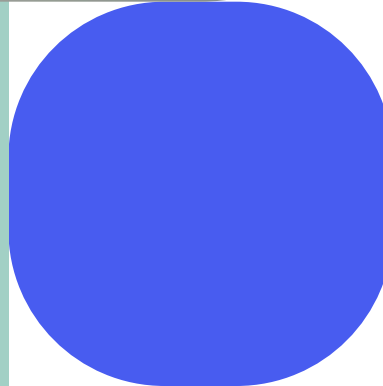
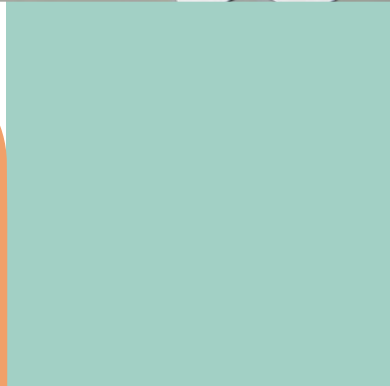
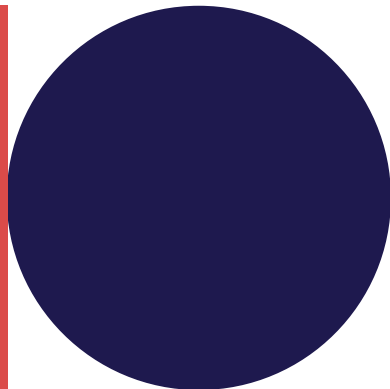
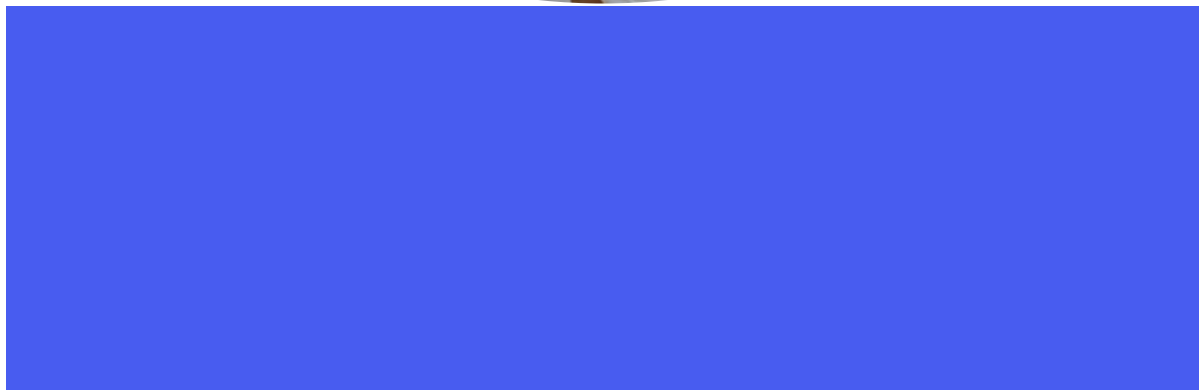


de Beaumont

# Engaging Business Leaders in Public Health Partnerships

A Roadmap for  
Public Health Professionals





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# Foreword: A Roadmap for Engaging Business Leaders

Strong partnerships are the foundation of effective public health practice. Public health has never worked alone to reach its greatest achievements in improving health and safety for communities across the country. These include innovative and life-saving initiatives like providing access to clean water, affordable and healthy foods, clean and healthy air, and others.

Though public health builds partnerships with many diverse sectors, like housing, transportation, health care, and education, one is often left out of the picture: the private sector. However, when public health misses out on engaging the private sector and business leaders, it misses out on a huge opportunity to advance a mutually beneficial vision and mission to transform communities.

An inextricable link exists between America's public health and economic well-being – achieving economic and social prosperity relies on having healthy and safe places to live, work, and play. Business leaders can help communities address complex challenges and prepare for future crises by partnering with public health to advance health and safety.

Yet, too often, public health is seen by business leaders only as a bureaucratic, regulatory entity, rather than a collection of strategic partners that can create opportunities for community well-being, prosperity, and possibility. Public health cannot meet today's challenges alone. Our success depends on collaboration and partnerships with the private sector.

To help change that perception, the de Beaumont Foundation developed this toolkit to enable better understanding and partnerships with business leaders. We hope this resource helps you start engaging with business leaders with confidence, clarity, and sustainability. You'll find research insights directly from business leaders, a practical engagement framework, and messaging guidance to make your partnerships with the private sector more effective and impactful.

At the end of the day, advancing public health isn't just about the programs we run – it's about the partnerships we build and the shared belief that **good health is good business.**

## 01

## About This Toolkit

This toolkit was developed to help public health professionals initiate and deepen engagement with business leaders in ways that feel relevant, effective, and aligned with both business priorities and public health goals.

Business leaders play a powerful role in shaping community conditions. They influence workforce stability, economic vitality, and local policy environments. In many communities, employers are trusted voices and key decision-makers whose support can strengthen public health efforts.

But engaging businesses on public health issues can be challenging. Public health priorities do not always feel immediately relevant to business leaders, who face tight operational constraints, reputational and political considerations, and pressure to prioritize workforce and performance outcomes. When public health engagement feels political, abstract, or misaligned with business priorities, participation is unlikely.

To help overcome these challenges, this toolkit provides practical, research-informed guidance to help you engage business leaders strategically and effectively. It's worth saying upfront: success

doesn't mean reaching the deepest level of partnership with every business you approach. Progress at any stage – a conversation started, an internal communication shared, a coalition joined – is meaningful. The goal is to move businesses forward from wherever they are, not to transform every contact into a champion overnight.

### This toolkit includes:

- Audience insights that explain the friction between businesses and public health
- An engagement formula for engaging with business leaders
- Guidance on which types of businesses to engage and when
- Message “do’s” and “don’ts”
- Recommendations for the role of local public health departments

## 02

## Who is This Toolkit for?

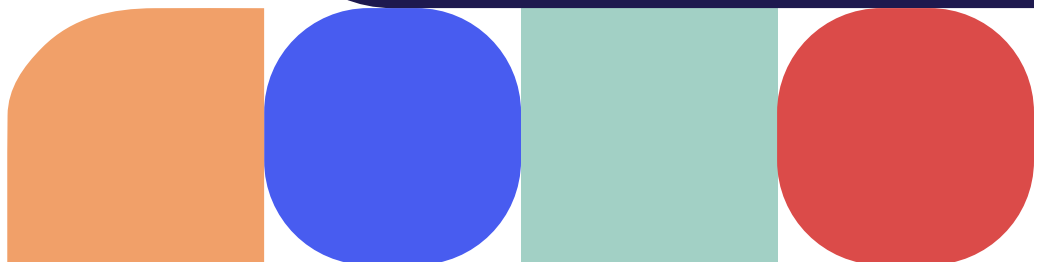
This toolkit is designed for public health professionals who engage with, or want to engage with, business leaders more strategically and confidently. This could include local and state public health departments, non-profits, advocates, and others who believe they could create greater impact with the support of businesses in their communities.

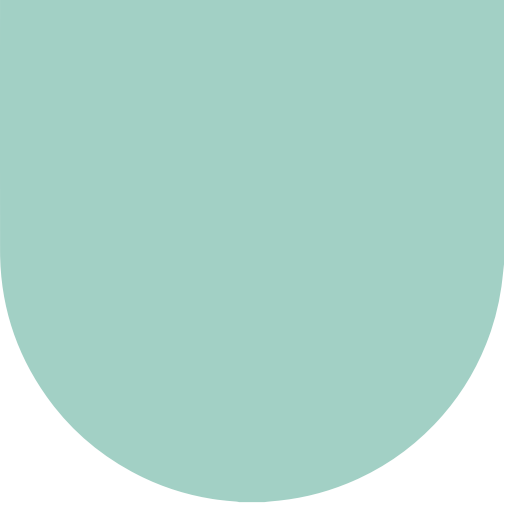
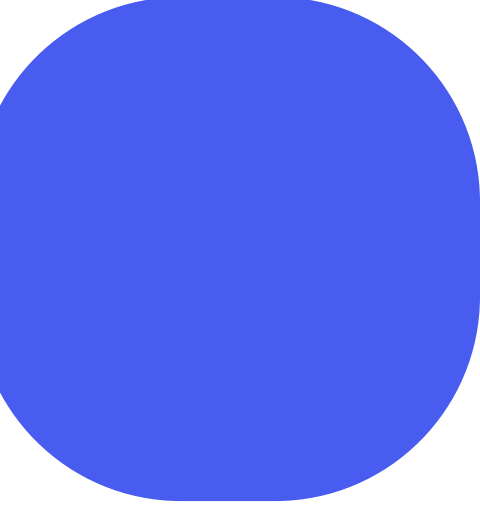
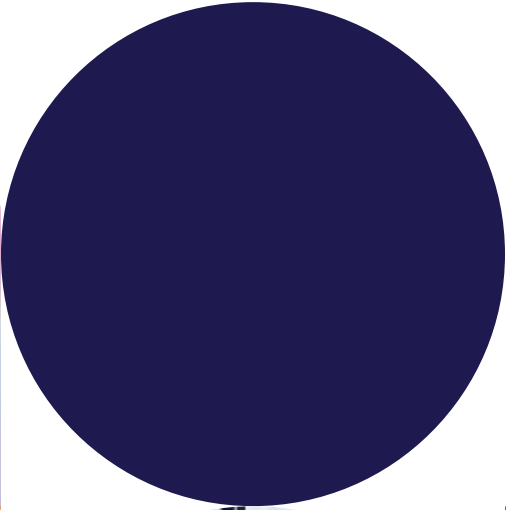
This toolkit will be most helpful for engaging with:

- Chambers of Commerce
- Corporate social responsibility (CSR) departments at regional or national businesses
- Local businesses
- State and local trade associations

Whether you are initiating a first conversation or deepening an existing relationship, this toolkit is designed to help you make engagement feel feasible, relevant, and worth it – for both public health and business leaders.

**Glossary Note:** Some of the terms introduced in this section are defined in the glossary at the end of this toolkit. Please see [page 43](#) for brief explanations of these terms.





## 03

## How to Use This Toolkit

This toolkit is designed to be practical and flexible. You don't need to read it cover to cover — use it in whatever way is most useful for where you are in the engagement process.



### Navigating the toolkit

The toolkit is organized into three parts.

- [Sections 1–4](#) build your foundational understanding of engaging business leaders in public health efforts: the research behind the recommendations, the role your department might play, the barriers you'll likely encounter, and how to choose which businesses to approach.
- [Sections 5–8](#) explain the Engagement Formula, a five-step framework for engaging business leaders that you can apply directly to a real issue you're working on.
- [Sections 9–12](#) give you practical communication tools: tested messaging guidance and a business language glossary.

If you're new to business engagement, we recommend reading through these parts in sequential order. If you're already familiar with the landscape and ready to take action, you can jump directly to [Section 9](#) and work through the formula. *Note: This toolkit is designed to be most useful when you have a concrete*

*initiative or health issue in mind for business partnership – the exercises and examples work best when applied to a specific context rather than general relationship-building.*

### Using the exercises

Several sections include structured exercises with fill-in templates. These are designed to be completed individually or as a team before beginning outreach. Taking the time to work through them – even briefly – will sharpen your strategy and surface assumptions worth pressure-testing. The exercises build on each other, so completing them in order will give you the most complete picture.

### Using this toolkit as a team

This toolkit works well as a shared resource for teams planning a business engagement effort together. Consider walking through the exercises in [Sections 7](#) and [9](#) as a group to align on your target audience, realistic engagement goals, and division of roles before outreach begins. The messaging guidance in [Section 10](#) can also serve as a useful reference when preparing for specific conversations with or presentations to business leaders.



## 04

## Methodology

The recommendations in this toolkit were based on an extensive round of research with business leaders across roles and industries.

Five focus groups were conducted (total n=20) with business leaders from November 12 to 14, 2025, including participants from large corporations, trade associations, and small-medium sized businesses across the US.

Specifically, this included:

- **Two focus groups with corporate social responsibility (CSR) leaders from major corporations**, who determine how their companies participate in local partnerships and events.
- **Two focus groups with state and local trade association leaders**, who represent the broader business community in their regions, including leaders from industry-specific associations (e.g., manufacturing associations).
- **One focus group with small- and medium-sized local business owners** with firsthand experience managing a business with deep roots in a community.

The focus groups were held virtually via Discuss.io and explored participants' perceptions of public health, as well as their concerns, questions, and perceived barriers or facilitators to supporting public health efforts. In each group, we also tested a range of messages to explore the most effective way to motivate business leaders to engage in public health efforts.

With that research foundation established, the sections that follow put these insights into practice.





## 05

## The Role of Public Health Departments

This section is meant to guide public health departments in making strategic decisions about what role they should play in a business-focused partnership. Many business leaders associate public health departments with regulation and political advocacy, so they may not always be the best face for a coalition or engagement. In those instances, a supportive, convening, or observational role is more appropriate.



However, there are times when it does make sense for public health departments to take a prominent leadership role. Here are three scenarios when leading is recommended:

- 1. Technical expertise is needed.** Public health issues are often complex and multi-faceted. Health departments bring specialists and deep expertise, making their guidance essential for effective partnerships and practical solutions.
- 2. Data can illuminate the problem or solution.** Public health departments have access to critical community health data and insights. When the scale of a problem or the potential impact is unclear, health departments can play a valuable role providing data, setting expectations, and assessing outcomes.
- 3. Trusted organizations are already involved or could be easily engaged.** Validators make a cause feel credible and important, and make businesses more comfortable getting involved. When a trusted validator (e.g., a research hospital) is on board, it signals support for the department's leadership, allows them to lead in earnest, and helps ease businesses' concerns over political risk or backlash.

**Guiding Questions:** The following questions are useful thought-provokers in assessing whether it makes sense for your public health department to be the visible “face” of a business partnership or coalition:

- **First**, contemplate environmental readiness and how your efforts may be received.
  - Is the current environment conducive to collaboration, or likely to be adversarial?
  - Would public health department involvement introduce reputational or political risk for the business(es)?
  - Are there trusted organizations (non-profits, hospitals, etc.) better positioned to lead?
  - Could the department make the same impact in a quieter supporting role?
- **Next**, consider the capacity of your health department and the expected impact you can make.
  - Does the department have the staff time, expertise, and leadership support to lead effectively?
  - What other work would be deprioritized to pursue this engagement?
  - Is the expected impact proportional to the investment required?



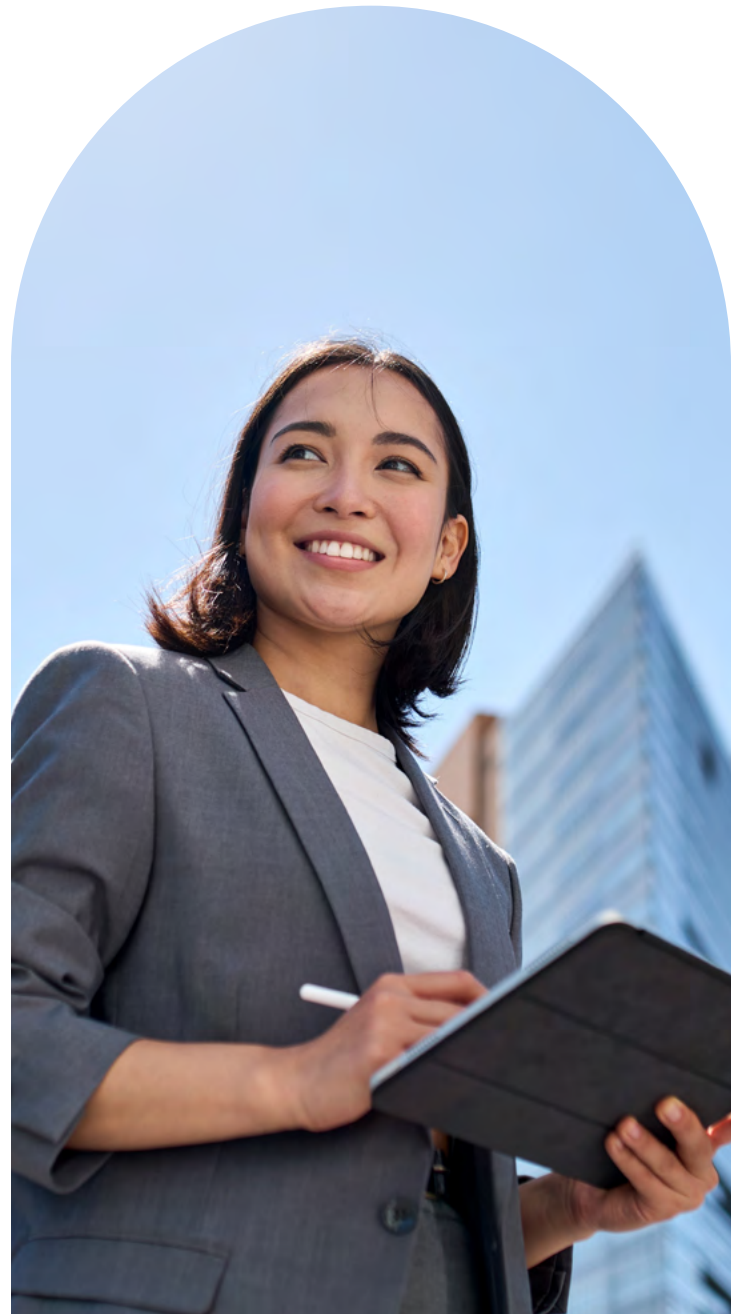
## 06

## Barriers to Business Engagement: Understanding the Friction

Even when your department is well-positioned to engage, getting businesses to participate is rarely straightforward. To engage effectively, it's important to first understand why businesses hesitate – and what's really driving the engagement gap.

The biggest challenge to engaging business leaders is not opposition to public health itself – it's the perception that public health isn't relevant to what businesses are trying to accomplish. Understanding where this perception comes from is critical to closing the engagement gap.

Throughout focus groups, leaders across business sectors described public health as long-term, abstract, and often political, while their own work is defined by immediate, more internal pressures: revenue, workforce stability, and day-to-day performance. As a result, their instinct is to deprioritize or sideline public health efforts – not because they oppose them, but because they cannot clearly see how they fit into the urgent realities of running a business.



We identified three key barriers that fuel this engagement gap.



### Public health feels unrelated to a business's mission

Many business leaders equate public health with regulation, political advocacy, or crisis response, making it difficult for them to see how they could add value.



### Public health feels long-term and abstract, while businesses are focused on the here and now

Business leaders are focused on what affects them today: revenue, profitability, workforce reliability, etc. Public health, in contrast, is often seen as a generational or long-term endeavor with unclear or distant payoffs.



### Public health is polarizing – both nationally and locally

Business leaders worry that their involvement in public health efforts could signal political partisanship and alienate customers or employees. Interactions with health departments specifically can feel reputationally risky.

## Key Barrier #1: Public health feels unrelated to a business's mission

**What it means:** Many business leaders equate public health with regulation, political advocacy, or crisis response, making it difficult for them to see how they could add value. Even leaders who genuinely want to support their communities often struggle to see how they can contribute to public health efforts beyond financial donations. As a result, they may not realize the important role they could play through more active participation in solutions.

**Why it matters:** This narrow mental model limits the kinds of collaborations business leaders can imagine. Leaders underestimate how their operations, credibility, workforce, or customer relationships intersect with community health. Without concrete examples of how public health aligns with their mission, they default to thinking it isn't their lane – which reduces buy-in and makes deeper, sustained partnerships far less likely.

## Feedback from business leaders

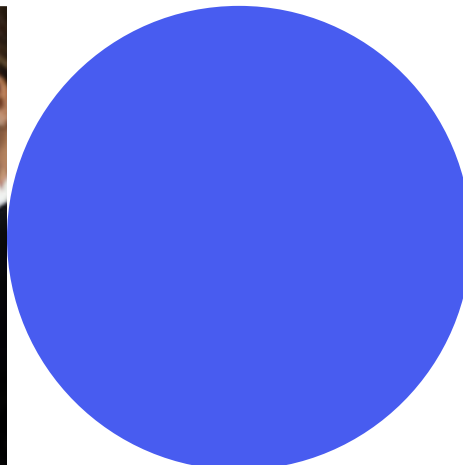
“ I actually like this [definition\* of public health], but I’m surprised it’s as comprehensive as it is. It includes things like affordable and healthy housing and walking and biking infrastructure. When I think of public health, I don’t know that I would have included those things and made it as comprehensive as this definition.

– SMB (Small-Medium Business) Owner

“ We recently partnered with our local Department of Transportation to reduce a dangerous stretch of road down to two lanes to slow traffic. I didn’t think of that as a public health initiative, until given this [broader] definition\*. And after, the Department of Transportation provided a six-month observational study demonstrating reduced speeds, which reinforced the value that we share within our sector of keeping roads safe.

– CSR Leader

**\*Referenced definition:** “While public health responds to many urgent issues, like disease outbreaks, natural disasters, and environmental threats, its primary focus is on the prevention of health issues by creating conditions where people can achieve their best possible health. Those conditions can look like supporting green space and walking/biking infrastructure, access to healthy foods, access to affordable and healthy housing, and many other large-scale community issues.”



## Key Barrier #2: Public health feels long-term and abstract, while businesses are focused on the here and now

**What it means:** Business leaders are focused on immediate pressures – revenue targets, profitability, customer expectations, workforce stability, and day-to-day performance. Anything that doesn't directly address these urgent needs can feel like a distraction or even a drain on limited capacity. Meanwhile, they see public health often as a long-term, generational endeavor, which makes it feel disconnected from the problems businesses need to solve today.

**Why it matters:** Because businesses prioritize short-term stability and results, they deprioritize public health engagement that doesn't offer an immediate, visible payoff. Even leaders who value community well-being struggle to justify investing time or resources in initiatives that feel indirect to their mission or slow-moving. As a result, public health can be perceived as "nice to have" rather than aligned with core business needs – making partnerships harder to launch and sustain.

### Feedback from business leaders

“ I think a lot of [public health initiatives] have a long-term horizon. Companies, however, especially publicly traded ones, have very short-term horizons. Their priorities tend to be, how are we going to do this quarter? How would we make this quarter look good for our shareholders? ”

– CSR Leader

“ I think it all comes down to the bottom line...and whether it's going to be a risk to business. If employees think [a public health initiative] is important, they're going to get leaders on board, or if they think that it'll drive more revenue. But I think it comes down to revenue for my members. ”

– Trade Association Leader

## Key Barrier #3: Public health is polarizing — both nationally and locally

**What it means:** The lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have made businesses cautious about anything that could be interpreted as political or polarizing. Local health departments, in particular, are viewed as polarizing due to their regulatory responsibilities within communities and carry reputational risk; many leaders worry that partnering with them could signal partisanship or align their organization with contentious positions. Even strictly non-political initiatives can get caught up in this narrative, leading businesses to avoid public-facing partnerships or, in some cases, private collaboration altogether.

**Why it matters:** This perception makes businesses highly risk-averse to engaging with public health partners, especially public health departments. Instead of evaluating public health opportunities on their substance, leaders default to protecting their brand and avoiding potential controversy. And, when no coalition is involved, businesses perceive engagement as riskier and are more acutely aware of reputational implications. This limits the range of issues they are willing to engage on, narrows the set of acceptable partners, and slows or stops potential collaboration before it even begins.

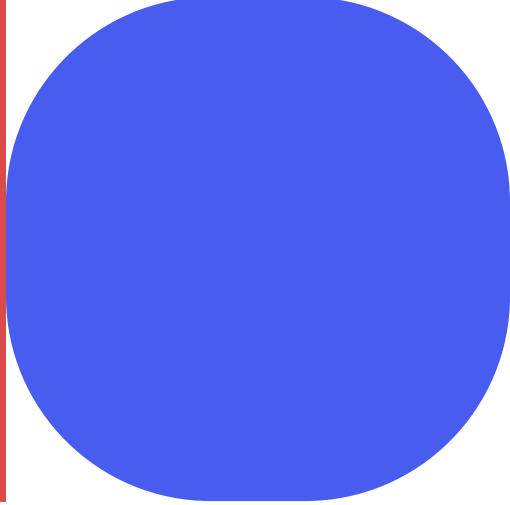
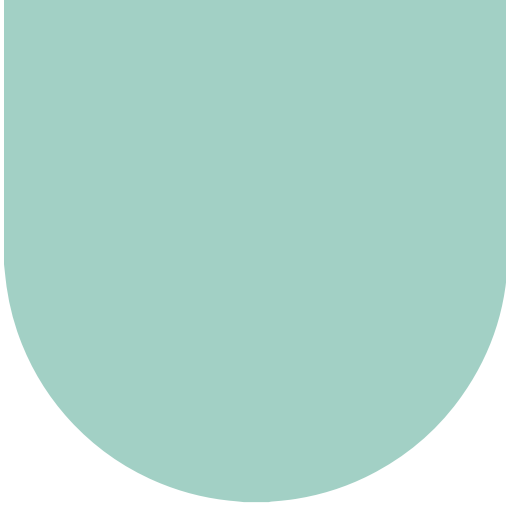
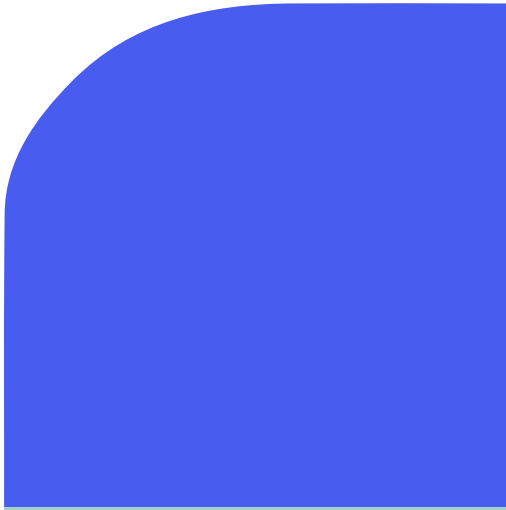
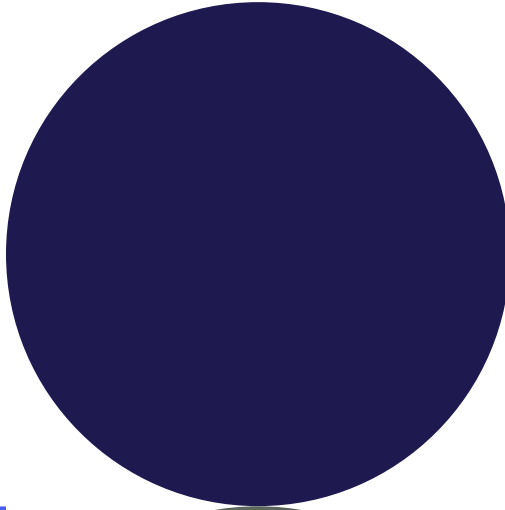
### Feedback from business leaders

“Public health is very politicized at the moment. I think our members would be interested in supporting public health by volunteering their time or learning about cutting edge issues ... but our members span the political spectrum and some work at different organizations that depend on government funding to a large extent. So, if the project was viewed as political or controversial in some way they would be very hesitant to be involved.

– Trade Association Leader

“We have to be careful as a company about how we say things or not say things, and I have to stay out of having any public opinion about anything. I would be more than happy to do things like [public health partnerships], but the politicized part of it is a difficult thing for somebody like myself who relies on the public to make a living.

– SMB Owner



## 07

## Moving Forward: Choosing Who in the Business Community to Engage

Before reaching out to a business leader, the first step is to think strategically about which types of businesses to engage. Below are some questions to help you determine which types of businesses you want to engage, who within them to target, their potential motivations for getting involved, and the barriers you'll have to overcome to reach them. *Note: In the following sections, [the Engagement Formula](#) will provide more detailed guidance on how to overcome these barriers – so don't feel like you have to have all the answers just yet.*



While many concerns about engaging with public health are widely shared across the business community – from maintaining the bottom line to protecting brand reputation – some stand out more for certain job functions than others. For each group of business leaders below, we focus on the most prominent and commonly referenced concerns.

In addition to the type of organization, the nature of the business (i.e., the service they provide or the product they sell), will make a significant difference in their willingness to engage. See [Section 10](#) for tips on how to connect your cause to a business's mission using language that resonates with business leaders. The [glossary](#) also defines each of these audiences in more detail.

## CSR Leaders at Major Corporations

*Note: This guidance likely also applies to major corporations' HR or internal communications teams, who may be relevant audiences for employee health and wellness efforts.*

Because they work at major corporations, corporate social responsibility (CSR) leaders are responsible for aligning their company's community investments with broader business objectives – balancing stakeholder expectations, internal priorities, and reputational considerations all at once. Their goal is to demonstrate that doing good and doing well are compatible.

When approaching CSR leaders, it's important to ask yourself:

1. **Is this topic political?** CSR leaders are risk-averse and apprehensive about engaging in anything that could be polarizing. Because of this, the best way to engage them is through non-political initiatives that don't pose any potential "[brand tax](#)."
2. **Are there meaningful, bottom-line benefits for the business that justify the necessary resources?** Because CSR leaders value stability and visible results, highlighting the [return on investment](#) of a partnership will make engagement more appealing.
3. **Are there low-risk engagement initiatives that could act as a starting point?** Slow internal processes make new partnerships difficult to put into action at larger corporations. Lead with

engagement options that don't require major resources. Low-stake engagements help build momentum, familiarity, and trust for deeper engagement in the future.

4. **Are there opportunities to engage alongside other businesses?** CSR leaders may be more comfortable participating when other companies are also involved. Inviting them to join coalitions or collaborative efforts with peer organizations can reduce perceived reputational risk and make participation feel more like shared leadership than a standalone corporate stance.

### Feedback from CSR leaders

“ At our company, we try to stay out of things that are hot topics and don't lean into that because within our customer base – and the business model – we have so many different mentalities around things. So, when it comes to those really hot topics, those are issues we would take a pause at.

– CSR Leader

“ We are very metrics-driven, so we'd want to know exactly what we were getting into, and what are the benefits, both from a visibility perspective and from a public health perspective.

– CSR Leader

## State/Local Trade Association Executives

Because they represent the business community broadly, trade association executives have a finger on the pulse of their members' priorities and their sector writ large. Their goal is to keep their members unified and represent their interests.

To put your best foot forward to engage with trade association leaders, consider:

1. **Could this initiative create political or controversial risk?** Trade association leaders are hesitant to pursue partnerships that might upset their membership base. Topics that are apolitical and pose little potential for backlash are the easiest starting points.
2. **Will this partnership clearly benefit association members?** Spelling out the benefits that members would gain from a partnership gives association leaders confidence that they'll have – or can generate – member support.
3. **Does the initiative have an intuitive relationship to the industry or sector?** To stretch outside their normal comfort zone, the relationship between the industry and the public health issue must “make sense” and align with trade association members' priorities. For example, focusing on road safety for an association of auto manufacturers, or focusing on extreme weather for an association representing contractors whose teams work outside, directly connects public health goals to industry priorities.

### Feedback from trade association leaders

“Protecting workers from climate-related health risks is appealing. All of our members work outside for the most part, and safety is a big part of our industry, so that is directly relevant to us. With a lot of [public health initiatives] there's no real connection between the effort and our industry. Supporting prenatal care or vaccination efforts we wouldn't get involved in just because of the lack of direct connection – and because those can be mildly controversial at times.

– Trade Association Leader

“If there was a good argument for why a public health issue had implications for our members' bottom lines, then I think that is something we would look at.

– Trade Association Leader

## Small and Medium Local Business Owners

This audience may interact with public health primarily as a regulatory body and be less familiar with community partnerships and other facets of public health work. Although they may have more questions about their involvement in public health efforts, they bring a strong local perspective and have significant credibility with community members (compared to CSR and Trade Association Leaders).

To determine whether engaging them makes sense, ask yourself:

1. **Will this partnership trigger fears of regulation?** Business owners often see health departments as regulators rather than potential partners, since their interactions typically involve inspections and safety compliance, which can make leaders wary of how a partnership might affect that relationship. Initial pushback is normal and can be addressed by emphasizing the collaborative nature of the effort. Extreme pushback, however, may signal that the timing isn't right for engagement.
2. **Will this initiative require significant time and resources?** Local business owners have limited time and resources. Offering low-lift initiatives provides an easy entry point and helps ease any concern that participation could disrupt their business.

3. **Will this initiative provide near-term, tangible benefits?** Business owners are hyper-focused on immediate operational pressure, such as workforce stability, customer experience, and revenue targets. Anything that feels abstract, or like a long-term investment will be met with hesitation.

### Feedback from small-medium business owners

“ My time is my most valuable commodity, and I'd want to know what my return on investment is, what my impact is, and what I'm doing with my financial resources.

– SMB Owner

“ It's a difficult line to straddle because I have a compliance-based relationship with [the local health department]. It'd be a difficult relationship because I'd be doing stuff with them differently. They're more of a police [figure] for us... but I wouldn't totally be against partnering.

– SMB Owner

While these barriers can make business engagement appear daunting, being aware of them allows you to start thinking about how to overcome them. With the right framing and approach, public health partnerships are possible – businesses just need to be reminded that public health efforts are neither a zero-sum game, nor are they politically risky, nor do they produce only abstract outcomes.

## Exercise: Picking Your Target Audience

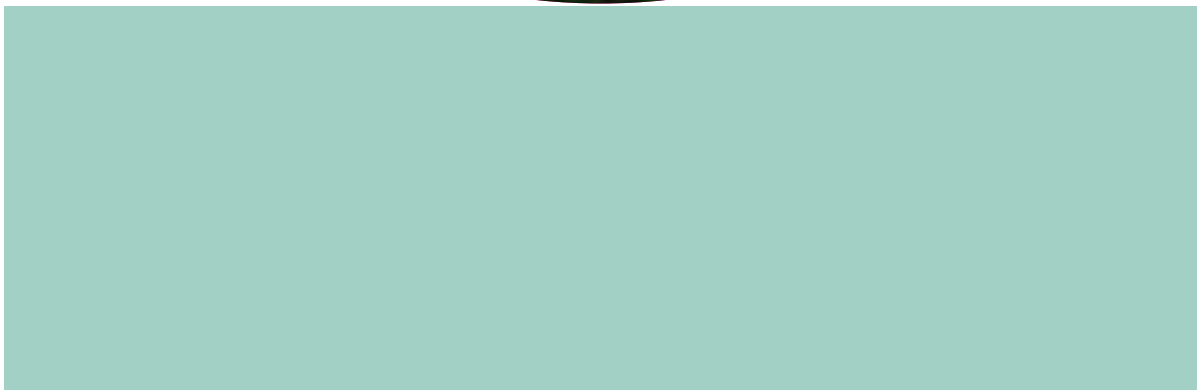
This exercise is designed to help you consider which type of business, among those described above, you want to engage with and what barriers you'll have to overcome to do so. The goal of this exercise is to start picking targets to keep in mind as you go through the [Engagement Formula](#) on the following pages. So don't feel like you have to have all the answers for engaging them quite yet.

Using the template below, describe the business segments you want to engage and explain why those partnerships feel realistic.

What segment(s) do you hope to engage with?	Why? What makes this a realistic and worthwhile partnership?

Next, consider the motivations and barriers that might apply while pursuing this partnership. Think strategically about what it would take to sustain engagement and fully commit to this partnership – both from your perspective and that of your potential business partner.

Motivations for your target businesses to get involved	Barriers that you may need to overcome



## 08

## The Business Engagement Spectrum

While some businesses may not be ready for public engagement efforts, they are often open to a quieter first step. Even among the most cautious leaders, one form of engagement that drew near-universal support was a willingness and desire to share public health information internally with employees. Unlike public partnerships or coalition sign-ons, internal awareness-raising felt low-risk, within their control, and directly relevant to workforce well-being. Before beginning outreach, it's important to consider the level of engagement a business is realistically prepared for. To help with that, use the following spectrum as a guidepost.

When considering engaging a business, keep in mind that **success isn't defined by reaching the "end stage"**. Focus on fostering progress along the spectrum and deepening engagement at any stage. Sustained partnerships require significant time, energy, and resources, so the "Champion" stage may not be realistic or needed for every organization. Progress at any level is meaningful, because every step counts toward expanding businesses' role in shaping community health.



## Stage 1: Building awareness

Engagement starts with awareness. Many (perhaps most) businesses will need to begin this process by learning about the relationship between public health and business outcomes. Consider your objective here to be more about spurring curiosity than action. You might consider encouraging them to:

- Review fact sheets linking public health topics to industry risks and opportunities
- Explore local public health data dashboards with business-relevant metrics
- Subscribe to public health email updates for employers and executives

## Stage 2: Low-risk participation

At this stage, businesses have voiced or demonstrated interest in taking limited, low-visibility actions, often internally or through coalitions. A strong starting point is encouraging them to raise awareness within their own organization, helping them take meaningful action while keeping risk low. To encourage uptake of low-risk options, offer the following as starting points:

- Share internal wellness communications or challenges with employees
- Make internal policy or environmental changes in the workplace
- Partner with other businesses or trade associations to provide public health

resources (e.g., co-host an employee education event on stress management or cross-promote information about nearby vaccination sites)

## Stage 3: Active collaboration

Businesses at this point on the spectrum are prepared to take the next step and engage in co-designed initiatives with shared responsibility. Encourage those ready for a close partnership to consider the following collaborative efforts:

- Partner with a local nonprofit or community coalition on a specific public health topic
- Sign on to a public statement or open letter about an issue
- Provide financial or in-kind support for a local public initiative

## Stage 4: Sustained partnership/champion

This end of the spectrum includes entities that have built ongoing, trusted collaboration across multiple issues. These businesses are strong models for partnerships, and they also may help in recruiting others to the cause. When engaging with businesses in this stage, think about deepening the partnership:

- Encourage further integration of public health goals into business strategy or CSR reporting
- Establish regular check-ins or joint planning sessions for future initiatives

## Exercise: Map Your Current Engagement and Set Expectations

Using the template below, describe **where** you think the business segment you want to engage with falls on the “engagement spectrum”. Consider the reasons for their level of engagement and what it might take to move them along the spectrum or deepen their current level of participation.

Where does this business sit on the spectrum?	
Why do they fall where they do?	
What do you think they need to see to take the next step?	
What engagement tactics do you plan on using?	

With a clear picture of where your target business stands on the spectrum, you’re ready to apply the Engagement Formula. The following sections walk through each of the five steps in detail.

## 09

## The Engagement Formula: Engaging Business Leaders Effectively

Once you've asked yourself these questions and identified your audience, it's time to plan your approach to engagement. This engagement formula is designed to support public health professionals to engage effectively with business leaders. These steps are designed to address the three core barriers described above that drive the engagement gap and reduce the friction that usually holds business leaders back from joining public health partnerships. Each step helps you articulate a strategic focus, reduce political and reputational risk, increase relevance to business leaders, and make participation more feasible.

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The five steps are:

1. Pick a specific health issue
2. Connect the issue to the business's core mission
3. Show the workforce and business implications of your public health issue
4. Build relationships between your health department and the business
  - a. *Bonus Step:* Strengthen engagement through coalitions
5. Maintain the relationship

Taken together, this approach helps professionals move from abstract goals to concrete, actionable engagement that aligns with both public health priorities and business realities.

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## Step 1: Pick an Issue

The purpose of this step is to **establish strategic clarity before outreach begins.**

Starting with a specific public health issue – rather than engagement for the sake of engagement – ensures that **outreach is targeted, purposeful, and grounded in a clear value proposition for businesses.**

An issue-first approach:

- Provides strategic focus for identifying which businesses to engage and who to contact
- Helps the messenger define the “ask”
- Makes the return on investment (*ROI*) clearer for businesses by defining what successful outcomes would mean

Without this clarity, **engagement risks becoming vague, overly ambitious, or misaligned with business priorities.**

**Thought starter:** Identify a single, clearly defined issue that is timely and actionable. Explain why the issue matters now and describe how it directly affects business priorities – especially workforce stability, availability, or performance. Be specific enough that you could clearly articulate what success would look like from a business leader’s perspective.

**Example:**

- **Issue:** Lack of access to affordable childcare for hourly workers.

- **Why it matters now:** Local employers are experiencing high turnover and *absenteeism* following the closure of several childcare centers.
- **Business connection:** Employees without reliable childcare are missing shifts, leaving roles unfilled and increasing strain on remaining staff.
- **What success looks like:** Employers publicly support a local childcare stabilization policy and participate in a pilot program to expand childcare slots near major employment centers.

## Step 2: Connect to the Business’s Core Mission

This step addresses one of the core barriers to engagement: that public health feels unrelated to a business’s mission. When issues aren’t mission-aligned, businesses struggle to see the benefit of participating and don’t understand how they can contribute. Businesses are far more likely to engage when requests align with what they already do well, reflect their values, and fit within their existing operations or capabilities.

The goal is to make sure there is an intuitive pathway from mission › action › impact.

### Why mission alignment matters

Connecting the issue to a business’s core mission:

- Increases credibility and trust by showing you understand the business
- Reduces perceived risk by aligning with existing values and practices

- Makes participation feel like a natural extension of what the business already does

**Thought Starter:** Think about a business you want to engage. Review the company’s mission, values, and initiatives. Identify what the business already does well that connects to this issue. Then define a specific, realistic action you could ask them to take that aligns with their mission and uses their existing strengths. Clearly articulate how that action would lead to meaningful workforce or community impact.

**Example:**

- **Business:** A regional manufacturing company
- **What they already do well:** The company invests heavily in workforce development and promotes itself as a stable employer that supports working families.
- **The ask:** Partner with local organizations to support a childcare pilot program for employees and test more flexible shift scheduling while new childcare slots come online.
- **Pathway to impact:** Mission (supporting working families) › Action (childcare partnership, scheduling flexibility) › Impact (reduced absenteeism, improved retention, and a more stable workforce).

## Step 3: Show the Workforce and Business Implications

One of the key reasons businesses don’t engage with public health is that it often feels tied to long-term, abstract outcomes, disconnected from problems businesses need solved today. This

step aims to connect the dots so business leaders clearly see how an issue affects their top priorities and daily operations. Workforce framing shifts the conversation from abstract outcomes to concrete business realities.

### Why workforce framing works

Workforce framing resonates because:

- Recruitment, retention, morale, and productivity are universal business concerns
- Workforce impacts are experienced daily and are easy for leaders to recognize
- Focusing on the workforce feels practical and apolitical, lowering resistance to engagement
- It positions public health as a contributor to operational stability rather than a competing priority

**Thought Starter:** Try to translate your issue from a “public health” issue to a workforce development issue. Identify how the issue you’re working on affects business’ ability to recruit employees or affects employees’ ability to show up, be productive, or remain in their jobs. Articulate how the solution you’re pursuing would lead to a more reliable, productive and happier workforce for the business.

**Example:**

- **Common public health framing:** Childcare access supports family health and child development
- **Workforce framing:**
  - **Recruitment:** Employers struggle to attract workers without dependable childcare

- **Retention:** Employees leave when childcare falls through
- **Productivity:** Missed shifts and last-minute callouts disrupt operations
- **Business-relevant message:** Supporting childcare policy helps stabilize the workforce and reduce operational disruptions

## Step 4: Build Relationships

Effective business engagement doesn't end with a single conversation or commitment; it deepens over time. Building relationships means staying in regular contact, following up on what you've heard, celebrating wins together, and continuing to connect your work to what the business cares about. As trust grows, so does the potential for more visible, sustained participation. A business that starts as a cautious supporter can become a champion, but only if the relationship is tended to.

### Bonus Step: Strengthen Partnerships Through Coalitions

The four steps above are the foundation of effective business engagement. One best practice that can significantly amplify them is building or joining a coalition.

Not every engagement effort must include this step. For many initial outreach conversations, a

direct one-on-one approach is entirely appropriate. But when you're ready to deepen engagement, expand participation, or tackle an issue that carries political or reputational risk, collective action is one of the most powerful tools available.

Think of coalition-building as 'engagement 201' – it's most relevant for businesses at the [Active Collaboration and Champion stages](#) of the Engagement Spectrum (Stages 3 and 4). For businesses earlier in the spectrum, you can reference the coalition as context (such as by saying other organizations in the sector are already involved) without requiring them to formally join. As trust builds and comfort grows, an invitation to participate more visibly becomes a natural next step.

When businesses act together, participation is less likely to be perceived as political advocacy and more likely to be seen as responsible, community-minded leadership.

### Why coalitions matter

Coalitions strengthen engagement because:

- Businesses feel more comfortable acting alongside peers rather than independently
- Collective action increases likelihood of successful outcomes
- Trusted validators make the cause feel more credible
- Coalitions suggest the burden of action will be shared

## How to build or join the right coalition

Effective coalitions are intentional, not accidental.

Public health professionals should:

- Identify organizations businesses already trust or engage with

- Include peers or competitors to normalize participation
- Balance visibility (who lends credibility) with practicality (who can act)

## Potential coalition partners

Depending on the issue and context, coalition partners may include:

Partner Type	Strategic Value
<a href="#">Industry Trade Associations</a>	Provide industry legitimacy, reduce the visibility of any individual business, and provide established communication channels
<a href="#">Chambers of Commerce</a>	Serve as neutral conveners; reframe health as an economic/workforce issue; disperse risk across a wide swath of businesses
<a href="#">Anchor Institutions</a> (Hospitals/Universities)	Provide credibility that the public health issue has been studied and verified by trusted authorities
Peer Businesses	Reduce the fear of “standing out” and signal shared risk and a larger trend; help justify participation internally
Nonprofits/Grassroots Organizations	Provide subject-matter expertise and credibility, and ground the work in community needs

## The role of public health in the coalition

Public health departments can play a critical behind-the-scenes role, including:

- Serving as a technical expert on data and evidence
- Acting as a convener or connector across sectors
- Supporting strategy while allowing businesses to lead publicly when appropriate

**Thought Starter:** Think about who else is affected by this issue and who business leaders already trust. Identify organizations, employers, or associations that could help normalize participation and reduce perceived risk. Consider the value each coalition partner could bring (e.g., validating the health need; representing community voices; providing cover for other businesses)

### Example:

**Issue:** Access to childcare

- **Employers with large caregiving workforces:** Pilot employer-supported childcare solutions (e.g., stipends, flexible scheduling)
- **Childcare providers or early childhood nonprofits:** Provide subject-matter expertise and co-design materials
- **Chamber of Commerce or business alliances focused on childcare:** Serve as neutral convener to broaden participation
- **Public health departments:** Provide data, convene partners, align on goals

## Engagement Formula: Step 5: Maintain the Relationship

The purpose of this step is to ensure business engagement is durable and scalable over time. Effective engagement is not a one-time ask. It is a progression along a spectrum – from awareness to participation to deeper alignment – built on trust and demonstrated value.

### How to maintain the relationship

The research shows that business leaders are far more likely to re-engage when their initial involvement feels relevant to their workforce, low-risk and non-political, and respectful of their time. Sustaining the relationship means **reinforcing those conditions** – not expanding expectations too quickly.

### Public health professionals should:

- **Close the loop.** Share what happened as a result of the business's participation. Even small progress updates (e.g., new relationships established, internal procedure changes) show that their involvement mattered.

- **Reinforce workforce relevance.** Continue connecting outcomes to recruitment, retention, morale, or operational stability.
- **Keep future asks proportionate to comfort levels and capacity.** Avoid escalating immediately from low-risk participation to high-visibility advocacy. Allow engagement to deepen gradually.
- **Offer flexible entry points.** Some businesses may prefer private engagement (e.g., data sharing, advisory input), while others may be open to public participation. Maintain multiple pathways for prolonged engagement.
- **Stay responsive to shifting priorities.** Business environments change. Check in periodically to understand evolving workforce pressures or constraints.

**Thought Starter:** Think about a business you have engaged, or plan to engage, on a specific issue. Identify how you will follow up after their initial

participation. What information will you share? How will you demonstrate workforce or operational relevance? What would be a realistic next step along the engagement spectrum that feels aligned with their comfort level?

**Example:**

**Issue:** Sustaining engagement on childcare access

**Initial engagement:** A group of employers joins a Chamber-led coalition supporting efforts to expand childcare options and affordability.

**Follow-up actions by public health partners:**

- Share data showing reduced absenteeism and indicators of improved workforce stability
- Provide a short briefing highlighting how childcare access connects to employee recruitment and retention
- Invite employers to participate in a private advisory session on implementation challenges



## Engagement Formula: Your Turn

Use this worksheet to apply the toolkit to a real-world issue. The goal is to move from strategic clarity to a realistic, low-risk business engagement plan that aligns with workforce needs and public health priorities.

- 1. Define the issue:** Brainstorm a single, clearly defined issue that is timely and actionable. Be specific enough so that you can justify why this issue matters now, and why business leaders should care.

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- 2. Connect to the business's core mission:** Think about a business's values, what they already do well, and how that relates to your issue at hand. You might start by listing specific existing strengths of the business, considering why that would make them an impactful partner.

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- 3. Show the workforce and business implications of your issue:** Directly describe how engagement could lead to several business-related benefits – such as a more reliable, more productive, and happier workforce.

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4. **Build relationships:** Contemplate ways you plan on tending to the relationship you have started with the business. Jot down actions you can take to cultivate open lines of communication, deepen trust, and sustain a long-term, collaborative partnership.

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- 4a. **Bonus Step: Strengthen partnerships through coalitions:** Brainstorm who else might be affected by this issue and have interest in hopping onboard. Be sure to contemplate the value, expertise, and established trust each coalition partner could bring to the table.

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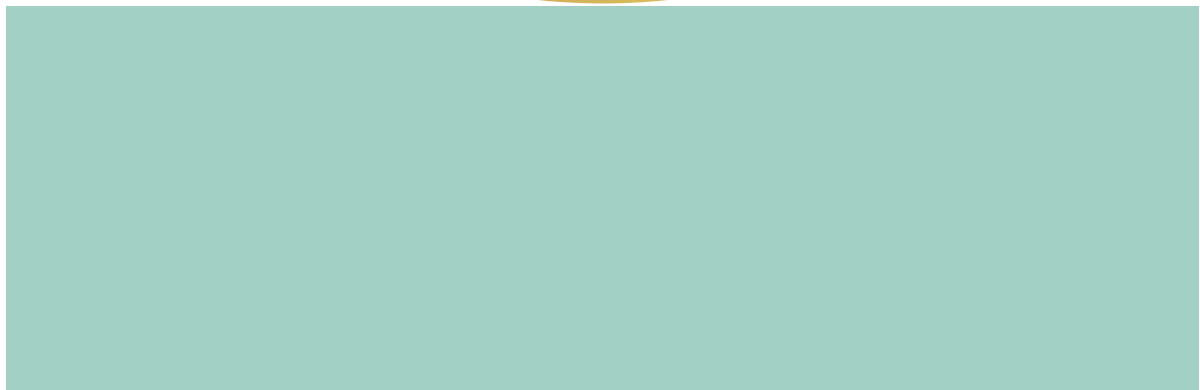
5. **Maintain the relationship:** Strategize how you will follow up after initial engagement. Consider what information you plan on sharing, how you will demonstrate business outcomes, and what the next step toward deepening engagement may look like.

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## 10

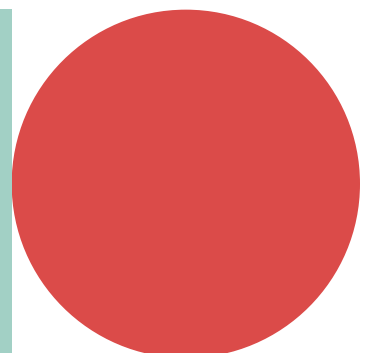
## Message Do's and Don'ts

With your engagement plan in place, the next critical ingredient is getting the messaging right. The following guidance distills which words and frames resonate with business leaders and which ones are likely to cause them to disengage.

Knowing what messages are motivating – and which ones should be avoided – is a crucial part of your engagement strategy. Based on language tested directly with business leaders across sectors, the following chart outlines best practices for framing your “ask” and convincing businesses to participate.

Do...	Don't...
<p><b>Highlight local examples with visible outcomes.</b></p> <p>Business leaders are more likely to engage when they can envision the specific, tangible impact they can make. Whenever possible, showcase examples from other businesses in the same sector or community to create a sense of friendly competition, momentum, and achievable results.</p>	<p><b>Focus on vague, generic, or abstract benefits.</b></p> <p>Ambiguity makes engaging in public health seem like a costly commitment with uncertain payoffs and irrelevant to a business's mission.</p>
<p><b>Say this:</b> “A local construction firm that introduced hydration stations has seen improved worker morale and fewer safety disruptions.”</p>	<p><b>...Not that:</b> “Public health partnerships create shared value.”</p>
<p><b>Emphasize practical action steps.</b></p> <p>Businesses are more motivated when the actions feel meaningful, incremental, and within their control.</p>	<p><b>Use political/advocacy-oriented language, or make references to COVID-19.</b></p> <p>Political references – and COVID-19 examples in particular – scare leaders away because they frame public health as political, which raises concerns about reputational risk.</p>

Do...	Don't...
<p><b>Say this:</b> "This partnership focuses on practical actions, like implementing internal wellness programs and employee resource groups, to help support employee mental health."</p>	<p><b>...Not that:</b> "This partnership will help drive major policy priorities and wins."</p>
<p><b>Use business-relevant language.</b> Business priorities (e.g., employee productivity and workforce strength) are top of mind for leaders. Using language that focuses on the upsides of engagement – rather than scare tactics – is more likely to encourage participation.</p>	<p><b>Use fear-based messaging.</b> Fear-based messaging can feel threatening and trigger feelings of anxiety. This makes leaders doubt whether the issue is solvable or whether their efforts could make a difference.</p>
<p><b>Say this:</b> "Sharing hygiene tips and encouraging employees to get their flu shots can protect your workforce from illness, reduce absenteeism, and improve overall productivity."</p>	<p><b>...Not that:</b> "Not encouraging flu shots and good workplace hygiene puts your business and your employees' health at risk."</p>
<p><b>Demonstrate clear, short-term relevance.</b> Because immediate business pressures take priority, buy-in is more likely when the ask is framed as an additive, pragmatic decision with measurable impact.</p>	<p><b>Overpromise impact.</b> Exaggerating outcomes fosters skepticism and hesitation. Business leaders are reluctant to join partnerships with unrealistic goals or benefits.</p>
<p><b>Say this:</b> "Small wellness initiatives can help employees stay healthier and more engaged, supporting smoother daily operations."</p>	<p><b>...Not that:</b> "Investing in workplace wellness programs will save your business money on healthcare."</p>



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## Conclusion

Engaging business leaders in public health work is not simple – but it is possible. The barriers are real: public health can feel abstract, political, or disconnected from the daily pressures that drive business decisions. Yet the research underlying this toolkit makes clear that those barriers are not insurmountable. Business leaders are not opposed to public health. They simply need a reason to engage that speaks to their interests and motivations.

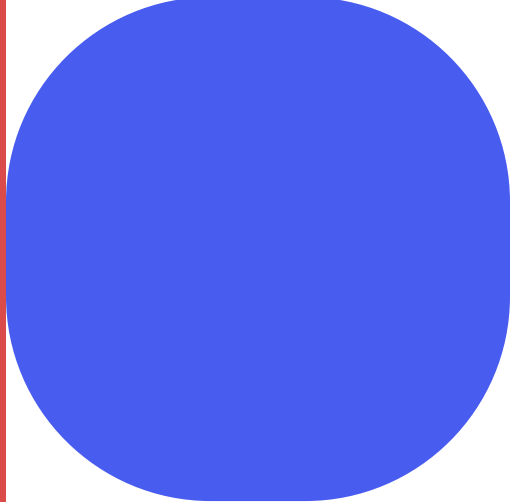
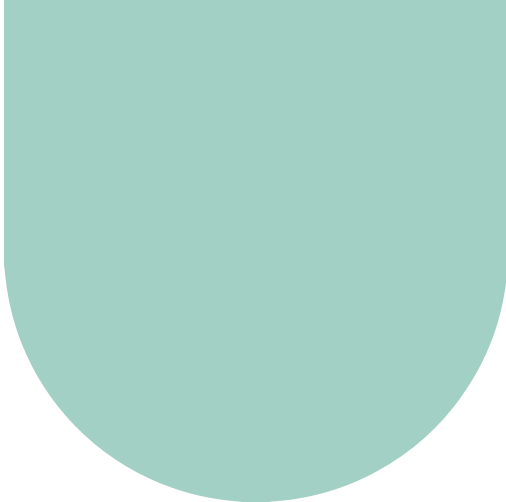
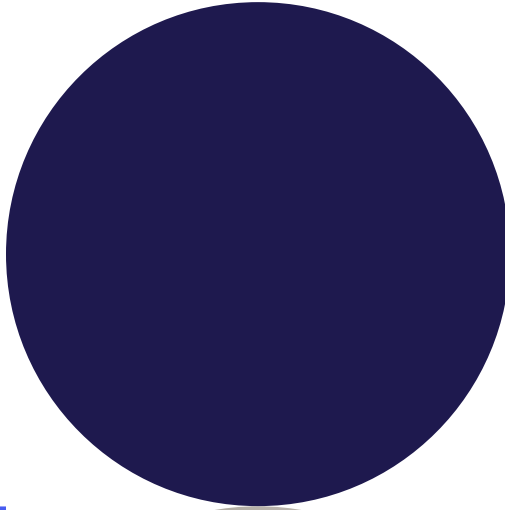


That’s exactly what this toolkit is designed to help you do. By starting with a specific issue, connecting it to a business’s mission, framing it in workforce terms, building the right coalitions, and sustaining the relationship over time, you can make public health feel relevant, credible, and worth a business leader’s investment.

No single partnership will look the same. Some businesses will be ready for sustained collaboration; others will need to start with a fact sheet and a

conversation. Progress at any stage is meaningful. The goal is not to turn every business into a public health champion overnight – it’s to build trust, demonstrate value, and expand the circle of people who understand that healthy communities are good for business.

The work ahead will require patience, adaptability, and a willingness to meet business leaders where they are. This toolkit gives you the tools to do exactly that.



## 12

## Glossary

Public health and businesses may ultimately share the same community goals, but they rarely speak the same language. When engaging business leaders, one of the quickest ways to build credibility is to translate your public health objectives into their operational priorities. A pitch focused on “community health” might get a polite nod, but demonstrating how an initiative improves their ROI, reduces absenteeism, and aligns with their impact goals gets their attention. Think of this glossary as your translation cheat sheet. By mastering these foundational business terms, you can frame public health efforts not just as a moral good, but as a strategic business advantage.

### Business Outcomes

- **Cost-Benefit Analysis (CBA):** A process used to compare how much a decision will cost versus how much financial benefit it will bring.
- **Cost of Inaction/Opportunity Cost:** The financial or reputational price a business pays for choosing not to take preventative action.
- **Key Performance Indicators (KPIs):** The specific, measurable numbers a company uses to track progress toward its goals. The potential financial, reputational, or strategic benefits a business misses by choosing not to take preventive action.
- **ROI (Return on Investment):** The financial or strategic benefits a company gains from a project compared to what it costs.

## Social Responsibility

- **Corporate social responsibility (CSR):** A company's active effort to positively impact society beyond just making a profit, often led by dedicated internal teams that can serve as key partners for initiatives, especially at larger companies.
- **Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG):** A set of measurable standards investors use to evaluate a company's environmental impact, social responsibility, and ethical leadership.
- **Impact Reporting:** A public, often annual report detailing a company's actual progress on its social, environmental, and community goals.
- **Strategic Philanthropy:** Corporate giving and community partnerships that are intentionally tied to a company's long-term business goals and strengths.
- **Triple Bottom Line:** A business philosophy that measures success not just by financial profit, but also by social and environmental impact ("profit, people, and planet"). \*\* This CSR-oriented language works best for this audience, but may not translate as well to other groups.

## Reputation, Marketing, and Communications

- **Anchor Institutions (Hospitals/Universities):** Large, community-rooted organizations such as hospitals and universities whose resources, expertise, and trusted reputation can strengthen the credibility and effectiveness of partnerships or coalitions.
- **Brand Equity:** The value a company gains from having a trusted, positive public image that makes people want to support them.
- **Brand Tax:** The hidden costs or reputational risks a company incurs when its brand is associated with a partnership or initiative that may be controversial, misaligned with its values, or perceived negatively by stakeholders.
- **Chambers of Commerce:** Local business associations that represent and support the interests of businesses in a community and can help connect public health professionals with employers, amplify initiatives, and lend credibility to collaborative efforts.
- **Mission Alignment:** How well a specific project or partnership fits with a company's core goals and values.

- **Trade Associations:** Organizations that represent and support the interests of businesses within a specific industry or sector, providing networking, advocacy, and resources.
- **Value Proposition:** A clear statement explaining the unique, measurable benefits a partnership or service provides to the company.

## Workforce and Human Resources

- **Absenteeism:** When employees habitually miss work, leading to lost productivity and increased costs.
- **Employee Value Proposition (EVP):** The complete package of culture, pay, and benefits an employer offers to attract and keep great employees.
- **Human Capital:** The economic value of an employee's skills, experience, and overall physical and mental health.
- **Presenteeism:** When employees come to work sick, fatigued, or highly stressed, causing a drop in productivity and potentially spreading illness.
- **Productivity:** A measure of efficiency that compares how much work is produced against the time and effort it takes to produce it.
- **Turnover Rate:** The percentage of employees who leave a company over a certain period, representing a major hiring and training cost to replace them.

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