategic and engaged grantmaking. Programs funded by the Foundation build the capacity and stature of the public health workforce, improve public health infrastructure, and advance the distribution of information and data in the field.



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State and Local Health Agencies

ASTHO and the de Beaumont Foundation would like to acknowledge the state and local health agencies that participated in the LC and contributed to the development of this change package:

- Boston Public Health Commission
- Houston Health Department
- Maryland Department of Health
- Minnesota Department of Health
- Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services' Division of Public Health
- South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control

Additionally, ASTHO and the de Beaumont Foundation would like to acknowledge staff of the Center for Public Health Practice at the Ohio State University College of Public Health and the National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) for their contributions to this change package.