Creating Successful Collaboration Structures in Public Health Initiatives

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Introduction

Collaboration structures are essential for sustaining momentum in public health initiatives. Backbone structures, advisory bodies, and community-based implementation frameworks play distinct yet interconnected roles in ensuring coordinated, sustainable, and impactful action grounded in collective input. However, without clearly defining how these structures will function, there is a risk of ambiguity, misalignment, and fragmentation.

This resource offers grounding, foundational knowledge for understanding collaboration structures and the dynamics that influence effective partnerships. In addition, it offers practical tools to help you take inventory of partners, reflect on relationships and trust, and plan for effective communication.

Understanding Different Collaboration Structures

No single structure fits every collaboration. Some initiatives rely on an internal team to coordinate shared goals, while others draw strength from advisory groups or community-driven coalitions.

Table 1 compares three frequently used structures and illustrates how they interact to sustain collective work. Reviewing these distinctions can help clarify expectations, determine where decision-making authority lies, and assess whether your current approach reflects both organizational and community priorities.

Table 1: Example Collaboration Structures

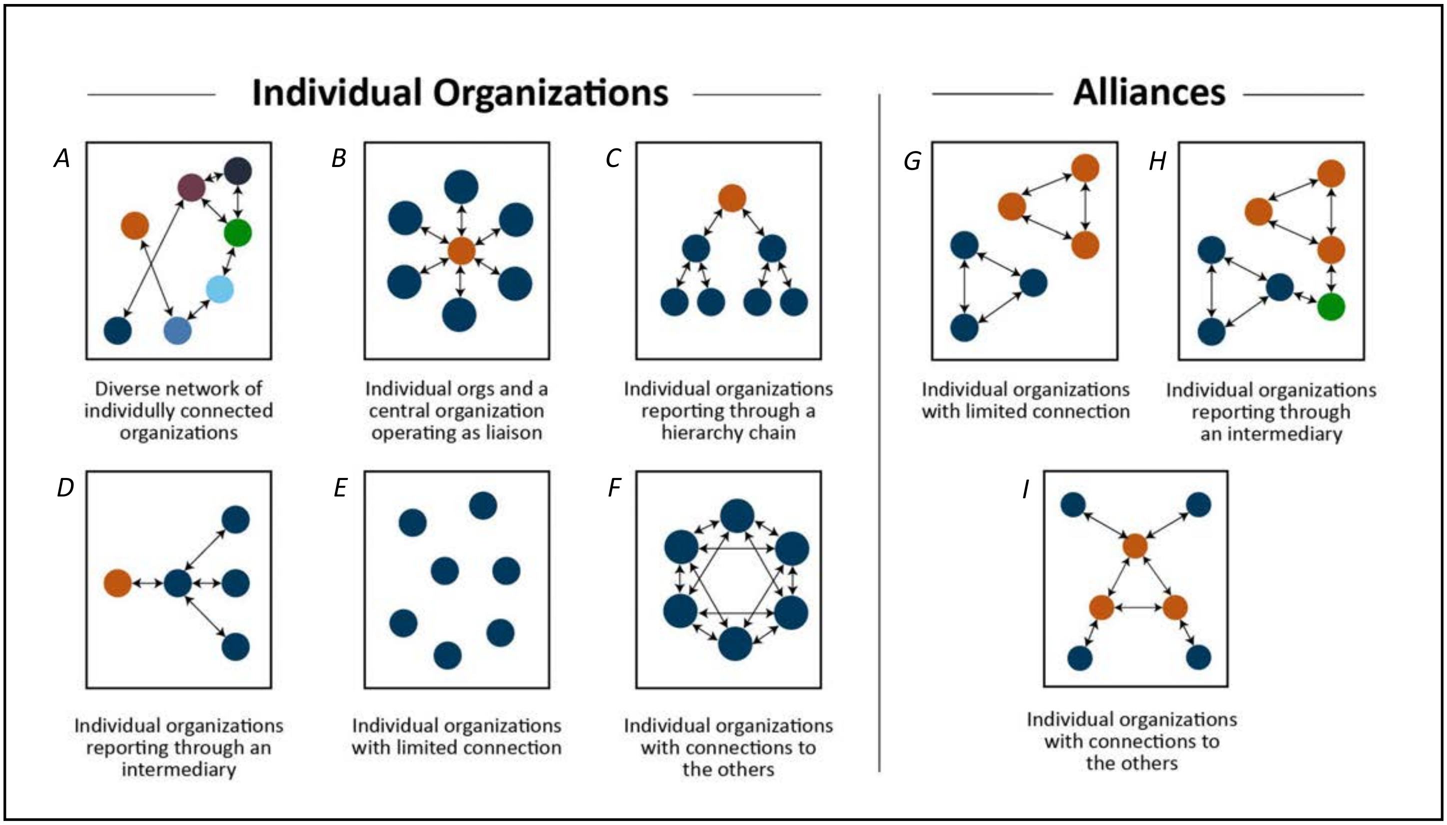
Stucture	Definition	Core Function	Example	Contextual Considerations
Backbone Entity	Internal team or organization coordinating collective work.	• Facilitate meeting. • Track progress. • Manage communication. • Serve as fiscal agent for the project. • Coordinate resources across the agency.	• Internal QI team. • Neutral convener.	May be state-run or partner-led depending on trust/authority structures.
Advisory Body	A group that offers expertise and oversight, usually formalized.	• Provide feedback. • Guide strategic direction.	• State Health Improvement Plan (SHIP) advisory committee. • Quality improvement councils.	Should include voices reflective of local priorities; membership may shift post-planning.
Community-Based Implementation Team	Group closest to the work; often grassroots or community leaders.	• Lead and own implementation of strategies.	• Local coalitions, CBO networks.	Decision-making approaches should reflect local norms (e.g., consensus, elders' input).

Organizations and alliances can connect in a range of ways within a collaborative system (as illustrated in Image 1). In practice, no single configuration is inherently better than another — each carries strengths and tradeoffs that influence how communication, trust, and decision-making unfold.

Diagrams A-F in Image 1 show examples of individual organizations operating within a shared effort. These range from loosely connected networks (A, E) to more centralized or hierarchical arrangements (B-D), and to highly interconnected systems that emphasize shared accountability (F). **Diagrams G-I** depict alliances — groups of organizations that coordinate collectively. These can operate independently (G), through a liaison or bridging partner (H), or as a core team with reciprocal connections to others (I).

Together, these models offer a visual prompt to consider how your current or planned collaboration is structured. Reflect on where your network most closely aligns, and whether your structure supports the flow of information, inclusion of voices, and level of coordination your goals require.

Image 1. Diagrams of Network Structures



For a deeper dive into collaboration structures, consider exploring the [Collective Impact Model] or reading [Coalitions and Partnerships in Community Health] by Frances Dunn Butterfoss.

Understanding Group Development

Collaborative groups evolve over time. Psychologist Bruce Tuckman's model outlines five key stages that collaborative groups typically move through. While some teams may move through these stages in a linear way, others may spend extended time in one phase, return to earlier stages after a change in membership or direction, or cycle through phases multiple times. There is no one right way.

Recognizing where your team is in its development helps you normalize tension, support group resilience, strengthen partnerships, and guide the use of stage-appropriate facilitation tools. To deepen application, consider using Tuckman's Stages of Group Development, which align observable behaviors, team needs, and leadership strategies with each stage. This can help facilitate more nuanced group reflection and support.

Tuckman's Stages of Group Development

Forming

Team members are just getting to know one another and looking for clarity. You can support this stage by:

- Clarifying purpose, roles, and expectations.
- Encouraging introductions and connection.
- Establishing group agreements.

Storming

In this stage, differences emerge, and tensions or confusion about direction may arise. You can support this stage by:

- Creating space for open dialogue.
- Acknowledging differences in opinion.
- Reinforcing shared purpose and group agreements.

Norming

Here, members start to find rhythm and cohesion; trust is building. You can support this stage by:

- Developing collaborative processes.
- Acknowledging progress.

Performing

In this stage, the team is working smoothly toward shared goals with mutual accountability. You can support this stage by:

- Supporting shared leadership.
- Sustaining engagement.
- Celebrating wins.

**Visit ASTHO's "Defining Clear Roles and Responsibilities for Effective Public Health Plans" for more support at this stage.*

Adjourning

Finally. Here, the group wraps up or transitions (if time-limited). You can support this stage by:

- Reflecting on lessons learned.
- Documenting achievements.
- Planning for sustainability or handoff.

Tools for Organizing Partner Engagement

There are several ways to track and organize partnership information depending on what is most actionable for your team. Table 2 provides a summary comparison of three useful formats, with links to quickly navigate directly to the description and instructions for each approach.

Table 2. Approaches to Organize Partners

Approach	Focus	Best For	Suggested Format
Partner Inventory	Roles, influence, engagement.	Teams wanting detailed partner profiles.	Table (Word, Excel)
Engagement Pathways Tool	Depth of engagement, next steps.	Teams tracking partner momentum.	Flowchart (PowerPoint, Miro/Mural)
Collaborative Ecosystem Map	Breadth of collaboration, relationship mapping	Visualizing partner networks.	Network diagram (Miro/Mural, Lucidchart)
"Who's Missing" Tool	Partner identification and recruitment.	Teams wanting to fill partnership gaps.	Table (Word, Excel)

Partner Inventory

Understanding who is part of your collaboration — and the roles, influence, and engagement each partner brings — is essential for maintaining clarity and momentum. A partner inventory provides a snapshot of the individuals and organizations contributing to your initiative and helps reveal patterns in participation, authority, and connection. It also builds on the earlier discussion of collaboration structures by making those networks more tangible, translating the abstract “who” and “how” of collaboration into a working reference you can update over time.

Use this tool to identify current partners, their roles, and levels of influence and engagement. It can serve as both a planning and reflection tool — helping teams assess whether the right mix of partners is at the table, clarify where decision-making power sits, and determine where additional relationship-building might be needed.

How to Use This Tool

1. Start by listing all known partners or organizations involved in your initiative, grouping them by team, coalition, or network if applicable Include the group name and type in the title of your tool so that all team members working on the project have proper context.
2. Chart out each partner's type, current role with your initiative, and levels of influence and engagement. Keep these ratings simple and consistent (e.g., low/medium/high).
3. List ideal role or engagement types and opportunities for each (i.e., where you see potential for deepened engagement or leadership).
4. Review your completed inventory to identify imbalances (e.g., heavy representation from one sector) or areas for growth (e.g., missing community voices or partners with low engagement but high influence).
5. Revisit and update the inventory periodically to track changes as partnerships evolve or as new collaborators join.
6. The result is a dynamic, at-a-glance view of your partnership landscape that supports intentional engagement, transparent communication and shared accountability (as illustrated in Table 3).

Table 3. Sample Partner Inventory Table

Partner/ Organization	Type (e.g. community-based organization, health system, etc.)	Current Role	Influence (Low/ Medium/ High)	Engagement (Low/Medium/ High)	Ideal Role or Engagement Type	Opportunities
Zoe from Lake Regional Medical Center.	Health system	Project champion within the partnering health system.	High	Medium	I would like to see Zoe take on more of a leadership role for our community health coalition.	Zoe has a lot of influence within the health system that isn't fully realized in our current health improvement plan.
Lucas from the Chronic Disease Team.	Program team internal to the health department.	Accountable for the chronic disease activities in our health improvement plan.	Medium	High	Continue to be a champion internally for chronic disease-related strategies.	Lucas brings a wealth of experience from the chronic disease team – collecting and analyzing data, community outreach/ education.

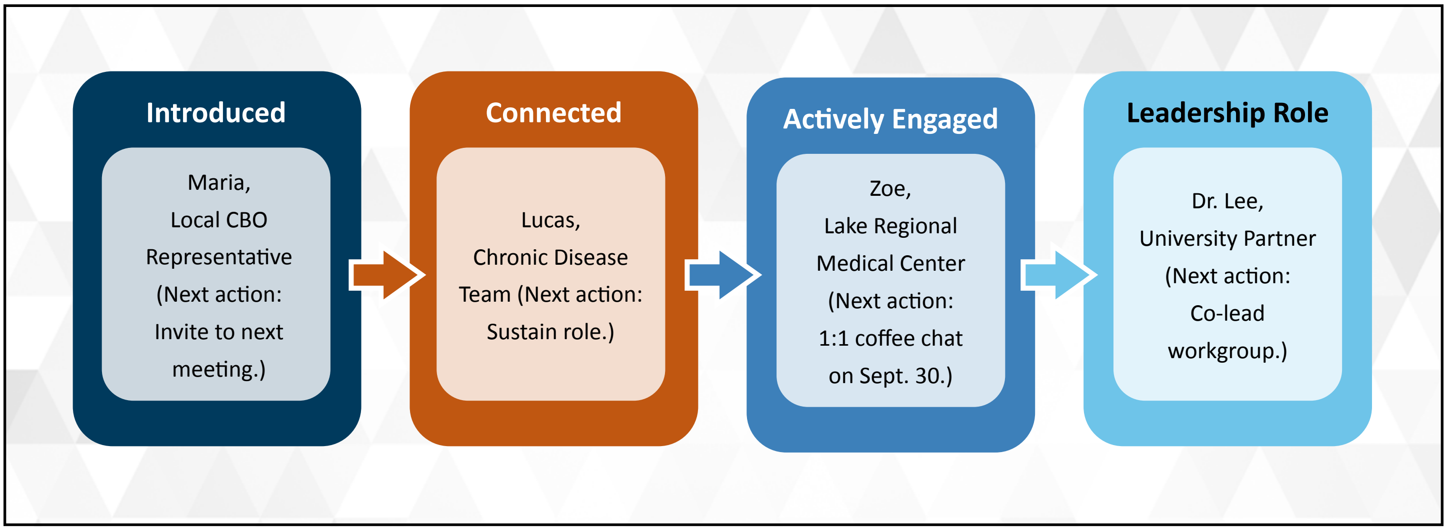
Engagement Pathways Tool

The engagement pathway approach organizes partners based on their level of engagement and helps visualize how to advance relationships.

How to Use This Tool

1. Chart out levels of engagement (e.g., introduced, connected, actively engaged, and leadership role).
2. Plot each partner at the stage that reflects their current engagement.
3. Define a specific next step to move each partner forward.
4. Color-code partners to track momentum or priority (optional).

Image 2. Sample Stages of Engagement Diagram



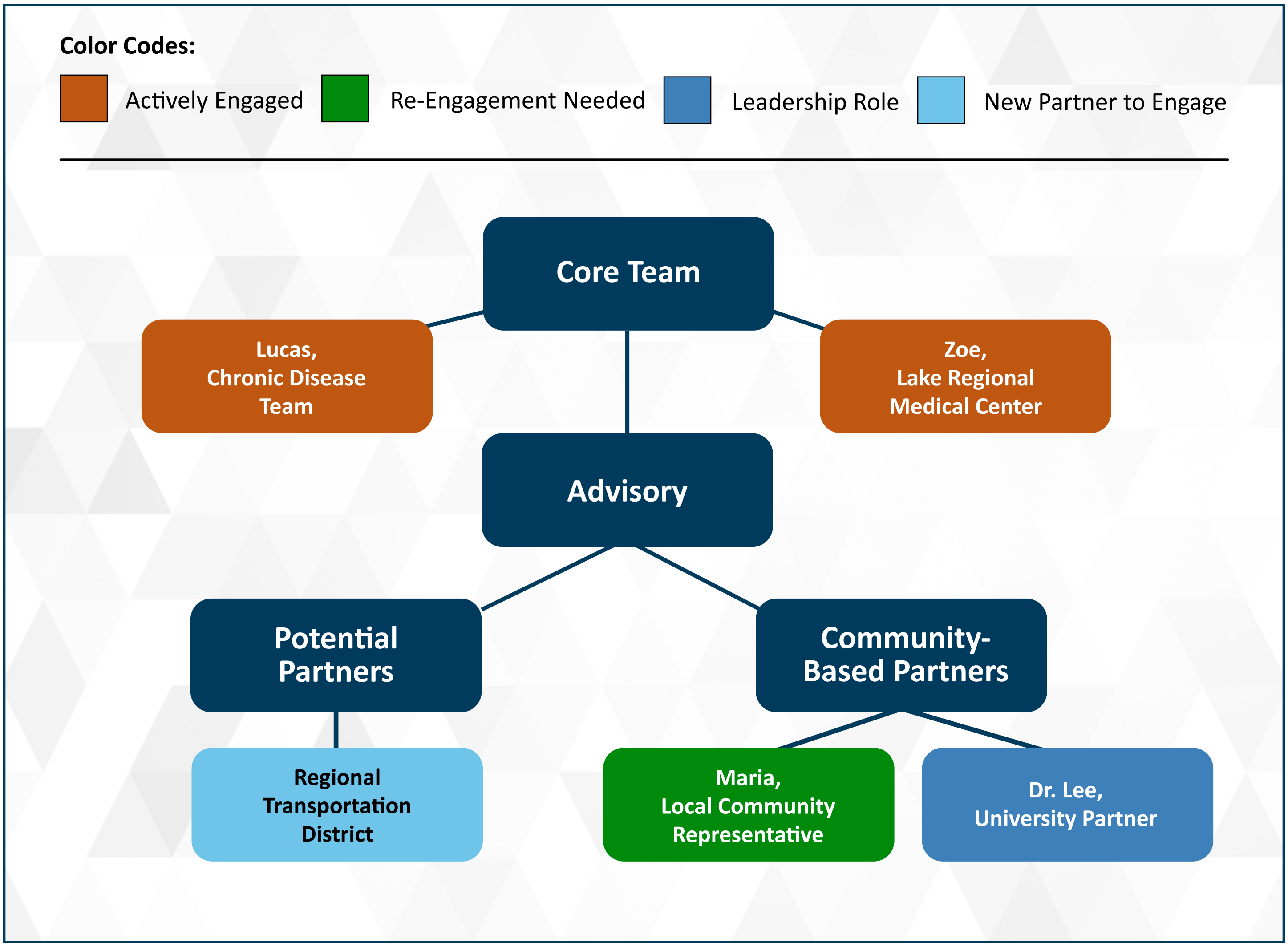
Collaborative Ecosystem Map

The ecosystem map visualizes partner types and relationships within a network, helping teams quickly see the full landscape of collaboration.

How to Use This Tool

1. Organize partners into relevant relationship clusters (e.g., core team, advisory body, community-based partners, potential partners).
2. Map existing collaborations and connections.
3. Use color codes or symbols to show current engagement and next steps.

Image 3. Sample Collaboration Map



“Who’s Missing?” Tool

If it feels like the same few partners are always at the table — or if your team struggles to engage new perspectives — this tool can help. Broadening collaboration requires intentionally identifying who isn’t yet part of the conversation but whose participation could strengthen your work. The “Who’s Missing?” Tool helps teams think beyond existing relationships to recognize missing voices, underrepresented groups, or new allies whose insights could expand the relevance, trust, and reach of your initiative.

By mapping these gaps, teams can begin to understand where collaboration may lack representation or connection and develop realistic entry points for engagement that honor existing relationships and community priorities.

How to Use This Tool

1. List key communities, organizations, or partner groups who are not currently engaged, but whose participation would strengthen collaboration and outcomes.
2. Describe why their engagement matters to the project or initiative, noting the specific value, lived experience, or expertise they would contribute.
3. Identify potential barriers that may prevent participation, such as limited capacity, competing priorities, or past experiences that have made engagement more difficult.
4. Capture initial outreach strategies or opportunities for connection, such as introductions, upcoming events, or mutual contacts who can facilitate engagement.
5. Periodically revisit this table (illustrated in Table 4) to document progress, celebrate new partnerships, and note where continued outreach may be needed.

Table 4. Sample “Who’s Missing?” Table

Missing Group/ Community	Why Their Engagement Matters	Barriers to Involvement	Initial Engagement Strategy
Local Breastfeeding Coalition	They offer a myriad of educational resources and engagement opportunities that are ripe for collaboration with our health improvement coalition.	This is a grassroots organization that we haven’t been able to make a connection with yet.	Jade recently made a new connection with one of the co-leads. They offered to make a warm hand-off connection for our coalition on Aug. 15.
Regional Transportation District	We’re having challenges reaching certain populations and making headway on our access to care objectives. Engaging with this group could offer new opportunities and innovation for the region.	Scheduling conflicts and staff transitions.	Lou reached out to the new Regional Transportation District contact on March 15. They have an informal coffee scheduled on June 2 to learn more about the coalition’s work and opportunities for future engagement.

Here are a couple of additional resources to support partner identification:

- The Circles of Involvement resource from the Prevention Technology Transfer Center Network offers a simple, actionable guide to brainstorming and categorizing potential partners across sectors and roles. This can help expand the list of those who may be missing from your collaboration.
- While focused on Adverse Childhood Experiences, ASTHO's Stakeholder Mapping Roadmap provides a practical, interactive process for mapping partners, understanding their influence, and identifying gaps in representation. The approach is adaptable to other public health contexts.

Trust and Relationship-Building Reflection

This reflection exercise is designed to help teams look beyond technical coordination and examine the quality of relationships that underpin effective collaboration. After organizing or mapping partners, it can be useful to pause and consider how trust is formed, maintained, and demonstrated within the group. Use the following prompts to reflect on what's working well and where there may be opportunities to strengthen connection, communication, and reciprocity across partners.

- Where does this group fall in Tuckman's stages of group development?
- How well do we understand each partner's priorities and constraints?
- Do we make space for informal relationship-building (e.g., 1:1 meetings, listening sessions)?
- Do our practices allow for shared decision-making and co-ownership?
- Are any partners feeling disengaged or left out?
- Are any of our partnerships extractive rather than mutually beneficial?

Consider using PHAB's Collaborative Trust Scale as a companion tool to these questions. It offers a structured way to assess and discuss trust among partners, helping to identify strengths and gaps that can guide relationship-building strategies.

Mapping Partners and Planning Communication

After you've identified your partners, you can take the work a step further by looking at how they fit into your broader strategy for collaboration. Partner mapping isn't just an inventory — it's a way to see relationships in context, understand dynamics, and decide how to move the work forward together.

Power-Interest Matrix

One approach is to map partners into a Power-Interest Matrix, based on their level of power and interest. Power reflects a partner's ability to influence decisions, allocate resources, or shape outcomes, while interest represents how invested they are in the goals or success of the effort. Plotting partners across these two dimensions helps clarify communication needs, engagement strategies, and where to focus relationship-building efforts.

In this example, power and interest are used as the primary criteria. However, teams can adapt the tool to use other factors that are most relevant to their project or initiative — such as readiness to engage, level of trust, or alignment with shared goals. The intent is to help visualize relationships in a way that best supports planning and collaboration.

How to Use This Tool

1. Draw from your existing partner lists (from the Partner Inventory or "Who's Missing?" Tool) to identify the organizations and individuals you'd like to map.
2. Rate each partner's level of power and interest and place them within the four quadrants of the matrix (illustrated in Image 4).
3. Review the placement for patterns — for example, are there highly influential partners with limited engagement, or highly engaged partners with less influence?
4. Use these insights as a starting point for deeper reflection on roles, relationships, and communication — expanded in the next activity using the CLIP framework.

Image 4. Example Power Interest Matrix

		Partner Level of Power	
		High	Low
Partner Level of Interest	High	• Agency leadership and program teams • Centralized state IT department	• Agency public health program managers • Local health departments
	Low	• Funding partners	• Community-based organizations • Health care systems

CLIP Characteristics Table

Pair the Power-Interest Matrix with the CLIP characteristics (Collaboration, Leadership, Influence, and Power) from the IAP2 framework to get a fuller picture of how each partner can contribute, lead, or influence outcomes. This lens helps teams think beyond influence and interest alone, capturing the relational and leadership dynamics that affect collaboration.

How to Use This Tool

1. Begin with your completed Power-Interest Matrix. Use it as a foundation to identify which partners fall into each quadrant.
2. Review the CLIP characteristics from the aforementioned IAP2 framework and consider how they show up for each partner or stakeholder. For example, who demonstrates strong collaborative skills or informal leadership, even if their positional authority is limited?
3. Use an "Engagement Strategies" column to reflect on how best to sustain or rebalance each relationship. This may mean adjusting communication frequency, inviting partners into decision-making, or identifying opportunities for shared ownership.
4. Document insights that stand out. Patterns — such as overreliance on a few powerful voices or underutilized community leadership — can inform your next communication plan.
5. Periodically revisit this alignment table (illustrated in Table 5). It's especially helpful before major planning sessions or when revising engagement strategies to ensure partnerships remain authentic and well-aligned.

Together, the Power-Interest Matrix and CLIP characteristics offer a balanced view of formal and informal influence, helping teams better understand how leadership, trust, and collaboration operate across the network.

Table 5: Alignment of the Power-Interest Matrix and CLIP Characteristics

Quadrant/Corresponding Highlights	Description	Engagement Strategies
• High power, high interest. • "Manage closely." • Dominant, forceful.	Manage closely and engage in the decision-making process. These partners or stakeholders have significant influence over the success and outcomes of the project.	• Involve • Collaborate • Empower • Inform • Consult
• High power, low interest. • "Keep satisfied." • Influential, dormant.	Keep informed and meet their needs. Theseare decision-makers who have significant influence on the project's success but have other priorities currently.	• Consult • Involve • Collaborate • Inform
• Low power, high interest. • "Keep informed." • Vulnerable, marginal.	Anticipate and meet needs, keep them actively informed. These partners and stakeholders are affected by the decision but have little power to influence it.	• Collaborate • Empower
• Low power, low interest. • "Monitor." • Concerned.	Simply monitor these individuals. They are not significantly affected by the decision and have little interest in or power over influencing the outcome.	• Collaborate • Empower

Communication Plan

From here, teams can build a communication plan that's intentional about:

- How often and in what ways you connect with each partner.
- What type of engagement (inform, consult, involve, collaborate, empower) fits their role.
- Which resources, updates, or touchpoints will keep them invested.
- Who on your team will maintain the relationship and track progress.

How to Use This Tool

1. Use the insights from your Power-Interest and CLIP analyses to identify which partners should be prioritized for more active communication or engagement.
2. Record each partner or group in the table, noting whether a communication resource already exists (e.g., newsletter, standing meeting, shared workspace) or needs to be developed.
3. In a "Status and Next Steps" column, describe what's currently in place and what adjustments would strengthen the connection.
4. Assign a responsible party and clarify the type of engagement (inform, consult, involve, collaborate, empower) to ensure accountability and consistency.
5. Use "Importance" and "Timeline" fields to set realistic pacing — some partners may benefit from quarterly updates, while others should be engaged more frequently or through co-leadership opportunities.
6. Revisit and revise the plan (illustrated in Table 6) as relationships evolve. The goal isn't to create a static document but to guide intentional, ongoing communication that strengthens collaboration over time.

This plan turns partner mapping into action, translating insight into clear, sustainable communication routines that maintain trust and momentum.

Table 6. Example Communication Planning Table

Existing/New Resource for Communication	Status and New Steps	Partner of Focus	Responsible Party	Type of Engagement	Importance	Timeline
Quarterly coalition meeting	Standing meeting is established; consider adding a brief "partner spotlight" segment to highlight cross-sector work.	State Health Improvement Coalition	Partnership Coordinator	Involve/ Collaborate	High	Quarterly
Monthly program update email	Existing communication; refine content to include progress on shared performance measures and upcoming engagement opportunities.	Chronic Disease Prevention Program	Communications Lead	Inform	Medium	Monthly
Shared project workspace (Teams/ Sharepoint)	Platform established; organize folders by workstream and invite new regional partners for transparency and document sharing.	Regional partners	Administrative Support	Collaborate	Medium	Ongoing
Community forum or listening session	Plan first event; partner with community-based organizations to co-facilitate and collect feedback on upcoming SHIP priorities.	Community-based organizations and partners	Project Manager	Empower	High	Biannual

Putting It Into Practice

Operationalizing collaborative structures requires tailoring processes to the unique functions and contexts of each structure. Explore strategies to apply these tools in real-world contexts.

Build from Relationships and Local Context

Effective collaboration starts long before scheduling meetings or writing plans. Incorporating insights from ASTHO's "How-To Guide: Engaging Island Jurisdictions," this tool emphasizes the importance of building trust and grounding collaboration in local context:

- Build relationships first: Schedule one-on-one check-ins with potential members to foster early connection.
- Use inclusive facilitation: Rotate meeting formats or use local facilitators to ensure comfort and accessibility. ASTHO's toolkit "Engaging Partners in a Virtual Space" offers techniques to improve working relationships between partners.
- Define decision-making practices: Co-create charters, group agreements, or governance norms.
- Be flexible: Adapt frequency, style, or leadership models to fit what your community needs.
- Honor local values: Recognize elders, community leaders, and traditional norms in your planning.

Reflect on the Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership

Collaboration is more than just inviting input; it's about sharing power. "The Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership" offers a continuum from informing to community-led decision-making, helping teams assess where they are and set goals for deeper engagement. This tool can support internal reflection on how to shift from consultation toward shared governance.

Co-Create Project Charters or Agreements

Use participatory techniques to develop shared agreements. ASTHO has a Charter Template and Guide that walks teams through the process of crafting their own.

Operationalize Tuckman's Stages of Group Development

The following suggestions help teams apply the partner inventory and trust reflections in real-world contexts.

For new or forming groups:

- Host a connection session: Focus first on relationship-building. Use the partner inventory to explore who's at the table, their strengths, and shared interests. Use the "Who's missing template as a group brainstorm. Perhaps there are connections to be leveraged and extend group membership.
- Clarify purpose and expectations: Co-develop a group charter or set of working agreements to align on goals, roles, and norms.

For groups in the storming or norming phases:

- Pause for reflection: Dedicate meeting time to the relationship-building questions. Invite partners to reflect on how the group is working together, not just what it's working on. If needed, consider anonymous responses to surface honest feedback.
- Support honest dialogue: Normalize disagreement or misalignment as a natural part of building strong collaboration. Everyone joined the group for a reason or passion. Use facilitation techniques that surface differing perspectives constructively (e.g., anonymous polling, small group breakouts).
- Revisit structure and clarity: Co-create (if not already drafted) or revise the group charter to ensure it reflects the current environment.
- If action steps are unclear, revisit your plan and consider turning to ASTHO's "Operationalizing Goals to Maximize Public Health Planning" for guidance.
- Strengthen relationships: Invest time in informal or one-on-one conversations between meetings. These small touches build trust that helps the group move forward during harder conversations.

For performing groups:

- Deepen engagement: Use the Partner Inventory to revisit partner roles and elevate underutilized champions.
- Sustain and adapt: Use reflection questions to ensure the group stays responsive to evolving needs. Update the "Who's Missing…?" list as context shifts.
- Document successes: Highlight examples of collaborative impact to inform funders, leadership, and future teams. Celebrate the small wins along the way (not just at the end of the project) to keep momentum strong, maintain engagement, and reinforce accountability throughout the work.

For teams nearing transition or closure:

- Plan for adjourning: Reflect on the group's journey. Document what worked and share learnings with other initiatives. Consider holding a retrospective discussion at the project's conclusion to capture insights in real time. Tools like MURAL's Retrospective Template can provide a structured way to reflect and create a record to refer back to over time.
- Support continuity: Identify which roles or structures should be sustained (e.g., transitioning a community-based implementation team into a standing advisory group).
- Celebrate contributions: Host a session to recognize partners and maintain goodwill for future collaboration.

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