



Engaging Business Leaders in Public Health Partnerships

Use de Beaumont's *Engaging Business Leaders in Public Health Partnerships: A Roadmap for Public Health Professionals* to initiate and deepen engagement with business leaders in ways that feel relevant, effective, and aligned with goals.

Why Engaging with Business Matters

Business leaders play a powerful role in shaping community conditions. They are trusted voices who influence workforce stability, economic vitality, and policy environments. Partnerships between business leaders and public health can help communities address complex challenges, prepare for future crises, and advance health and safety.

Understanding the Relevance Gap

The biggest challenge to engaging business leaders is not opposition – it's relevance. Public health often doesn't feel connected to what businesses are trying to accomplish day to day. As a result, businesses' first instinct is often to deprioritize or sideline public health efforts.

The Barrier

Unrelated to Mission: Public health feels unrelated to a business' 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.

Why It Matters

This narrow mental model limits the kinds of public health collaborations business leaders can imagine. Without concrete examples of how public health aligns with their mission, they default to thinking it isn't their lane.

The Barrier

Long-term and Abstract: Business leaders are focused on what affects them today – factors like revenue, profitability, and workforce reliability. In contrast, public health is often seen as a generational or long-term endeavor with unclear or distant payoffs.

Why It Matters

Because businesses prioritize short-term stability and results, they deprioritize public health engagement that doesn't offer an immediate, visible payoff. As a result, public health can be perceived as "nice to have" rather than aligned with core business needs.

About the Research

Findings are based on five focus groups (n=20) conducted in November 2025 with leaders from large corporations, trade associations, and local businesses across the U.S. Two groups included corporate social responsibility (CSR) leaders, two included state and local trade association leaders, and one included small- and medium-sized local business owners. Discussions explored perceptions of public health, as well as concerns, questions, barriers, and facilitators to supporting public health efforts.

The Barrier

Polarizing: Businesses worry that their involvement in public health efforts could signal political partisanship and alienate customers or employees. Specifically, interactions with government health departments can feel reputationally risky.

Why It Matters

The lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have made businesses cautious about anything that could be seen as political or polarizing. This limits the range of issues they are willing to engage on, narrows the set of acceptable partners, and hampers potential collaboration before it begins.

The Engagement Spectrum

Before reaching out, consider the level of engagement a business is prepared for. Success needn't be defined by reaching the "end stage" – every step helps expand businesses' role in shaping community health.



Stage 1: Building Awareness

Spur curiosity by encouraging businesses to:

- Review fact sheets linking health topics to industry interests
- Explore local public health data with business-relevant metrics
- Subscribe to email updates for employees and executives



Stage 2: Low-risk Participation

Starting points with limited visibility include:

- Share internal wellness communications with employees
- Adjust internal policies or the workplace environment
- Partner with other businesses to provide public health resources



Stage 3: Active Collaboration

Share responsibility through efforts to:

- Work with a local nonprofit or coalition on a specific health topic
- Sign onto a public statement about an issue
- Support a local public health initiative, financially or in-kind



Stage 4: Sustained Partnership/Champion

Deepen the partnership:

- Integrate public health goals into business strategy or CSR reporting
- Check in regularly and jointly plan future initiatives

Choosing Who in the Business Community to Engage

CSR Leaders at Major Corporations

These teams align their company's community investments with broader business objectives. When engaging with corporate social responsibility, consider:

- Is this topic political?
- Are there meaningful bottom-line benefits for the business?
- Are there low-risk ways to get started?
- Are there ways to engage alongside other businesses?

Trade Association Executives

Trade associations represent the broader business community, with the goal of unifying members and advancing their interests. When engaging with associations, consider:

- Could this initiative create political or controversial risk?
- Will it benefit association members?
- Does it connect to the industry?

Local Business Owners

Small-to-medium business owners may interact with public health primarily as a regulatory body and be less familiar with community partnerships and other public health work. When engaging them, consider:

- Will this partnership trigger fears of regulation?
- Will it require significant time and resources?
- What near-term, tangible benefits will it provide?

The Engagement Formula

Follow these five steps to address the relevance gap and advance potential partners along the engagement spectrum.

Step 1: Pick a Specific Health Issue

An issue-first approach provides strategic focus for deciding which businesses to engage, helps define the “ask” to them, and clarifies the value proposition and ROI.

Step 2: Connect to the Business’ Mission

Define the intuitive pathway from their mission à action à impact. This increases credibility by showing forethought, reduces perceived risk, and makes participation feel natural.

Step 3: Show Workforce and Business Implications

Translate your issue from a public health framing to a workforce framing, articulating how the problem and solution affect recruitment or employees’ ability to show up, be productive, and remain in their jobs.

Step 4: Build Relationships

Stay in regular contact, follow up, and celebrate wins together to deepen trust.

Bonus Step: Strengthen Partnerships through Coalitions

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

Step 5: Maintain the Relationship

Ensure engagement lasts and scales over time by reinforcing the conditions that motivated businesses to participate in the first place: reiterate business relevance, keep asks proportionate to comfort level, and stay flexible and responsive.